

NO MORE MASS TOURISM IN BALI



From mass tourism to a deserted destination: the island paradise of Bali has to reinvent itself in the Corona crisis. Is there a future beyond commerce and coma drinking?

Well known Kuta Beach is hardly recognizable. Where the sun worshippers from all over the world usually cavort, masseuses offer their services and vendor's trays sell sarongs and ice-cold Bintang beer, there has been a tough lull since March. **Even the famous sunsets over the Indian Ocean take place without a large audience because of the coronavirus.** Bali has become a deserted destination.

More than half of Bali's economy depends on the tourism sector, most Balinese work here, directly or indirectly. No wonder, according to the local statistics office, more than six million international guests visited the "Island of Gods" last year, which is only about 5700 square kilometers in size - that is about one and a half times the size of Mallorca.

The Vice-Governor, Cok Ace, already calculated in early summer that Bali would lose 9.7 trillion Indonesian Rupees every month due to the pandemic - more than 550 million euros. An enormous number for such a small island.

June, July and August are usually considered the high season for sun, culture and party lovers from Australia, China or Europe. In a direct comparison: While 600,000 foreign guests were counted in June 2019, this June the figure was 32.

Bali, however, is used to crises. In 2002 and 2005 the island was attacked by terrorists, and hundreds of holidaymakers were among the victims. The tourism sector had just begun to recover when the bird flu struck in 2007 - but even the H5N1 virus could not bring the island to its knees. At the end of 2017, volcanologists warned of a major eruption of the Gunung Agung, and many cancelled their planned trips for fear of the fire mountain. The catastrophe did not happen and the tourists came back. With the coronavirus, however, another opponent has now struck, one that has kept the entire industry in a stranglehold for months. Can it recover this time too?

130.000 Hotel Rooms for 4900 Tourists

When local tourists from the neighboring islands were allowed to arrive again for the first time at the end of July, they were greeted at Denpasar airport with great fanfare and garlands of flowers. The relief was so great that a local minister even described the day as "historic". But the numbers speak a different language: "The opening for local tourism had no significant impact on hotel occupancy," said Made Ramia Adnyana, spokesperson for the hotel association IHGMA. On the weekend of August 22 to 23, for example, only 4900 tourists from other islands had visited Bali. A cinch, if one considers that 130,000 hotel rooms are available.

Another cold shower followed. Plans to reopen Bali to foreign tourists after September 11th had to be rejected in August. Until at least the beginning of 2021, the border will remain sealed. Precaution is better than indulgence: "Bali must not fail in the revival of tourism, because this could damage

Indonesia's image in the world," warned Bali Governor Wayan Koster.

At the same time, demands are growing louder that Bali must become more independent of tourism. This would also be a chance for a more sustainable new beginning. Because the boom also had a flip side: Mass tourism and garbage, commerce and binge drinking. Apart from a few idyllic places off the tourist trail, Bali was no longer the tranquil hippie and surfer paradise of the 1970s.

"For Bali, the travel ban is also a blessing, it is finally quiet, nowhere is traffic chaos. This is really something special," says Alejandro Fernandez-Cruz. The Spaniard has lived with his family in Ubud for three years. In all this time he has only ever experienced Bali packed with tourists. Now, however, the ex-pats and the locals are moving closer together.

Many have turned to agriculture. Governor Koster also pointed out the great potential of Balinese agricultural products already in July - especially with regard to tropical fruits. "Salak (snakeskin fruit) is already in great demand, and we are also preparing a market for dragon fruit."

In general, after so many setbacks, Koster wants to put Bali's economy on more pillars in the future than just tourism, including the innovation sector and the manufacturing industry.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has hit the Balinese hard. Even though the virus gives the island itself a breathing space from the masses, people are suffering from job losses and lack of money.

There is something else that stands out these days. The residents are increasingly pursuing one of their great passions. The Hindu Balinese consider flying kites to be lucky charms - so it is perhaps no coincidence that there are so many in the sky at the moment.

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