

Learning from The Longhouse

Building in Bali requires patience, but yields amazing cultural discoveries

By Linda Nederkoorn

In Bali, the home of the gods is Gunung Agung, the mist-shrouded, active volcano that marks the island's highest point. According to legend, Gunung Agung was created when the first Hindus arrived with a sliver of the legendary Mount Meru, the axis of the universe. From the moment I caught sight of Gunung Agung's gently sloping sides in 1979, the mountain, like the island, has called me back. In 2006, as my husband and I stood on a hillside in Jimbaran gazing over light-dappled treetops past the sparkling waters of Jimbaran Bay with Gunung Agung floating surreally in the distance, we decided that we would build a house in Bali. And we would build it on that very spot.

Our villa, The Longhouse, stretches over the crest of a finger of land in a series of separate pavilions, each of which takes advantage of the view. The traditional Balinese house is a complex of individual pavilions called *bale*, all of them enclosed within a walled compound. The most important element and the starting point in any home construction in Bali is the location of the home temple. It is from here that all eyes turn respectfully towards Gunung Agung. Wherever you are on the island, the sacred mountain is *Kaja* or 'Balinese due north'. Thus the primary home temple is located in the northeast corner of the house. The temple dictates the sleeping area for the head of the house. And so it is in The Longhouse.

During construction, my time was filled with site visits, design consideration, selection of materials, procurement of fixtures, fittings, furnishings. What I hadn't expected was how these ordinary activities would sweep me into Bali's world. My architect and my consultants became my friends and teachers. I learned, as our hillside was excavated, that the earth in Jimbaran is mostly limestone, and that this land mass, joined to the rest of the island by a causeway, was from ancient times known for its holy limestone caves. I learned that our traditional *alang alang* roof, made of the best reeds from the island, could not be rushed since the reeds are only harvested once a year. I learned that the design carved



The author and her husband at The Longhouse

into the Balinese door to our master bedroom was from Singarajah, the old capital. I discovered fine basketry from Tenganan and colourful hand-woven *songket* fabric from the Klungkung market. With each new element of the design and furnishing, a different aspect of Balinese life and tradition came into focus.

Perhaps the most memorable part of the experience was the cultural education I received from our Balinese architect and his multi-talented wife. From jaunts to favourite restaurants serving local delicacies, to exquisite dance performances under the dim lights of a village high in the mountains, I was always invited to participate in their activities and gained an insider's view of the Balinese way of life.

The furnishing and decoration of The Longhouse led me down bumpy roads to find the best that Bali had to offer. I decided to name each bedroom after a different island in the archipelago, with 'Bali' for the master suite. Earth-red *Sasak* pottery from Lombok, a faded photo taken long ago in the jungles of Sumatra, exquisitely hand-waxed and dyed *batik tulis* from Java, and intricate, naturally coloured *ikat* in rich blues, reds and rust from Sumba, individualise each of the six bedroom suites.

In early April 2008 an auspicious day was selected and in the warmth of the Balinese morning, with offerings of fruit and rice, cakes and money, a Hindu priest requested the gods' permission for us to stay in our house. As our friends and neighbours gathered at The Longhouse temple, Gunung Agung's silent majesty in the distance filled us with hope.

Linda Nederkoorn, who first joined FOM in 1979, has travelled extensively throughout Southeast Asia. Her current project, *The Longhouse*, has allowed her to see Bali from a unique perspective.



View of Gunung Agung from The Longhouse

Photos courtesy of the author