

Pilgrim's paradise

Nicki Grihault explores the heart of Bali on the *Eat, Pray, Love* film trail



This image: Nicki prays at Tirta Empul temple. Below: *Eat, Pray, Love* author Liz Gilbert



Clockwise from left: a view of the beautiful rice terrace fields in Pajung, Ubud; a Balinese dance performance at Cafe Lotus; Julia Roberts in Bali, where she converted to Hinduism; peaceful luxury at the Uma Ubud hotel; one of Ubud's many Hindu temples; a tranquil gorge near Ubud



Barefoot, cross-legged and wearing a lacy white shirt with a batik sarong, I prayed in front of a basket of offerings. I was dressed in the traditional style of Balinese women and, like them, I was performing my devotions before a little collection of colourful flowers, leaves and grasses at the 10th-century water temple of Tirta Empul.

Guarded by a large statue of Indra, the god of rain, thunder, war and fertility, I joined pilgrims from all over Bali near the town of Ubud for a water purification ritual that's prescribed by traditional healers for stress, troubled minds and bad dreams.

I held my hands above my head in prayer while I was guided through a sequence of Hindu incantations, first praying to my own spirit, then the God of the sun, next Indra, and finally, to all God manifestations.

Located in the middle of the 2,000-mile-long Indonesian archipelago with the largest Muslim population on earth, it's easy to see why the Hindu enclave of Bali is known as 'The Island of the Gods'. Indian Hinduism, which arrived via Java in the 16th century, governs daily activities here, and life is a constant cycle of offerings and rituals, with harmony and balance central to Balinese culture.

life-changing personal odyssey and ended up falling in love. 'Ubad' means 'medicine' in Balinese, and the town of Ubud is named after the medicinal plants that grow wild in its forests. With its raw food cafes, yoga centres and New Age shops advertising everything from crystal healing to ecstatic dance courses, this small artists' community has long attracted spiritual seekers. It certainly seduced Julia Roberts, who plays Liz in the film of the book (on general release now) – she declared Ubud her favourite place in the world on *Oprah*.

The film's location team had come to the Tirta Empul temple to check it out for filming, but I was the only Westerner for purification that day. As I dunked my head under each of eight spouting gargoyles, representing the God manifestations, I repeated an intention. Visitors can choose whatever intention they like, and I'd decided mine would be to value myself more.

SPIRITUAL HEALING

Purified, the priest then led us into the inner temple for prayers, where I sipped holy water from my hand and pressed grains of rice to my forehead – symbolic gestures akin to the Christian taking of bread and wine.

My spiritual journey in Ubud, like Liz's, had begun with a visit to Ketut Liyer, a famous seventh-generation medicine man, who teaches Liz how to meditate alongside her yoga practice. But Ketut, of an indeterminate age between 60 and 105, was in hospital when I arrived, irrepressibly reading the nurses' fortunes, according to his daughter, who showed me the tiny porch where he performs readings within view of the family temple.

Luckily, Wayan Nuriasih, the other Balinese healer central

to Liz's story, was doing spiritual body readings when I arrived at her shop-cum-cafe, Balinese Traditional Healing Center. As I waited to be seen, I sipped on a series of health-giving drinks to calm my mind and prepare my body for a reading. First, I was served a freshly grated turmeric, honey and lime juice to cleanse my blood, next, a cure-all tea with ginseng, and finally, a murky moss-coloured Coleus leaf tea from India, for my stomach.

Wayan was busy examining an Australian woman right next to me (there isn't much privacy in her establishment). 'You must lose weight,' she told her directly, tossing her lustrous black hair, which reaches down to her waist. 'And if no boyfriend, use banana!'

On that bombshell, it was my turn to be examined. Wayan poked about, taking the pulse in my leg, reading my palm and shining a torch into my eyes and mouth. Her final diagnosis covered everything from vitamin deficiencies to my level of reincarnation (six times) and how many people would fall in love with me (also six, which cheered me up). Then I was directed upstairs, where I changed into a sarong to have my back, chest and arms scrubbed with betel nut leaves by – and this was a bit of a shocker – three young men. This was to 'rebalance me'.

Liz Gilbert regularly ate the delicious US\$6 multi-vitamin lunch special here, declaring it 'the best food in Ubud'. As I tucked in, I read the labels explaining each food's healing effect. There was calcium-rich tofu tempeh satay for

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strong bones and teeth; bean sprouts and seaweed with vitamin E for healthy hair and soft skin; and papaya with vitamin A to boost eyesight and digestion, among others.

WELLBEING BOOST

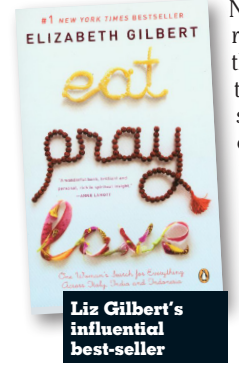
Walking out a few hours later with an eclectic selection of remedies, I felt a lot better than when I walked in. I was clutching packets of herbal and vitamin pills (for anything from boosting a poor memory to promoting younger-looking skin), along with a bottle of holy water to dab on my head at night. My knees were covered in plasters soaked with a strengthening herbal tincture, and I had betel nut leaves tucked down my trousers to warm and balance my hara (the centre of gravity just below your navel).

I, like the film crew, stayed at the lovely thatched-roofed Uma Ubud hotel set in a tranquil spot

on the fringes of town. I took full advantage of the free yoga classes in the mornings, held in an open-air pavilion in front of a jungle-like ravine that trilled with birdsong. Sometimes, as I tucked into an al-fresco breakfast of ricotta cheese hotcakes with grilled banana, dried cranberry and walnuts, I'd see a Balinese woman praying over an offering on a shrine. Spirituality seemed to be in the ether here.

This was confirmed by Lacey Hall, the nutritionist at Como Shambhala, a luxurious retreat centre that takes its wellbeing very seriously. 'Anything can happen in Ubud,' she told me over a healthy lunch at the retreat's restaurant, Glow. 'The place has such strong spiritual energy.'

Later, after a Stress Reliever juice and a spelt flour pizza, I was wrapped in a Balinese full-body spice mask, bathed in a frangipani flower bath and kneaded in →





a traditional Indonesian massage. It was all I needed to slip into a meditative state.

Keen to retain my inner peace, the next morning I left the bustle of Ubud behind and took a cycle trip into the surrounding hills, as Liz did daily. It was the 'waiting season', and near the village of Bentuyung, the lime-green rice paddies backed by coconut palms (filmed for the *Eat, Pray, Love* movie) weren't yet ready for harvest.

THE GRAND FINALE

The Balinese joke that men are like dogs, always lazing around, and women like chickens, pecking about, always busy. Women can be seen here scrubbing clothes in the river, transporting wares on their heads, zipping along on the back of mopeds while balancing trays of offerings, and emerging from their homes with rice and coconut to feed the gods.

I teetered back to Ubud along dirt paths between rice fields, surprised to pass artists selling paintings from shacks and, in the middle of nowhere, Warung Bodag Maliah, a popular organic cafe.

On another morning, I took a walk through the rice fields under the gaze of the sacred volcano, Mount Batur. A team of ducks were devouring insects and fertilising one of the fields in preparation for planting. Ducks are an important part of the life cycle in Bali, and when their work is done, they're dished up as the local speciality.

Smoked duck was on the menu at Cafe Lotus, where Julia Roberts had dined, and where I watched the restaurant's nightly Balinese dance performance across a lotus pond lit by oil lamps. Men in hot



Clockwise from left: a mischievous macaque monkey; elaborately dressed dancers in a forest temple; worshippers at the Grand Ceremony



pink played traditional golden gamelan instruments, as women in elaborate costumes curled their hands, shifted their eyes and tilted their head in movements of religious significance, a burning incense stick in their headdresses.

I, like Liz on her travels, was also lucky enough to stumble upon a religious ceremony on the island. My final day in Ubud was a new moon and the main day of the 11-day Pedudusan Agung (Grand Ceremony), which hadn't been performed here for 20 years. I fell into step with a man wearing a traditional turban, tied at the front like a knotted handkerchief, a frangipani flower tucked behind his ear. He was holding a sacrificial duck tied with a golden brocade in a procession all dressed in white (the holy colour). They were heading for the first temple in the Sacred Monkey Forest Sanctuary, an ecological reserve and temple complex in Ubud.

This rare ceremony for villagers revitalises the temples' spiritual energy by appeasing the gods of lakes, mountains and seas. It also realigns the universe, whose axis is thought to be tilting, resulting in earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, wars and chaos.

The gamelan orchestra burst into life along with singing and dancing, as the sacrificial duck entered the temple. A bearded priest wearing chunky gold rings and a red and gold headdress was ringing a bell,

and children as young as four sat obediently with their mothers and grandmothers, their tiny hands clasped in prayer. Next came women with 'tower offerings' – fruit and palm leaves to represent the Tree of Life – in goblet-shaped baskets on their heads.

At another temple in the heart of the forest, prepubescent dancers made up like mini Cleopatras spilled in and out of the towering ancient walls, using them like wings in a theatre. Watching over all this were live macaque monkeys with faces like bearded old men, getting up to mischief around the temple walls.

One chased a shrieking tourist along the path, trying to snatch her water bottle. Despite their troublemaking, monkeys are believed to be the sacred holy soldiers of the Hindu deity Rama, led by the monkey god Hanuman.

The Grand Ceremony was a spectacular grand finale to my Balinese pilgrimage. As my taxi driver, Mustika, drove me to the airport, he made an observation about island life: 'Everything comes in threes in Bali: the Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; the stars, moon and sun; animals, trees and people; and prayers, three times a day.'

And eat, pray, love, I thought to myself. That's another trio he can add to the list. **SPIRIT&DESTINY**

TRAVELLER'S CHECKS

STARRY NIGHTS

There's a feast of astrological and gastronomic delights available at The Boulders Resort & Golden Door Spa in Arizona, USA. As well as indulgent treatments and shamanic experiences, the desert spa offers a Dining With The Stars Dinner on the autumn and spring equinoxes and summer solstice. The five-course meal takes place in the Boulders' organic garden under the night sky, with a talk and Q&A session with astrologer Tom McMullan. The menu is created especially by McMullan and the Boulders chef, using seasonal produce and according to the positions of the planets. It's all washed down with organic wines. The dinner costs US\$95 (£62). See www.theboulders.com

RAW FOOD DETOX

Discover a healthier way to live on a raw food detox from 14-21 November in Mallorca. You'll start each day with yoga or a mountain walk, and nourish your body with enzyme-rich juices and raw or 'living' foods, such as germinated seeds and sprouts, wild green herbs, wheatgrass, algae and other veg. Educational talks, a massage or body

treatment, and a spa afternoon are also included. The retreat is run by Beverley Pugh, a reiki master, rebirther, life coach and living-foods chef, and the accommodation is in an 18th-century manor house. The week costs from €1,389 (£1,165), including all food and activities, excluding flights. For further dates in 2011, see www.spa-in-spain.es



Boost your energy with 'living' foods

BUS IT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Visiting the Middle East just got easier with the launch of the new Falafel Bus (departures start February 2011). The hop-on, hop-off service offers a series of passes for Egypt, Jordan and Israel, from £350 for 15 days' travelling. So if you fancy a dip in the Dead Sea, a trip to the Pyramids or a camel ride around the ruins of Petra, check the website for routes – see www.falafelbus.com

FACT FILE

• Virgin HIP Hotels (www.vhiphotels.co.uk; 0844-573 2460) offers a seven-night B&B package at Uma Ubud hotel, Bali, from £1,259 per person sharing. This includes flights with Malaysia Airlines departing from London Heathrow, private transfers and a one-hour

Como Shambhala/Indonesian Massage or set lunch per person. Bookable activities at the resort include the purification ceremony at the water temple and palm readings with Ketut Liyer (£17-25).

• Body readings with Wayan Nuriasih cost US\$25, plus US\$15 for medicines. Find her healing centre at No 5 Jalan Jembawan, Ubud.