

GOOD WEEKEND

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THE AGE MAGAZINE

See Bali & Cry

The bulldozing
of a culture

by David Leser



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Nehru called Bali "the Morning of the World".

Investors, including the Soeharto clan, are calling it a goldmine. As development fever takes over, paradise is in danger of sinking under the weight of garbage, human waste and golf balls.

Farewell my lovely

This is a story about Bali Low, not Bali Ha'i. It is a story you will never get from tourist brochures, nor from your trusty travel agent. You certainly won't get it from the Indonesian Government. That's because it's about greed, politics and excrement. Literally. It's a tale that you might not like – if you're in the middle of your cornflakes or have just booked your annual holiday. But it's one that begs to be told, if not for the sake of your own health, then at least for Bali's.

It's also one that should be told because of Bali's unique relationship with Australia. How many Australians have been touched by this tiny pearl in the Indonesian archipelago during the past 30 years? Half a million? One million? More? How many suitcases have tumbled on to our airport carousels bearing its artefacts, how many Australian homes designed in its image, how many hearts

stirred by its rich cultural processions of exquisite young women and men?


For nearly 25 years, it has been the most favoured overseas holiday destination for Australians. As of 1995, the figure stood at more than 8,000 a month, the second highest source of tourists for the island after Japan. For most of us, Bali remains our most direct experience with Indonesia, an exotic image to soothe any disquiet caused by, say, Jakarta's brutal subjugation of East Timor or its ruthless muzzling of political dissent.

You can, of course, still reach for the purple prose to describe the pink sunsets and the verdant rice terraces. You can still visit ancient temples, feast your eyes on people of grace and beauty, bathe in the pageantry of music, dance and drama that is Bali's unique cultural offering to the world. Let it be said, you can still have an incredible holiday in this place.

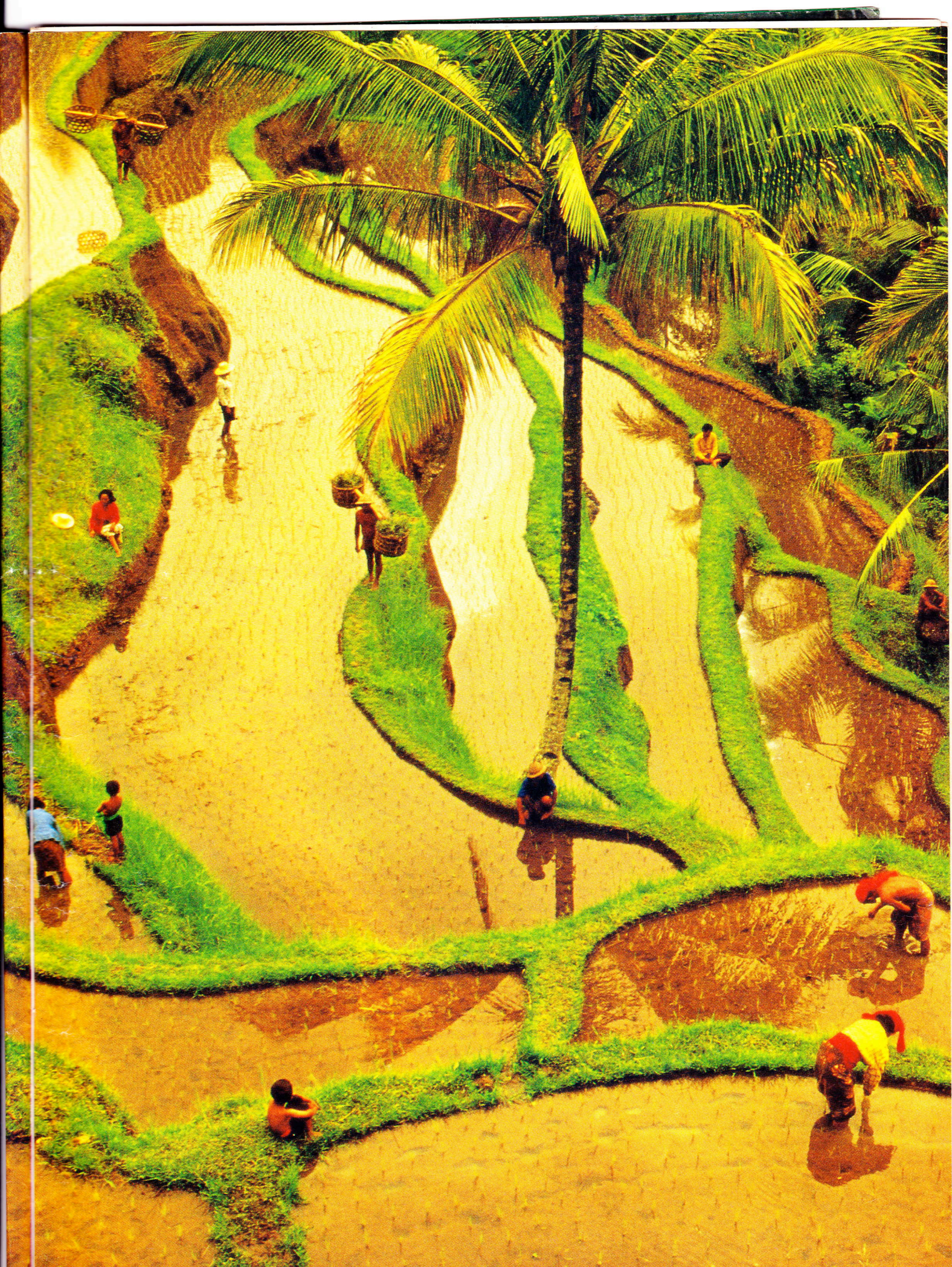
It's only when you get out of your deckchair long enough to poke around on ▸

STORY BY DAVID LESER

THE PHOTO LIBRARY



Two steps forward, one back: Bali's traditional rice terraces are under threat from overdevelopment.



the spongy edges that you discover the "dark side of paradise" – Bali sinking into its own mire. Then you will see the sewage oozing out of the soil on the banks of the Sayan terraces outside Ubud, where the multi-million-dollar Four Seasons Hotel is being built at breakneck speed. You will see it in the wet season, excrement spilling from the septic tanks of three- and four-star hotels into the streets of Kuta and Legian and then into the sea. You will see it in the rubbish dumps – legal and illegal – which sit like smoking ruins alongside motorways close to hotels and restaurants. You will see it in the reports that the Indonesian Government has not published

succumbed, too. Nehru, India's first prime minister, visited the island and dubbed it "the Morning of the World". Former Indonesian president Sukarno, son of a Balinese mother, established a palace court there and in doing so elevated the island to a pre-eminent place in the Indonesian cultural firmament.

With the succession to power of General Soeharto in 1967, Bali became entrenched as the primary tourist destination in Indonesia, a place vital to the national economy. From the late 1960s it was backpackers looking for cheap *losmens* (Balinese guesthouses), surfies chasing ideal waves, hippies shopping for the best ganga.

This had some positive benefits for many Balinese. Thirty years ago Balinese children were dying from malnutrition. Now families could afford to build new homes, buy motorcycles, send their children to schools. The tourist industry spawned thousands of new businesses – handicrafts, fashion, furniture, art, cuisine.

But according to Carol Warren, who has studied the impact of tourism on Bali's environment and culture, this huge injection of money also had a harmful effect on Balinese life. "Despite a continuous flow of rhetoric espousing earlier commitments to 'cultural tourism'," Warren said, "development policy has



Gods and golf: one of Balinese Hinduism's most important temples is within a few hundred metres of the new Bali Nirwana Resort (below).



about the state of Bali's beaches – bacteria levels so far above the World Health Organisation's recommended standards that you'd have to be crazy, or just plain ignorant, to take the plunge.

The fact is, Bali is being dangerously overdeveloped and, with it, its environment and culture ransacked. Such is the hunger for the quick rupiah, the staggering lack of planning and basic urban infrastructure, and the level of cronyism and corruption within Indonesia, that the forces lined up against Bali look insurmountable. Hell, even Greg Norman has as good as given his imprimatur to the idea that rice sickles can be turned into golf clubs!

THE IDEA of Bali as an island paradise first tantalised Westerners in the 1920s and '30s. It was unique among the world's exotic locations, a Hindu-animistic island in an Islamic sea, a museum of ancient Javanese culture, a flourishing temple-based society of kings, priests, scholars, artists and traders, an exotic fantasy where Europeans could find spiritual harmony and physical pleasure. The famous names who went there merely added to its lustre: artist Walter Spies, anthropologist Margaret Mead, actor Charlie Chaplin, actor and playwright Noel Coward, writer H.G. Wells.

By the 1950s, non-Europeans had

The 1970s and '80s saw this appeal broaden – everything from beer and skittles in Kuta to boutique holidays on rice terraces could be had for an affordable price.

Then came the deregulation of Indonesia's financial system in 1988, and with it an unprecedented investment boom. Licences to start private banks became freely available and controls over interest rates removed. Massive amounts of credit were on offer from domestic as well as foreign banks and in Bali this translated into a huge injection of money into the tourist industry.

Suddenly the island was a rich man's honey pot, particularly for a growing new Javanese middle class. According to Dr Carol Warren from the Asian Studies Program at Western Australia's Murdoch University, investment in major tourist projects on the island soared from \$US17 million in 1987 to \$US170 million in 1988. Between 1988 and 1995, that figure rose steadily to \$US295 million. Many of these tourist projects were residential resorts offering Jakarta's new rich, and also a growing number of holiday-makers from Asia, a home away from home.

become almost entirely geared toward the gross maximisation of tourist numbers and the income they might generate. This in turn has created acute environmental and social problems."

Bali's development fever is staggering. Every day the embryo of yet another hotel or condominium takes form, thus eliminating another vestige of traditional Bali. In many ways it is a microcosm of the struggle being waged across Indonesia: how to satisfy the interests of economic growth and still preserve the stability and unity of a diverse people, many of whom are wedded to time-honoured ways of life. "If there is no tourism, we can't develop in Bali," I Made Samba, head of the Tabanan regency's planning board, told the *Far Eastern Economic Review* when confronted with opposition to one of Bali's biggest tourist resorts at Tanah Lot in 1994.

"We rebel against Bali becoming the pleasure park of the world," retorted Ibu

Gedong Bagoes Oka, who led the worshippers in protest against this project and was prepared to voice her concerns. (Such is the culture of fear that pervades not just Bali but Indonesia as a whole that it is often difficult to get people to speak their mind.)

Conspicuous among the development projects are a number of giant luxury resorts connected to President Soeharto and his children. "Bali has become a colony of Jakarta's, a playground for the Javanese elite, especially the Soeharto family," says Dr George Aditjondro, an Indonesian academic and dissident now living in Australia. "The entire tourist industry on that island is monopolised by one clan, which is the

director of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, this "acumen" stems largely from their position in the family and the fact that rarely, if ever, do they have to dip into their own pockets. "The Soeharto children get most of their money from the state banks and don't pay it back," he says.

George Aditjondro has documented the extent of the Soeharto family's holdings in Bali. Sigit Harjojudanto, for example, is President Soeharto's eldest son and owns, among other properties, shares in the Bali Cliff Resort Hotel, where former prime minister Paul Keating once met Soeharto. The hotel is built in the Nusa Dua area, on the Bukit peninsula, 75 metres above

the sea with an elevator carved into the cliffs.

Just to the east of the Bali Cliff is the Nikko Bali Hotel, also part-owned by Sigit. Like the Bali Cliff, the Nikko is built on a cliff face. The original structure, designed by Indonesian engineers and financed

because the Indonesian builders felt it was appropriate. I think the labourers may have paid for the hard hats themselves."

So slipshod are some building practices that the foundations for at least one hotel in Legian were laid on a bed of waste matter. As recounted to GOOD WEEKEND by one environmental source, the engineer was instructed to lay the foundations to a depth of 12 metres. At 8 metres he discovered a sewerage aqueduct and insisted to the site manager that the sewage be pumped out and the aqueduct be filled with cement before construction resumed. He was sacked on the spot.

Structural and worker safety is only one of the many hidden costs of rampant growth Indonesian-style. The disposal of waste is another. Bali has no integrated system for dealing with garbage or human waste. Some of the more luxurious hotels are now treating their own sewage but the majority of hotels and *losmens* still rely on septic tanks.

"I can show you hotels in Kuta and Legian where the septic tanks have overloaded and they've had to close the footpaths to the beach because of the excrement," said one Indonesian-based Australian engineer who spoke to GOOD WEEKEND on the condition of anonymity.



"Bali's entire tourist industry is monopolised by the Soeharto clan. It is terrible because it is destroying the environment and local democracy."

All in the family: President Soeharto (left) and three of his children (above, from left) Tutut, Sigit Harjojudanto (with wife Elsy) and Bambang.

President's family. It is terrible because it is destroying the environment, it is destroying the local democracy which is bound up in the *subak* [irrigation farming] system and it is not contributing much to the economy."

Within Indonesia the extent of the Soeharto children's empire is largely a matter of public record for the very reason that family members see it as testament to their business acumen. They have major shares in commercial ventures ranging from sophisticated satellite technology to bottled water and cigarettes, from property to petrochemicals, broadcasting to banking, taxis to road tolls and, as recent reports have indicated, to dubious gold deposits in Borneo's East Kalimantan province. According to Professor Richard Robison,

remedied by Perth-based engineers Ove Arup and Partners, although geotechnical advice given to the Indonesian owners still warned that in the event of a major earthquake the cliff face was susceptible to collapse.

Morrison said that during the construction phase, 14 people had died on site. (The unofficial figure was 35.) "Some were crushed when material fell from a crane because it wasn't properly secured," she says. "One was electrocuted; a couple fell from the tower of the 14th and 15th storeys. There were no safety rails and no protective clothing for the workers. People worked in thongs, and hard hats were only issued to the labourers halfway through the project because they demanded it, not

through the now banned state lottery (SBSD), was not planned for earthquake conditions which are prevalent throughout the island.

According to Jill Morrison, the Australian site representative for the hotel's interior fit-out, shortcomings in the original design were

"The control of human, plastic and solid waste is the big issue on Bali and nobody is listening," says Sean Foley, an Australian living in Bali and working as an environmental consultant to a number of United Nations projects. "This island will eventually disappear under a sea of crap if nothing is done soon."

Documents from Udayana University in Bali's capital Denpasar obtained by GOOD WEEKEND reveal levels of faecal coliforms in the waters around Bali way above World Health Organisation recommended standards of zero.

So polluted are the waters that environmental experts don't discount the possibility of a large-scale cholera outbreak. "It's not a very popular notion," says Rio Helmi, vice-chairman of the Wisnu Foundation, Bali's only environmental organisation, "but I think the possibility exists of a very large-scale cholera breakout. We've had smaller incidents where people have been infected, but it's never been widespread. Every day the possibility gets bigger."

In early 1995, newspapers reported that 61 Japanese tourists contracted cholera after returning from Bali. Japanese health authorities issued health warnings which were immediately discounted by

REUTERS

Indonesian authorities. "There was a huge campaign mounted within Indonesia towards Japan discounting it, saying it was all hysteria," said one local source who insisted that his identity be concealed. "Instead of taking that as a warning bell and saying, 'Now we really have to get into action and do something about the situation', it was all covered up. It was like the problem didn't exist."

Melody Kemp, an Australian environmental health consultant based on the island, advises against swimming in most



Among the hotel's features is a swimming pool grafted on to the river bank close to holy springs where villagers have been bathing for centuries.

tourist areas. "Anyone who goes and swims in the ocean here should be concerned for their health," she says. "Doctors are increasingly seeing people suffering from ear, nose and eye infections in addition to the usual Bali belly."

Kemp gained some notoriety for herself last year when she wrote to *The Jakarta Post* newspaper decrying plans for a new (Sheraton) Four Seasons hotel on the banks of the Ayung River near the cultural centre of Ubud. Designed by former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's nephew and due for completion by July, the hotel is an enormous edifice set in what was once a traditional rural landscape of rice paddies and coconut trees. Although Four Seasons management insist the hotel is not being built inside an environmentally protected area, a study of local maps obtained by GOOD WEEKEND suggests otherwise.

Among the hotel's many features is a swimming pool grafted on to the river bank

close to holy springs and to where local villagers have been bathing for centuries. It is also where the ceremonial ash of the deceased has long been deposited. Royal Rowe, general manager of Four Seasons, said the reason for the pool's location there was simple: "Aesthetics". He added that the Balinese were more than welcome to continue bathing there if they wanted.

While defending his own project, Rowe made it clear he believed the pace of change in Bali was too rapid. "With development here, frankly I don't know where they're going to get the water from," he said. Rowe confirmed that President Soeharto's third son, Tommy, owned a share of the Four Seasons hotel in Sayan but doubted it was as high as 30 per cent, as widely rumoured. "I would imagine it's probably less than 10 per cent, maybe even less than five," he said.

Aside from owning a sizeable share of the other Four Seasons Hotel at Jimbaran Bay, Tommy Soeharto, believed to be the president's favourite son, owns, together with the army, PT Sempati Air, the airline that flies regularly between Jakarta, Denpasar and Perth; shares in PT Tirta Artha Buana, a company that provides drinking water to three key tourist areas in Bali; shares in PT Ayung River Rafting, a company that sells rafting rides down the Ayung River (close to where the Four Seasons hotel is situated); and perhaps most significantly, shares in PT Bali Benoa Marine (BBM), the company converting

Benoa Bay into a major tourist resort.

Tommy's Benoa Bay project will form part of what seems to be Indonesia's answer to the Gold Coast, a string of gigantic developments along the southern coast of the island designed to attract mass tourism, especially from Jakarta's burgeoning elite anxious to escape the capital's worsening traffic snarls and pollution.

These expansions are a dramatic departure from the recommendations of a 1971 Master Plan for tourism drawn up by French consultants. This plan called for three established tourist zones – in the Nusa Dua, Sanur and Kuta areas – to contain the impact of mass tourism. The philosophy behind this plan was that Nusa Dua, in particular, was going to absorb the high-class hotels, with the Kuta and Sanur areas offering smaller-scale accommodation more suitable to their surroundings. However, such was the appetite for tourism investment by provincial and regional government authorities

left out of the original plan that by 1988 the number of zones had increased to 15. Five years later, by decree of the Governor of Bali, this number had increased to 21, thereby opening one-quarter of the island and an estimated one-in-five Balinese villages to commercial exploitation.

The Governor of Bali, Ida Bagus Oka, declined to respond to a number of questions faxed to him by GOOD WEEKEND, including reasons for this dramatic departure from the original tourist plan.

Speaking to GOOD WEEKEND through an interpreter, Nyoman Gelebet, a former consultant on the 1971 Master Plan, said Bali now was being "smashed" by "eight monster projects". One of them is Tommy Soeharto's Benoa Harbour where 20 million cubic metres of sand fill are being dredged to create a "dreamworld" resort that will include a giant marina, five golf courses, luxury villas, condominiums, shopping centres and hotels.

The dredging serves another purpose as well – to increase fourfold the size of nearby Pulau Serangan (Turtle Island), considered possibly the most controversial of all Bali's grand schemes.

The project has been defended on the grounds that it will save the island from 'sinking' due to its increasing population, as well as arrest beach erosion from the nearby brackish water shrimp ponds. Opponents argue that apart from violating Balinese religious sensibilities – the project is located next to Bali's second most important temple – it is an environmental disaster waiting to happen. It will alter tidal patterns as well as destroy fishing grounds, mangrove swamps, seagrass and the coral reef itself. There are also plans to blow up a mountain near to a small fishing village on the east coast and extract rocks in order to help build a sea wall around the expanded island.

"For me, Serangan encapsulates everything that is going up the wall about Bali," Melody Kemp says. "There is so much greed that it has turned to decadence and in the process they are making stupid decisions."

"One, Serangan is on the flight path of the airport so there will be a steady flow of low-level aircraft noise. And two, it's at the confluence of five major rivers, all of which are bearing industrial and human waste. Anyone going in the water there is going to get incredibly ill – if not from diarrhoeal disease then from the heavy metals and high levels of toxic dye from the Batik industries found along these rivers."

The initial environmental impact study for Serangan was prepared by the Perth-based environmental consultancy firm LeProvost, Dames and Moore, which questioned the concept on numerous ecological grounds. After issuing its findings, the firm was dumped in favour of a local group headed by Professor R. Mardani, the former head of Denpasar University's

Many farmers were forced to sell their ancestral land, while others who did so willingly later decided they had been duped.

environment studies centre who was later placed in charge of tourism. Professor Mardani, according to well-placed sources, was far from enthusiastic about the project but was in no position to oppose its continuation.

Rare are the times that the Balinese engage in active protest. Rare because they prefer to avoid open conflict and rare because to protest is to invite retribution from the Government. This is why the demonstrations in early 1994 remain a watershed in contemporary Balinese history. Angered by a giant resort at Tanah Lot, site of one of the most important – and easily most photographed – shrines in Balinese Hinduism, thousands of people took to the streets to voice their opposition. The demonstrations were brutally suppressed.

The Tanah Lot project, known as the Bali Nirwana Resort, is controlled by the Bakrie Group, a conglomerate with long-standing business connections to the Soeharto family. It was the first of the mega-resorts approved for the island in 1991 and is due to open this year, its many features including a 401-room, five-star hotel, 450 residential units and

an 18-hole international golf course designed by Greg Norman.

"Tanah Lot distinguishes itself because it is a gross transgression of a very sacred site," says Carol Warren. (To tee off from the 12th hole is to come within 150 metres of the temple.) Bulldozers began levelling the land around Tanah Lot in the early '90s before all land-holders had agreed to sell, before the required building permits were issued or before the environmental impact assessment process had been completed. Many farmers were forced to sell, while many others who did so willingly decided later they had been duped.

"We were told that our land was going to be taken for government projects," said one farmer who spoke to GOOD WEEKEND through an interpreter. "It seemed to us that the Government needed our land. We didn't realise until after we got the papers, until after we sold the land, that it said Bali Nirwana Resort at the top."

In the few years since the land was taken, prices have soared from about \$1,600 per 100 square metres to \$16,000 last year. By next year, one landlord is expecting to be able to sell his plot for about \$40,000.

Golf now poses one of the greatest threats to Bali's ecosystem. At Tanah Lot two-thirds of the land resumed for the project is taken up by the Norman-designed golf course. Given that a golf course can consume as much as 400,000 litres of water a day, Warren claims this to be an unacceptable concentration of a precious resource. Plans for 26 more golf courses on the island make this a matter of growing urgency.

"The golf course is a maniac consumer of water and purveyor of environmental disaster," Professor Manuaba, one of Bali's most respected environmental commentators, told the local *Bali Post* in 1993. According to Warren, the island is now losing 1,000 ha of rice paddy each year. "This means one of the most fertile and productive agricultural regions in the world will soon be facing rice shortages." It will also mean further contamination of the water table because of the heavy use of fertilisers and chemicals, as well as the destruction of local customs associated with the *subak*.

George Aditjondro has urged that plans for further golf courses on the island be suspended. He has also called



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for Greg Norman to pull out of the Bali Nirwana Resort and donate his estimated fee of \$1 million to the farmers and local religious authorities.

"Politically and financially it would be a very important gesture because so many farmers have lost their land," he said. Norman declined to respond to a number of questions faxed to his corporate representatives by GOOD WEEKEND.

ON A FULL moon evening in September last year, thousands of delegates from around the world attended a World Tourist Organisation conference on Bali's Sanur beach. Made Wijaya, an Australian-born landscape architect who has lived on the island for the past 24 years, doubts that any other place in the world could have turned on such a show. Wijaya has

culture of jealousy is becoming stronger and working its way through families."

In 1993, in the district of Gianyar, the regional head ordered the removal of all roadside trees, believing tourists preferred treeless streets. Now there is no shade. In Kuta a beautiful river that until a few years ago wended its way through the town has been filled. Around Denpasar enormous areas of rice fields have vanished. At Candidasa the beach has disappeared following the mining and bombing of coral reefs and the construction of hotels too close to the high watermark. At Gilimanuk, on the west coast, plans are under way for a bridge connecting the island with Java. The tide looks unstoppable.

And everywhere, the fingerprints of the Soeharto family or their friends. According to well-placed expatriate sources, Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana, the President's

Enormous areas of rice fields have vanished. At Candidasa the beach has disappeared following the mining and bombing of coral reefs.

designed gardens for more than 50 hotels in Bali and is regarded as something of a local cultural watchdog. He was sceptical about such a conference being held.

"I was sort of against it," he says, "the idea of having [ceremonial] tooth filings to order on the footpath. But I went there and, true to form, the Balinese pulled out all stops. There were 100 *jukungs*, those outriggers with the red sails; and tooth filing and people pounding rice and people being married and monsters and the whole unbelievable ceremonial Balinese year compacted into 20 metres of footpath, like the Royal Easter Show except all cultural.

"And these delegates from countries which really have little culture and little to offer in terms of cultural tourism were just flabbergasted." Wijaya believes the Balinese culture is infinitely flexible and resilient but that it now needs tourism to survive. "It has survived colonisation, Islamisation, Christianisation ... [but] without the tourist dollar, this wonderfully dynamic culture really couldn't survive into the 21st century," he says.

Ibu Mas, an aristocratic Balinese whose small village guesthouse near Ubud has been recognised internationally for its holistic approach to tourism, is one of many Balinese who disagrees with this view. She believes the island is threatened as never before. The pace of change is unprecedented. Land speculation is so rampant that parents and children now fight over what to do with their heritage. Do they sell their small holdings for tourist purposes or retain it for agriculture? "The balance has been tipped," she says. "It is creating a lot of conflict ... because the

eldest daughter, otherwise known as Tutut, and her younger sister Siti Hediati Prabowo (Titiek) have recently bought up national forest and a stretch of the west coast for what will soon be another resort. Tutut is now widely tipped as the next vice-president of Indonesia. Their brother Tommy is believed to have just been granted the *izin lokasi* (permit to develop land) for the Buleleng region. This will give him control over most of West Bali, including much of the national park, up to Singaraja. In Payangan, near Ubud, hundreds of hectares of rice paddy have been acquired by a conglomerate with close ties to Bambang, Soeharto's second son. The local joke is that farmers will soon be wearing hard hats while they work so they don't get injured by stray golf balls.

At Pecatu, in the south, farmers have risen up in protest against Tommy Soeharto's plans for a tourist city that will eclipse anything yet conceived for the island. Their only hope now is that their protests are being backed by the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) and the Legal Aid Foundation.

As Indonesia heads towards election day on May 29 – an almost foregone victory for President Soeharto and the ruling Golkar party – social unrest throughout the archipelago continues to mount. Riots in Jakarta last year, riots in Lombok this year, continuing resistance in East Timor and Irian Jaya every year, growing ethnic unrest in West Kalimantan and an insurrection that shows no sign of abating in north Sumatra.

By comparison, Bali looks calm, especially poolside from the deckchair. But so did Mount Agung in 1963 before it erupted. □



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