

Four Seasons Resort Bali At Sayan, Wowing Guests Twenty Years On



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Travel

I cover the world of travel with gusto...literally, the world.

Ibu Fera is a magician. She practices the black arts you might say. Or certainly you'll think so once you've closed your eyes and fallen under her spell. A former Buddhist nun, Ibu Fera will guide you into blissful dreaminess during her Sacred Nap ritual at the [Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan](#).



The bamboo Dharma Shanti Yoga Bale lies right in Sayan rice fields. CREDIT: FOUR SEASONS RESORTS AND HOTELS

As you hang in a silk hammock in her breezy bamboo *bale*, a pavilion surrounded by rice fields, her soothing mantras and life of Buddha storytelling will put you under, and then bring you back refreshed (and perhaps enlightened).

The wellness talents of the Javanese-born Ibu Fera are but one of the umpteen reasons that the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan comes fresh off of being named the top hotel in the world in the [2018 Travel + Leisure World's Best Awards](#). What a triumphant way to celebrate twenty years of being one of Bali's premier properties.

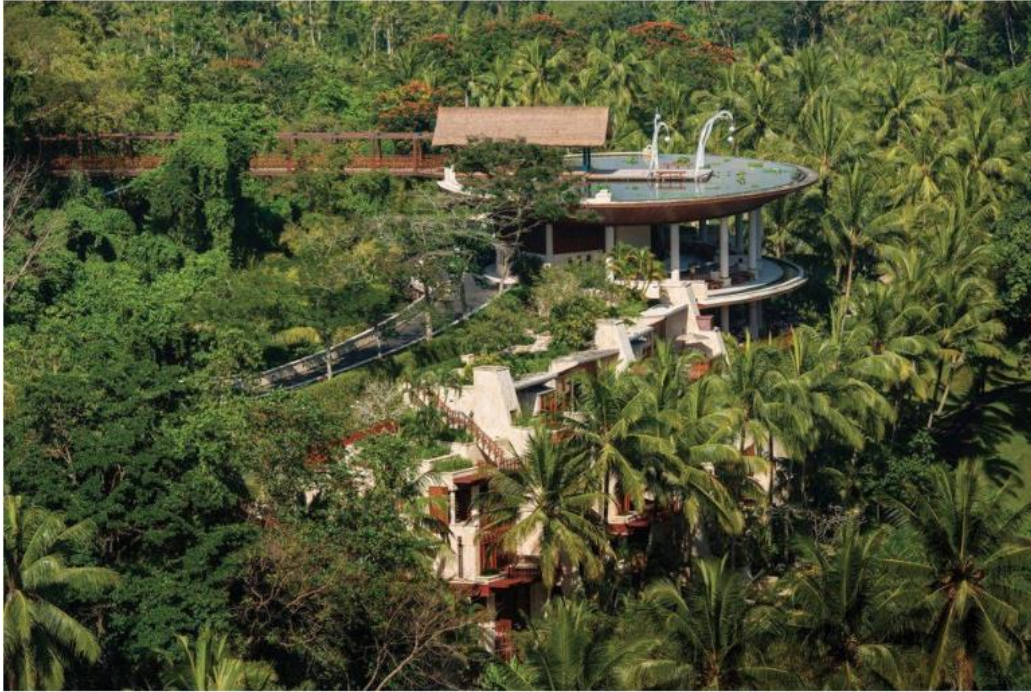


A Two Bedroom Villa with private pool overlooking the green Sayan terrain. CREDIT: FOUR SEASONS RESORTS AND HOTELS

You surely noticed when the property, which lies outside of the storied town of Ubud at the base of Bali's central highlands, made a splash last summer on social media. Images went viral of a charismatic former U.S. president and his family delighting in whitewater rafting down the Ayung River that flows right in front of the resort.

Last winter, the Four Seasons Sayan inaugurated its now-popular Sokasi Cooking School whose breezy riverfront pavilion with a swooping bamboo roof stands next to an ancient banyan tree. Just as at the [Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay](#), the Sayan culinary team escorts guests to local markets to discover the very ingredients they're learning about.

At a relaxed Chef's Table evening, Sous-Chef Wayan Sutariawan casually imparts knowledge as he guides diners through a seven-course tasting menu that includes a stuffed duck with spicy *base gede* paste that is cooked over twelve-hours in a buried claypot. The other signature moment is when the *celeng guling* suckling pig roast comes out. With a *base genep* spice made of a dozen herbs, the pig is cooked on a spit right in the open air kitchen.



The down-is-up form of the Four Seasons Sayan wows guests. CREDIT: FOUR SEASONS RESORTS AND HOTELS

To get to the Sokasi pavilion, indeed to get anywhere on the property, means the pleasure of walking through windy garden pathways that spread the length of the grounds. Each stroll is also a chance to study more of the well-labeled herbs that you've been sampling and which grow in small plots.

Long before the Sokasi addition, the Four Seasons Sayan was known worldwide for a wow factor that never ceases to, well, wow. Approaching the property down a long wooden footbridge evokes a cinematic scenario in which a lost world appears out of nowhere. Suddenly in front of you a rice bowl-shaped lotus pond floats above the forest canopy. Surprise, you are entering the property from above, while beyond the pond the property descends precipitously down into the steep river gorge.

To continue the movie theme, the main building, which includes eighteen suites and was designed by London architect John Heah, is often compared to a *Star Wars* set. Some guests might see perhaps in the curved open-air lobby that is just below the lotus pond a hint of Brazil's modernist legend Oscar Niemeyer, or Louis Kahn meets the tropical forest in the way the room units are stacked. The real takeaway, however, is that Sayan works harmoniously with its landscape, particularly in Heah's array of rice paddies throughout.



Through dance and music, Sayan guests discover Balinese culture at daily performances. CREDIT: FOUR SEASONS RESORTS AND HOTELS

To stay in one of forty-two Pool Villas is to experience further what keeps the property's sight lines brilliantly so open. Here too you descend down to your villa, via an enclosed limestone stairway with a gurgling water basin; it's a moment in which you might begin to experience the concept of *niskala*, or unseen energy. The water might also suggest Bali's famous *subak* irrigation systems which collectively form a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#).

Inside, teak wood floors, louvered wooden sliding doors, an outdoor shower and a mosquito net-covered bed remind you that you are in the tropics. Features such as a walk-in closet and your private pool in a thick garden brimming with vibrant plants such as red ginger remind you that you are simply pampered. Imagine the splendor then in the Royal Suite which has hosted President Obama as well as Julia Roberts when she filmed an adaptation of a popular novel of self discovery.

Minutes away, the celebrated town of Ubud is not as quiet as it once was, what with its fine shops, galleries and restaurants drawing visitors from all over the island. The gorgeous plates and bowls at [Gaya Ceramic and Design](#) are made in a studio that was started by Italians and which now trains and employs some eighty local ceramicists. Their small showroom is as much art gallery as pottery store (they also participate in the [Refill My Bottle](#) movement, a noble cause on an island that like everywhere is struggling with a plastics problem).

At the [Tony Raka Gallery](#), be sure to meet magnetic Tony himself who oversees an eclectic series of spaces. Around a huge courtyard with chickens clucking about, Tony collects and refurbishes traditional Balinese dwellings and farmhouses. There are so many side art galleries in his compound that it's all really a museum. In the main halls, he shows contemporary Indonesian artists in revolving exhibits. And of late, he's added a really cool arts cafe in which a few huge boulders pop through the long counter.

An Ubud tour can be nicely followed by a visit to the Four Seasons Sayan's Sacred River Spa where the treatment rooms rival a New York apartment in size and blow them away in tranquility. A deep knead treatment starts with you imitating your therapist's motions in a ritual of both of you using your own hands to connect to yourself and release body tension.

Lunch hour at the Riverside Café, which is just above the main pool, is a hoot as you hear shrieks of joy from passing rafting parties in the river below; party being the operative word as you'll discover later on your own merry rafting descent.

Over dinner at the open-air Ayung Terrace in the property's main building you'll appreciate the curving design element that allows you to take in more of the jungle canopy. A starter of *gurita panggang* is a coconut smoked octopus and chilli sambal, while a main dish of *rendang isa sapi* consists of beef short ribs in Sumatran coconut sauce.

Eventually it comes time for you to try your hand at being a Balinese rice farmer. Yes, you'll look like a mega tourist in your traditional farmer hat, and act like one as you're exhausted after ten minutes of bending down to plant your seedlings. In addition to making a true local connection, your reward is fresh coconut water—as in the fruit being plucked right from the tree—followed by a picnic breakfast in a *bale* down by the river.

And perhaps after that, you'll be ready for another Sacred Nap session with Ibu Fera. Or maybe you'll choose to hang from the *bale* ceiling in her anti-gravity yoga session.

Either way, it's all uphill from there once you leave the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan—in the very best sense.