Nusa Penida: paradise under siege

Nusa Penida is a haven for the endangered Bali starling, but the island's days as an unspoiled paradise may be numbered, writes Samantha Brown.

For patience, patience, patience,” Nengah Sudipa says as we trudge through a sandy coconut grove on Nusa Penida, a limestone island lying a 45-minute boat ride east of Bali.

“Don’t spot any and retreat to the foundation’s office and information area.”

The waters of the Badung Strait - which rush between a deep trench separating Bali and the islands of Penida, Ceningan and Lembongan - lap at the distance.

The irony, perhaps, is that Nusa Penida is a much poorer island, with tourism yet to bring spoils - positive and negative - here. The treacherous waters surrounding the island, along with its forbidding cliffs, led to it being used as a jail during Bali’s 18th century Gergel dynasty.

I sample a small green fruit from a “Singapore” tree - it’s like a cross between a grape and a fig. “The starlings love them,” he says. Not today, it seems; we don’t spot any and retreat to the foundation’s office and information area.

The birds released on Nusa Penida do well; over on Bali, where they used to swim from tree to tree on the island.

Agriculturnally, the past few decades. Water is in short supply here; the terraced land - farmed with cassava, corn, papaya, bananas, teak and plants for animal feed - is a stark contrast to the lush emerald paddies that cover much of Bali.

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It’s a hard-scrabble existence for the islanders, many of whom have left over the past few decades. Water is in short supply here; the terraced land - farmed with cassava, corn, papaya, bananas, teak and plants for animal feed - is a stark contrast to the lush emerald paddies that cover much of Bali.
though it’s similar to Bali’s Bukit Peninsula. The farmers’ homes on the beach here are not romantic shacks, but rough cinderblocks with corrugated iron or dilapidated red-tiled roofs.

Now the island’s landscape may be changing. The Chedi - a five-star, GHM-managed resort chain - recently announced plans to build 100 villas on pristine Crystal Bay in 2015. Riffing on the success of the Bali starting programme, and in recognition of the island’s status as a sanctuary, Spanish designer Ismael Pindado has designed other-worldly egg-shaped villas set against a bright blue sky. White limestone is literally pulled by hand from the earth by sun-weathered workers, leaving ethereal caves.

Some tourist literature speaks of Nusa Penida being "like Bali 30 years ago", but I’m not swayed. Nusa Penida and Bali are geographically different; volcanic Bali has its "subak" system, an irrigation network criss-crossing the island watering its green paddies; in two days on Penida, the only running water I see gushes out of a cliff towering above the sea, a few pipes pumping some of it back up to land to be used by some of the island’s more than 40 villages.

The road to Crystal Bay opens out to a large sandy coconut grove, then the beach yawns to the left and right, a few rocky outcrops in the centre of the bay make it particularly photogenic. To one side of the bay, a few thatched roofed, open-air huts have been set up for day trippers on Bali Hai cruises balihaicruises.com Snorkellers’ heads bob offshore. A couple clutching a few bottles of Bintang beer climb aboard their chartered boat, done for the day.

A little flotsam and jetsam lie on the beach, but it’s a pretty, rustic scene, with cows lumbering by the beachside temple.

A small warung at the coconut grove shakes fresh coconuts for 20,000 rupiah; the perfect antidote to the dry midday heat.

Dayat looks at the dozen or so motorbikes parked in the grove and shakes his head: "Many, many tourists."

And it's just the beginning.

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