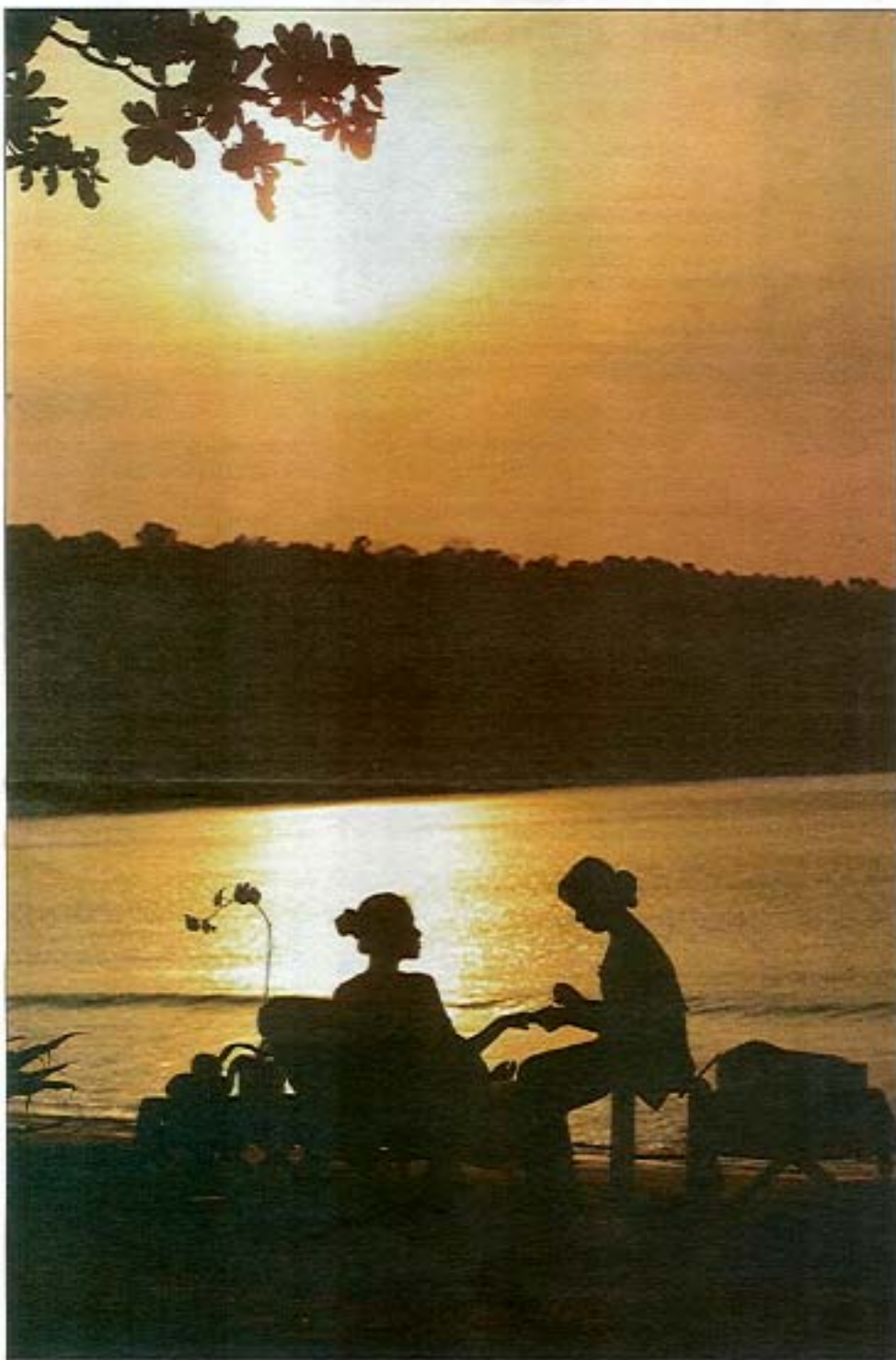


Medium is the massage



Sunset manicure at The Westin at Nusa Dua in Bali.

FLIP BYRNES

THE sky is tilted at an absurd angle, a layer of blue above a strip of gold sand.

Through one lazy eye a squirrel nimbly climbs a palm while the intoxicating combination of sea sounds and a cool breeze numb the senses.

"Is this OK?" whispers Ketut, my outdoor masseuse as she works on a particular tricky back knot.

"Oh yes," I answer, as a waiter delivers a glass of champagne.

"This is extremely, incredibly OK."

Bali is a country that excels in many areas.

Beautiful beaches, friendly people and a fresh cuisine are natural blessings in this island paradise.

The island is ripe to explore and while some choose to do it in car or bike, I was going to cross Bali by spa.

Nowhere does a spa better than Bali. With many treatments costing a fraction of what they would at home, there is no reason not to indulge in a 30-minute milk-and-honey bath for \$25 or any choice of hour massage for around \$35.

But that's just the nucleus of the experience - most spas are set in marble enclaves, some with wooden decking and all bedecked with frangipanis and often with billion dollar views.

Here's a taste of a few:

The Resort Seminyak and Prana Spa, Seminyak

First stop, The Resort Seminyak, located beachside in Seminyak, close enough to Kuta to be accessible, but a world away.

This is the South Yarra or Sydney's Paddington of southern Bali.

Chic boutiques line the road and courtesy of the Bali Deli, French brie, Swiss chocolate and turkish delight will satisfy any expat craving.

Met by Ketut, slippers are gently removed and a petal trail leads me into a room open on one side to hear the pounding of the ocean.

Gently, Ketut kneads airplane tension from shoulders and post-massage sits me on a balcony offering ginger tea while massaging happy feet. So far, so good.

It's impossible to leave Seminyak without a look at Prana Spa, connected to luxury property the Villas.

If you can only make one spa in Bali, then this is it.



REDISCOVER BALI

■ **PACKAGES:** Through Bali on Any Budget, packages from Sydney, including 4.5 nights' accommodation at Alila Manggis; return economy-class air fare; transfers in Bali and taxes, start at \$1392.92 per adult in low season, based on share twin. Conditions apply

■ **DETAILS:** www.BalioNANYbudget.com.au or phone Garuda Indonesia on 1300 365 331

Set up like a mogul's palace from Rajasthan, the opulence is almost overwhelming.

A riot of colour and fabrics lead guests down mirrored hallways.

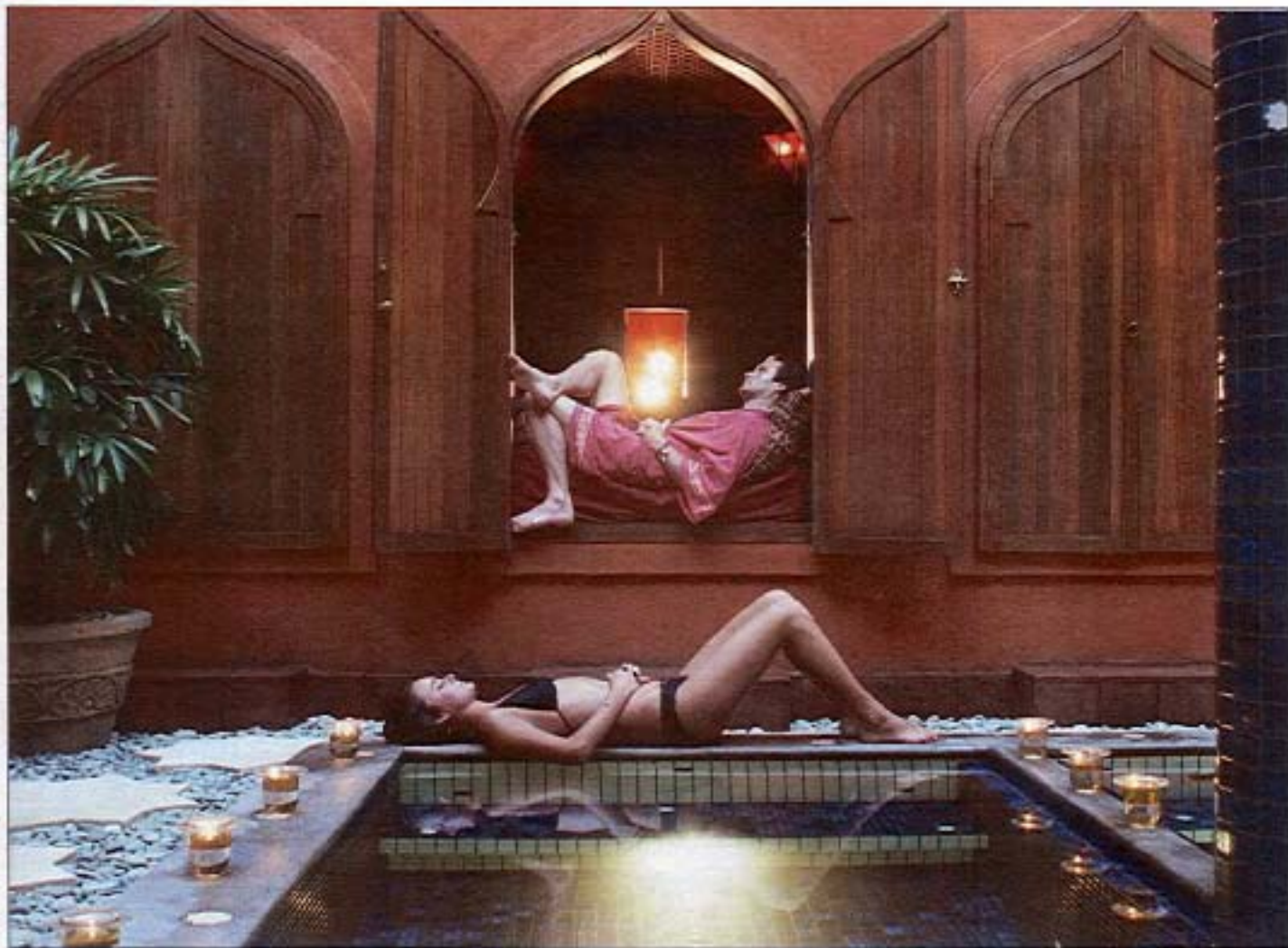
Secret pools lie hidden in private courtyards, Islamic arches decorate the open-air areas and there is a sense of mystery, partly because I have no idea what a Hair Cream Bath is (my scheduled treatment), but it sounds good.

Lead down more passages and through doorways, the Hair Cream Bath is an hour orgy of luxury for the head.

For a full 60 minutes creams are combed through and rinsed, with every stage complemented by a full head massage for \$40.

For something cheaper, an hour of reflexology in the dedicated Chill salon is a measly \$12. www.villas.net

Go on, pamper yourself



Relaxing by the pool at The Resort Seminyak and Prana Spa at Seminyak, Bali.

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There is no rest for the pampered and it was 40 minutes due north for Le Meridien Nirawna Golf and Spa in the Tabanan region at Tanah Lot.

Le Meridien, Tanah Lot

Adjacent to the dramatic Tanah Lot temple jutting towards the ocean, as the name suggests, the hotel has an 18-hole golf course and a spa.

I would love to say that I remembered this relaxing massage, which combined elements of eastern and western techniques, but I fell asleep.

The last thing I recall is staring dozily at a frangipani flower beneath the massage table and the next ginger tea. Visit www.bali.lemeridien.com

I was falling into spa coma, petals blurring into one another, days a haze of perfumed air and soft hands. But I ploughed valiantly onwards, bound for the

sleepy hamlet of Candi Dasa in eastern Bali.

Alila Manggis, Candi Dasa

Eastern Bali is an undiscovered oasis; the green slopes and clear water no doubt elements that first brought foreigners to Bali all those years ago. The jewel in the crown of this stretch of coast is Alila Manggis, a haven of beachside peace and tranquillity.

Within this gem are the outdoor Segara Bayu spa bales located on the grounds of the Pandan Forest.

Segara Bayu in Sanskrit means Sea Breeze-Bales and if you were any closer to the ocean you would be in it.

Nyoman treats me to a Balinese massage, firm hands press down all over the body with some stretching in between kneading.

Then for a dip in the pool where pool boys fill your glass with iced water and spread your towel before you've even

finished a lap, sneaky elves. Visit www.alilahotels.com

The Westin, Nusa Dua

In an almost permanent state of bliss, another massage seems almost ridiculous, but in the name of research and pre-airplane preparation, we plonk down on the padded outdoor pavilion of The Westin in Nusa Dua.

An hour south from Candi Dasa, the golden triangle of spa areas is almost complete.

It is here that one last ray of luxury is soaked up, back at Ketut where I first saw that wandering squirrel.

Through one lazy eye I catch a glimpse of an out-of-place military uniform.

The Indonesian PM is in town and his digs of choice are here at the Westin.

Shame he doesn't pull up a pew and enjoy some of Bali's simpler luxuries.

If you are after a relaxing holiday easy on the wallet and heavy on the pampering, then Bali is back and it's the place to go.