

# Browsing in Craft Villages in Bali

By Carey Lovelace

UBUD, Indonesia — In the rice-terraced highland region midway between Bali's central mountains and lowland beaches are villages that are known for a special craft: Mas for wood carving, Celuk for silver-smithing, Batubulan for stone carving. Within a 10-mile (16-kilometer) radius of the tourist mecca of Ubud, associated with painting, are stores, workshops and factories of interest to the visitor who appreciates local handicrafts. During a monthlong trip to Indonesia last May, I visited several of these Balinese villages.

My first impression was that the paradise described to me by friends who had visited over the years had already vanished. Narrow lanes were clogged with exhaust-belching motorbikes and trucks. The muddy main street of Ubud was lined with thatched lean-tos — as well as T-shirt shops, Fuji film signs, placards advertising cheap plane tickets, vegetarian restaurants and, considering this was off-season, a surprising number of Westerners. Yet from the clouds of vehicle exhaust and clove cigarette smoke, other sights began to emerge: ornate stonework and sarong-clad women balancing cargoes of sticks or fruits on their heads.

I was lucky enough to spend 14 of my 18 days in Ubud at Murni's Houses, in Campuan, one of several small neighboring settlements whose borders have fused with Ubud's in recent years. Aside from running one of the area's best-known restaurants, the enterprising Murni (in Bali, last names are considered sacred and never used) is also the proprietor of a group of stylish boutiques in Campuan called Kunang-Kunang that sell Indonesian goods in a sedate atmosphere tailored to Western tastes. However, there is little bartering — about 10 percent off the marked price is all they'll concede.

Diversions in Ubud include bartering in the local market for palm-leaf baskets produced in the bamboo-weaving town

of Bona, and attending *legong* dance dramas at night in the town's palace.

And within a 20-minute drive from Ubud are several craft centers. On the outskirts of the district's sprawling administrative center, Gianyar, are textile factories with shops selling fabric at a discount. In their workshops in back, visitors can see the process of making *endek* cloth, whereby threads on a hand loom are tied and dyed to create a pattern, then retied and the process repeated. The Togog and Cili factory-workshops are known for their tours; centrally situated, they are among the easiest for the first-time visitor to find.

In Kapal, on the road from Denpasar to Tabanan, winsome terra-cotta figurines and containers can be purchased at particularly low prices, ranging from 5,000 rupiahs (\$2.50) for a figurine 6 to 10 inches tall to 40,000 rupiahs (\$20) for something larger. (Prices are calculated at a rate of 2,000 rupiahs to the dollar.) Firing quality is often poor, so pieces have to be packed carefully.

TWO and a half miles from Ubud is the wood-carving center of Mas, situated among verdant rice fields. The town played an important role in Balinese history as the site of the monastery of a 16th-century holy man called Nirartha. Traditionally, two of its brahmanic families have been associated with carving: Griya Dawh for shadow puppets, Griya Danganin for carvings. Nowadays, walking down its mud-lined central street, one passes palatial homes doubling as art shops.

The most impressive belongs to Ida Bagus Tilem, a carver whose father, Ida Bagus Nanja, was a sculptor who pioneered several of the styles that are now universally imitated, such as the short, fat figures in light wood that resemble Japanese netsuke. Pieces here can cost hundreds of dollars.

Mas is also known for its masks; the most affordable are found mainly at the many smaller workshops along its back

streets, starting as low as \$3. None of these is intended for use in *topeng* masked dramas; they are strictly for tourists. More expensive showcase pieces can be found on the main avenue; for example, Ida Bagus Anom, a noted dancer and gamelan player, designs *topeng* masks as well as *commedia dell'arte* and pantomime masks based on Western models, all sought after by collectors.

An easy way to see the handicraft villages is to take one of the half-day bus tours advertised along Ubud's main street. (Tours are also offered from hotels in Sanur, Legian and Kuta Beach.) However, stops tend to be at shops that feature mass-produced items, and prices, with a cut to the driver figured in, tend to rise as soon as the bus appears and then drop when it leaves.

Another approach is to hire a driver, which can sometimes be arranged through a guesthouse or hotel. There are also minivan drivers constantly offering "Transport?" to visitors walking down the street. (A benchmark rate for a full day is around \$20, which may be bargained down.)

Many Balinese artisans sell their works from their studios, a good way to buy paintings. At the Neka Museum in Campuan or the Puri Lukisan museum in Ubud, or galleries such as Agung Rai in nearby Peliatan, one can identify interesting painters, then seek them out.

A few days before boarding the plane in Denpasar, I bought a jumbo *endek* suitcase to hold all the handcrafted items I had bought. While I had found almost none of the rough-hewn "primitive" art I usually cherish, I happily packed away *lontar* books, puppets, bowls, baskets, batik fabrics, jewelry and other charming folk items, feeling a new appreciation for the talents of the Balinese at continuing a craft tradition that remains mysterious and artful despite commercialization.

Carey Lovelace, who writes frequently about arts and crafts, wrote this for *The New York Times*.