



# BLAZING SADDLES

For visiting mountain bikers, the volcanoes at the heart of Bali are far more than just a pretty backdrop: they provide a wealth of great trails with some unusual challenges thrown in

PHOTO: PAT & GRACE MIMMO FITZPATRICK

Story by Pat Fitzpatrick

Think of Bali and the familiar images pop up: terraced rice paddies, surfer culture, graceful parades of women carrying temple offerings through the streets. Part of the backdrop to all of this – what makes those paddies so fertile, what helped shaped the shoreline that draws those surfers, what gives the island’s Hindu beliefs their animist underpinnings – is the volcanic core of the island.

These mountains are a natural draw for tourists. For decades they have gazed at the soaring Gunung Agung, or looked down from the village of Penelokan on the rim of a stunning caldera that features the active volcano of Gunung Batur at its centre. Some have gone further: hiking down into the caldera to then climb Batur itself. But in the last few years, another option has emerged for those that want to raise the adventure stakes a little higher: mountain biking.

While you can discount wild mental images of you trying to out-pedal a stream of molten lava spewing from a crater, the reality is that this is a thrilling and very rarely encountered environment for mountain bikers.

Riding atop these volcanoes: heading down into the calderas, circling the crater lakes or cruising through blackened fields of solid lava is only the start though. On the outer slopes, the steepest gradients provide exciting, undulating descents down to more populated areas where the emerald paddies begin and the slope eases off. Here there are countless kilometres of interweaving trails linking farms and villages. Some of it is on generously wide roadway but there’s plenty of tight singletrack too. All of this adds up to an incredible amount of varied, crosscountry riding.

The views en route are often breathtaking. Behind you loom the impressive peaks themselves, around you is a world of cinders and lava flows or else a lush tapestry of greens, ahead and far below lies a beach-studded coastline, perhaps holding the beguiling promise of a après-ride swim.

The trail also holds the sort of spontaneous encounters that can stop you in your tracks: a noisy throng of kids enjoying a bath au naturel; a gaggle of ducks being artfully herded by a shepherd with

only a very long, thin pole; a horde of men on their haunches enthusiastically gathered around a cockfighting arena, their charges kept in cages of woven reed until released at each other to gouge and scrape with surprising violence.



Batur from the crater lake.

### Go with the flows

Most of the trails in Bali fall rather neatly into three areas: Batur, Karangasem and Bedugul, each of which broadly encompasses one of the island's volcanoes.

Batur is by far the easiest place to find trails and this makes it a good starting point for anybody wanting to do without an operator to guide them. The whole caldera is 40km in circumference and offers the cone of Gunung Batur at its centre, a crater lake and loads of singletrack on a mix of sand, lava, hard-pack and dust. There are numerous trails off the rim, either straight down to the east coast or into the caldera. In the dry season you may even find yourself on a centimetres-deep layer of fine volcanic ash overlaying anything from loose cobbles to smooth hard-pack. It's rather like skiing in flat light – you have no idea of what lies beneath!

Karangasem is a lower but equally challenging area situated in the east of the island, its topography dominated by the slopes of Agung, the highest volcano on the island. These lower slopes are serrated by a series of ridges stretching all the way from the mountain to the sea. These offer superb knife-edge singletrack and can be devilish to negotiate from both map-reading and



Last minute preparations before the bikes are shipped out to the start point.

The slopes of Gunung Abang.



PHOTOS: BALI TRAILBLAZERS



PHOTOS: PAT & GRACE MIMMO FITZPATRICK

Hitting the paddy after a steep jungly descent.



Time to get the snorkels out.

PHOTO: PAT & GRACE / MIMO FITZPATRICK

technical riding points of view. Watch out too for short, cheeky and incredibly steep uphill sections that punctuate the overall downhill trend and the super-technical man-made stone drops found every 10m or so on certain trails.

Bedugul is a less developed area probably not suitable for short-term DIYers unless you stick to the small, mapped, tarmac roads. There are great forest trails but some of them require more work until they are safe for the softer-than-hardcore. If you are into full-on one-two hour downhill descents on steep singletrack though, there are a myriad of ways down to the north and south coasts.

Biking in Bali offers plenty to get your teeth into. What follows are descriptions of some of the most exciting one-day trails, all within easy reach of the popular accommodation centres on the east of the island. Further trails are being added to the network all the time so check with your operator for new options. Though most rides are day-long and tackled as spokes radiating out from the volcanic hubs, multi-day rides are possible with planning.

### Abang to Tangkup

**TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY:** ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲

**LENGTH:** 45km

**DURATION:** 5 hours

**DESCENT:** 1350-230m

The day's ride starts with a gentle traverse from a temple at the edge of the Gunung Batur crater. You have time to perhaps mumble a quick prayer before the action kicks off in earnest with a very fast downhill on a flowing 8km-long jeep track.

Beware as this trail can be very tricky: not only steep but riddled with channels carved by water running down over the soft, dark, volcanic sand. It's very easy to be caught out by picking up too much speed and overshooting corners or else hitting areas where deeper sand had gathered on the trail. Finding yourself sprawled out is not uncommon.

After a short, stiff climb out of the valley, you then navigate down the side of a large ravine and continue to blast downhill through remote mountain scenery.

You then hit a jeep track that in places can be submerged in water. Its definitely a fun challenge, charging through the pool,

### Bali for non-riding partners and family

While the riders of the family head off on their self-propelled adventure, those left behind can find plenty of ways to amuse themselves.

If Ubud is your base then the markets offer tourist trinkets alongside more substantial local stone carvings, local art, clothing, homewares and more.

Many of the resorts thereabouts have pools and/or spa facilities. Taking up the opportunity to infuse local cooking into your repertoire is another popular option.

On the more adventurous side, whitewater rafting on the Telega Waja River is great fun for the whole family. There are a few larger rapids of Class III level but they are separated by quiet stretches of green water. The 6m, 45° drop over the dam wall, is a great way to finish off your rafting expedition.

PHOTO: STEVE THOMAS



spraying huge plumes of water in all directions.

A break about now gives the chance for a hydration top-up and is followed by a short, easy pedal on tarmac. A mix of singletrack and jeep tracks finishes the ride with a last steep descent into the first rice paddy. A small village nearby affords exceptional views across the Telaga Waja River.

After refuelling, you can even take in some refreshing whitewater rafting on the river to cap the day off.

## Pidpid to Perasi Beach

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY: ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲

LENGTH: 40km

DURATION: 5 hours

DESCENT: 750m-sea level

Starting high on the slopes of Mt. Agung, this trail descends very steeply down a tarmac road for a few hundred metres, warming your brakes right from the start. You continue downhill onto the dirt via a network of singletrack paths, which weave their way through shady coconut and bamboo groves –

all the while overshadowed by the impressive, looming bulk of Gunung Agung.

The first technical challenge comes at Drop Gully, a narrow defile that links the villages of the area with man-made stone steps that range from a mere bobble over a doorstep to knee-deep drops.

Continuing, you pass through an interesting area of rock quarries and accompanying villages of stonecarvers until you reach a little-known water palace at Jungutan. This is an atmospheric place to break for lunch, the stillness offset only by the sound of water spilling from the chutes and channels found all over the site.

You're then faced with the day's first serious hill climb which can quickly turn into a survival-of-the-fittest contest if you have competitive types in tow. From there a long ridge crest leads down towards the sea, with stunning views on either side making it hard to stay focused on what's in front of your wheel.

The final descent tails off to leave you on a inviting white sand beach from where a post-trail cool-off in the ocean is simply irresistible.



## Practicalities

### When to go

The rainy season extends from December until early March meaning that the best time to ride in Bali is from late March-December when the temperatures are marginally cooler and the rainfall is low. Temperatures up high on the volcano ridges are often around 20°C in the middle of the day and much cooler first thing in the morning or when it is raining.

### How to get there

Bali's airport (Denpasar) is connected by direct flights to most major regional capitals. Additional flights with various domestic carriers run many times a day from Jakarta. Ubud is the suggested base for bikers to cut down on travel time to the top of the rides. The town and its quieter outlying villages has countless accommodation options for every budget.

### What to bring

Such adventurous riding is usually best done on your own bike. The hardship of travelling with a bike is well worth the effort to ensure you are riding something you are familiar and comfortable with. Hire bikes can often take away from the experience – the brake systems not to your liking, the fit to your body not quite right etc.

Ensure your bike is ready for the adventure ahead by having it prepared by your local bike shop prior to departure.



Whether you bring your own bike or choose to hire one, it is still best to bring your own gear. Consider packing all of the following: helmet, gloves, seat, glasses, multi-tool, spare tube, puncture repair kit, pump, quick link for any chain breakages, cycling specific knicks, wicking tops, hydration-compatible backpack with 2-3 litre capacity, SPD shoes and pedals or your standard biking shoes. You'll also need your preferred sports drink powder, preferably an isotonic one to assist in hydration and recovery.

PHOTOS: BALI TRAILBLAZERS (NEAR RIGHT); PAT & GRACE MIMMO FITZPATRICK (ALL OTHERS)



## Contacts and further info

Denpasar has a couple of bike shops for last minute supplies and repairs: The Bike Shop, [www.balimountainbike.com](http://www.balimountainbike.com) and Rodalink, [www.rodalink.com](http://www.rodalink.com)

Ride International run mountain biking tours and skills courses around the region. [www.rideinternational.com](http://www.rideinternational.com)

Bali Trailblazers offer escorted rides on all the trails featured in this article. [www.bali-trailblazers.com](http://www.bali-trailblazers.com)

Several other companies offer more basic biking tours in Bali. Most are pitched at the mass market, staying on backroads as opposed to trails and featuring little more than a simple freewheeling descent through the rice paddies to Ubud.

To get a sense of what it is like to ride the Gunung Batur Crater Ride, you can check out the headcam footage shot by Brad Davies, a pro mountain bike rider for Giant Bicycles Australia who has just returned from a training camp in Bali. Find it at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD36ySTpQe0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD36ySTpQe0)



PHOTOS: STEVE THOMAS (LEFT), PAT & GRACE MIMMO FITZPATRICK x2

### Kintamani descent

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY: ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲

LENGTH: 35km

DURATION: 4 hours

DESCENT: 1,400-240m

This predominantly downhill route is an adventurous twist on the classic Kintamani to Ubud bike descent offered by many tour operators on Bali. Unlike the original, this one is not suitable for your grandmother!

Start by descending into a bamboo- and pine-lined gully via a short steep access that usually requires a couple of dismounts to negotiate the steep hairpin corners.

Once out of the jungle you are onto extremely hard and fast jeep tracks, with lots of opportunities to rack up frequent flyer points on the undulating sections. These tracks head through orange groves and vegetable farms, at one point skirting a huge ravine.

You finally pop out from the trees to find yourself among the more gently inclined rice paddies where you navigate along the margins of the fields, skirt the traditional *subak* irrigation channels, and dart through villages until you reach the outskirts of Ubud.

### Batur Crater Ride

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTY: ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲

LENGTH: 35km

DURATION: 4 hours

DESCENT: 1,700-100m

This ride begins at Penulisan, 1.5 hours from Ubud and perched on the outer rim of the Mount Batur caldera at 1700m.

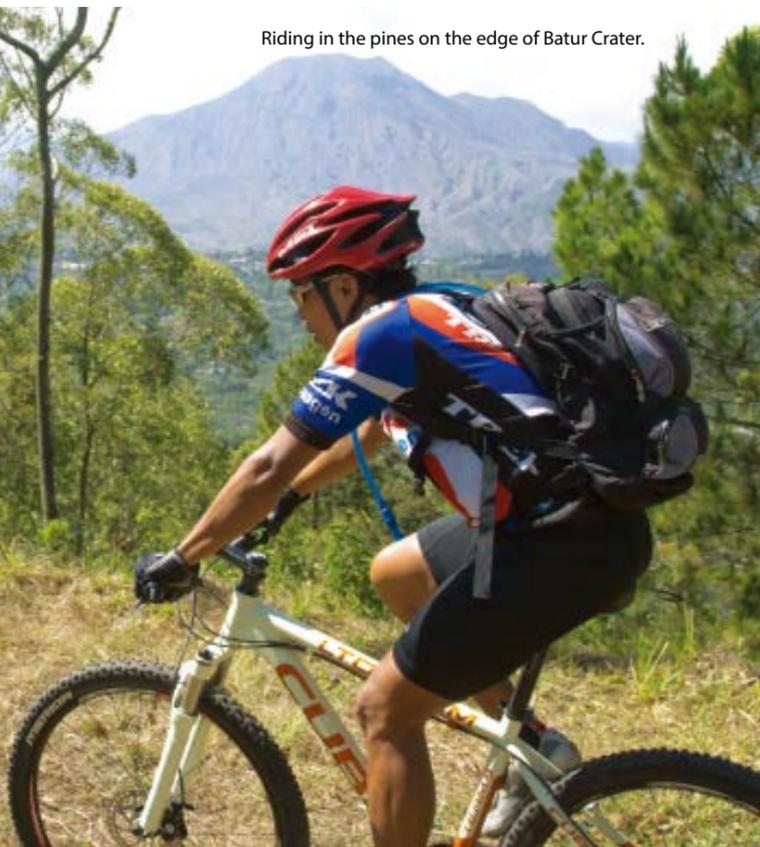
The initial part of the trail is on a broken-up tarmac road before you switch to cool pine forest singletrack that takes you along the ridge top, giving superb views of the crater and all the way down to the east coast.

Then comes the infamous 'Lung-busting Hill' taking you down into the inner crater. The hill is so named for having only five people ride up its entirety. Luckily in this case, you are going in the opposite direction and so can allow yourself a smile at the expense of those deluded enough to attempt it as a climb.

Reaching the floor of the caldera, you roll onwards on narrow sandy trails past several rustic villages before ending on a high note with a ride through the solidified lava field from the 1997 eruption on cobbled doubletrack.

The temperature can easily soar above 40°C here, with the heat bouncing up at you off the rocks so that it seems that molten lava must surely still lurk just beneath the surface. After this you'll be happy to find the crater lake at your journey's end where it is possible to take a quick dip. ▲▲

Riding in the pines on the edge of Batur Crater.



Saddle-sore group ready for a cool-off at Perasi Beach.

