NUSA PENIDA PROJECT

This PDF provides some background about the Nusa Penida Project. It gives a little more information about the island and introduces the village of Tiagan where the project will be based.

Map of Nusa Penida showing the main towns and villages. Tiagan is located beneath Puncak Mundi, the highest point on the island.

Some of the 250 villagers in Tiagan
About Nusa Penida

The island of Nusa Penida is located about 10 miles south of the Balinese mainland. The island, ten miles long and seven miles wide, is a limestone plateau. Bukit Mundi, at 1736 feet, is the highest point. The island is fringed with sandy beaches on the northern shore. Off the western shore, the small twin islands of Nusa Cenigan and Nusa Lembongan are separated from the island by a narrow channel, which in recent years has become a popular diving destination. The southern shore terminates abruptly in towering limestone cliffs - rugged and spectacular they face the Indian Ocean.

The island is administered by the mainland Balinese regency of Klungkung, roughly equivalent to a U.S. county. Nusa Penida, a kecamatan or district within the regency has an official population of 11,552 households, the great majority of which practice Balinese Hinduism. The two largest towns are Sampalan and Toyapakeh. Facing Bali, these towns serve as both market towns and points of entry. Lacking a deepwater harbor, access to the island from Bali has until very recently been by traditional flat-bottomed boats that simply ride the waves onto the sandy beaches. Passengers and goods then come ashore through the surf.

The principal industry is seaweed farming. About nine hundred families make their living from this labor intensive activity. The northern shore is also home to a handful of small family run fishing operations but the great majority of the population support themselves by subsistence farming in small communities scattered around the island’s interior.

The island’s infrastructure is undeveloped compared to Bali, although the narrow hilly roads do support motorcycle and small truck traffic. Electricity has been generally available on the island since 2000. Recently two 80 kilowatt windmills were deployed, leapfrogging existing diesel technologies to supplement the island’s electric supply. A tower to the west of the island provides cell phone service to the outside world.

Unlike Bali, Nusa Penida is a dry island, lacking not only the lakes and rivers that water Bali’s rice-fields and bustling population, but handicapped also by its limestone geology. What rainwater there is soaks through the island’s hilly limestone core to re-emerge at sea level in a handful of scattered locations as springs and pools. The island’s steep topography makes these water supplies inaccessible to the inland farming population, who make do by gathering and storing rain water in underground cisterns.
The island’s isolation, rugged terrain and difficult growing conditions led to its use as a kind of penal colony by the former Rajahs of Klungkung. Political agitators, criminals and even couples marrying outside their caste were sometimes banished to Nusa Penida, lending the island a dangerous connotation in the minds of the mainland Balinese. Indeed, the mainland Balinese consider Nusa Penida to be ‘haunted’ - a center of black magic and demons and home to the infamous I Macaling who frequently sends his invisible helpers to the mainland to spread drought, famine, rats and pestilence. I Macaling’s symbolic home is a shrine within the temple of Pura Dalem Ped on the island’s northern shore. Many mainland Balinese make the difficult trip to Nusa Penida to make offerings to I Macaling and seek his power to ward off evil and sickness.

A newly inaugurated modern ferry service connecting the island to the Balinese mainland together with the over-exploitation of the Balinese mainland is largely responsible for this change. Dubbed the Ro-Ro (Roll on-Roll off), the ferry utilizes a recently constructed deepwater harbor in the main town of Sampalan and is capable of carrying 10 vehicles and 200 people on a single voyage. It is hoped that an economical, regular ferry service will stimulate investment in Nusa Penida and reduce the cost of living for residents of the island.

These would be welcome outcomes and the general sentiment towards the ferry among islanders seems positive, enabling as it does the easy transfer of goods and people. Running at its full anticipated schedule, islanders will be able to go to the mainland and back in a single day.

However, there is also some concern that ‘investment’ may become a synonym for the development of traditional ‘sun and sand’ tourist resorts which might push out existing local industry, siphon off the island’s sparse water and electric supply and potentially destroy the delicate coral reefs that protect marine bio-diversity, fisheries and the beaches themselves. This scenario has already been played out in mainland Bali where beaches have been destroyed by thoughtless development, sewage flows, over-exploitation and environmentally unfriendly tourism.

With the exception of this annual influx of Hindu pilgrims from the Balinese mainland, the island has been spared large-scale outside influence. The pre-war Dutch colonial powers largely ignored the island, the Japanese Navy briefly occupied it during World War II and more recently the waters surrounding it have attracted scuba diving operations based on Nusa Lembongan and on the Balinese mainland. In some ways Nusa Penida still resembles the unspoiled Bali popularized in the 1930s by writers such as Miguel Covarrubias and Margaret Meade.

Today, although there is still no significant tourist presence on the island - no western style hotels, restaurants or shops - Nusa Penida’s isolation from the outside world is starting to change.
The Village of Tiagan

Tiagan is located just below Bukit Mindi, the highest point on the island, about 20 minutes by truck or bemo from the shore. Cooler and less humid than the islands coastal regions, this hilltop location has spectacular, panoramic views of the Balinese mainland.

Tiagan consists of 60 or so households. The most important buildings are the three village temples but there is also an elementary school, a motorcycle repair shop that sells gasoline in two-liter containers and a small warung where you can buy some basic provisions and cooked food. From the narrow tarmac road that runs through the center of the village the land rises sharply through a series of sculpted terraces to Bukit Mundi, the site of one of the island’s most important temples. As you look around you see that almost every piece of available land is tilled and planted. With the exception of a handful of businesses and government employees, the economy of Tiagan is based on subsistence farming.

Though poor by western standards, Tiagan is rich in spirit and quality of life and sustains a vibrant religious and cultural life, based on traditional Balinese Hindu rituals. These rituals are different and quite archaic compared to those of the Balinese mainland. Even the language is an older form of Balinese no longer spoken on the mainland and there are local variations of dance and music.

You can’t separate the religious life of the community from its daily life. Balinese Hinduism expresses itself in a series of rituals and dramatic features that have been intricately woven into the fiber of everyday life. There are ceremonies for every important activity of daily life. These include rites of passage for conception, birth, anniversaries, puberty and marriage, as well as rituals associated with death and reincarnation. In addition their are many annual celebrations dictated by the two Balinese religious calendars. Activiteis such as planting and building are coordinated with auspicious days and each household has it’s shrine or temple where frequent offerings are made to maintain an appropriate balance with the spirit world.

The staple crops are maize, cassava and beans. There is insufficient water to grow rice. Most villagers keep chickens and the more successful farmers also raise pigs and cows. Nusa Penidan cows are considered superior to those on the mainland because they represent a pure traditional strain and one of the few ways of making some disposable income in the village is to raise a calf until it is large enough to sell on the mainland. It’s a labor intensive activity. Animals are kept tethered and they must be regularly fed and watered.