

ADVENTURE

# ride\_\_\_\_\_on



THE UNDERWATER BUDDHA, NUSA LEMBONGAN

— Pedal from the highest mountain peaks to the glistening blue sea on a bike tour of Bali's south-eastern islands. It's the new way to experience this natural playground and Jenny Hewett gets into gear to find out why —

Jeremy Bishop



INFINITY MOUNTAIN BIKING TOUR





"This has got to be the last hill," puffs my friend Mitch from behind as we sluggishly inch our way up. On the edge of defeat, all I can muster are some expletives and an anguished cackle. Every snaking turn reveals yet another uphill battle. The sun is shining, the island air is as sweet as a coconut but there seems to be no end to this tropical stairway to heaven. "Ride it like you stole it," I coax myself, the sweat beading on my forehead. My legs, pedalling furiously, rage against the machine.

We're only about an hour into our two-day, action-packed mountain bike tour across Bali's south-eastern isles and at this point, there has been more pain than gain. But what goes up must come down. Like the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the natural infinity pool on the edge of the Indian Ocean waiting at the bottom is well worth the burn.

Earlier that morning, when the car arrives to collect us, I can barely keep my eyes open. But five words immediately startle me awake. "Penida is hilly and hot," says our local guide, Arta Wayan, as we head towards the harbour for the 45-minute boat trip across the Badung Strait from Sanur in Bali's south-east, bikes and helmets in tow. He wasn't exaggerating. Over the next 48 hours, the rugged and restless landscape of Bali's Nusa Penida and Nusa Lembongan islands unfolds like a storybook as we brave land and sea on an overnight mountain bike tour with Bali-based Infinity Lifestyle Adventures ([infinitylifestyleadventures.com](http://infinitylifestyleadventures.com)). By the end, we will have pedalled for around seven hours, snorkelled with three manta rays and covered about 70 kilometres. And my backside has the bruises to prove it.



KELINGKING BEACH

With its majestic rice fields, traversable volcanoes, back-road trails and narrow urban streets, Bali was made for two-wheel adventures. Casting a new light on one of Australia's favourite destinations, mountain bike tours are emerging as an alternative way to explore the island. "When we started in 2012, there were only a handful of cycling tour operators but now I think there are more than 60 companies offering them in Bali," says Sam Hoys, co-owner of Infinity Lifestyle Adventures. "We now serve about 5000 clients every year and operate tours across all levels in Lombok, Bali and Central and East Java."

It's hard to imagine that during the 18th century, prisoners from the Gelgel dynasty were held on Nusa Penida. These days, it's Insta-obsessed backpackers who are captured by its charms. Sprinkled with fruiting papaya, mango and banana trees, the island's dramatic landscape is all jagged cliffs and dry, wiry jungle. Even though it has small beachside homestays and bungalows offering budget accommodation, local warungs (food stalls) and dive centres, it is still largely undeveloped.

Not only are the scuba-diving spots here famed for their manta rays and massive ocean sunfish, the island's T-Rex-shaped Kelingking Beach, natural swimming hole Angel's Billabong and cove-like Broken Beach have become some of Bali's most coveted tourist spots.

This morning on Nusa Penida, villagers are going about their day as usual. A man sits on the floor of his workshop, carving traditional Balinese motifs into wood. "Hello!" kids call out, waving furiously as we ride past. "Selamat pagi [good morning]!" I offer in return, not taking my eyes off the road for a minute. Arta, out in front, signals the worst is behind us. Finally, down we go. The ocean panoramas are becoming more vivid and the breeze has lost its intense heat, but it will still be another hour before we reach our destination. When we do, I'm breathless in more ways than one. A rocky, green oasis sits at the edge of the ocean with a soup of intense turquoise and blues churning beyond it. A pod of dolphins glide past in the distance. Despite having to share Angel's Billabong with a swarm of selfie sticks, it's the reprieve we need after a challenging three-hour ride.

"This is like the Tour de France," Mitch laughs as we arrive back at Nusa Penida harbour that afternoon in a utility vehicle, pretzeled between our bikes. He's not wrong. This is an intermediate-level tour, after all, and we've already cycled the equivalent of four F45 cardio sessions today. Apart from the two-hour wait at a local warung for lunch ("Slow-cooked mie goreng is a new Balinese delicacy," I joke to Arta), we haven't stopped. But there's a good reason. "After 4 o'clock, the waves are big. We must try and take the boat before," says Arta.



BRIDGE FROM NUSA LEMBONGAN TO NUSA CENINGAN

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

### > **Wear your swimsuit underneath your cycling clothes**

for any impromptu opportunities to cool off mid-journey. A light shirt worn over your sports clothes will keep the heat off and help you avoid sunburn.

### > **Carry a small backpack and pack sunscreen,**

a sarong or small towel to wash and dry your feet, a reusable water bottle, tissues to use as toilet paper and travel sanitiser to clean your hands. Bring an underwater camera to get shots of the sea life and manta rays.

### > **If you'd like to see more, add two or three days onto your trip**

after the mountain biking tour has finished. This will give you time to properly enjoy the beaches and dining spots you may have only seen in passing, including Nusa Lembongan's laidback new beach lounge Ohana's ([ohanas.co](https://ohanas.co)).

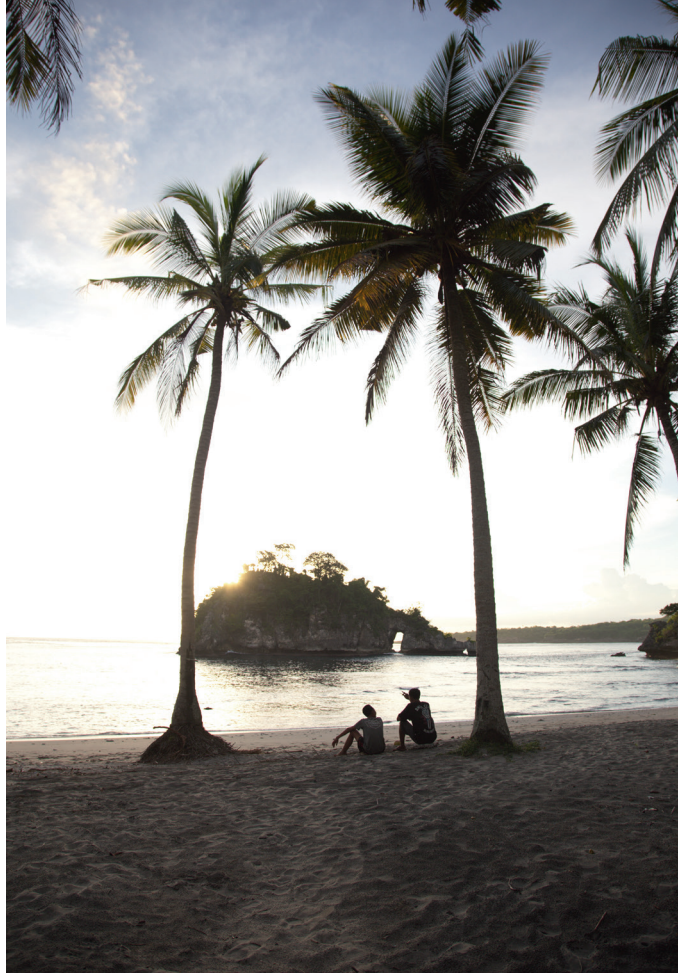


It's now 5.30pm and the small outrigger is zipping towards the iconic yellow suspension bridge joining the tiny island of Nusa Ceningan with Nusa Lembongan. Smaller and flatter than its sister island, low-key Nusa Lembongan is one of Indonesia's emerging destinations and offers swimming beaches, reef breaks, snorkelling and a growing collection of hip beach clubs, villas and hotels. Of all three islands to the south-east of Bali, it's the most developed.

On arrival, we're whisked away for hot showers and cold Bintang beers at d'Nusa Beach Club and Resort (dnusaresort.com) at Jungut Batu village. An affordable beachfront stay, with modern rooms, comfy beds, two pools and a bar, the hotel faces back to Bali's east coast and even has its own swing set for those iconic sunset shots. Just to the right of the hotel, Mount Agung looms spectacularly in the distance as the sun sets. The next day, over three hours, we will have completed a full lap around the island. It's an easier ride that will take in Nusa Lembongan's highlights, including a Venice-style raft cruise through eerie, claw-like mangroves and a quick stop at the Devil's Tears clifftop and nearby white-sand Dream Beach, before heading back to Bali.

But before the day starts, we have an early-morning date with the deep. It's 7am and things are running like clockwork. Our captain yells out in Bahasa, pointing at two fins slicing through the ocean. "Quick, quick," he shouts to me in English. "Jump in!"

The manta rays are right on time. Snorkel mask on and submerged, I watch them glide and pirouette through the water within an arm's length of my face. They're friendly, if not oblivious to us spectators. I squeal out of the way when one, bat-like, flies straight at me, its mouth agape. A known cleaning and feeding station, Manta Point is the marine equivalent of a bed and breakfast. The rays come for the buffet of plankton and stay for the parasitic scrub-down. I won't be anyone's breakfast this morning – but I'll need a good feed myself before getting back on that bike.



CRYSTAL BAY BEACH, NUSA PENIDA

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A MAGNIFICENT MANTA RAY