



IN THE KNOW

The Elite Havens villa rental company specialises in the best residences, varying in features and layouts for couples, small parties or larger groups. Size does matter, but whether petite, presidential or any variation between, you can be sure of a sparkling pool, fine design and an efficient but unobtrusive team of attendants, including a chef to rustle up meals if required and a manager to book tours, taxis or in-villa deliveries.

elitehavens.com

Haven for the holidays

A villa in Bali proves the ultimate family choice

SUSAN KUROSAWA

Are we in Italy or Spain or France? Our villa, a member of the well-regarded Elite Havens collection, is ornate and palatial. Actually, even comparing it to a palace could be insufficient. It's decorated in a lavish style (think: ceiling mouldings, brushed-gold finishes, handpainted wallpapers and looming portraits) that would make the reigning royalty of southern Europe feel right at home.

Yet here we are in Bali, a family group of four adults and a toddler, wondering if we should dress for dinner or, at the very least, call a butler to shine our shoes and possibly unpack for us, although my suitcase is little more than a bouncy bundle of bubble-wrap, thanks to a bit too much curio shopping. Welcome to five-bedroom Villa Agung, one of six rather extraordinary residences at the vast Pala Ubud estate on the outskirts of this popular hill town.

Ubud is more hectic than I recall from previous visits. The traffic is heavier, which seems impossible as it's always been a bit of a racing circuit, and drivers weave wildly. These days there are also Gojek delivery guys buzzing about on motorcycles, bearing a bounty of takeaway food anchored pillion-style with ingenious cords and straps. But all that noise suddenly recedes as Villa Agung's mighty double entry portals, fabulously painted and trimmed in red, green and gold, are gently closed behind us. Oh look, the view beyond a row of French doors is almost pastoral and picnic-worthy. A long pool gleams on the manicured (possibly tweezered) lawn and beyond lie high terraces of bamboo and triffid-like vegetation. There's a glimpse, if you peer just at the right angle, of sacred twin-peaked Agung Sanghyang Mountain, a mecca for committed climbers. No thanks to any uphill slog; we just want to swim.

Dragonflies hover over the pool like tiny helicopters. The branches of frangipani trees hold bouncy clusters of this most fragrant of flowers. Bougainvillea runs rampant in various bright colours; finches and sparrows are dipping and weaving like tiny fighter planes. We debate this aerial choreography as we loll about and feel so relaxed we are in peril of forgetting our names. Later we fully investigate this mansion's corners and crannies. There are huge living spaces on two floors, five bedrooms and a cargo of impressive art, including furniture given to the Singapore-based managing director-cum-adviser by a former (but unnamed) president of Indonesia. Paintings are everywhere, many by the adviser's talented family members.

It looks and feels like an embassy and so I know my feedback should be diplomatic. An absence of milk, too few varieties of tea, missing pieces of cutlery, and a few other annoying factors are reported, but duly sorted, and who could blame the staff for politely backing away when my reporter's notebook appears. There are edible gardens to visit, all beautifully maintained by

an expert crew of six, and plump with asparagus, green beans, tomatoes and celery. Stone statues of Hindu gods, each with a bounty of offerings of plump fruit, are topped with fringed parasols. Bright pink dragonfruit hang heavy on trees like oversized Christmas decorations. Sapote is a revelation, as is Pala Ubud's signature, and addictively delicious, nutmeg ice cream, made from ingredients on site. Fresh sugarcane juice and mie goreng, and much besides, appear for tariff-included breakfasts at Hura Restaurant alongside the reception area, which is open-sided and strung with pretty cane lanterns, but service is way too slow. We opt for villa delivery and sit poolside with our continental selections, discussing such important matters as where to go to lunch. This being Ubud, there is only one answer: the on-trend and fabulous Hujan Locale.

■ ■ ■

Our second villa choice is Sol y Mar and, yes, it really is all about the sun and sea, perched atop limestone cliffs with reaching views of the Indian Ocean and astonishing sunsets at Uluwatu on the Bukit peninsula. It could be Sicily or the fabled heights of the Amalfi Coast, were it not for scurrilous fruit-thieving macaque monkeys patrolling the rocky barrier fence. Close by is the sacred Pura Luhur temple, where monkey dance performances are staged each evening by local chaps who twirl about an amphitheatre. The real monkeys observe from the trees, scratching their fleas and baring yellow tombstone teeth.

Now here comes villa manager Made Murdana to discuss meals, rustle up extra towels to place beside the 35m infinity pool, and point out the names of flowers and vines. And to gently apologise for the wedding that took place the previous evening at the next-door villa. A compere had made rowdy use of the loudspeaker for his speeches, jokes and what sounded like bingo calling. He was all done by 2am. Made Murdana is mortified about the intrusion, but a good afternoon siesta looms and, anyway, you can sleep when you're dead, as my father was wont to

Sol Y Mar outdoor setting and ocean views, above; villa living space and exterior, right





say. So we lie about and read and plot more travel; being on holiday is the perfect time to clear the brain and book the next one.

Sol y Mar has five ensuite bedrooms, with capacity for 12 guests, and a gym and office; four bedrooms are on the main level and the fifth is tucked below. The decor is standard contemporary, beds and pillows are very comfy, mosquito nets keep out the pesky critters, showers are hot and bathroom unguents spiced with local ingredients such as ginger, coconut and lemongrass. White wicker chairs are topped with cushions patterned in tropical leaves and flowers. And Made Murdana's team – Gusti, Nrrngah, Ayu and two security guards – couldn't be more helpful. What's the permissible limit for a siesta? I decide we are free to write our own rules, so we doze, lie about, read thick novels and discuss more family holidays. And scoff sun-ripened mangoes that are juicy beyond measure.

Villa Sol y Mar's on-call chef is available to rustle up meals, and even guide an excursion to Jimbaran fish market, where ingredients are scooped up to bring back for barbecues by the villa pool. We order just one meal from a local restaurant, and a bike courier arrives with a towering pile of pizza boxes. We have definitely over-ordered but to be lolling in this faux-Amalfi setting, crunching away on slices topped with tomatoes, mozzarella and basil, seems madly wonderful. We break into a chorus of O Sole Mio, which is so corny and predictable but totally irresistible. The monkeys screech and scamper off.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Elite Havens.



Hara Hara restaurant at Pala Ubud estate, above; Villa Agung, below



WORLD. WIDE. TRAVEL SALE

SAVE UP TO \$500_{PP}

SAVE AN EXTRA \$200_{PP}
USE CODE AST200

EXCEPTIONAL
★★★★★
4.7 OUT OF 5
feefo



SCENIC SOUTH KOREA

14 DAYS FULLY INCLUSIVE CLASSIC TOUR

FROM \$12,080_{PP} (WAS \$12,580_{PP})

Our Scenic South Korea tour will see you exploring the most iconic sites, delving into deep-rooted culture and dining on delicious cuisine designed to bring you a range of once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Visit the impressive Gyeongbokgung Palace
- ✓ Admire scenic Seoraksan National Park
- ✓ Discover Picturesque Busan
- ✓ Take part in a Korean cooking class



SCAN FOR OVER 1,000 DATES ON SALE!



Everything YOU NEED IS ALREADY INCLUDED



Return International Airfares & Taxes



All Meals on Classic Tours



All Accommodation & Transportation



Comprehensive Sightseeing & Daily Activities

Call 1300 728 998, visit wendywutours.com.au or see your local travel agent

Valid from 31 Oct – 12 Dec 2025 on selected 2026 & 2027 tours and departures. Quote promo code AST200 at time of booking for extra \$200pp saving, valid to 12 Dec 2025. Subject to availability. New bookings only. Prices based on twin share. Single supplements apply. Not combinable with any other offer. Airfare prepayments may apply. Visit wendywutours.com.au for full terms and conditions. ATAS A10517