



On an island  
geared to  
honeymooning  
couples,  
we found a  
different kind  
of romance.

by  
Ashley Mateo  
and  
Kaitlin Menza

photographs by  
River Jordan

# THE TWO OF US

## are soaking in a private tub

overlooking the muddy brown rush of Bali's Ayung River.

It's Valentine's Day. Pin-wheels of lime and orange slices float on the surface of the steamy water, alongside shredded ginger, stalks of lemongrass, and crystals of sea salt. The water, spiked with shakti oil, feels even better than it looks. The only hiccup came before we stepped into the tub, when the spa attendant handed us robes, slippers, and disposable black panties so we could go topless. "Um, do we have to?" Ashley asked the attendant, who stared.

It was too complicated to explain that we are not lovers, not newlyweds—just two best friends trying to take a scented dip together. Though we've been privy to each other's highest highs and lowest lows, being naked together in what is basically a bowl of pho is not something we're interested in. The attendant gave a little shrug.

We met six years ago as coworkers in New York City, our similarities immediately apparent: We're both former cheerleaders who grew up near the Jersey Shore, ambitious and adventurous and very single. Travel is a spiritual imperative for both of us. We started exploring the world together with a trip to Thailand in 2014, and now we're constantly debating our next destination. At 11 P.M. one night last summer, a flight deal to Jakarta arrived in Kaitlin's inbox. The turquoise waters and dramatic Buddhist temples made Indonesia seem an ideal way to unplug from everything. For single people, Bali tends to get pinned to that "One Day, When I'm Not Alone" board. But Ashley said, "Why wait?" and the 10,000-mile journey was booked by 1 A.M.

We went all out on accommodations: a private villa with its own pool in Yogyakarta, on the island of Java; a bamboo tree house in Bali's cultural capital of Ubud; and

a beachside bungalow on the island oasis of Gili Air.

The best part: Even the most luxurious-looking places were just \$40 per night each. Any of these spots would have been ideal for consummating a new marriage; instead, we used them to celebrate our freedom and our friendship. And by the end of our too-short journey—six days packed with long talks, travel snafus, early morning temple visits, meals with locals kind enough to share their stories and food, many Bintang beers, and yes, that Valentine's Day soak—we'd relearned one simple yet important truth. Love—and the romance that comes with it—isn't reserved for one person. Friends are great loves too. We don't know what the future holds, but we know we'll be traveling together long after someone puts a ring on it.



## INDONESIA TRAVEL 101

- The country's major international airport is Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta.

- From there, short flights—often as cheap as \$30—connect you to spots like Bali's Ubud or Java's Yogyakarta.

- May, June, and July have the least humid weather and temps in the 80s.

- Tickets are cheaper during the off-season. For example, we went during rainy February and they were only \$623.

- Fast ferry boats operate between many of the islands. Buy tix in person; online prices can be wrong or confusing.

We are both chronic overschedulers in our NYC lives. The trip, like this day in Gili Air, gave us (Kaitlin, left; Ashley, right) the luxury of unplanned time.

**Below:** We met Wayan walking through the Tegalalang rice terraces outside Ubud. He invited us to his home for a song and coconut milk.



"WE HAD COME TO EXPERIENCE THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT WE ENCOUNTERED IN OUR DAILY LIVES."

## UBUD

With hot springs, luxurious spas, and cafés with ultra-fresh menus, Ubud is Bali's healthy nirvana.

### See and Do

#### TIBUMANA WATERFALL

Reached via jungle path, it's quieter than the more popular Tegenungan. Swim up to the falls and check out the cove.

#### FIVELEMENTS

The healthy living retreat where we simmered in our bath à deux also has vegan food and yoga. [fivelements.org/en](http://fivelements.org/en)

### Eat and Drink

#### WARUNG SOPA

An open-air restaurant with vegetarian dishes. Order the strawberry juice. [warungsopa.com](http://warungsopa.com)

#### LAMAK

The drink menu is decadent—try the rosé sangria. [lamakbali.com](http://lamakbali.com)



### Tree-House Living

The Firefly lodge in Ubud has multiple options at [airbnb.com/wishlists/6574234](https://airbnb.com/wishlists/6574234).

Here, an outdoor shower on the property.





## YOGYAKARTA

The star of Yogyakarta is the Kraton, the walled-in complex that is the traditional and current royal palace of the sultans.

### See and Do

#### BOROBUDUR

You can beat the majority of tourists at the largest Buddhist temple in Indonesia by paying extra for sunrise entry at 4:30 A.M.

#### TAMAN SARI

Here you'll find a complex of pools, tunnels, and an underground mosque built for a sultan in the 1700s.

### Eat and Drink

#### KOPI LUWAK COFFEE

Try the coffee made from beans digested in the stomach of a *luwak*, a catlike Indonesian animal. Pro tip: One tiny cup is like a double shot of espresso.

#### TEMPO GELATO

This stone-and-glass "temple" offers local gelato flavors like guava and dragon fruit. [facebook.com/tempogelato](http://facebook.com/tempogelato)

#### OXEN FREE

This former medical clinic turned moto-themed beer garden has live music. [oxenfree.net](http://oxenfree.net)

Opposite: A moment of Zen near our Airbnb in Ubud. Below: From the top of Borobudur, you get a 360-degree view of the Kedu Plain, known as the sacred garden of Java.

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE PERFECT MOMENTS THAT MADE US  
WONDER WHY WE PUSH OURSELVES SO HARD.



"WE HAD STOPPED PLANNING OUR TRAVEL WITH THE GHOSTS OF OUR FUTURE HUSBANDS HANGING OVER US."



## GILI AIR

Pony-drawn buggies greet you at the ferry on this volcanic island, where no cars are allowed.

### See and Do

#### GILI LUMBUNG

It's the only place on Gili Air with an ocean swing. Stop by when the tide is out to get A+ Instagram pics. Search *Gili Lumbung* for info.

#### MANDALABLUE YOGA

The classes are taught in a seafront studio, and they also offer stand-up paddle-board yoga lessons. [mandalablueyoga.com](http://mandalablueyoga.com)

### Eat and Drink

#### THE MEXICAN KITCHEN

Potent margaritas, solid Mexican food, and fresh smoothies on Bintang Beach. [facebook.com/gilimexicankitchen](http://facebook.com/gilimexicankitchen)

#### PACHAMAMA

Everything at this vegetarian villa/restaurant is made on the premises; try the toast with nut butter and banana. [facebook.com/pachamamagiliair](http://facebook.com/pachamamagiliair)

#### YAHUUUT

It may look like a convenience shop, but it serves great local Indonesian fare. [yahuuutvillage.com](http://yahuuutvillage.com)

Above: A local fisherman took us out on his boat for an afternoon of snorkeling in Gili Air. Bottom: View of the volcanic island of Lombok from our boat ride.

