

# TOKO BUKU

Reviews of English language books on Indonesia

## Bali Chic by Susi Johnston



is celebrated island popular tropical island. More than just a guide, new edition is a entirely trendiest "in list," cataloging the stylish, ed just how astounding accommodations, restaurants, island. A savvy upbeat Chic covers everything from spas, retreats, posh new villas, shopping suggestions and up and coming stars of Bali's burgeoning culinary scene to spiritual exploration, innovative fashion, cutting edge home design, funky nightlife and kooky adventures.

Bali Chic was written from the inside, not from the outside looking in. The book reads like the writer is candidly sharing her insights and what she knows for the benefit of a friend-of-a-friend coming to Bali who will then be able to find their own way once they're in the right groove. The author spent a lot of time just bumping around Bali in a jeep with friends, delving into all manner of hidden nooks and crannies at a leisurely pace. She is not as much as a guidebook writer as an art historian, antiquities dealer, socialiser, gossip-gatherer, and astute observer moving through a variety of different situations.

Johnston has lived among mystics in Tampaksiring, carpenters and farmers in Pejeng, in the heart of Seminyak a stone's throw from Ku De Ta, and now resides in the elegant residential enclave of Pererenan on the edge of "the real Bali" near the village of Mengwi. She also lived in the Ubud royal palace environs for seven years, immersing herself in the life of the court, learning to speak, read and write Balinese, making the acquaintance of princes, priests and farmers. She even became a Balinese Hindu (new name: Kadek Susilawati) over a decade ago.

In a recent email interview, Johnston compared other popular guide series: "Lonely Planet and Rough guides are aimed for budget up to mid-market. They tend to be enhanced phonebooks. Personally, I'm not sure there really is a market for this kind of guidebook anymore. We all can access specific information of particular interest to us online, anytime anywhere. There seems to be little benefit to having that info (plus a ton of un-needed other info) printed on paper."

Instead of being encyclopedic, Bali Chic is opinionated and laced with abundant attitude. There's a remarkable mini-essay on the evolution of the westward Kuta-to-Petitingit migration on the south coast, beginning with the first hippy surfers bursting from the bushes onto an empty Kuta Beach in the 1970s to the chic-issime Seminyackers of the '00s (with their own magazine!) and the genteel familied shores of Canggu and beyond. The section on Sanur social history is also first rate, the result of

thorough-going research on Donald Friend, Waworuntu, Made Wijaya, etc.

Johnston has made a conscious effort to steer clear of clichés. If people come to Bali burdened with too many preconceptions about "paradise," they are often disappointed. She has studiously, painstakingly, religiously avoided the hackneyed words and phrases which she would like permanently stricken from the travel writing lexicon, i.e. words like luxury, pamper, indulge, tropical paradise, oasis of tranquility, ad nauseam. The great challenge in guidebook writing is to not make every stunning luxury hotel sound just like every other stunning luxury hotel. Through a collaborative dialogue, the descriptions of participating hotels are original and capture what is unique about each place.

From a design perspective, as part of the publisher's Chic Collection series, Bali Chic is well conceived and reflects the bookmaking competence of the design team at Editions Didier Millet. The portable size of the book, the layout, the typography all works to make it visually enjoyable to browse through. EDM has made every effort to select images which are fresher, more contemporary and relevant than your usual boring brochure shots.

Bali is completely different from a desert island like one of the Andamans with nothing but white sand and snoring sunbathers. This writer has brilliantly managed to convey the island's aliveness, dynamic synergies and positive energy. Bali Chic's readership are people 25 to 55 who come to Bali to experience the island as it is rather than to catalog it and check it off their list of "been there done thats." Obviously there are many people who love Bali enough to choose to live here. This book goes a long way in explaining how this phenomenon happens.

Bali Chic by Susi Johnston, Paperback: 232 pages  
Publisher: Didier Millet 2008, ISBN 139814217107,  
paperback, dimensions 8.5 x 8.4 x 1 inches. Available for  
Rp295,000 at Periplus Bookshops in the Bali Galleria, the  
Matahari in Kuta, Made's Warung in Seminyak, Gramedia  
Bookstores, the Ary's and Ganesha in Ubud, and  
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