

Pandemic in Paradise : Tourism Pauses in Bali

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Pandemic in paradise: Tourism pauses in Bali

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Abstract

This research note provides an account of the trajectory of Balinese tourism through 2020, focusing on government actions in the face of the coronavirus pandemic and the responses of local people. Interviews were conducted with informants in the tourism sector to assess the impact of the pandemic. The findings suggest that before April 2020, people were calm and thought that Balinese tourism may survive, albeit on much-reduced arrivals. After April, when tourism shut down completely, a new sense of pessimism became evident. Although domestic tourism began again in August, the sector was still in deep crisis at the end of the year. Although Balinese people expressed hope that the future may offer a more sustainable kind of tourism, all indications pointed to official support for a return to mass tourism.

Keywords

Balinese tourism, coronavirus pandemic, government actions, locals' responses, pandemic impact

Introduction

Bali is one of the world's most heavily touristed destinations. Over recent decades, its tourism sector has experienced crises – notably Avian flu in 1997, the terrorist attacks of 2002 and 2005, the SARS outbreak of 2002 and the volcanic eruption of 2017 – which resulted in sharp declines in tourist arrivals. However, in one hundred years as a significant tourism destination (Subadra, 2015), it had never been subject to a complete shut-down, as happened in 2020, as a consequence of Indonesian government decrees and the closure of its main markets. This note traces responses from workers in the tourism sector to the unfolding situation, and the alternatives they have adopted to survive financially. It concludes that Bali's vulnerability is unlikely to result in a rethink of the tourism sector; rather, post-pandemic, all signs point to a return to the growth model that has long driven Balinese tourism.

to gain an understanding of the reactions of Balinese people to the complete disruption of the tourism industry on which so many depend for their livelihoods, in-depth interviews were considered the most suitable method (Silverman, 2013; Subadra, 2019a). The 17 informants either worked in tourism and were on leave or reduced pay, or had lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. Their experience spanned hotels, restaurants, self-catering accommodation facilities, travel agencies, tourist information services, and wedding and event companies. They were selected using purposive random sampling (Dwyer et al., 2012). Because of the pandemic restrictions, as well as lack of access for many informants to online facilities, interviews were conducted by telephone. All respondents were anonymised. Statistical and regulatory information was obtained from the Bali Statistics Agency and government notices, while contemporary

Data collection

The research was conducted in Bali from March 2020 to March 2021, using a qualitative approach. In order

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secondary data were collected from reputable online news publications.

Tourism in Bali: Trends to early 2020

Tourism in Bali is specifically regulated as an economic resource to provide work opportunities for local people and accounts for around 55% of Bali's GDP (Subadra, 2019b; Winterflood, 2020). Long recognised as a mass tourism destination, by 2019 overtourism seemed a more appropriate description of the Balinese condition (Dodds and Butler, 2019). Both international and domestic arrivals have grown steadily over the past years, as Table 1 shows.

These figures must be seen in the context of both a determination to stimulate domestic tourism and a relentless drive to increase international arrivals to Indonesia to 20 million by 2020. In a sense, the Balinese authorities are hostage to these ambitions. Domestic arrivals have grown substantially, especially in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombings, to offset 'destination vulnerability' in international markets (12). There is also a realisation that domestic tourism is important for sustainability: less leakage, longer stays, more support for local businesses in terms of

accommodation and food, and lower carbon footprint, for example (Widistuti, 2020).

While international arrivals to Bali have also steadily grown overall, those from South and East Asia and specifically China have increased as a proportion of the total. In 2019, arrivals from China were second only to those from Australia (Statista, 2020). There is, nevertheless, still a perception among the Balinese that the tourists with the 'thickest wallets', as the popular saying goes, remain those from the Global North.

Initial state responses, 2020

The fall-off in tourism from the early months of 2020 occurred partly as a result of Bali's main foreign markets closing down and partly as a result of actions taken by the Indonesian government. The first policy regulation (Number 3 of 2020) came in February, when the Minister of Justice and Human Rights cancelled entry visas for Chinese nationals (Government of Republic of Indonesia, 2020a). The result was a substantial decline of hotel occupancy.

In anticipation of a worsening situation domestically, the Indonesian government issued a decree on the 13 March (Number 7 of 2020, amended as Number 9 of 2020), in terms of which a national task force was set up to help minimise the spread of the disease (Government of Republic of Indonesia, 2020b, 2020c). It was led by the head of the National Disease Mitigation Agency. Another decree followed (Number 12 of 2020), declaring that COVID-19 was a non-natural disaster and stipulating that governors would be responsible for task forces at provincial level, while regents and mayors would play a similar role at regional and local level (Government of Republic of Indonesia, 2020d). (It is important to note that all levels of government in Indonesia are expected to adhere to policies and directives set by central government.)

Bali's task force, named Covid-19 Management Acceleration Task Force, was thus an extension of the central task force. It has been responsible for coordinating government departments involved in handling the pandemic in Bali, collecting data related to infections, recoveries and deaths from the nine Balinese regions and reporting to the central government.

In addition, the government of Bali assembled a team from three governmental agencies, Udayana University, the General Public Hospital of Sanglah and the Province's Department of Health (*Bali Post*, 2020). They have coordinated efforts to manage the treatment of infected patients and have played a central role in the dissemination of public information. In the early months of 2020, they issued public notices warning local residents that because Bali was still open

Table 1. Domestic and international tourists visiting Bali, 2014 to 2020.

Year	Tourists		Total
	Domestic	International	
2014	6 394 307	3 766 638	10 160 945
2015	7 147 100	4 001 835	11 148 935
2016	8 643 680	4 927 937	13 571 617
2017	8 735 633	5 697 739	14 433 372
2018	9 757 991	6 070 473	15 828 464
2019	10,545,039	6 275 210	16 820 249
2020	4,596,157	1,069,473	5,665,648

Source: Bali Statistics Agency (2021a, 2021b).

Table 2. Room occupancy rates of hotels, January and February 2020.

Hotel classification	January 2020 (%)	February 2020 (%)	Decline (%)
5 Star Hotel	63.26	45.32	17.94
4 Star Hotel	61.6	45.08	16.52
3 Star Hotel	53.42	46.82	6.6
2 Star Hotel	54.47	49.84	4.63
1 Star Hotel	62.06	29.32	32.74
All stars average	59.29	45.98	13.31

Source: Bali Statistics Agency (2020).

for tourism, risks of infection were high. Further public notices recommended prevention measures such as personal hygiene (washing hands, wearing face masks), as well as public measures such as social distancing, testing at points of arrival and organising specific hospitals to treat cases.

The Governor of Bali issued a circular on 16 March 2020 regarding public education, government modes of working and combating fake news about COVID-19 (Government of Bali Province, 2020a). Significantly, there was no advice at all for the tourism sector. Although the Regencies of Badung, Bangli, Gianyar and Tabanan ordered managements to close sites temporarily, the Association of the Indonesian Tourism Industry, GIPI (Indonesian Tourism Business Association) failed to provide clear guidance to the province as a whole. Its meeting on 9 March 2020 did not even discuss the mitigation of COVID-19 risks. The chair went so far as to claim that '*Saya Juga Capek Bahas Corona*' - 'I am also tired discussing Corona' (Tribun-Bali, 2020). Therefore, tourism-related enterprises were left to use their own judgement as to how to react to the evolving situation.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 on the island was in early March 2020 (Government of Bali Province, 2020b). The first deaths occurred in April; while cases remained relatively low until July (when there were 3,360 confirmed cases and 48 deaths), the infection rate and associated deaths rose markedly in the second half of 2020. By early January 2021, 18,138 cases and 531 deaths had been reported (Government of Bali Province, 2020b).

In the earlier phases of the pandemic, there was much media coverage of the supposed 'mystery' of low transmission and infection rates in Bali – in fact across Indonesia as a whole. Medical specialists attributed the situation variously to a youthful population demographic, lack of testing, misdiagnosis, and how the virus behaved in the tropics. These are not matters for analysis here. Importantly for present purposes is to note that the deteriorating situation was deemed severe enough for the Indonesian government to halt all inbound tourism by presidential decree in late April, in terms of decree Number 11 of 2020 (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020e).

Also in late April, the central government banned all domestic transportation by road, rail and air, effectively shutting down internal travel. The only exceptions were cargo, essential services and emergency (Jakarta Post, 2020). This was in large part to prevent the spread of the virus via the annual exodus for Ramadan. The only tourists left in Bali after that were the few who could not immediately return home.

Local reactions, February to July 2020

Until the April decrees, local people reacted with some confidence, believing that as they had come through previous crises, they would come through this one (Ashton, 2020):

We must not panic; however, we must be more aware by keeping our bodies safer, washing hands more frequently and avoiding crowds. (Informant-1, 7 March 2020)

Being aware is essential but not being paranoid... since each must depend on their own karma. (Informant-8, 7 March 2020)

Nothing special Sir, there used to be cases of virus such as SARS, MERS and Swine Flu earlier in Bali. (Informant-9, 7 March 2020)

Even in the core areas of international tourism, Nusa Dua and Ubud, there seemed an atmosphere of calm:

It is rather shocking as many people have died, especially in China. However, practising a healthy life and keeping a distance from people suffering coughs may protect us from this disease. (Informant-5, 7 March 2020)

In these months, accommodation providers were generally able to survive, as domestic tourists and international tourists other than from China continued to arrive. Two hotel employees working in the Sanur and Jimbaran areas noted:

There are some cancellations of room reservations in the hotel where I work, especially from C-Trip Travel Agency serving Chinese and Korean tourist markets. However, it is not significant as our major markets are European tourists. (Informant-7, 7 March 2020)

There have been cancellations since the middle of February until now. The February occupancy rate should be above 75%, but it dropped sharply to 30%. (Informant-9, 7 March 2020)

In the face of such falling occupancy rates, concern deepened among some managers:

Initially, it was natural, however, as it goes for a month it affects business significantly. Therefore, we are beginning to apply crisis management in order to keep running. (Informant-4, 10 March 2020)

The Balinese responded well to public health messaging to wear face coverings in public, wash hands often, maintain social distancing and cleanse their houses

and compounds. Acceptance of these practices, as well as new restrictions on mobility, was enabled by the Balinese Hindu belief system of *Rwa Bineda* – the two spirits of God and evil, co-existing in the universe (Subadra, 2015). Coronavirus is deemed to belong to *Bhuta Kala*, the evil spirit. Accordingly, the Hindu Council of Bali, the Board of Traditional Villages of Bali and Department of Development of Traditional Society of Bali Province issued a circular calling on believers to serve *Pejati*, an offering dedicated to God in family temples, and *nasi wong-wongan*, an offering representing the evil spirit, at the entrances to their compounds (Government of Bali Province, 2020c).

The celebration of *Nyepi*, the annual Day of Silence marking the Balinese Hindu New Year, fell in March. On this day, four prohibitions are traditionally observed: *amati geni* (no fire), *amati karya* (no work), *amati lelungan* (no travel) and *amati lelangan* (no entertainment). In 2020, the normal *Nyepi* observance was extended from 24 to 48 hours and the ‘no travel’ prohibition took on additional meaning as a gesture of physical isolation to combat the pandemic. Online *Nyepi* cards were widely adorned with face masks and sanitisers.

Unfortunately, the equilibrium that Hindu belief strives for was sorely tested in pandemic conditions and on occasion has been found lacking. Hundreds of returning Balinese cruise industry workers were treated with hostility, since they were believed to be carrying the virus into Bali (*INewsBali*, 2020). Residents of Karangasem and Bangli Regencies rejected their presence altogether and they were finally relocated to Badung Regency, the southern region of the island where most hotels and resorts are located (*Radar Bali*, 2020; *NusaBali*, 2020). These cases suggest that there was less solidarity within Balinese communities in pandemic conditions than in the case of the eruption of Mount Agung in 2017, when people willingly opened their territories to those living within the zones most severely impacted by the volcanic eruptions.

There was a very notable shift in attitude, with confidence giving way to extreme anxiety, after the complete halt to tourism arrivals in April. It was from this time that many lost their jobs. A staff member from a villa complex in Tabanan reported:

There have not been any guests staying since early March... I am now in a dire situation. On the one hand the traditional village forbids incoming guests; on the other hand, the owner needs guests to generate income... some of my fellow hospitality workers have now taken unpaid leave while some of them have been made redundant. (Informant-11, 7 March 2020 and 26 April 2020)

In the same vein, the chair of the Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association for Badung Regency noted that

It is the worst ever as the occupancy rate reached zero... since [the beginning of] April, about 96% of the hotels have closed as there are no tourists anymore... it will rise to 100% as foreign tourists are ordered to return to their home countries. (*Bisnis.com*, 2020)

The loss of livelihoods prompted widespread discussion on social media, claiming that COVID-19 and the shut-down were warnings from God to Balinese authorities to rethink the current condition of Balinese tourism. Instances of tourist misdemeanor quickly escalated into stereotype: criminals guilty of overstaying, deception, theft, credit card fraud and fighting (*Detik News*, 2021). It seemed as if local residents expected a reconstruction of tourism on a different basis after the pandemic.

Low occupancy rates and travel cancellations forced hotel and villa managements to apply urgent measures to secure their assets. Some hotels made employees redundant, while others changed work shifts or obliged employees to take leave. Hotel employees in Jimbaran and Seminyak areas reported that

Unpaid leave policy is targeted for the end of April... Outsourced employees have been made redundant and those on contract will not have their contracts extended. (Informant-9, 7 March 2020)

It is a really terrible condition... 56 staff have been discharged since the Australian government issued a travel warning for lockdown... all rooms are unoccupied now, except one villa which has been occupied by a German tourist for three weeks, as he could not get a flight home. (Informant-8, 7 March 2020 and 19 April 2020)

This not only affected accommodation but also touched employment throughout the tourism supply chain. As a Balinese tour guide reported:

This is the worst condition I have ever experienced since I became a Japanese tour guide in the 1990s... It's very hard to live now... every day I make taro crackers... cook chicken leg curry to be sold online and delivered door to door to earn money. (Informant-14, 22 February 2021)

As this testimony illustrates, many of those suddenly unemployed had to turn to other ways to earn a living. Some became micro-entrepreneurs, selling items such as food and masks. Others returned to family farms to

work the land, while some traditional villages expanded employment opportunities.

I returned to my village when I was dismissed from the villa where I worked last year...as there were no guests...Now I look after my parents' Salak farm and harvest food once a week to fulfil my family's needs. (Informant-17, 8 February 2021)

The complete absence of tourists from April also caused the closure of tourism sites and attractions, in terms of the requirements of two national ordinances. Local governments were meant to oversee this process; however, this period also witnessed a new role for traditional village authorities, as frontline workers combating the spread of the virus (Wedha et al., 2020). For example, *Pecalang*, the customary security guards of these villages, were actively involved in the closure and guarding of tourism sites.

For those whose livelihoods were not dependent on temple tourism, the absence of tourists brought some relief:

I feel more comfortable worshipping without tourists... Our privacy is not well kept [and] the management must determine strictly which areas are accessible for tourists, to ensure that they are no longer disrespectful. (Informant-9, 3 January 2021)

Opening to domestic tourism from August 2020

With hotel occupancy rates plummeting to one or two percent, the authorities cautiously began to re-open for necessary travel at the end of May, with a raft of new measures in place to reduce the risk of spreading infection, such as completing application forms and obtaining COVID-negative certificates. A much-publicised intention to re-open to international tourism in September 2020 failed to materialise in the face of a worsening situation. This was a blow to many:

I felt optimistic hearing the government planned to reopen Bali tourism for Christmas and New Year. How can I and other fellow tourism workers survive if there are no foreign tourists visiting Bali? (Informant-11, 2 January 2021)

Postponing international tourism is just like a double-bladed knife...it stops the Covid-19 outbreaks but burdens the tourism stakeholders' and state's finances...The hotel where I used to work...had financial difficulty...and was finally sold very cheaply for a 142-room hotel located in the Kuta area. (Informant-16, 3 January 2021)

Partly in response and accompanied by a vigorous 'We Love Bali' promotional campaign, domestic tourism was allowed to resume, on condition travellers could produce negative PCR swab or rapid tests. In addition, Indonesia introduced a 'Cleanliness, Health, Safety and Environment' (CHSE) accreditation scheme for the tourism industry and made recovery grants available to support applications (Tourism Department of Bali, 2020a; *Kompas*, 2020e; *BisnisIndonesia*, 2020). Although some 877 Balinese businesses had successfully applied by the end of 2020 (Tourism Department of Bali, 2020b), most smaller operators have been unable to meet the stringent requirements of the scheme. Domestic tourism therefore appeared to be benefiting only the better-off tourism businesses.

The Head of the Tourism Department of Badung Regency estimated that through August, some 2,500 to 3,000 domestic visitors had entered through I Gusti Ngurah Rai International Airport (*Kompas*, 2020d). By October, this had risen substantially to between 5,000 and 6,000 tourists per day (*Kompas*, 2020f). Some availed themselves of accommodation deals normally out of their reach. For example, the five-star Ayana Resort had earlier in the year reduced its room rate from IDR 3,500,000 (₹175) to IDR 1,500,000 (₹75) (*Tempo*, 2020).

Conclusion: The new normal for Balinese tourism?

In Bali as in virtually every other destination, the pandemic has resulted in two seemingly irreconcilable outcomes: on the one hand, local residents can enjoy their environment without being overwhelmed by strangers and on the other, it has destroyed the livelihoods of many thousands of workers.

There has been some talk about avoiding a return to overtourism. In mid-2020, the regional government even introduced the concept of *Sad Kerthi* – Six Types of Sustainability – into cultural tourism provision (Government of Bali Province, 2020d). This is unlikely to have an impact on the nature of recovery, however, as resort owners, accommodation providers, airlines and so on look to recuperate losses as quickly as possible as soon as mobility is permissible. In December 2020, the new Indonesian Minister of Tourism visited Bali with a brief to expedite measures to prepare for the opening of international tourism (Tourism Department of Bali, 2020c). All indications are, then, that recovery will be predicated on the previous growth model.


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