

Totally devoted

A snail's pace while holidaying brings enlightenment

With some places, just being there is enough and Villa Sungai in Bali is such a place. While there recently, I was reflecting on this in the outdoor bath (too much information, I know) as I watched small birds flit around in the jungle canopy and observed the clouds floating by.

My wife did complain that the toilet croaked when she flushed it but this signified an amphibian presence, which added to the allure as far as I was concerned. My son was chuffed to find a large snail attempting to join him when he bathed.

Villa Sungai's setting is lush and, as well as the local villagers, your neighbours are monitor lizards, a plethora of bird species, squirrels and various other creatures. Add the bucolic symphony of roosters crowing, cattle lowing and pigs squealing, and the soundtrack of this rural retreat is complete.

Villa Sungai and its little sister, Sungai Gold, exist side by side on the banks of the Penet River adjacent to the village of Cepaka in Tabanan province, Bali. This location is not on your tourist map but is near well-known spots such as the hipster surfers' enclave of Canggu. The popular resort strip of Seminyak, with its trendy restaurants and excellent shopping, is 30 minutes away by car but longer if there's traffic, which there increasingly is in Bali nowadays.

There's none around Villa Sungai, however. Here, all is peaceful, and lounging, waited on hand and foot, is the order of the day.

The Balinese are Hindus, devout folk whose daily lives centre on their temples and devotional life. This credo affects all areas of their lives and they seem naturally attuned to service, which is no doubt one of the reasons

why they are so successful in the realm of tourism.

There's nothing servile about them, however, as they approach hospitality almost prayerfully. So it is at Villa Sungai where general manager Made and his team soon seem like family. The staff are on duty 24/7 (press a buzzer and someone appears) and you have a driver available at all times for sightseeing.

Chef Wayan will cook whatever you choose from an extensive menu (breakfast and nightly canapes are included; for other meals, you only pay for the ingredients), which includes a Balinese degustation dinner featuring local delicacy suckling pig, carved at your table.

There are various spa treatments available, or you can simply lounge by the 18m-long horizon pool that seems to spill effortlessly into the river valley below.

Subtle luxury is the order of the day and Villa Sungai was named best overseas boutique property 2010 in *Luxury Travel* magazine's Gold List. It's a secret hidden deep in the heart of Bali where villa accommodation is now all the rage.

Getting there is easy as it's only 45 minutes from the airport, while a VIP butler service is offered to streamline the process of arrival and departure.

If you don't want to venture too far from your comfort zone, your driver will take you to the nearby town of Kediri where you can shop for batik with the locals.

A late afternoon stroll through Cepaka with views out across the rice paddies is also highly recommended.

At night, ensconced behind mosquito netting, you fall asleep to the sounds of the jungle-fringed river



LAP OF LUXURY ... take a dip in Villa Sungai's 18m pool, relax indoors or enjoy chef Wayan's fare

At night, ensconced behind mosquito netting, you fall asleep to the sounds of the jungle-fringed river – it's all very Somerset Maugham.

The owner, Gold Coast-based Pamela Hayes, has created a heavenly haven that could only exist on the island of Bali. *Eat, Pray, Love* wasn't filmed here, but maybe it should have been.

VILLA SUNGAI from \$1000 per night; Sungai Gold from \$600 per night per room. www.bali-villasungai.com

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