

# A House In Bali

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Westerners started building houses in Bali about 80 years ago and since then have been melding elements from east and west in their tropical homes. But the way the Balinese traditionally use rooms can be very different to ours. It's interesting to observe what westerners expect a bathroom, kitchen, dining room and bedroom to be, what Balinese are comfortable with and what the Balinese think westerners want -- three very different visions of what makes a safe and comfortable home.

This picture recently appeared on FaceBook. I thought it was a fascinating window into what a local builder understood to be selling points in Bali's burgeoning housing market. There are so many elements to a house, so many expectations; it's easy to fall into the cultural chasms between each one.

(A word about nice chickens. I do think that a nice chicken around the place is indeed an important feature. I have a Rhode Island Red hen named Mabel who will not only sit companionably on my lap but often produces an egg for my breakfast. Chickens that are not nice decline to lay eggs and scratch up the exotic vegetable seedlings in the garden. Not-nice chickens make excellent curry.)

"Balinese generally live out doors and do not place as much emphasis on interiors as we from cold climates do," pointed out author Diana Darling who has spent over 30 years living in Bali, often at the village level. Diana's magical novel 'The Painted Alphabet', based on an epic Balinese poem and offering many insights into traditional daily life, is available at Ganesha Books and Periplus.

The typical Balinese extended family compound is still built according to ancient protocols. "The compound could be described as a curled-up foetus," explains Rucina Ballinger, another 30-year resident. "The head will always be located in the easternmost corner facing the mountains and the feet in the south west. The head is considered holy and so is oriented to Mount Agung, and the ritually unclean feet in the opposite direction. The compound temple and ritual bale are closest to Mount Agung, and the kitchen and bathroom are at the other side of the compound. The sleeping and living spaces are in between."

The entire compound may be built based on measurements taken from the length of the original male owner's foot, his footsteps being seen as the microcosm of a macrocosm. The compounds are hereditary, being passed down through the male line of the family. But the land is owned by the village and cannot be sold except in exceptional circumstances. So the Balinese family compound is a tradition that will continue to endure at the vortex of rapid change.

When a Balinese builds a room or house for a foreigner to rent, he will usually

adapt his traditional understanding of each room to what he sees as the foreigner's very strange ways.

Bad rooms. It's kind of a nice concept to have a special room to be bad in, either with another consenting adult or just as a place to while away a lazy afternoon with a trashy novel and a glass of whiskey when you're supposed to be doing something else. (We all have different ideas of what constitutes badness. I have already confided in this column that mine is eating bacon; I trust most of my readers are able to trump this with something more exciting.) And to have two or three bad rooms presumably provides for different types of badness... Ah, bedrooms, you say.

Balinese sons bring their wives into the family compound when they marry and their sons do the same, so a family with many sons will, in a few generations, have a very crowded compound. Each freestanding bedroom in the compound will house a son, his wife and their children. Here the nuclear family and any valuables can be securely locked up at night. Often it's the only private place in a busy family compound which may be home to up to 40 people, often including a tyrannical mother-in-law. Children share their parent's sleeping quarters until the age of about seven. If there's enough room, the children may have their own sleeping rooms or share with their cousins but if the compound is very crowded, they may continue to sleep in their parent's room for many years. This intimacy requires that conjugal relations be conducted with extreme discretion.

And the bedroom windows and doors will likely be tightly closed all night. The Balinese usually like to sleep in shut-up rooms which are secure against marauding spirits, thieves and other things that go bump in the night. Security trumps airflow every time, which explains small windows that only open from the bottom and the absence of screens and security bars that would let a breeze-starved westerner leave them open all night. "Indonesians in general don't like any breeze, whether it is open windows in the bedroom at night or an open car window while driving," says Rucina, who leads unique cultural tours of Bali. ([www.balispirit.com/tours/bali\\_tour\\_dhyana.html](http://www.balispirit.com/tours/bali_tour_dhyana.html)). This may be a hold-over from old tradition or fear of spirits, and is often described as a fear of masuk angin, or 'wind entering'. Ask your Balinese friends for an explanation of this, I've never been able to get a straight answer.

Sleeping alone is considered very bizarre behavior. When I lived in Singapore, the local young women who worked in my office expressed dismay that I would sleep all alone in a big house. When they came to visit, they told me that if they lived there they would all sleep in the same bedroom, for company. Maybe even in the same bed. These were Chinese, Indian and Malays, so the sentiment against solitary slumber seems to be broadly based in Asia.

Kitchens are another room viewed very differently by our different cultures. A Balinese kitchen, another separate building, is often a dark and smoky place. "Traditionally the peeling, chopping, grinding and other preparations were done on a chopping block while squatting outside where the light was better, and only the

actual cooking took place inside," Diana remembers. "Even up to the end of the 20th century, the Balinese still thought it remarkable that we would have a kitchen right inside our houses and stand up to prepare food."

Balinese kitchens should have a *bungut paon* (mouth of the kitchen) with a traditional wood-burning stove, even if this is only used for ceremonies. Some families still use wood stoves instead of gas or kerosene. And each nuclear family in a compound will have its own kitchen if space permits; the women consider this more important than a separate sleeping room for the children.

Balinese kitchens are often kept locked up at night. "I'm not sure why this is -- perhaps because it's the women's domain," mused Rucina. "Maybe it's a safe place to hide a bit of cash from the men of the house." I know that when I built my house, Wayan insisted that I keep the pantry locked at night. "Poison," she intoned darkly without further explanation. As the kitchen is the first room that visitors pass (and they say that any bad thoughts they might harbor will be 'burned off' by God Brahma, it's also the place where a visitor could place something unwanted, such as a spell...or poison.) As time went on I forgot to lock the door at night and eventually lost the key, without disastrous results.

Balinese compounds don't have dining rooms. The women shop for and prepare the day's food in the morning and it's left out under covers for the members of the family to help themselves to when they're hungry. People come and serve a plate of food and go off somewhere alone to eat it quickly; the Balinese don't talk while they eat. They don't share our cultural habit of the family gathering around the dining table to chat over dinner. In fact, our concept of a dinner party is very alien to the Balinese. When invited to a Balinese house for dinner, all the socializing is done before the meal is served. When the food appears, people eat quickly and then go home.

What constitutes full furniture from a Balinese perspective? They traditionally sit on the floor. They used to sleep on simple beds of wooden planks and a woven mat without pillows. In the past, clothes were stored in baskets, with the husband's clothing stored higher than the wife's and women's underwear at the lowest level. So chairs, beds, tables and even cupboards are quite new ideas.

Perhaps no other room in the house is regarded so differently by our cultures than the bathroom. In the temperate west where many foreigners have roots, long cold winters make a cosy and pleasant bathroom a very attractive option. Many of us remember the out-houses of our grandparents and are very grateful for modern plumbing and heated floors.

The Balinese think we spend a ludicrous amount of design attention and expense on the little room (*kamar kecil*) that is seen here as the least worthy of respect. Anyone who's visited a Balinese compound will soon realize that this is the least regarded room in the house and one in which the least possible time will be spent. Because cosmology requires that bathrooms be located in the southwest of the land, our concept of ensuite bathrooms -- indeed, having a toilet under the same

roof as the kitchen and bedroom -- is considered most strange. (So, by the way, is our use of toilet paper.)

Toilets as such were unknown until fairly recently. In many Balinese compounds, a bathroom was only installed in the past few decades with funds from the government. Until the 1970s and even today in some areas, everything we do in a bathroom was done in the closest river, in genial groups. So even though the Balinese don't traditionally socialize over a family dinner, they will gather to relieve themselves in the river together with great conviviality. If there was no river nearby, other options included the closest stand of banana trees.

The late Dr A A Jelantik, a descendent of the royal house of Karangasam, describes his experience as a boy at school in the 1930s in his autobiography 'The Birthmark'. "In Denpasar there was no running water system... there were ditches in the pigsties serving as toilets and the pigs cleaned up everything... we children were frightened to enter the yard and preferred to defecate squatting on the high mud wall with our backs towards the hungry animals." Similar backyard systems exist in Goa, India, where pork is also a popular menu item -- an excellent example of recycling.

So Balinese, especially elders, may well look astonished when we fuss about the colour of the toilet, paint and tile of our kamar kecil. My staff continue to marvel that I use my bathroom as a gallery, so that my visitors and I have something interesting to look at while we are sitting around. Tamu are SO strange.

When Balinese build houses for westerners, they often automatically incorporate their own expectations of what a room needs to be. This cultural element often makes for very closed-in rooms that separate us sun-and-breeze hungry foreigners from the very elements we came here to enjoy. And this leads me to my greatest puzzle. The Balinese spend much of their free time lounging outdoors on cool bales, but they often don't provide their rental rooms or houses with an outside patio or porch so we can do the same.

Foreigners living in Balinese-designed houses often comment that the bathrooms are not thought through (see above) and there is no comfortable place to sit and read, especially at night (the Balinese do not have much of a culture of reading for pleasure). Stairs are another issue. Perhaps because the traditional family compound was single storey, the stairs they do build tend to be extremely steep; Diana tells me this is done to save space.

So if the Balinese think we want bad rooms, fool furniture and nice chickens it's only because we are so strange in our ways, and they are trying to make us happy.

Ibu Kat's book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

1. *Ganesha Books in Ubud and Seminyak*
2. [www.balidazethebook.com](http://www.balidazethebook.com) downloadable as a PDF file
3. *Amazon downloadable for Kindle*