

NOT FOR
NOTHING**TROPICAL
PARADISE
AT WORK**

Volunteering for a paradise-like bird sanctuary on Bali's Nusa Penida island hardly seems anything like work

Located off Bali's south-east coast and touted as one of its "best-kept secrets" in my dated Lonely Planet guidebook, I expected Nusa Penida to be anything but. Yet as I wave goodbye to the tourist hordes, and find myself between chickens and their owners on a small runabout for the 14km-journey, I begin to wonder.

An hour later, colourful fishing boats bob gently along a coconut tree-lined coast, as seaweed farmers haul bulging bamboo baskets back to their traditional thatched huts for sorting. No touts, no hotels. It feels like I've just stepped back in time.

A sanctuary from tourists, the 20,000ha island is also a haven for rare birds. The Friends of the National Parks Foundation (FNPF), has been re-populating species such as the Mitchell's lorikeet, the Java sparrow, the red lory and the Bali starling — all endangered due to poachers — via a captive breed-and-release program on the island since 2004.

I'm here as part of FNPF's new volunteer program, which offers tourists the opportunity to give hands-on help to the project, while experiencing life in a



The writer pauses for a break while potting up seedlings in the nursery
BOTTOM: The Bali starling, perched on a paw paw tree

**JUST
RELAX**

Wash off the day's work with a visit to Crystal Bay, the epitome of an undiscovered paradise — think turquoise water lapping on white sand and schools of clown fish darting between untrammelled coral. You'll have it all to yourself — bar of course, the local teenagers flirting and playing football.

traditional Balinese village. Volunteers spend the morning tree-planting and teaching English in schools, and the afternoon exploring the island.

After settling into my volunteer quarters — a jungle-bamboo bungalow — I'm put to work, which comprises potting up seedlings ready for planting in the large reforestation

area, which aims to provide the birds with a long-term habitat and food.

Dr Bayu Wirayudha, the charismatic leader of FNPF, believes the volunteer program is about cultural exchange as it is about helping in the field. "Long-term volunteers can learn traditional skills such as dancing, carving or weaving."

Dave Campbell, a teacher from Geelong, his wife Ceridwyn and children Skyla (seven) and Melody (four), taught English in primary schools during their volunteer stint.

"We were an instant sensation in the classroom; the kids were so enthusiastic. It was fantastic to see our children playing with the local kids. Volunteering is a unique way to travel as a family. We had a real



Education on sustainable farming and the promoting of eco-tourism are benefits that locals receive from the FNPF
BOTTOM: Dave Campbell and his family had a great time integrating into the local culture



immersion into the community.”

For Wirayudha, working closely with the locals is the key to the success of the program. “I spent the first two years talking with communities, and now all 41 villages on the island have established traditional regulations to enforce bird protection.”

Part of the ‘social contract’ that Wirayudha has struck with the islanders is that in exchange for protecting birds and their habitats, FNPF delivers

community benefits, such as freely distributing thousands of trees each year for agroforestry, sustainable farming education, promoting eco-tourism, and an education scholarship for children to attend school and university (especially girls). Village children gather in the FNPF grounds twice a week to attend free traditional dance classes, and the annual inter-school ‘Conservation Competition’ is now a major part of the Independence Day celebrations.

Today, the proof is in the pudding. The Bali starling, the island’s emblem, numbered less than 10 in the wild in 2005, due to a hefty bounty on its head (birds fetch up to AU\$1,000 on the black market). A release of 64 cage-bred starlings between 2006 and 2008 by FNPF has since resulted in the birds doubling that number.

On our return trip, we check on two recently released male lesser sulphur-crested cockatoos, who have joined



DR BAYU WIRAYUDHA

“The program is about much more than just birds. It’s about wildlife, habitats and the people; that’s what makes it successful”

the only three females left in the wild. Unaware of the urgency of their union, the cockatoo courtship is slow.

Sitting around the fire that night with my guide Wayan, I almost feel guilty that I have received far more from my experience than I could ever return. I look up to see a streak of white swooping into a nearby nest box. Wayan smiles and tells me, “The Bali starling says ‘thank you’.” ★

It costs AU\$15 a day to stay with FNPF. Meals from the nearby *warung* (restaurant) costs AU\$1. Accommodation comprises single beds with mosquito nets. It’s best for volunteers to stay for at least a week. Nusa Penida is a short boat ride from Bali — twice-daily boats cost IDR40,000 (AU\$4.50) from Padang bai, and IDR70,000 (AU\$8) from Sanur. For more details or to donate to the Nusa Penida Bird Sanctuary, call +62 (361) 977978 or go to www.fnpf.org.