



# Three's a charm

**Move over Bali - the nearby Gili Islands are the go-to for travellers in the know**

WORDS PAUL EWART

For decades the island of Bali has been on the lips of every traveller dreaming of a tropical getaway. But years of popularity mean parts of the island have swapped simple charm for luxury resorts, crowded nightclubs and shopping strips.

Many travellers are now turning their attention to a nearby trio of islands in the Indonesian archipelago to get their sun and sand fix.

A few hours by fast boat from mainland Bali, just off the coast of neighbouring Lombok, the Gili Islands tick the “tropical getaway” boxes: jaw-dropping white-sand beaches, abundant coconut palm trees, dazzling turquoise waters and

**There are no cars, no motorbikes and best of all, there's an island to suit all tastes**

amazing marine life.

Gili means “small island” and while *gilis* can be found all around Lombok, when people talk about the “Gili Islands”, they’re referring to Gili Trawangan, Gili Air and Gili Meno. Veritable specks, these islands are tiny. There are no cars, no motorbikes

and best of all, there’s an island to suit all tastes.

Young and looking to party? Gili Trawangan is for you. Want somewhere romantic and secluded? Look no further than Gili Meno. How about somewhere in between? Gili Air should do nicely. Not that you need to confine your visit to just one of the Gilis - you can island-hop with ease. Allow a good two days for each island, or make a proper vacation of it with an extended Bali add-on (taking into account travel time to and from the Gilis). But whichever way you plan to visit, be sure to add the islands to your travel hit-list sooner rather than later.



## Gili Trawangan

The largest and most heavily developed of the three Gilis, Gili Trawangan (or “Gili T” for short) has become a stopover destination for the international party set. Here, backpackers and dedicated pleasure-seekers populate the island’s multitude of bars and resorts. The scene is divided into two main areas: the east side of the island (which is where the boat drops you off) is the most developed (think: jam-packed beachfront of bars, restaurants and accommodation), while the northern tip of the island offers a more subdued vibe, with laid-back beach shacks and bars.

Gili T’s newfound status as a party island has promoted many comparisons with Ibiza in its early years and this burgeoning reputation is seeing the island shake off its former backpacker guise, attracting a more hip and cashed-up crowd from Asia and Europe.

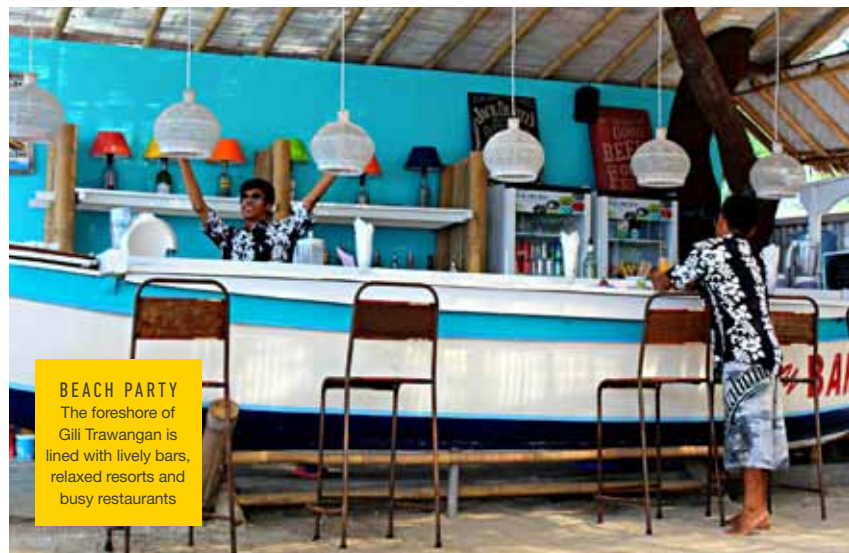
**Stay:** Hotel Vila Ombak ([hotelombak.com](http://hotelombak.com)) remains one of the best resorts on the island. If your budget is bigger – and your comfort zone narrower – then this is your place. Overlooking Mount Rinjani, the property features a large outdoor pool and a beachfront restaurant and is an easy five-minute walk from the jetty.

**Eat:** The daily night market in front of the boat pier is where you can eat very well – and very cheaply. Freshly caught seafood, grilled steak and pan-Asian dishes are available. Kick off your walking degustation with a portion of delectable *nasi campur* (mixed rice dish with meat, vegetables, egg and shrimp) from the stand near the entrance.

**Do:** Party! While there’s an array of nightlife options (there’s even a full-moon party on Gili T), Sama-Sama Reggae Bar is a safe bet for a good time. Positioned near the makeshift harbour on the main street, the bar offers great live music, often from well-known Indonesian bands. ➤



## Gili Trawangan has become a stopover destination for the international party set



**BEACH PARTY**  
The foreshore of Gili Trawangan is lined with lively bars, relaxed resorts and busy restaurants





DESERT ISLAND DREAMS  
Life on laid-back Gili Meno moves at a sedate pace



## Gili Meno

Arguably the quietest and most peaceful of the three islands, Gili Meno is for those who want a truly relaxing holiday – a leisurely snorkelling trip and an afternoon in a beach hammock is as taxing as it gets. The vibe is laid-back – horizontal even – which makes sense when one of the only activities available is to laze in a beach hammock doing, well, nothing. Snoozing aside, there are ample spots for swimming, snorkelling and diving around the island, with the best beaches positioned along the north coast and the southern end of the west coast.



## An afternoon in a beach hammock is as taxing as it gets

**Stay:** Aptly translated as “slow-slow”, the Adeng-Adeng Bungalows ([adeng-adeng.com](http://adeng-adeng.com)) is a family-run resort that embodies the peace and tranquility for which the island is famed. Set back a couple of hundred yards from the beach in landscaped tropical gardens, private bungalows are separated by winding footpaths through banana trees and pristine fish ponds.

**Eat:** The commercialisation of Gili Meno is still in its infancy, so the dining options compared to the other Gilis are minimal, particularly when it comes to eateries outside of the beach shack variety. Aside from gorgeous rooms, the Mahamaya boutique hotel’s ([mahamaya.co](http://mahamaya.co)) restaurant is the fanciest restaurant on the island, and like all good things, it’s priced accordingly.

**Do:** The odds are good that the turtles you have been snorkelling alongside were former residents of the Gili Meno Turtle Sanctuary ([gilimenoturtles.com](http://gilimenoturtles.com)). Here, a small team works to protect the endangered sea turtles, hatching around 500 babies each year. There isn’t a formal entrance fee, but donations go towards food for the turtles and maintenance of the pools.



# Gili Air

Significantly less developed than Gili Trawangan, but more so than Gili Meno, Gili Air is a happy mix of the two. There isn't a party vibe as such, but in high season you can expect to stumble upon the occasional makeshift rave on the beach. Most of the dining and nightlife options are on the east coast and positioned directly on the beach, so if you're not a night owl, then opt for accommodation elsewhere.

You can walk the island on foot in around 90 minutes, but for novelty value (or for transporting you and your luggage from the boat drop off point) take a ride in a *cidomo*. These pony or horse carts are one of the only means of transport on the island.

Come evening, bliss out at the island's resident yoga and meditation space, H2O Yoga and Meditation Center ([h2oyogaandmeditation.com](http://h2oyogaandmeditation.com)), for their daily candlelit Tibetan singing bowl class. Bliss.

**Stay:** With a location a few minutes walk from the main harbour and a few steps away from the best snorkelling beach on the island, The Sunrise Resort ([sunrisegiliair.com](http://sunrisegiliair.com)) is a great option for visitors. Locally designed villas either overlook the fine, white coral sanded beach or an idyllic coconut grove. While the ocean is on their doorstep, the hotel also has a great natural stone pool if you're craving a freshwater swim.

**Eat:** Follow the delicious aroma of locally caught fresh seafood being grilled over charcoal and you'll find the Chill Out Bar and Restaurant ([chilloutbargiliair.com](http://chilloutbargiliair.com)). Raised dining platforms are situated directly on the sand with picture-perfect views across to neighbouring Lombok and Mount Rinjani.

**Do:** Head straight to the coral reef on the eastern side of the island for amazing diving. The marine life ranges from the ubiquitous (although, still impressive) giant green turtle sightings to moray eels, parrot fish and the more elusive black and white tip reef sharks and manta rays. Gili Air Divers ([giliairdivers.com](http://giliairdivers.com)) offer year-round scuba at every level, from entry through to advanced. ★

## Bliss out at the island's resident yoga and meditation space

### GETTING THERE

#### FROM BALI

There's a variety of fast boat options with many tickets including transfer to or from your hotel.

Check seat availability and book online ahead of travel. Boats between the islands usually operate twice daily and the journey takes around 15 minutes between each.

[gilibookings.com](http://gilibookings.com)

#### WHEN TO GO

The Gili Islands have a tropical climate so you can expect enjoyable weather year round. The high season runs from June to August. During the month-long

Muslim Ramadan celebrations, the bars turn down the music at around midnight. If you plan to scuba dive, the best months are from May to September, but it's possible to dive throughout the year.



**FLOAT AWAY**  
Snorkel with tropical fish and turtles in the clear water off Gili Air

**Travel Info** ✈️

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