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Do your homework before booking a villa in Bali

LISA ALLEN | THE AUSTRALIAN | APRIL 01, 2014 12:00AM

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Villa Kurus Bali is a five-bedroom hideaway on Bali's southwest coast. Source: Supplied

RENTING a private villa is de rigueur for many of the almost one million Australians who holiday in Bali each year.

Twenty years ago, many Aussie travellers made do with budget accommodation, replete with a traditional Indonesian *manul* — a giant tiled water tub with a plastic scoop for bathing. Electricity might come on once a day for an hour or so. Or it might not.

These days, luxury villas — with private swimming pools, personal chefs and on-call chauffeurs — offer holidays fit for a rock star. Often cheaper than a hotel and offering more seclusion — think complexes with lush walled gardens and dedicated staff — the private villa also offers considerably greater bragging rights than a three-star hotel on Kuta Beach.

But paradise can have its pitfalls and it pays to do your research before booking your luxury pad.

Hapless holiday-makers have reported being ripped off by scams, including the phantom villa, where guests pay to rent accommodation that doesn't exist, overcharging, and the false promise of goods and services such as disabled access.

"Aussies are going everywhere ... and they are getting fleeced if they meet the wrong people and don't get professional guidance," says Melbourne-based lawyer Michael Bula, of Michael Bula Solicitors, a specialist in international property transactions.

In Bali, Matthew Georghson, Elite Havens managing director, says villa scams are increasing.

Georghson, who manages more than 160 villas in Bali and Lombok, tells of an elderly Australian woman and her wheelchair-bound daughter arriving for a holiday having been assured their villa was wheelchair-friendly. "They arrived at Christmas time to find the villa was not wheelchair friendly and, because it was that time of the year, it was not easy to find an alternative with disabled access," Georghson says.

"Guests arrive in Bali and find they have been duped."

Despite the problems, Georghson says, there is a big future for villas.

"People like the staffing, they like the privacy, they like the extra room, the gardens, and the private pool."

Georghson vets each villa in his rental pool. "Our job is to ensure that the villas we offer meet our standards.

"Some villas might be perfect, but at others we might have to train staff, improve furnishings: should these conditions be met, we sign them up. But they have got to maintain that standard."

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Do your homework before booking a villa in Bali

Lisa Allen

April 1, 2014

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Sydney architect and urban designer Rodney Jensen and his wife, Joanne Winstanley, are spending four weeks in Bali next month.

After an extensive internet search, they have booked a self-contained villa owned by a French family in the popular beachside district of Sanur, paying about \$50 a night through online site AirBNB.com.au.

“We both prefer self-contained accommodation and access to a pool that is only confined to two or three other families,” says Jensen.

“We value having some sort of relationship with the manager beyond it simply being as a guest in a large hotel. The living quality and experience of living in a private villa is a quantum leap from staying in a five-star - accommodation.”

But you can have a villa in Bali and it can be five-star.

London-based Small Luxury Hotels boss Paul Kerr oversees five SLHs in Bali and the company may introduce private villa rentals in the near future.

Discussing the villa rental trend, Kerr says: “You have fads, it might be a fad, there’s an element of that. People like privacy. It’s like hiring the whole of Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands.

“Villas could also work out cheaper (than a hotel) and it could be good value if you have enough people.

“Luxury to me is definitely about freedom of choice. You have a lot more freedom in a private villa than a hotel. “With most hotels there is a certain element of constriction.”

Bali high: Tips for villa rental

- Michael Bula, of Michael Bula Solicitors, advises villa renters to look out for one thing. “Deal with a reputable and recognised real estate agent; do not deal with someone in the street who says they have a wonderful villa or apartment to rent. In other words, do your due diligence to ensure you are dealing with an agent authorised to rent out the property in question. Obviously, ask for a full rental contract. Do not ever deal verbally. Get a lease or tenancy contract.”
- Natalie Smith, an executive with Compare Travel Insurance, advises taking out travel insurance because, if the property is broken into and your personal possessions are stolen, travel insurance will cover it. “But you would have to prove that the villa was locked and any small expensive items would need to be kept in the safe.”
- Adnya Desak, of Bali Mode Ubud, which specialises in legal and visa issues, advises staying in a Bali hotel for a few days to check the villa exists before making any payment. Then you can negotiate the rental deal.
- Elite Havens partner Matthew Georgeson says holiday-makers should look out for villa owners who misrepresent the villa’s standards and also for staff who overcharge guests. “Often they are not malicious; the owner lives overseas and the staff are left to run the villa, often not to the owner’s standards.”

- Use a reputable villa management company because rogue agents specialise in accepting full payment to rent villas, but won't pass it on to the owner, says Georgeson. If you book through an online travel agent and things go wrong, you have little or no recourse for the quality of what you have booked, he says. "Many booking platforms have no quality assurance — except for online guest reviews — and the online content is often self-managed by owners."
- If your villa's air-conditioning system breaks down or it floods, say, there are few places to turn to if you are renting from a private owner, Georgeson says. Reputable villa managers have teams of engineers dedicated to maintaining villas and replacing crucial staff such as chefs. They also have several villas they can use to re-house guests if needed.

What's on offer

THROUGH Elite Havens, Small Luxury Hotels, Prestige Bali Villas, and wotif.com

JAJALILUNA, Seminyak

Four-bedroom villa hidden behind vine-clad walls and shaded by coconut trees. From \$US965 (\$1044) a night. *elitehavens.com*

L HOTEL, Seminyak

Suites sleeping two, from \$US291.20 a night in this small luxury hotel in Seminyak. *slh.com*

KETAPANG ESTATE, Tabanan

Seven villas set in sprawling oceanfront grounds in the south of Bali near the town of Tabanan, about 43km from Ngurah Rai International Airport. From \$US146 a night. *slh.com*

KAMPOENG VILLA, Seminyak

Four-star villas in a 12-villa complex in Kerobokan, near trendy Seminyak. From \$US125 a night. *wotif.com*

VILLA UBUD, Seminyak

Part of the four complex Lakshmi Villa development, the two-bedroom Ubud Villa charges \$US355 a night in low season, running from January 9 to

June 15 and from September 1 to December 18. The Lakshmi villas are 100m from Bali's best restaurants, shops and nightclubs. *prestigebalivillas.com*

KUDUS, Canggu on Bali's southwest coast

Five-bedroom villa, from \$US850 a night. *elitehavens.com*

SAYANG D'AMOUR, Seminyak

Six-bedroom villas in Seminyak with a distinctly French flavour spiced up with dashes of Morocco. From \$US1300 a night. *elitehavens.com*

VILLA LEGA, Batu Belig

Five-bedroom contemporary villa in a walled garden next to the W Hotel, from \$US1185 a night. *elitehavens.com*