



Lost and found in Northern Bali

We leave Bali's popular Ubud behind to discover monkeys, holy men, underwater ruins and a new perspective in Northern Bali.

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Of all the waiting rooms I've been in, Pura Lempuyang Temple is by far the most spectacular. Instead of white walls and fluorescent lights, I'm sitting beneath an open sky flecked with clouds tickled pink by the morning sun. I'm not here to see a doctor; this appointment is of a more spiritual kind. You could call it a check-up for the mind and soul. My guide, Andy, has arranged for me to meet with a holy man to learn more about the temple, one of the six holiest sanctuaries in Bali, and Hinduism, the predominant religion of Bali. "Understand Hinduism," Andy tells me, "and you will understand Bali."

Like all doctor's appointments, there is a wait but I'm happy to be outside soaking up the views. Looking out across the valley, the temple's famous heavenly arches frame a distant volcano erupting from primordial jungles. There's a stillness here that's almost meditative.

I say "almost" because uncoiling away from the arch is a small line of tourists waiting, phones in hand, for their turn to take a photo. A man sitting on a brick offers his services in exchange for a tip. I watch as he obligingly snaps one couple feigning nonchalance, laughing theatrically and pointing at the view with backs to camera. After checking their photos, the tourists

quickly leave without a second glance at the intricately carved stonework beside them.

"It was not this way three years ago," says Ketut Cara as he arrives to welcome me to the temple. The holy man is dressed head to toe in white linen and exudes a calm warmth. He tells me the temple has become a magnet to travellers after being made famous by influencers on Instagram.

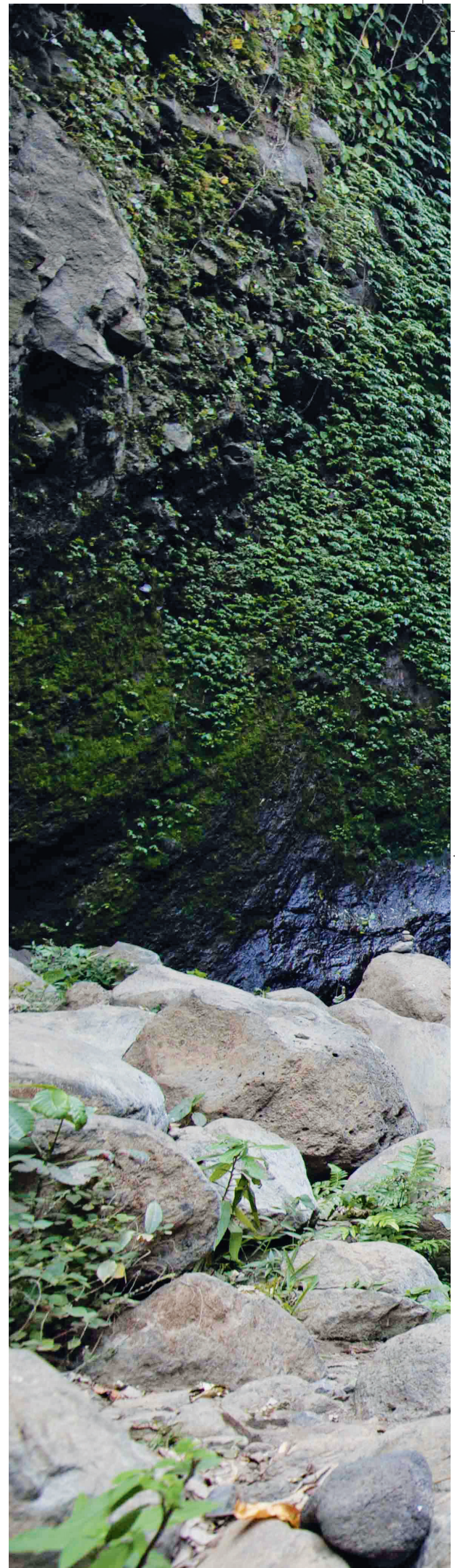
"Now signs have appeared asking tourists not to fly their drones, and a new car park was built to handle the amount of traffic. It's almost as though people have forgotten why this temple was created."

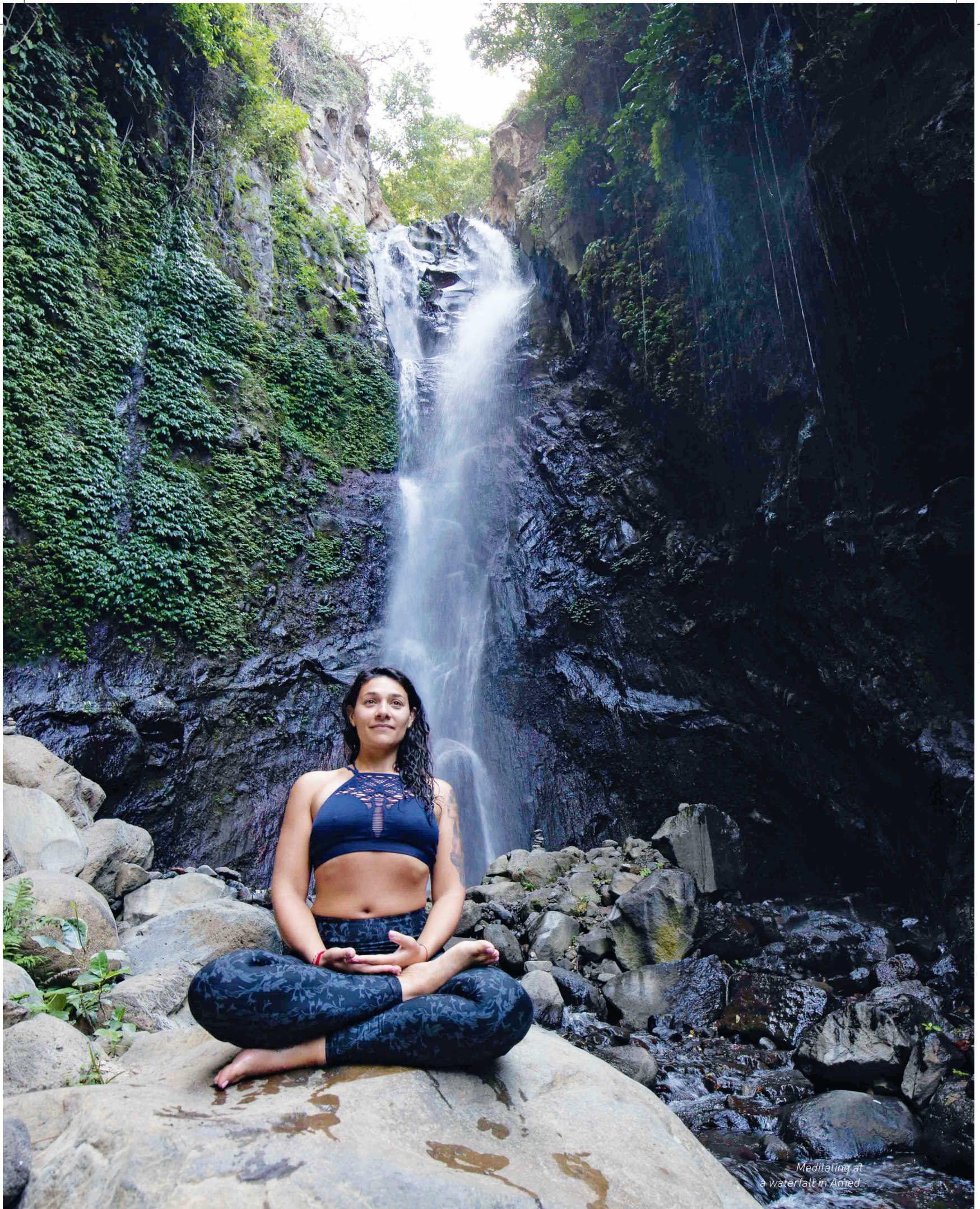
The holy man leads me up a staircase flanked by snarling dragons. A sign asks visitors not to venture past this point,

but Ketut waves me through. We enter a wooden door and into Lempuyang's inner sanctum, open only to those who come to pray. Unlike other more lavishly decorated temples in Bali the interior is open-roofed and modestly furnished.

Sitting cross-legged on the bare floor, Ketut tells me life is all about balancing the yin and yang, the spiritual and the material, good and evil, purpose and purposelessness. Yes, purposelessness: the forgotten art of delighting in being aimless and being comfortable with that. Having escaped to the islands of Indonesia from the harried streets of Melbourne,

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*Meditating at
a waterfall in Amed.*



Left: Pura Lempuyang Temple.
Below left: Men returning home after the hunt.



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I can't help but be a little awestruck by the concept of mindfully doing nothing.

Putting words into immediate effect, Ketut invites me to pray with him. Together, we burn incense and sit in the uncoiling smoke, meditatively breathing in and then out with a baritone “om”. Eventually, my self-consciousness slips away, and I'm caught in a mingling of smoke, water and wind. Ketut takes a cup of blessed water and rains the contents down on my head. He then offers me a sip of the cup before marking my forehead and chest with sticky rice as a blessing.

I feel a deep sense of connection and gratitude for the opportunity to share this moment of calm with Ketut. We return down the stairs to see the photography queue has doubled in size. Standing among the well-groomed tourists, I realise I'm still marked with water and rice, my hair is

a dishevelled mess and the smell of incense wafts from my clothes.

Beneath the tide

The three wild boys race through the water. Their lithe limbs cut long strokes as they plough downwards into the deep. A steady stream of bubbles escapes from their snorkels and disappears upwards. Within moments they've reached the barnacled ruins of the USS *Liberty*, carefully inched their way through a large tear in the ship's hull and emerged out the other side. They desperately rush back to the surface as quickly as their lungs will allow. Even underwater I can still hear them laughing, but the innumerable fish surrounding me don't seem to take notice of their bravado. They're too busy nibbling at the algae and coral that blanket the sunken ship like carpet.

In her heyday, the *Liberty* carried railway parts and rubber between Australia and the Philippines as part of the Allied war effort in World War II. Back then Indonesia was occupied by Japanese forces, with the islands forming a militarised belt between the Australian mainland and Asia. In January 1942, the *Liberty* was torpedoed while passing Lombok island. When the authorities realised there was too much damage to be repaired, she was towed to Amed on the east coast of Bali and stripped of anything worth saving. After that she was left to the elements. For nearly 20 years, the *Liberty* rusted in the sun until one of Bali's temperamental volcanos erupted. The tremors caused her to roll off the beach and here she is, in a shallow grave.

“The *Liberty* is still much-loved,” Harry assures me. He was born on Bali and has been snorkelling up and down the eastern coast since he was a kid but it's the *Liberty* he always comes back to. “She is a mecca for divers who want to explore the wreck and see lots of colourful fish. I love that so much new life has come from something that was once abandoned,” he says.

Holding on to an inflatable life ring, Harry guides me over the wreckage and points out the features of the ship. He knows the names of all the fish, from the blue damselfish anxiously hiding among the coral to the giant trevally, which surprisingly manage to stay afloat despite their huge size.

When I first heard about this scuba-diving hotspot, I pictured it crammed with tourists and big-brand hotels lining the beachfront. Instead, I find wide vacant beaches fringed by palm trees, and sun-bleached fishing boats hauled out of the water for the day, their owners gathered together in the shade drinking beer. A mob of tanned children chase down a motorcycle selling ice cream. There's nary a sign of development in sight.

Back on land, I'm met by Garri Bernal from Sea Communities, a community-based tourism operator in Les Village just a short drive from Amed. They've run diving programs from the village for years with the twin goals of bringing tourism dollars to the local community and to rehabilitate the natural reef.

“This village was a producer of ornamental fish for the aquarium trade back in the 1980s,” Bernal tells me. “They were using potassium cyanide to catch the fish, and over two decades it basically destroyed the reef. The fish went away, and the fishermen lost their livelihoods.”

The solution to the problem lies in the USS *Liberty*, where a thriving ecosystem full of tropical fish and a rich variety of coral have formed a symbiotic relationship



Top: *Canang sari*, one of the daily offerings made by Balinese Hindus.

Top right: *Macaque monkey.*

Above right: *A woman from Les village farms salt while her daughter watches.*



with the wreckage. Inspired by the new coral that has attached itself to the ship, Sea Communities developed a program to create its own artificial reefs using specially created metal frameworks. It offered working holidays for experienced divers to stay in the village and spend their days diving and seeding coral on to the metal structures, which are then pieced together to form an artificial reef.

Despite the setbacks from rough weather and coral bleaching caused by warming seawaters, Bernal says the success rate for planting new coral has been high. The village is hopeful that the reef will some day be fully restored, and already fishermen are reporting butterfly fish have slowly started to return.

Looking ahead, the future of the village is inextricably bound to the health of the reef. "The butterfly fish is the canary in the coal mine," Bernal tells me. "They are the best indicator of the health of the reef. If they return, it means we are on the right track."

A new day

It's 4am by the time we pull into the gravel carpark. There's already a small cluster of hikers gathered around their vans, stretching and adjusting their head torches. The mood is electric.

Two hours ago, when my alarm went off in the hotel room, I wouldn't have imagined I'd be this excited about hiking up a mountain, but things are a little different when you're standing beneath the hulking silhouette of Mount Batur. It's as if I have received a double shot of adrenaline.

After a safety briefing our group sets off, crossing the car park and making our first steps on the dirt trail to Mount Batur's summit. Up ahead I can make out a shoestring of headlights forming a glowing trail up the face of the mountain. We pause for a moment at a small shrine to light incense and pray for our safe passage, then the trek begins in earnest.

Mount Batur has drawn hikers for decades, partly because it's still an achievable climb for even unfit explorers, but mostly for its unusual topography. Technically speaking, the active volcano lives inside a double caldera — an outer oval encasing a single mountainous peak that reaches up to 1717m. The result is breathtaking views over Lake Batur at its base and Mount Agung wreathed in cloud in the distance.

But before we can enjoy the view, we must pass through gnarly woods and burnt-out low-lying scrub. We scramble between boulders and tackle sandy slopes where every two steps forwards also means sliding one step backwards. My calves are burning and the taste of dust has well and truly dried out my mouth. When you're spending hours scrambling in the dark there's also a lot of time to think.

When I landed in Bali, I'd braced myself for trendy cafés ripped straight out of Melbourne, high-end resorts and the excesses of over-tourism. I didn't expect to be challenged or moved by the locals I've met. Bali has taught me that everything is in balance; it's just a matter of shifting perspective. In the ruin of the *USS Liberty*, there is new life. Amid the hubbub of Lempuyang, there is the chance to find stillness. Even now, climbing the side of the volcano with heavy legs, the buzz of adrenaline burnt up hours ago, I'm sure the pain will all be worth it.

Emerging over the lip of the summit, I can see the horizon beginning to burn with the new day. I watch as fellow hikers arrive with the same exhausted look on their faces. While they are distracted by the view, mischievous macaque monkeys seize their moment to steal people's drinking bottles and snacks before running off screeching with their new prize. It's a surreal moment to be standing up here above the clouds, the whole of Bali stretched out at my feet. I'm wide-eyed, breathless and so deeply satisfied. It turns out this trip was just what the doctor ordered. 🍌

Justin Meneguzzi is a freelance travel writer and photographer living in Melbourne. His travels have taken him as far north as the unforgiving Arctic and south to the sunny streets of Rio de Janeiro. Justin travelled to Bali as a guest of Intrepid Travel. Follow more of his adventures on Instagram @justinmeneguzzi.