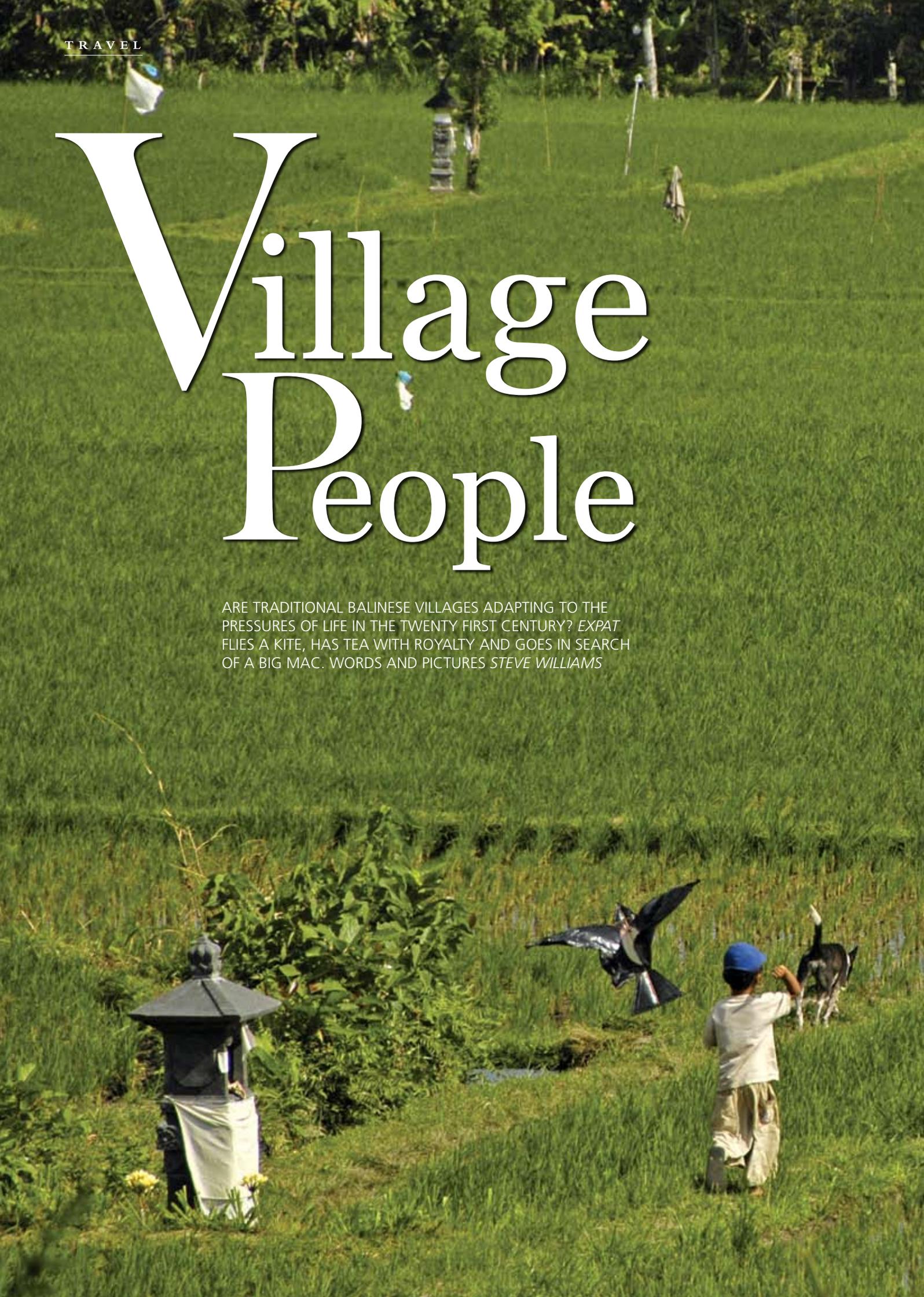


TRAVEL

Village People

ARE TRADITIONAL BALINESE VILLAGES ADAPTING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY? *EXPAT* FLIES A KITE, HAS TEA WITH ROYALTY AND GOES IN SEARCH OF A BIG MAC. WORDS AND PICTURES *STEVE WILLIAMS*







"You born in village, you die in village".

I was thinking about that comment, made by a Bali village leader, while I was doing the tourist thing in Bali: sitting in a seafood restaurant, deciding whether I wanted my lobster "life" or "die" as listed on the menu. I opted instead for the prawns, they were definitely "die" and quite good.

"Allo!" Allo!"

Just a couple of days before I was in a small village just outside Ubud, being greeted by two very cute kids who were helping their father move piles of rubbish around a scrubby block of land next to their home. Smoke hung heavy in the air from the burning rubbish, filtering through the leaves of a few orphan banana and coconut trees. You get a lot of that in Bali; greenery and smoke.



"Allo!" Allo!"

Big smiles. I approached their father and asked if I could take a photo. He rounded up the kids for the "shoot." He spat on his hand trying to fix their hair (which was fine anyway). I wondered if that happened prior to Lord Lichfield's royal family portraits at Windsor Castle.

The kids suddenly got stage fright and hid behind one of the few trees. Dad tried to coax them out, while I told him not to worry. The kids didn't budge – but I still heard a little *"Allo!" Allo!"* now slightly muffled by the tree. Thanking the father, I settled for a shot of their dog that hadn't moved from his prime position in the dirt the entire time.

The family went back to their rubbish disposal and I continued my wandering.

If you get the opportunity to explore a *real* Balinese village, do it. This one thankfully didn't feature predominantly on the tourist operator's list – no exhaust-belching, tourist-regurgitating coaches or plastic-crap souvenir shops in sight – just me, the camera and some very friendly locals simply going about their business: women washing clothes in a stream; serving behind the counter of the village store; carrying various items in baskets on their heads; sweeping what appears to be dirt from dirt. Kids watching their kites soar high above the rice fields, expertly negotiating the network of narrow mud-packed ridges that snake out across them. Men sitting on steps, smoking, solving the problems of the world; others out in the fields, sun glinting as they sharpen their curved blades for another back-





breaking day on the *sawah*.

There aren't too many cars – motorbikes and scooters are the favoured means of transport, often carrying an insane number of passengers.

It seems everyone owns at least one dog; they're everywhere. There are a few cats, but they have the sense to keep away from the dogs. The dogs bark at you, it's not vicious, they're just protecting their turf and why wouldn't they? This place is beautiful.

As you would expect, life in a traditional Balinese village is pretty laid back, but you may not expect it to be so well structured. Pretty much every aspect of family life is intertwined with the life of the village – it is very rigid and comes complete with many responsibilities that must be reciprocated. There is, for example, an obligation to help at ceremonies.

The Balinese are highly religious people and there are temples of all shapes and sizes

everywhere. About 95 per cent of Balinese practice Hinduism, even though Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population. And the Balinese love a good ceremony. On any given day there will be rites of passage ceremonies for milestones virtually from conception to right before death and beyond, but the biggest of them all is cremation. There are pre-natal rites, birth ceremonies, the 12-day, 42-day and three-month old baby ceremonies, tooth filing, and marriage, right through to the ritualistic braiding of tourists' hair at Kuta. Not really; but I wouldn't be surprised.

Even though *life* is fairly simple, the administrative structure of Bali is quite complex. I could devote a rainforest of paper to this, but basically Bali is divided into distinct provinces, then regencies, then villages or *desas*, then subvillages or *banjars*. These are the cores of village life and the people in each *banjar* run their own affairs in a communal effort.

Think of it as an “autonomous collective” à la Monty Python's *Holy Grail*. Well that's sort of it; some people argue that banjars actually come before *desas*, but a village leader explained it to me – and he should know. We chatted and sipped tea over *wajik*, which is a very tasty combination of glutinous rice and palm sugar, wrapped in a pandan leaf.

As the sun cast morning shadows of the ever-present frangipani trees in his family compound, he explained how the government has a very high regard for the role of the village, how it “sticks” the country together and how the village culture is not as strong in Java.

“The traditional village is the key to keeping culture and social life in Bali – you born in village, you die in village.” He told me the village leaders' responsibilities are to protect culture and village life and to bring

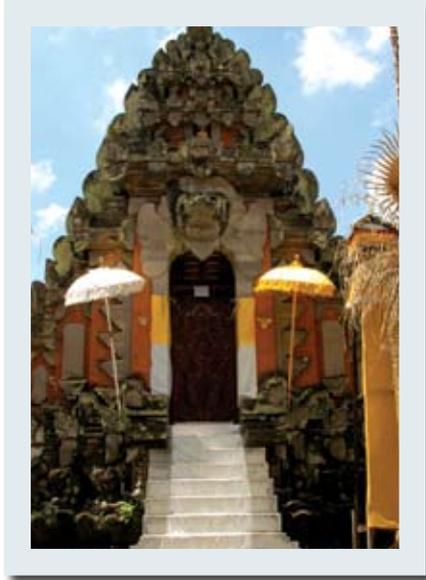


in positives from western cultures. That led us onto tourism and how the economic aftershocks of the 2002 and 2005 bombings are still reverberating through the island. “Very sad – tell the people to come.”

He expressed concern that the government had banned cock fighting, which was an integral part of village life. It's hard to pin down whether the *actual* cockfighting has been banned. The *gambling* on cockfighting was made illegal, but three rounds of the “sport” are still allowed at Hindu religious ceremonies. For years it has been used as a blood offering to appease the lower spirits. Village cockfights used to be, and presumably still are, a big social event. For generations they were held daily, governed by an intricate set of rules and were men only events, with often small fortunes of rupiah changing hands on a lethal flash of the razor sharp blade or *taji* attached to the cock's leg.

Women were allowed to sell food, like hotdog vendors at a football match, which raised funds for the village. I use the word





presumably, because obviously cockfighting still does happen – maybe not in the big stadiums at Denpasar but definitely at the village level. On my travels around the village, I noticed cocks being kept in bamboo cages on the footpath close to the road. This is to get the birds used to noise in preparation for the aural frenzy that is a cockfight. If you make something illegal, you simply force it underground – and being a fairly portable operation, cockfighting is easy to hide.

The village leader was a bit cagey about whether it still goes on. I changed the subject to talk about his home – a family compound that's design is as fascinating as it is practical.

Traditionally, family compounds, temples, even the village itself must comply with the concept of cosmic order. Family compounds or houses consist of a number of *balés* surrounded by a wall. The *balé* is the basic element of Balinese architecture – an open-sided pavilion with a thatched, steeply-pitched roof. The *balé's* size, proportions, number of columns, their size and position are determined by tradition and the owner's caste status. Though in more populated, built-up areas such as Denpasar, the housing has a lot more western influence.

Domestic living arrangements are also quite interesting, adhering to that sense of community which runs right through Balinese villages. It is expected a family's only son must stay in the traditional home; his wife and children will live there as well. If there is more than one son, one must stay, usually the eldest. It's very different to the western style where you do everything in your power to encourage your kids to leave home as early as possible short of changing the locks.

However, if a family has only a daughter, her husband has to move into the girl's traditional home, but he must be of the same caste. Sometimes girls run away if they fall in love





with a man from a different caste. Her family will usually still accept her, but depending on the family, she may not be allowed to live in the family home. The caste system is very strong in Bali, but not quite as complicated as in India.

One man I spoke to had ten people living in his family compound – his wife, two children, his father and mother, his brother with wife and one son and his sister who is not married. When she does marry, she will move into her husband's family's villa. Sounds cosy. They have one kitchen, though they eat separately with their individual families. The menu? "Morning rice, afternoon rice, evening rice. Though (we) have different things with the rice!"

The people from the village find work either in the rice fields, or in the seemingly hundreds of arts and crafts stalls that line the roads around Ubud. Some work in the hospitality business in private villas and hotels. Bali's capital Denpasar offers employment as well.

The social aspect of village life is something

very foreign to those currently living the transient expat lifestyle. As one Balinese woman explained: "I lived overseas for a year. I didn't even know my neighbour's name – I really missed my big extended family. There's always someone here for you. At home, I don't need to go to nightclubs – the village is my club".

One of the Princes of the Ubud royal family, Tjokorda Artha Ardana Sukawati, is confident the village lifestyle will continue, "the more we keep it, the better it will be for Bali." We were sitting in large, very un-Balinese, colonial-European chairs in Puri Saren Agung – the most famous of Ubud's royal palaces – resplendent with magnificent *balés*, beautiful courtyards with a myriad of statues, intricate wood carvings and gold leaf everywhere.

The Prince talked about how the relationship and tourism and culture must be dynamic. It's not all talk – evening cultural dance performances are held in the courtyard of the palace, with proceeds going to the dancers. "The performances help keep

young people in touch with their culture and traditional customs," he says. Incidentally, Puri Saren Agung was also Ubud's first hotel. It opened to guests in the 1930s and you can still stay there.

The Prince is an architect and lectures at university, and while we were chatting some of his students dropped by. We spoke of adapting to changes, to modernisation. He told me that when electricity first came to Ubud there were concerns that trees would need to be cut down. Unfortunately underground power cables weren't an option back then. The electricity was put on, with minimal tree loss. There were also fears the ingrained social network would be threatened by the arrival of Ubud's first cinema and even television. It wasn't – it's all part of that "adapting" that you hear spoken of a lot. Even though part of Ubud is fairly touristy there's still a charm to the place. Interestingly, you can't buy a Big Mac in Ubud – the royal family petitioned the government to stop the golden arches being built next to those magnificent old stone arches. All power to them. So even though they hold no *actual* power, the Tjokordas are still highly respected in the community because of their bloodline and community work; often acting as mediators between villagers and the government. They are also custodians for Balinese arts and culture, partially evidenced by saying no to the burger-eating clown. With decisions like that, it appears life in Ubud and the villages of Bali will continue as it has done for centuries, albeit with constant adapting.

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