



Oali high

An idyllic mountain retreat set amidst a lush tropical rainforest?
Indonesia's Begawan Giri may be the last word in paradise.

By Aimee Lee Ball Photographs by James Merrell

At Begawan Giri an azure swimming pool beckons and (opposite) a butler waits in attendance.

My bath is filled with fresh flowers—jasmine, gardenia, magnolia, hibiscus, rose. I am Kevin Spacey's fantasy in *American Beauty*. And the tub itself is hand-carved from a single monolithic piece of terrazzo stone, its interior polished like a jewel, under a ceiling of hand-cut coconut tile. A masseuse sets up shop on my terrace, offering a choice of aromatic oils—citrus, spice, or ylang-ylang—and a batik sarong to cover me. A butler has placed in my suite a bowl of fruit I've never seen before, a new specimen every day this week—hairy red rambutans, woody purplish mangosteens, scaly brown snakefruit—all revealing juicy nectar of the gods when peeled. My shoes are lined up at the door—on these floors of 19th-century teak I am, at the management's request, the Barefoot Contessa. Occasionally I shoo a butterfly out of the room.

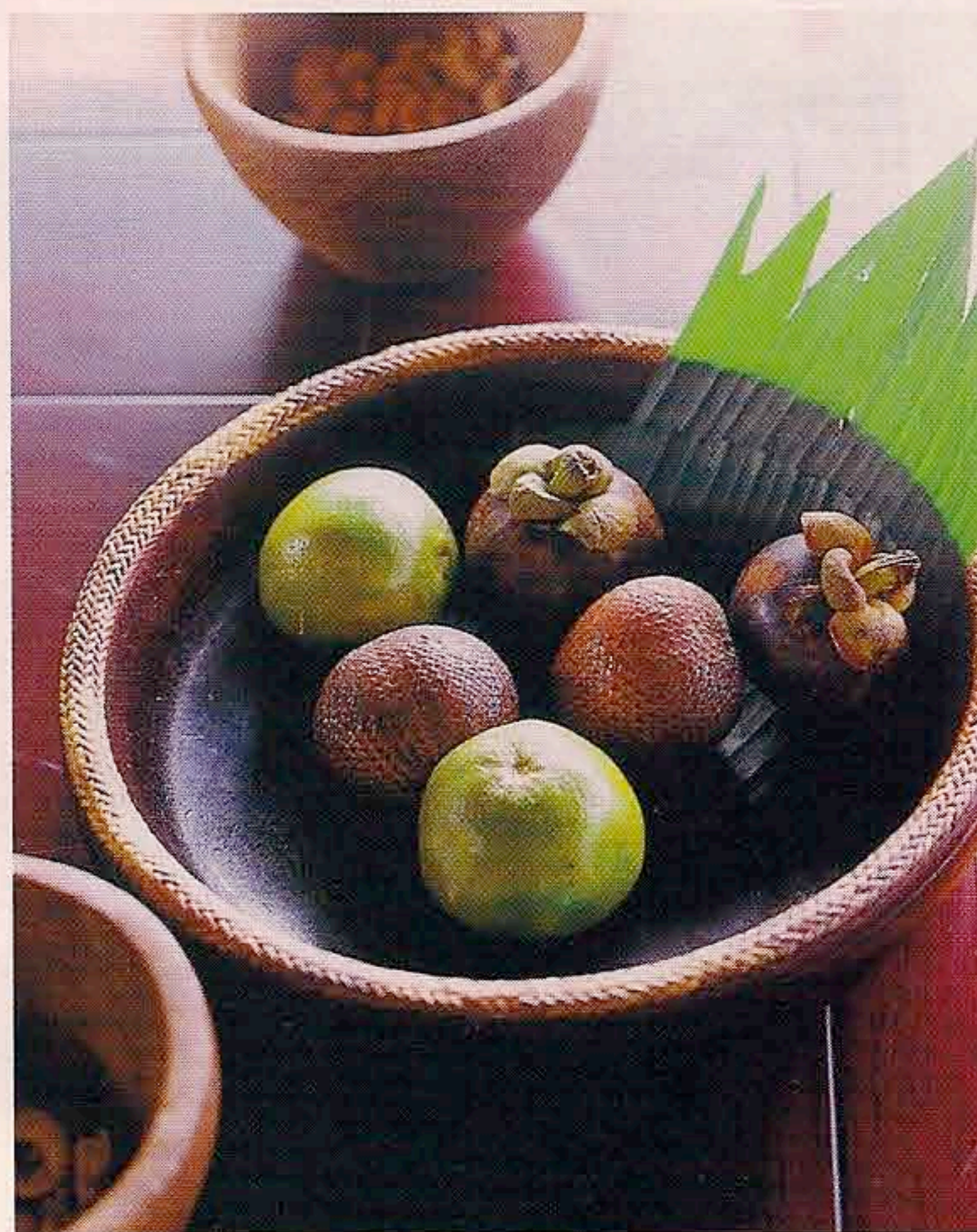
The Balinese don't have a word for "paradise" in their language, but Begawan Giri would translate nicely. The name of this idyllic place really means "Wise Man's Mountain" in Balinese, although Bradley Gardner was surely considered the village idiot when he conceived it 12 years ago, inspired by a Bali vacation. Most men would have been content with a souvenir photograph of a glorious picnic site, reached by hiking through a lush tropical jungle to a promontory over the Ayung River gorge. Gardner knew he had to live there.

The island was just a pit stop en route to Australia for this mad-dog Englishman and his wife, Debbie, when they first visited, scouting new markets for the thriving costume jewelry business he had shifted from London to Hong Kong. (He was a King's Road hippie who became the scarf-clip king of Britain in the early '70s.) But Bali was a siren call. "There isn't another place in the world that has the same magic," says Gardner. "Lots of places have beautiful beaches and palm trees, but then you ask: What next? Bali fulfilled that 'what next' with its culture and spirituality." Of the 13,000 islands in Indonesia, Bali is the only one dominated by the Hindu religion, and the tiny village of Begawan has special significance. According to local legend its dense rainforest was inhabited by wild animals and spirits, formidable enough to deter most mortals but attractive to those in search of wisdom and mystical powers. Three sages founded an ashram there and discovered a sacred spring called Toya Mampeh, whose waters would not run clear if there was any spiritual pollution in the village. Several centuries later, a decade or so ago, the Begawan Giri Estate was built around it.

The property was first intended as a compound of private residences, with surroundings and services befitting a luxury island home. Nobody ever accused Gardner of settling for simple, practical, or conventional living quarters—he'd restored old rectories, vicarages, and manor houses in England—but the logistics of Begawan Giri were daunting. It took three years just to purchase the land, 25 acres of it, negotiated plot by plot with villagers who owned bits and pieces. "You can't have a Western head and buy a piece of land like this," says Gardner. "It's very sensitive, and we needed to understand it. During the first rainy season we watched what the water did so we could make sure it went where it was meant to go." In other words, so they could tell which spots were susceptible to flooding. The initial structure was a bamboo house for the owners and their three sons, built by villagers.



Above, flower-petal water to rinse off a restorative rub made from a mixture of honey and yogurt. Below, tropical fruits for the taking: green tangerines, snakefruit, and mangosteens.



Lolling in one of Begawan Giri's several infinity-edge pools. Facing page: a phalaenopsis orchid accents an entryway.



The Balinese believe that a visitor's presence pleases the gods, and there is a maxim often delivered straight into your eyes when you leave: "Keep Bali inside."



Above, curtains drape the bed in a Wanakasa suite. Below, mat and slippers greet you at the doorway (no shoes allowed).



“You’ve heard of the Swiss Family Robinson? We were the English Family Gardner. We had no running water for bathing and cooking, so six local girls made twelve trips a day down to the spring, without a bead of perspiration.”

Malaysian architect Cheong Yew Kuan was only 29 when he was hired to realize Gardner’s vision, resolving to build nothing formulaic. He even meditated for inspiration at Toya Mampeh with a Balinese healer under a full moon. “There was a constant dialogue with the land,” he says. “It’s easy to be influenced by overseas mentors and transplant their ideas, but I wanted these houses to spring from Bali, to be subjugated to the environment. It’s a fragile and amorphous landscape, and it needed some structure.” The villas were first erected on bamboo platforms and then photographed from a helicopter to determine scale, proportion, and placement, to select the best views and identify how sunlight and breezes affected the rooms. The gardens were planted with 2,500 trees, many chosen for their fragrance, flowers, and fruit: African tulip, mahogany, flamboyant, coffee, avocado, litchi, durian. (The latter, which looks like a spiky football and smells like old gym socks, is reputed to be an aphrodisiac. There’s an Asian aphorism to this effect: “When the durians are down, the sarongs are up.”) In keeping with tradition, no machinery was used on the site. Local workers did everything by hand, and foundations were laid by husband–wife teams: The men dug, and the women pulled up the buckets of earth.

Somewhere along the way, Begawan Giri evolved from private compound to unique refuge for travelers. One does not dare use the word “hotel” in Gardner’s presence. “I’ve done everything I could to *not* make it a hotel,” he says. “I rejected what the industry had to say, flew in the face of every hotelier I met. They know how it’s worked before, but it’s not done from the customer’s perspective. I’d always gone to hotels and thought: Why didn’t they . . . ? You end up in a cookie-cutter box. There are X-number of suites just like it.” The Gardners went on a decade-long international shopping spree before opening for business last year, selecting fourposter beds to be tented with muslin, showerheads the size of hubcaps for indoor–outdoor baths, antique candelabra and tapestries. “I wanted every corner to be a feast for the eyes,” says Gardner. “I wanted to have a ‘Wow!’ factor.”

It is an hour’s drive from the airport at Denpasar into the mountain village of Begawan. (No matter where you are going in Bali, there is only one narrow road, and drivers tend to feel—how shall we say?—confined by a designated lane of traffic, so unless you have a death wish, it’s best to let the natives take the wheel.) A dusty dirt lane with its many desultory chickens and dogs miraculously becomes a paved road lined with sugarcane, banana trees, and whiskery white spider lilies that leads to Begawan Giri’s five “residences,” all known by Indonesian names and comprising a total of 22 suites. (Smoking is prohibited indoors since so much of the place is constructed of exotic woods and would go up like tinder.) There are four or five suites per residence, or villa. The guests of each one share an open-sided sala that serves as living and dining space, a library–TV room, a kitchen for room-service meals, and a slate-tiled infinity-edge pool that seems to extend to the horizon (with water from the sacred

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Heading up a stone pathway, a room-service attendant transports her delivery in the traditional Balinese way.

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spring). The decoration, views, and ambiance of all five villas are distinctive.

Bayugita (Windsong) was built first—a prototype for the rest of the estate, overlooking terraced rice fields and rather properly colonial, evoking the European sensibilities of Bali's early Dutch settlers. Bayugita's buildings are made of a local stone (*paras pila*), with thatched roofs of dried *alang-alang* grasses—all surrounding an interior walkway of steps made from an old tobacco factory. There are blue batiks from Jakarta, rugs from Mongolia and Tibet, a Victorian porcelain toilet painted with flowers. (Gardner admits to a fetish for old British bathroom fixtures, supplied by a dealer in Bath.)

Tirta-Ening (Clear Water), says Gardner, “is where Java meets Zen and chills out.” Inspired by a Javanese palace (Taman Sari), it has a central pavilion made of a golden rock (*batu kuning*) that seems to hover over three lotus ponds, and frangipani trees held upright by bamboo supports, like old men with canes. The stone-and-timber structures are roofed in shingles of *kayu besi*, a hardwood recycled from telegraph poles since it's a protected species. The floors of wide-plank teak required a more serious salvage operation: Gardner found a buried forest, probably the result of some natural disaster, then got permits to excavate the lumber, and processed it in a dry kiln built on the property. There are hand-carved doors, woven leather furniture from the Philippines, panels of fabric with a banana-leaf design. The master suite boasts a Chinese opium bed and a floating bathhouse with a six-ton tub that looks like a large moon rock. “It's a playpen,” admits Gardner.

Tejasuara (Sound of Fire) is masculine and primeval, set in a landscape of lemon grass, decorated in hues of indigo and burgundy, with walls of split bamboo and woven sheets of *merbau* wood. Gardner was obsessed with a milky stone from Sumba, a remote island four days' sail east of Bali. He imported 1,200 tons of it and had 50 trucks waiting at the port to unload it. A massive double staircase hung with seven desiccated water buffalo heads forms the entrance. Large stone slabs serve as paths to the bedrooms. A brazier at the edge of its pool is lit every evening, and the surrounding chaises (some built for two) are made of roughhewn logs. There are beds

of rare black bamboo, tribal textiles, tall drums from Timor, and light fixtures fashioned from antique wooden bowls.

Wanakasa (Forest in the Mist) has the most dramatic perch, built around a holy banyan tree. Offerings are laid daily (some of the employees even leave cigarettes for the spirit residing there). It feels like an opulent tree house, supported by massive columns of *bingkirai* trees nearly two feet in diameter and 30 feet high, the ceilings lined with woven rattan mats from Borneo. In the morning an opaque mist rises from the river some 300 feet below, and the semicircle of the villa's pool echoes the river bend. There are chairs made of tiger bamboo and teak tables with inlays of cinnamon that is crushed and resined, each taking a month to complete.

Umabona (House of the Earth Son) is formal and elaborate, inspired by the palaces of Madjapahit, an Indonesian empire of the 14th and 15th centuries known for its intricate and unrestrained decoration. A river-stone walkway leads to a teak house with breathtaking views of volcanic mountains. There's a terra-cotta temple (*candi*), tiered like a wedding cake, in the middle of a small pool that overflows to a larger pool 30 feet below. An entire floor is devoted to the bathrooms, which have sunken tubs, towering towel racks, and bas-relief walls inspired by the Kama Sutra.

Caveat: Unless you travel with an isolation tank, the sanctum sanctorum of a vacation is compromised by the presence of other people. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the shared villas of Begawan Giri, where the open-air structure means you may be privy to the neighbors' musical tastes, marital strife, and child-rearing techniques. It can't be helped—even Adam and Eve eventually had to share Eden. And the management does try to anticipate special needs with a pre-arrival questionnaire about requests for cribs and babysitters, as well as flower arrangements and dietary restrictions. It's also possible to go for days without seeing another resident.

Since his self-imposed mandate was nothing less than redefining commercial hospitality, Gardner was unwilling to settle for traditional food service. “I didn't want two dozen mango tarts sitting in the freezer,” he says. “I wanted food to be picked and prepared.” The man who leapt to the challenge was David King, a young South African who studied with California culinary

goddess Alice Waters and most recently had cooked at an innovative Thai restaurant in Australia. King's tour de force menu riffs on indigenous ingredients, many grown on the property with organic mulches and fertilizers made by the gardening staff, who will proudly show off the compost heap. Freshwater shrimp and *gurame*, a delicate, sweet fish, are bred in ponds on the estate grounds; free-range poultry and eggs are supplied by villagers whose enterprises are subsidized by Begawan Giri. King buys Tasmanian salmon from a farm that ran at huge losses for years because of the owner's conviction about avoiding vitamins or antibiotics, then grills it with a crisp gingerlike rhizome called galangal. He loves to play with complex, layered flavors: Duck is salted, poached, blanched, dried, and finally seared over charcoal, presented with a minted and pickled cucumber salad. And those mango tarts are made to order, served warm and caramelized like a *Tatin*. Nearly any fresh fruit will be juiced for your breakfast beverage (who knew pineapple juice could taste like . . . pineapple?), and I eat the homemade grape jam (like nothing Welch's ever made) with a spoon. Bi-ji, the striking candlelit open-air restaurant, has tables of etched glass and a long dining bar for communing with the the chef sushi-style. Afternoon tea service is offered in a 150-year-old Javanese house, imported and erected panel by panel on the site. But you can eat anything you want, any time you want, anywhere you want. If you arrive at 3 a.m., jet-lagged and starving, you can have baked beans on toast in your room; or you can take a picnic of crab timbale into the jungle.

The Balinese like to delve into Mother Nature's pharmacopoeia for their body treatments. And there are glorious herbal rubdowns at Begawan Giri's outdoor spa, called The Source, but they're not for the puritanical or less than able-bodied: On an island where native women still walk about bare-breasted, massage tends to address almost every square inch of the body. And while the mountain will come to Mohammed (i.e. massage in the privacy of your own suite), the delightful riverside spa can be reached only by descending 250 stone steps, which are purposely uneven to confuse the demons and, in sections, covered with moss. Huffing and puffing I climbed onto a gauze-draped platform called a bale and submitted to the pleasures of Taksu, a

traditional technique of healing touch. My masseuse, Wati, spoke few words of English, and I doubt she was familiar with rotator cuffs or patellar tendons, but she located and eased my sore spots so adroitly that I tried convincing her to abandon Bali for New York. Sessions with visiting "masters" are available (I declined the "psychic massage" and "healing of the past"), and there are plans for a "Jungle Gym" spread over the property: a series of workout stations fashioned entirely from castoffs of the ironwood used in construction of the villas. (I searched hard to find anything plastic at Begawan Giri, and all I came up with was a shower cap. Even shampoo and body lotion are in chunky stone containers.)

The music accompanying my massage did not come from a CD: Birds in the surrounding trees were singing, a scene worthy of *Fantasia*. (Begawan Giri is something of a bird sanctuary; in fact, the management breeds and frees a local species that has become rare because the natives capture and cage the birds.) But somewhere in the middle distance I could hear a clamor that sounded like picketing Teamsters or village insurrection. It turned out to be the happy noise of whitewater rafting, one of the extracurricular excursions the butler assigned to each residence will cheerfully arrange, if you can bear to tear yourself away from the sybaritic life. I happened to join a large group of Japanese tourists—not a pretty sight, with all of us in the required orange safety vests and helmets. A two-minute instruction course taught me the Japanese words for "forward paddle," "backward paddle," and "We are about to hit a rock" (all conveyed with a universal "boom-boom"). I worried aloud about dropping an oar in the river and becoming useless, dead weight, but the guides are more than capable of manning a raft single-handedly. All of us were quickly soaked to the skin, and one of my fellow passengers even fell overboard, to no great concern—we just fished her out.

The nearby town of Ubud is considered the cultural center of Bali: Its lively crafts market offers anything from glorious ikat fabrics, handwoven and dyed in multihued patterns that were formerly the prerogative of royal families, to the mosquito-repelling incense coils that are lit in your room each evening. The Balinese believe dancing was created by Indra, Lord of the Heavens, for the pleasure of the gods, and their classi-

cal dances are performed in the evening at the outdoor courtyard of Ubud's 16th-century temple. The legong is danced with the hands, neck, and eyes as much as with the feet: Women in gilt costumes move with outstretched arms and trembling fingers, wide eyes darting, accompanied by a gamelan orchestra with cloth-wrapped drums, polished bronze bowls, and something xylophone-ish (there are only five notes in the Balinese scale). It's been said that nothing in Bali is made for posterity since the damp climate is corrosive, but the people are proud of their artistic traditions and eager to impart their skills, as well as to sell. Stop at one of the many shops in Celuk and you will be encouraged to watch the making of the silver jewelry that informs the town's reputation; in Mas, it's woodworking; in Batubulan, stone-carving. But the best way to embrace the true culture of the island is a muddy trek through the rice paddies to the temples—two essential elements of local life.

The Balinese believe that a visitor's presence pleases the gods, and there is a maxim often delivered straight into your eyes when you leave: "Keep Bali inside." It is also a deeply held belief that all the land belongs to the gods, who allow the people to work it, live from it, and enjoy it. This philosophy is embraced by the owners of Begawan Giri. "It's a hippie's dream," says Gardner of his creation, "but it was like climbing up a glacier. What held my sanity was this piece of land. It would not allow us to give up. It's powerful, it has a soul, and the people that are meant to be here are allowed to stay." ■

AIMEE LEE BALL, A NEW YORK-BASED FREELANCE WRITER, WROTE ABOUT THE HOTEL BEL-AIR IN *DEPARTURES'* SPECIAL OCTOBER (CALIFORNIA WE LOVE) ISSUE. *Suite rates (double occupancy): \$475-\$950 per day, including breakfast but excluding 21 percent tax and service charge. Whole residences: \$2,375-\$4,400. Reserve through Resorts Management, Inc.: 800-225-4255. Begawan Giri Estate, Box 54, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia 80571; 62-361-978888; fax 62-361-978889; www.-begawan.com. Singapore Airlines has flights to Denpasar (about an hour's drive from Begawan Giri) from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York—all routed through Singapore; 800-742-3333; www.singaporeair.com. The quintessential book about Balinese culture, "Island of Bali," was written by Mexican painter Miguel Covarrubias in 1937; it is still in print.*