

Where Coffee and Design Compete for Dollars and Likes

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Bali is one of the 17,000-plus islands that make up the country of Indonesia. Over the past ten-ish years, the island has experienced dramatic change, in part due to Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir "Eat Pray Love" in 2006, followed by a movie version in 2010. Before her book, Bali was a getaway for Australian surfers looking for new waves. It was full of bustling markets with local wares and verdant rice patties. Today, it's a different island. Bali's largest cities to the south are crowded with tourists looking to fill their Instagram with selfies next to Bali's numerous temples and waterfalls. Coach buses packed with foreigners overtake the narrow jungle roads, and gleaming hotels stand where there once were dense forests.

Gilbert's story isn't the first time a memoir has had an impact on tourism. This effect has happened in other places, like Tuscany, Italy (Frances Mayes's "Under The Tuscan Sun") and the Pacific Crest Trail (Cheryl Strayed's "Wild"). But perhaps it's more evident here in Bali because the traditional way of life, with its strong religious influence and modest living, has remained a strong fixture and contrast to the Western influences brought by visitors.

However, it's not just foreigners on holiday who have made an impact on the island, it's also the expats—often interested in the very affordable (some might argue cheap) cost of living that the island offers. Today there's a wide range of foreigners on the island, from yoga instructors to surfer bros, corporate ladder escapees, and award-winning chefs. You'll also find a large number of Australians, opting for the chill island life instead of the bustling Sydney scene. There's even a private school (the Green School) that's popular among expats and their children.

Expats include a growing number of transient, temporary, international residents who travel full time, usually working remotely. These digital nomads have also accelerated change—especially in the coffee industry—on the island. These (typically) younger professionals frequent Bali





for its low-cost living and tropical surroundings. When you're making \$1,000 a month teaching English online, you can live quite well in Bali, with rent prices for private villas going for \$300-\$400 a month (if you're savvy). Those who make higher incomes, like consultants, writers, and coders, are able to live lavishly in Indonesia compared to their home country. With their worldly coffee consumption and strong affinity to Instagram-friendly cafes, they too have shaped what the Balinese coffee market offers. And the locals, in general, seem happy to oblige consumer demand.

It's only been in the last decade, with the influx of expats, digital nomads, yogis, and writers looking for love, that the third wave coffee movement gained traction across the island, perhaps fueled by its proximity to Australia. On almost every street in the trendy neighborhoods of Canggu and Kuta you'll find breezy, open-air, Aussie cafe concepts selling avocado toast and flat whites. It's a dramatic difference from the modest roadside coffee stands serving Bali coffee (an instant powder coffee) and frequented by locals. In fact, locals were quite proud of the fact that there were only two Starbucks on the island until only a few years ago.

These well-traveled and highly engaged digital nomads have brought with them the desire for Instagramable lattes in chic cafes. Instead of an office, they work out of co-working spaces and coffee shops, their midnight conference calls fueled by coffee. They're discerning customers, not only in taste but also in comfort and design. They want a picturesque cafe to share on social media, a chill place to hang with friends, and of course, fast wifi.

While local, more modest, less design-focused coffee shops do exist, like Old Man's Coffee in Ubud (a no-frills, boho-Bali cafe with limited seating), the new norm is exhibited in cafes designed for social media. Places like Expat Roaster in Ubud, or Crumb and Coaster, and Coffee Cartel, both in Kuta, seem to focus on aesthetic as much as they do taste. They often stick out among neighboring businesses that are housed in humble, shed-like buildings. Inside these luxe cafes, expect posh seating, lush decor, artistically plated menu items and latte art. While the quality craft coffee might position them as a destination for coffee lovers, the vibe, decor, and curb appeal likely contribute to a more substantial portion of the business. For a nation and island known for high-quality coffee, the actual beverage is less of an emphasis than the cafe in which it's served.

Perhaps at heart, expats, even with their worldly view, subconsciously desire aesthetics that are familiar to them. Paradoxically, they choose to live in a foreign country, yet still gravitate to spaces and places that feel more like home.

After living in Bali for six months over two years, I can't help but wonder if the impact that expats and tourists have had on the Bali coffee scene isn't happening in other places across the world. It's a struggle that I'm sure many developing communities face when trying to hold onto the traditions of the past while embracing a flood of foreign money and international tastes. It's fundamental to capitalism—the market responds to customer demand.

One can only hope that the chase for Instagram likes and money doesn't dilute the intentionality of the third wave coffee movement or the unique coffee culture of a place.

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