

# Eat, pray, whatever

DI BAUWENS, The West Australian June 11, 2010, 3:00 pm



Eat, Pray, LEAVE, scream the posters splashed around Ubud. The real estate version reads Build, Stay, Love.

It's hard to get a little peaceful down time in Bali's artistic and cultural heart these days without feeling that you're jumping on the Eat Pray Love bandwagon, and one can only imagine the chaos once the film of the same name starring Julia Roberts hits the big screens.

Oh yes, there are also "Julia ate here" signs and, of course, the one who started it all - Elizabeth Gilbert, author of the book in which she tells of heading to Bali (and elsewhere) to find herself, life, love and meaning, and spending time with medicine man Ketut Liyer - is also at the top of the name-dropper's list.

Liyer is doing a roaring trade with EPL tourists, but there's scepticism among the locals. So where can you go for a bit of low-key meditation and inner journeying without feeling like a new-age junkie?

I recently indulged in a "retreat without the retreat" in a gem of a place tucked away off the main streets of Ubud. So excited was I when I arrived and discovered that the Google find was a spectacularly beautiful and peaceful slice of heaven I almost achieved a state of bliss without trying - \$1940 for six days. Or Escape the World, Pathways of Transformation, Joyful Yoga Retreat and Purity for the Mind, Body and Soul.

With only three days up my sleeve, I couldn't join a retreat but I could partake of the stunning facilities for just \$70 a night for a spacious, clean, comfortable room with its own terrace, day bed and alfresco dining table and chairs. Breakfast was included - served either in my room or in the dining room overlooking the rice fields.

Other meals were taken outside and, with a shuttle service into the centre of Ubud, just 1.5km away, it posed no problem at all.

A boutique-style resort set in jungle-like gardens that cascade to the river below, Kumara has 10 rooms, two swimming pools, an open pavilion overlooking the gorge and magnificent vistas.

Squirrels dart about in the trees, birdsong fills the air, exotic orchids bloom and secret hideaways beckon. Lanterns flicker in stone nooks on paths leading through the glorious gardens.

It's rare to see another soul save for the discreet staff.

Then there's their spa, with superb treatments that are an absolute steal. I almost feel guilty at the kind of service that is lavished on my body for a mere pittance. The signature herbal massage based on Ayurvedic principles to balance the chakras is \$17; an Ayurvedic Chakra Dhara is a sensual and spiritual full body and soul experience with dripping warm oil for 2 1/2 hours at just \$63.

Clove and orange oil is massaged into my head and a fresh hibiscus mask applied to my hair before my head is wrapped in a banana leaf, my arms massaged and spirit awakened as I gaze over a rice field for just \$22.

Just about everyone in Ubud is on red alert for spiritual seekers so it's not too difficult to find yourself just where you want to be. Yes, the universe will provide. As when I said to a driver called Wayan that I would like to meditate.

The next day, in a scene my husband (who has yet to discover the wonder of the path to enlightenment) would have described as my most memorable Ab Fab moment, I joined locals in a purification cleansing ritual at Tirta Empul before a prayer session in a temple with not another Westerner in sight.

We had driven through the lush green country and rice paddies, donned batik sarongs and respectable long-sleeved shirts before something akin to a baptism in pools of purest water. Wayan had prepared all the offerings with love. Small woven baskets filled with flowers. Incense sticks. All used in a ritual of prayer and thanks.

Each time we pray - with empty hands, then a white flower, a petal-filled cone and finally, coloured petals which all end up behind ears or on top of heads - the flower is held over the incense smoke. About 20 villagers are there to purify in the pools, under fountains that pour directly from the source - crystal clear. The ritual involves

praying before putting heads under the fountains three times. By the time I have done the fountains in both pools my heart is well and truly open.

At the temple ceremony, the old priest carries himself like a king. Even though the white suit coat is moth-eaten he has the elegance and presence of royalty.

While I am moved by the scene, I can't help but feel like an impostor. Especially with bits of rice clinging to my chakras.

But it's the sight of Wayan than makes the deepest impression. He looks as if he's just taken an overdose of a happiness drug. He's glowing.

I say "How do you feel, Wayan?"

"I feel bliss," is the excited reply. I suppose if, like him, you carry out this ritual of devotion three times or more a week, you're going to achieve the real deal.

Back at Kumara, lounging by the pool and marvelling at two statues half-hidden by the foliage, I overhear the conversation of American participants in a retreat. They are less than pleased with the behaviour of one of the group, who has decided she will no longer eat anything that needs to be chewed.

She is on the ultimate detox path. She thinks she's a guru. Only thing is, she has been spotted smoking cigarettes on her balcony.