

## INDONESIA

# Tranquil island gem

Bali may be a holiday mainstay for many but those willing to venture further afield in the archipelago will be well rewarded, says **Paul Ewart**



**A** HORSE and cart rumbles along the nearby dirt road, kicking up a cloud of sand. To my right, a resident islander gently strums a Bob Marley classic on his guitar from the comfort of his hammock. On the left, a middle-aged couple – kitted out in snorkel gear – make their way down from the cafe deck to the pristine white beach below. Welcome to Gili Air.

Forget the raucous Bintang singlet-wearing crowds holidaying in Bali; Gili Air – in map terms, anyway – is a stone's throw from the tourist hotspot, but it may as well be an entirely different country.

Gili Air (or Little Island of Water) is part of an archipelago of three small islands just off the northwest coast of Lombok. Here, laid-back Indonesian island culture is fused with a tourism industry catering to travellers seeking some serious R&R.

There's a definite "castaway" vibe here and a small resident population of Sasak people allows visitors a rare glimpse of traditional island life – one that has been largely lost in other parts of the region, due to the influx of tourists.

As you might expect, navigating this sliver of sand is easy. While there are no motorised vehicles on Gili Air, bicycles are in abundance and easily available for hire, as are a steady stream of small horse-drawn carriages, or "cidomo".

However, given that you can walk around the island in about 90 minutes, the best form of transport will be your own two feet. Indeed, walking paths snake all over the island, including a coastal path, which makes for a pleasant evening stroll ahead of sunset or a great early morning running track.



**CASTAWAY VIBE:** Sunrise Resort villas on Gili Air (above); and small horse-drawn carriages or cidomos are a common sight on the island (left).

Although Gili Air is closest to the Lombok mainland, it is the most overlooked of the three Gili islands in terms of development (for example, the island's first ATM was only recently installed). And with this basic infrastructure comes power outages or "mati lampu". These small disruptions can last for a few hours, but most hotels and bars have back-up generators.

Likewise, this slower pace means that the polished five-star hotels of neighbouring Bali are yet to arrive, so expect accommodation that errs more on the side of rustic. But there's a range of options to suit all tastes and wallets.

A standout is the Sunrise Resort, which offers traditionally constructed

villas either overlooking the beach or set back in coconut groves. Think hand-cut solid stone bath tubs and private hammocks with sea and mountain views. While the beach is on its doorstep, there's also a pretty natural stone pool, complete with waterfall. The hotel is also adjacent to a popular restaurant: Le Cirque – a French eatery that also has a takeaway patisserie.

At dusk, the smell of fresh seafood being grilled on charcoal signals that it's time to eat. Most of the dining and night-life options are on the east coast and positioned directly on the beach.

Being a place where people really come to get away from it all, organised activities are thin on the ground, but

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when you're done with the beach, it's time to get wet. The snorkelling and diving here is world-class and the island is smack bang in one of Indonesia's top diving spots – an area that also has a reputation for being the “turtle capital of the world”.

Head straight for the coral reef on the eastern side of the island, where fine, white sand gives way to a reef that's accessible at both high and low tides. The sea is crystal clear, with temperatures averaging a very pleasant 28C and the marine life ranges from the ubiquitous (although, still impressive) giant green turtle to moray eels, parrot fish and the more elusive black and white tip reef sharks and manta rays.

As sunspoil as my experience appears to be, on my last night on Gili Air, I find myself drinking a beer or two with a Scottish hotelier who has been running a property on the island for the last 15 years. He's predicting major changes for this little piece of paradise. “Things are going to change – and quickly too,” he says. “Enjoy it while it lasts.” He explains that the jump in popularity of the neighbouring “party island”, Gili Trawangan, is impacting on the peace and relative serenity of Gili Air.

My eyes opened, I spot construction I hadn't previously noticed and as I walk down the dirt track to the harbour on my final morning, I'm given a flyer for a rave. A rave!

I leave knowing that, at least for now, the tranquillity of this island gem is intact, but who knows for how long.

So, whether you visit Gili Air as an add on to a Bali break or as a stand-alone holiday, do it soon before it's too late.

G02  
GILI AIR

GETTING THERE

Virgin Australia flies daily to Bali from Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Melbourne.

See [virginaustralia.com](http://virginaustralia.com)

From Bali there are a variety of fast boat options to Gili Air, with many tickets including transfer from or to your hotel. Check seat availability and book online ahead of travel.

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

STAYING THERE

Sunrise Resort: With a location a few minutes walk from the main harbour – and a few steps away from the best snorkelling beach – this property ticks boxes. Traditional villas either overlook the beach or are set back in a coconut grove.

See [sunrisegiliair.com](http://sunrisegiliair.com)

SEE AND DO THERE

Gili Air Divers: Offering year-round scuba at every level in addition to free diving introductory courses, Gili Air Divers is one of the best operators on Gili Air. It's also handily located in front of the best snorkelling area on the island.

See [giliairdivers.com](http://giliairdivers.com)

MORE

See [indonesia.travel](http://indonesia.travel)



QUIET HAVEN: Gili Air is one of three small islands off the northwest coast of Lombok. Picture: iStock

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