

GATEWAY TO THE MORNING OF THE WORLD

Deceptively simple, elegantly constructed and breathtakingly located, Rabul and Indraksbi Mookerjee's home in Bali, designed by architect Ernesto Bedmar, has been furnished by the island's best accessory—its stupendous views

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THRESHOLD OF SOLITUDE
Entrance to the inner
courtyard and pavilions.



SPACED OUT

The sparsely furnished living pavilion features an eight-seater sofa. The columns supporting the pavilions are reclaimed ironwood pillars that used to support piers.

A NATURAL STUDY
The comfortably furnished library
pavilion looks out to the ocean.

PHOTO: DJUNA IVEREIGH





PHOTO: DUJUNA IVEREIGH

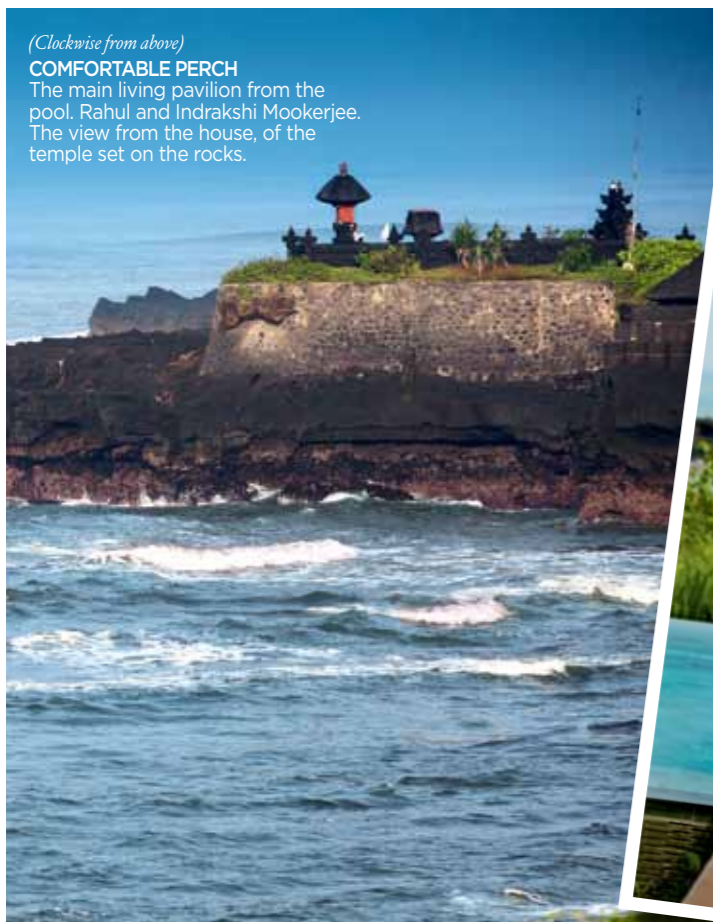


(From above)
IN-HOUSE STYLE
Views from the main dining table. One of the indoor-outdoor guest bathrooms.

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PRIVATE GARDEN
One of the four guest bedrooms with an en suite garden.



(Clockwise from above)
COMFORTABLE PERCH
 The main living pavilion from the pool. Rahul and Indrakshi Mookerjee. The view from the house, of the temple set on the rocks.



ALESSANDRO LUPI

When the Argentinian architect Ernesto Bedmar was commissioned to design Jiva Puri in Bali, he was overcome by “a strong feeling of insecurity” because of the blessed island’s own traditions of simple, elegant and airy architecture.

He had received so much inspiration from the local aesthetic that he’d put those traditions to work in projects around the world over two decades. The Argentinian felt there was little he could add to the Balinese style. Jiva Puri was the first commission the well-known, Singapore-based architect received in Bali. In the end, the stunning vistas from the property and Bedmar’s wealth of experience gave him the confidence to start work on the project. In *The Bali Villas*, a recent book on the house, he thanks the villa’s owner for his confidence in allowing him “to build a simple environment” for the holiday home.

There is an innate modesty in such comments, which was echoed by its owner, Rahul Mookerjee, when I interviewed him briefly for this article. Mookerjee declined to speak about the house at length or of his motivation behind building it because he felt an article about the holiday home for *AD* should, first and foremost, be about the architect and the house itself.

NATURAL MINIMALISM

Such modesty should not be mistaken for an absence of audacious ambition. Bedmar has taken the precepts of Balinese architecture—its giant entrance gates and its compounds designed around the centrality of a courtyard—and updated them for the 21st century. I can think of few architects working in Asia—other than the late Sri Lankan genius, Geoffrey Bawa, and his successors such as Channa Daswatte—who can venerate classical architectural traditions while somehow rewriting the rules comprehensively.

To begin at the beginning: There is that gargantuan gate and long compound walls in a nod to Balinese tradition and then another one that reveals a narrow path running alongside an elegant lawn that could double as a tennis court, and a linear pond that is very Bawaesque. There are only—only—frangipani trees lining the lawn. The lack of flower beds is a relief because they would have been a distraction in this setting. There are four sleeping palaces for guests that lead off that central axis, each with their own quiet garden to reflect on when one wakes from the tropical haze of an obligatory afternoon nap. This is another of the seeming contradictions of Jiva Puri; simplicity coexists with luxury, solitude one moment with the perfect feng shui for an extended house party. By the time one reaches the living and dining spaces, a sharp intake of breath is necessary because this is a show-stopper of a pavilion with a view. There are expansive, wraparound glimpses of the ocean that feel like 360-degree views, even though one knows that the molten metal of the sea at sunset is playing tricks on one’s vision.

SPIRITUAL LEANINGS

To the right is a temple—there must always be a temple in view in a Balinese landscape—but this one is extraordinary because it is black, set on black rocks by the sea, and more than just a little brooding. When I walked down to it one evening, I imagined that the waves crashing against it for many millennia had still not washed away a deviant tendency towards paganism.

The living area with these beguiling views is such a natural place

to gravitate to that it is always hard to pinpoint when dinner parties begin and when they end. The furniture in the living and dining pavilions is spare, but grand. Designed by Bedmar’s architectural firm, Bedmar & Shi Designers, the eight-seater sofa reminded me of the minimal lines of B&B Italia, somehow made suitable for the languid tropics. It faces directly towards the daily drama of the sunset, and as often as not, the melodramatic storytelling of Indrakshi Mookerjee, the owner’s vivacious and humorous wife. The columns that support the huge pavilion look like they could support a temple three times as large.

What the temple of Jiva Puri celebrates aside from Bali itself is food. (A former chef from the Grand Hyatt is often in residence to cook sumptuous meals. If this weren’t enough, on my last visit, Mookerjee’s mother produced a Bengali feast of such authenticity that I raided the fridge the following day for leftovers.) A seven-metre-long distressed-wood dining table sets the scene perfectly. Above it hang suitably giant lanterns, fashioned remarkably from shrimp traps from the nearby island of Lombok.

PARADISE FOUND

People from around the world have been falling in love with Bali for almost a century. In the 1920s and 30s, the island bewitched legends in their own lifetimes; German artist, Walter Spies and the Canadian musicologist, Colin McPhee. Spies’ home, facing Mount Agung, is one of the most special villas in east Bali. The homes they built became much more than four walls and a roof, turning into a long-winding tale of self-discovery and achievement.

Jiva Puri is the summit of a similar journey, although because the 21st century is an easier time to make such dreams a reality, it was not as arduous as that faced by foreigners who lived in Bali almost a hundred years ago. Taking a break after 25 years in banking, Mookerjee approached building and staffing Jiva Puri with the attention to detail and foresight that would make a hotelier envious. The lengthy pool with a floor of natural stone, for instance, takes the monotony out of swimming laps because the stones literally change colour before your eyes. If you want to dine by the poolside, there is yet another large dining table and seating area by the pool to do so.

Early one morning on a recent visit, I came down to the library, seemingly precariously perched over the sea, to have a cup of tea with Mookerjee. The rain-swept setting was so perfect we were soon doing yoga there. Never did a sun salutation feel so organically right. More than half a century ago India’s Jawaharlal Nehru described Bali as “the morning of the world”. It is an incomparable description because it is so true—there are few places on this beautiful island where that feels more apt than at Jiva Puri.

Bedmar, for all his initial worries about creating a home that could add to the traditions he revered, has succeeded so extravagantly that he has won three new commissions on the island since Jiva Puri was built. In the preface to the coffee-table book celebrating the architecture of Jiva Puri, Bedmar thanks “the gods and spirits of Bali” for the new commissions. As for Mookerjee, at a recent party I spotted him dancing with his elegant, 70-something mother amid those formidable pillars from a temple epic. The moon cast its spotlight on the revellers and the sea crashed against the rocks below. We associate homes with security and stability. Jiva Puri is different. On this ancient island its contemporary style promises an elixir of perpetual youth. ♦