

Extract from Landscape Outlook - Spring Issue 2002
Art and Water in the Bali Landscape by Diana Harden

ART AND WATER IN THE BALI LANDSCAPE

Is this a travel story or a landscape story? Well it's a bit of both. In choosing a holiday destination to please the whole family including one landscape designer, one non-landscape spouse and two male teenage offspring, Bali seemed to offer something for everyone. Bali offers beautiful scenery, fascinating history, endless shops and restaurants and delightful people.

For a self confessed lover of tropical and sub-tropical plants, Bali has many excellent examples of beautifully landscaped gardens, both historical and modern. Many of the large hotels are lavishly landscaped.

An easy and relatively affordable way of getting around the countryside is to hire a car with a driver on daily basis. As luck would have it our driver, Wyn, had good English, an excellent knowledge of places we visited, an interest in plants and gardening and most importantly of a good sense of humour.

Historically water is used extensively in Balinese Hindu temples and royal pleasure gardens. Water was incorporated in temple complexes originally for ritual bathing. The use of

water is decorative and has a cooling effect, which given the tropical climate makes a lot of sense. The Balinese traditionally employed clever engineering skills to capture water and channel water via aqueducts into ornamental fountains. Excellent examples of temples with water features can be seen around Ubud including Gunung Kawi, an 11th Century temple at Tampaksiring with huge shrines cut out of the cliff faces on either side of river valley. If visiting the Sacred Monkey Forest Sanctuary at Padangtegal, Ubud, be sure not to miss the Holy Bathing Temple. The temple is located next to stream and is reached by an amazing intricately carved stone bridge (just don't look at the footings!)

Goa Gajah, or 'Elephant Cave' (11th Century) is a religious complex at Bedulu. The entrance of the cave is

an ornately carved face of a demon, bearing some resemblance to an elephant, hence the name. In the courtyard of the complex are bathing pools with

water gushing from waterspouts held by six female figures. Below the temple courtyard is a contemplative pool beautifully nestled into the valley adjacent to a meditation niche.

What is most striking about Balinese Hindu temples is that they are heavily decorated with stone carvings and decorative features on the temple gateways, walls, fences, shrines, pavements and pavilions. The large and imposing temple at Mengwi, Pura Taman Ayun (1643), the second largest temple in Bali, is well worth a visit. It is set in pleasant gardens and is lavishly decorated with carved stone statues. According to our driver, a king who hated ants built the temple. To prevent ants entering the temple, he surrounded the temple complex with a wide moat. The inner temple courtyard is surrounded by a moat also.

Water features were a prominent part



Goa Gajah



Goa Gajah

of the Royal Compounds. An interesting example can be found at Tirtagangga in east Bali, with an extensive network of ponds and fountains.

Having seen some of the historical uses of water and temple decoration, it was now time see how tradition has influenced the modern garden design in Bali. This was best done by visiting some of the deluxe resort hotels. The traditional use of carvings, decoration and architecture has been translated onto the design of the modern hotels. Beautiful ceramic water jars, stone carvings, decorative bridges, lanterns, vine covered pergolas and water features are used extensively. Open sided pavilions seen in temple complexes and in family compounds are found in the design of hotels lobbies, restaurants and elements within the landscape. Open sided structures are eminently suited to our climate as outdoor living spaces. Thatched roofs complete the look. Thatch is readily available in Australia and is much cooler than corrugated iron or polycarbonate roofing materials.

The westerners' love affair with Bali began in 1930's in Sanur near the capital Denpasar. Sanur is now a popular tourist destination with many beautifully landscaped resort hotels. The gardens at the Bali Hyatt at Sanur were originally planted in 1973. In 1981 the gardens were renovated by an Australian, Michael White, known in Bali as Made Wijaya, and his associate Ketut Marsa. Tropical foliage plants are planted in sweeping abstract swathes of various coloured and texture foliage and flowering plants. Signature plants are *Bougainvillea*, Frangipani, *Hibiscus*, *Cordyline*, *Codiaeum*, *Syngonium*, *Rhoeo*, *Alpinia*, *Alocasia*, *Philodendron*, palms and ferns. Many plants introduced for the Bali Hyatt are now

seen extensively in Bali. Pools and ponds are an important feature of the landscape design. The Bali Hyatt run garden tours once a week.

Many of these plants grow very well in many parts of Australia. Other plants which grow successfully in Australia and give the look (including indigenous plants and other drought hardy plants) are: rainforests trees and shrubs such as Lilly Pillies, *Cupaniopsis anacardioides*, *Glochidion ferdinandi*; palms like *Howea forsteriana* and *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*; tree ferns *Dicksonia sp* and *Cyathea sp* as well as Birds Nest Ferns, *Cordyline stricta*, *Cordyline petiolaris*, Giant Mondo, *Liriope* 'Evergreen Giant', *Aspidistra elatior*, *Ctenanthe lubbersiana* (& others of the *Maranta* family), *Doryanthes excelsa*, *Crinum pedunculatum*, *Canna* 'Tropicana', *Phormium cvs.*, gingers.....the list goes on.

The architecture and landscape design of the Four Seasons Hotel in Ubud, responds superbly to its dramatic location on a hillside of a steep valley. Entry to the hotel is at roof level via a wooden footbridge. A shallow pond covers the roof, reflecting the surrounding landscape and taking advantage of the superb views. Rice paddies on the steep hillside opposite become borrowed landscape for the hotel. The landscaping is simple and modern relying on massed plantings of foliage plants and incorporating rice paddies into the landscape design. A single row of bamboo has been planted to provide a narrow screen to block unpleasant views from either

side of the long driveway from the road to the reception area. This clever device is used often where space is at a premium.

Other hotels worth a visit near Ubud are The Amandari and The Chedi.

South of Kuta, on the limestone Bukit Peninsular, the climate is hotter and drier than elsewhere on Bali. Landscaping at the Four Seasons Hotel at Jimabaran has been designed in response to this climate and geology with plant selection of local species supplemented with others suited to the semi-arid location. The



Four Seasons Hotel, Jimabaran

local limestone is used extensively in walling and paving. Local carvings and huge water jars are used to good effect creating careful compositions. Pots placed at the base of trees are used to conceal light fittings to uplift trees for dramatic night-time effect. Water plays an important role in the landscape, with swimming pools, waterfalls and cascades meandering down the hillside to meet the sea. Each villa has its own private pool. Plants such as *Plumeria*, *Agave*, *Dracaena* and *Cycad* are used for their sculptural qualities. *Russelia equisetiformis* is everywhere. This is a very useful plant, being drought tolerant, easy to propagate and blending well with tropical plants and Australian native shrubs and grasses. An interesting paving detail is very popular where the local limestone (this would translate well into sandstone) is laid as regular square

paving with a random crazy pave border.

Ornamental grasses are used to create differing seasonal effects. Grasses are hugely popular here in Australia both for re-vegetation projects and for ornamental use, the most reliable being *Dianella cvs.*, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, *Poa labillardieri*, *Isolepis nodosa*, *Carex appressa*, *Juncus usitatus* and of course the ubiquitous *Lomandra*.



Nusa Dua



Ritz Carlton

Not far away is the Ritz Carlton, a newer, more formally designed and very opulent resort. The long entry driveway is bordered with clipped bougainvillea in full flower, effectively screening any unpleasant views. Water is used extensively. From a reflection pool just beyond the open foyer it cascades down the hillside through a series of formal ponds. The influence of the traditional royal pleasure gardens and temple sculptural waterspouts is a recurring element throughout. The differing moods of the water features move the visitor from the lobby down a central walkway flanked by formal geometric ponds and terminate at calm reflection ponds. Open sided pavilions look onto this area for contemplation and relaxation. Decorative pots and sculptural plants are used here to

good effect. One very stunning and memorable planting combined grey leaved palm underplanted with massed green *Liriope*, *Zephyranthes candida* and *Rhoeo*.

The huge resort/convention complexes at Nusa Dua are interesting to visit from a landscape designer's point of view, but you would miss out on experiencing the real Bali by staying there. Of the resorts visited the Grand Hyatt had an impressive entry foyer, with unusual pale green stone paving, simple ponds and dramatic water jar ornaments. The planting is very colourful, with bands of massed foliage texture and flower colour although the serpentine watercourse created with artificial rock somehow seemed a bit dated.

Waterbom Park, a water-slide theme park in Kuta proved to be biggest surprise of the holiday. With beautiful gardens, pools and ponds, an assortment of shade trees, lush foliage concealing the water slide towers and the sound of cascading water effectively screening out the noise of the heavy Kuta traffic it created a real oasis in a sea of chaos.

What can be learnt from all this? First it shows us that 'tropical landscaping' has grown into a sophisticated and elegant style far beyond the sad local interpretations of a line of awful Cocos palms. For much of Australia, where living in the garden is possible six months of the year it can provide inspiration for beautiful pavilions that provide cooling shade in our summer heat. Balinese gardens filled with colourful foliage plants remind us of the foolishness of a planting plan

that considers flowers and their colour at the expense of varied form and leaves that hold their colour all year round. We can look to sources of art and sculpture just as beautiful as those more reminiscent of our European past.

Most of all we can see water used in every way, from cool contemplative pools that fill us with peace and stillness to the excitement of roaring and gushing cascades and falls.

Water that fills our senses just like the call of far away temple bells or the touch of a sensual Balinese massage.

Diana Harden

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