

# FOR THE LOVE OF NATURE

OUR CONTRIBUTOR NADIA BINTORO VISITS UMAJATI RETREAT AND JOINS ONE OF ITS CULTURAL GREEN ACTIVITIES...

For conscious travelers, a perfect place to stay is more than just a resort with lavish amenities and luxurious facilities. There are principal questions in their minds to tick; is the design sustainable? Do they empower the local community? Are they employing measures to limit their impact to the environment? All these questions brought me to Umajati Retreat in the northeast of Ubud.

Located in the quaint village of Petulu, the journey to Umajati was as

serene as the place. From the Ubud city center, I went further uphill onto the direction of Kintamani. Following the trails, I found myself in the village of Petulu, which is famous as the natural habitat of the holy herons. However, as I reached the village, there were no signs of any luxury villas nearby yet.

One of the resort's staff picked me up, and we started meandering through the small alley following the directional sign. The road soon opened up to a stunning authentic Balinese village that felt like it was just being transported from the '70s. Coconut trees lined the street, leading up to a patch of rice fields that were fencing the both sides of the road. A couple of Balinese farmers was plowing amidst the golden rays of afternoon sunlight. I soaked in this serene view as I reached up my destination. Enclaved

in lush greeneries at the end of the road, a villa complex was standing. A sign written, "Umajati Retreat".

## SECLUDED RETREAT

Umajati is a true definition of a secluded retreat with two refurbished *joglo* (traditional Javanese houses) that were transported from Lamongan in East Java. The *joglo* houses are named after the villages they come from; Wates Bangbau and Bugoharjo. These hundred-year-old *joglos* were re-assembled in Bali while retaining their original Javanese house structure. The layout is open and airy with a vast lounge that opens up to the outdoor seating area. Each house has its own private garden with a bamboo waterspout, a lotus pond and a relaxation pavilion that is perfect for an afternoon reading.

Umajati holds on tight to their sustainability principles. Almost 99 percent of the structural *joglo* are made of recycled timbers, while the construction materials are mostly locally sourced. To limit excessive water and energy consumption, the retreat runs its own wetland filtration gardens that purify used





water. Its signature terra cotta roofs and wrap around verandas also have their own significant functions. The vernacular architecture was designed to allow passive solar cooling for an air conditioning void.

The sustainable architecture was already amazing, but it was the inside décor that really hooked me. The main lounge was decorated in a traditional setting that's stunning yet laid back. Welcoming the guests were two 4.5-meters of traditional weavings from Savu Island and Sulawesi. On the sofa were handspun heirloom cotton pillows from Tuban Java. I noticed that they were all created with indigo dye in various hues.

The founder of Umajati Retreat, William Ingram, stated that all these textiles are naturally produced and colored using dye by the local weavers and administered through the Threads of Life, a fair trade business that works with culture and conservation. This organization

– that William also founded in 1997 – has worked directly with over 1,000 women on 11 islands across Indonesia. Along with its non-profit sister organization the Bebali Foundation, Threads of Life aims to overcome poverty by empowering traditional weavers to gain financial security while conserving their traditional dying skills.

Umajati Retreat also supports the Bebali Foundation's botanical garden and the natural dye studio in its retreat's complex. Guests are welcomed to join the half-day *batik* workshop that features hands-on *batik* work on a small textile. My curiosity was tickled. It was soon settled that I would take this workshop to learn about the natural dyeing process on the following day.

## POWERING THROUGH

The next morning, I stepped into the Bebali Foundation's studio within the retreat's complex and

was welcomed by Bli Komang, the natural dye instructor. Before we got our hands dirty in the *batik*-making class, Bli Komang shared some insights about the botany, the dye process and the traditions of Indonesian textiles.

Across Indonesia, textile and weaving arts are still very much intact and culturally reserved as a woman's work. In some villages, weavers use natural dyes derived from plants to color the garment. The workshop at Umajati Retreat starts with an explanation of the Bebali Foundation's work with these local communities, followed by a walk through the Bebali's botanical garden. Throughout its work, the Bebali Foundation has documented over 300 dye plant species across the archipelago. Some of them can be found in the Bebali Foundation's botanical dye garden and natural dye studio that takes up to 15 percent of the Umajati property.

For a nature-lover like me,

wandering through the botanical garden in Umajati is an experience to treasure. There are flocks of plants for fibers and another group of plants for the dyes. Bli Komang explained in details the over-a-hundred plants that are used by the traditional weavers across Indonesia to make natural dyes for cotton, silk and other fibers.

For indigo, for example, Bli Komang explained how the color is made from the combination of vegetable dyes of the shrubs named *Indigofera tinctoria*, *suffruticosa*, and *morinda* red, from the trees in the genus *Morinda*. With patience and skills, dye masters carefully combine each ingredient to create bright, muted or energetic colors.

We put this information into action to make our own *batik*. There are two ways of making *batik*; handwritten or stamped. I was about to go the easy route with the stamped *batik* but Bli Komang insisted that we learn both methods to understand the complexity. As the name implies, we needed to draw our own pattern for the hand-written



The hardest part of hand-written *batik* is embossing our sketch with a boiling wax.



*batik*. But the hard part came after sketching as we needed to emboss our sketch with a boiling wax made naturally from beeswax. Afterwards,

we can apply the indigo dye onto our pattern.

To dye the fabric, the process is not easy. Aside from making the right mixture of coloring, a dye master needs to mix and dip the fabric into the dye several time to get the best result. As we went through every process, I could see that the whole process is very labor intensive and requires heavy diligence. It's no wonder naturally-dyed fabrics cost more than factory-made.

A visit to Umajati Retreat is definitely not only relaxing but also intellectually and culturally rewarding as well. If you want to learn further about the natural dye process, a two-day visit won't be enough. I have to say that this is the kind of experience that conscious travelers would approve and give their badge of approval for. ■

**By Nadia Bintoro**

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Bli Komang Sujata, the Field Staff and Natural Dyer, was explaining about the process of natural dying.