

CHOOSING A VILLA

The Easy Way

So you've decided on a luxury villa holiday in Bali or Phuket. Perhaps it's a holiday with extended family, including kids and grandparents, or maybe it's a grownups' escape - you and three other couples, for example, or a bunch of friends celebrating a hen's party. That's the easy part done. More difficult is choosing the villa itself. Factors to consider include location, size, facilities, kid-friendliness — and, of course, price. At the recent opening of Pandawa Cliff Estate, a “wow-inducing villa on Bali's Bukit Peninsula, we asked JON STONHAM, CEO of luxury villa rental group, Elite Havens, for some tips.

How many villas does Havens operate, and where are they located?

We currently have 172 villas: four in Lombok, three in Sri Lanka, three in Thailand and the rest in Bali. It's a moving target, though! Thailand and Sri Lanka are definite growth areas. There isn't much infrastructure in Lombok yet. Our Lombok villas are all facing the Gili Islands, and they tend to be “destination villas”: right on the sea, white sandy beaches, big buildings, lots of land and garden space, great for kids; but you won't find many restaurants.

Where are the villas in Bali?

Elite Havens makes a point of having villas in as many locations as possible, from Candidasa on the east coast to Ubud in the interior, and Seminyak, of course. We have a villa on the island of Nusa Lembongan; and we're also going further west beyond Tanah Lot, up that coastline, and inland from Canggu to places like Tabanan - there are some huge and spectacular properties there, set on one or two hectares.

There's also the whole breadth of design styles on offer, from very traditional Balinese properties to super modern glass-and-steel villas. So, something for everyone.

How does a villa “newbie” decide which location to choose?

The locations vary greatly - the Bukit coast is so different to Seminyak, for example. How do you choose? Well, the website will give you an initial idea of what the location is like. And we often help people make a final call. A guest might say to us, “We want restaurants and shops,” or “We want to be by the beach.” We tend to probe a bit more, and ask them why they want to be in a particular location. We're often able to recommend a villa in a slightly different position or one with a different price point - for example, a few minutes back from the beach rather than right on it — and the guests end up loving it. Or we let them know that, if they're in Canggu or Umalas, they get to experience beautiful, rural Bali, while still being only 15 minutes from everything that Seminyak has to offer.

How many people can stay in an Elite Haven villa?

They come in all sizes. We have everything from a one-bedroom villa to a nine-bedroom individual villa, to a place like where we are today, Pandawa Cliff Estate, which we can convert into a 16-bedder by combining the three villas. Prices range from around \$150 per room up to \$700 or so. The price is contingent on the scale of the property, the available facilities and so on, but compared to a hotel of similar quality, represents great value for money. All our villas come staffed with chefs, butlers, maid service and a villa manager (also the concierge), and many have a car and driver; and all the staff are trained to provide a high level of service.

Tell us a bit about the day-to-day operations of Elite Havens.

We have a central office from where we manage all villa reservations as well as doing all the pre-provisioning, arranging pick-up and VIP services at the airport, booking transfers, and so on — we get guests to their villa; you needn't worry about arranging transport, We always try to organise the first couple of meals, too, so you don't have to think about that when you first arrive. We encourage people to try an Indonesian spread as one of their first meals — it's a great way to get a taste of local food and a glimpse at the island's culture.

The biggest factor for us is quality. If you book an Elite Haven, you get an Elite Haven - that is, a top-notch standard that comes about through our scale of operations. This scale means we can do things efficiently; so, we have our own fleet of cars, we have our own drivers, they all speak English, they all know where everything is. If there's an issue with a villa, we refer it to our own engineering department based in the head office, We had a problem with the sea wall of a villa recently; our engineers fixed it on behalf of the owner, and the guest didn't even know it was being done. Similarly, if a guest has a medical issue, we have a team capable of reacting to this. This scale gives guests a lot more comfort, and it means we don't have to rely on any third parties.

Aside from a beautiful property in a great location, what do you think people look for in a villa holiday?

First, it has to be totally private. Second, it should be value for money; a villa might initially sound expensive at \$800 a night, but when you consider that it's, say, five bedrooms on a per-person basis, it's cheap. (Plus, the food is almost at cost price — at a resort, your children put their hands up for a soft drink and it costs you \$5; kids grab a drink from a villa fridge and it's 50 cents.) Third, it needs to be a fantastic experience. This is where the villa managers and staff can help, by helping guests to see the "real" Bali, whether it's by bringing someone to do a cooking demonstration at the villa or arranging anything from an afternoon of kite-flying to an excursion to Waterbom. If you want to know where Bali's 10 best restaurants are, we can tell you - and book them for you.

Does Elite Havens do any villa-building?

Villas are personally inspected by our team before being considered for our portfolio (and only a small percentage make the grade), but we don't build our own properties. Instead,

we advise a lot of owners on what to build. Many times we take over the management of a villa and find that it's been designed with a double bed in every room. A much better option is a combination of double beds and "split kings", some with trundle beds underneath; this provides flexibility for a broader set of guests to book the villa, which of course means we maximise the rental for the owner.

We're also very big on ensuring there are facilities for children, from a proper pool for infants to a kids' room with a Wii, a DVD player, foosball and so on; when you're a big group and it starts raining or the sun is at its height, you want something for the young ones to do. Kitchens should be proper commercial ones so that the owners can offer their villa for weddings. And every villa needs its own generator in case the power fails.

It's this kind of attention to detail that is a trademark of every Elite Haven villa; they are superb properties, beautifully maintained, and with extremely well trained staff.

Do you live in Bali?

No, but I'm here all the time. I first visited in 1995. My parents were in the Air Force, so I've lived around the world. Singapore has been my home base for the past six years. From 1993 to 2006, I was in Hong Kong. I set up Asia Hotels, an accommodation booking platform, which I sold to Orbitz in the US. After that, I took a two-year sailing stint with my family — our children were aged six and four. We sailed out of Hong Kong and two years later sailed into Singapore. Expat Living did a story on the adventure, and I had literally hundreds of people get in touch with me after reading the magazine.

How much travel do you do now?

Almost every week. I'm either here in Bali or in Thailand or Sri Lanka. My kids are now 12 and 15; one's at boarding school in the UK, the other's at Tanglin Trust in Singapore and heading to boarding school next year. My wife has a senior IT role at DBS.

What does the future hold for Elite Havens?

Our aspiration is to be the largest luxury villa rental company in Asia and to be a brand that people recognise around the world, like Small Luxury Hotels of the World and Leading Hotels of the World.

A final word on Bali: do you think it's changing too fast?

Every destination changes. Look at Phuket; it's changed beyond recognition. There will always be challenges, especially when development happens quickly. I think you do need to look harder in Bali to find the best of the island now, but when you do, it's amazing. Ubud is becoming very crowded, but it's still beautiful; we have a stunning villa there, right in the centre — guests love it.

I recently invited the members of my black-and-white movie club in Singapore to come down and stay - it was a group in their 50's, some of them a bit jaded about Bali. We stayed in an extraordinary villa, and I took them on a cycling trip from the volcanoes back down to

the villa. It was an eight-hour experience, with a private guide; we stopped to pick rice, and we visited a village house and watched the preparations for a ceremony. Three of them have booked to come back.

Bali has loads to offer people. Absolutely loads.

To book, visit www.EliteHavens.com. Our cover this month features Villa Windu Asri, just one of the Elite Havens properties available to rent.

Choosing a villa the hard way...

If you don't book a villa through an established and reputable company like Elite Havens, you run the risk of encountering a range of pitfalls, including the following real-life scenarios that Jon and his team have heard about (and, where possible, helped to bail out the suffering guests!).

- Rogue agents who take guests' money but never pass it onto the owner, leaving the guests stranded.
- Owners who are away overseas and whose staff don't run the villa to the standards that are expected.
- Rogue staff who over-charge for services, leaving guests with no one to turn to.
- Guests using booking platforms that have no quality assurance except guest reviews and content that is often self-managed by owners.
- Standalone villas with few resources to fix or respond to emergencies.
- There have even been cases (mainly in Europe) of con artists building websites for non-existent villas including maps, photos, floor plans — the guest pays and turns up to find that it's not a rental property, or that the property doesn't exist at all!

www.elitehavens.com