



ONCE SERENE NEVER FORGOTTEN

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW MACKENZIE



Steve happens to be one of these locally based entrepreneurs I talked about, "I was always confident that Bali would recover within 2 years" he told me over a coffee in Serene Garden Villa, one of his seven private villas. A Kiwi by birth, he enjoyed a successful career in the hotel industry, finally ending up in Bali to launch the Hard Rock Resort in Legian.

So, when Steve went solo in 2000 and left his proper job at the hotel, why did he call his new company 'Serene Villas'? "Serene is a word that is synonymous with Bali; in its style, its people, its culture and its outlook on life. It's also the state of Buddha and it seemed to me a perfect word to describe what a luxury villa experience should be about."

Having acquired a strip of land in Seminyak's Jalan Drupadi, Steve and his partners set about creating an exclusive villa enclave consisting of three 3-bedroom, two 2-bedroom and two 1-bedroom private villas. "The challenge with this project was to utilise the space in what was quite a narrow plot of land. We had to be very creative about maximizing the flow between indoor and outdoor spaces". With a width of 25 metres Steve did a great job. Whilst occupying an average space of only 450 square metres, each of the seven villas present a spacious atmosphere; they are also very different. "We tried to create an eclectic modern range of individual villas, not cookie cutter replicas; each property has a different style."

Serene Garden Villa, where we met, has a warmth about it, which is achieved by the polished wooden floors and soft local fabrics utilised in the upholstery and curtains. "Each villa has a different colour scheme but we ended

up using a rich orange colour more than anything else. To me this orange is a trademark colour for Bali, you see it particularly in Hindu cultures" explained Steve, as he pointed to numerous bright orange scatter cushions.

He engaged the Triadi Group to construct Serene Villas. "Triadi are trusted developers and responsible for some of the most spectacular private property on the Island. Having researched many properties during our preparation phase, I found that unless professionally built, homes in the tropics deteriorate very quickly. We wanted to work with a contractor who understood which materials



Serene isn't perhaps a word you would associate with Seminyak these days - congested roads, flat out construction and poor drainage. 'Surreal' might be more appropriate. Yet people still flock to this trendy area of Bali. Ask any villa or hotel operator in the area and they will tell you that they've never had it so good with pre high season occupancy percentages running in the 80s & 90s.

"In the aftermath of the financial crisis and terrorist attack, with few tourists about, locally based entrepreneurs invested in new businesses, anticipating Bali's bounce back. Much of this investment went into hip bars, restaurants and villas...now consumers can't get enough of it".

This is how Steve Michie explains the current popularity of Seminyak.

work best and I must say we are very happy with the result."

The villas were completed in two stages and each villa took about twelve months to complete. "Don't believe anyone who says you can deliver a turn-key property in under twelve months" Steve insisted, "once you've sorted out the IMB (building license), worked around the rain and fixed all the snags, it's impossible to do a quality job in under a year."

I asked him whether anything had gone wrong during the construction phase, "Nothing major, but be prepared for the unexpected: insufficient electricity from PLN (Indonesian Electricity Board); drainage and coping with the heavens opening, all things which are easy to underestimate here in Bali."

What about building materials? Is there anything which you would replace? "We deliberately used alang-alang thatched roofing because it is a material which fitted in with our 'serene' concept; its ethnic, cool and creates a castaway holiday feel, but in hindsight, you can achieve the same effect using iron-wood shingle tiles and avoid the main pitfalls of alang-alang; which is that alang-alang doesn't last for ever and you have to treat it regularly for bugs."

The single most important piece of advice Steve offers has to do with the longevity of building materials. "Because of the extreme heat and heavy rain it's important to go with material which doesn't deteriorate quickly. I can't tell



you how many old and tired looking villas I've visited to be told that 'actually we built it only two years ago!'. You really have to build with low maintenance in mind, avoid materials which require a lot of effort and up-keep."

Steve's personal favourite area in the villas is the bathrooms, "we've just re-fitted all of the bathrooms because in the past two years new options for bathroom fittings and furnishings appeared on the market which weren't there in 2002 when we started". He is referring to the new modern stainless steel taps and rain-drop shower heads which compliment the existing large terrazzo tubs, "guest feedback on our bathtubs is terrific, they love them!"

With his background in the hospitality business it is not surprising that Steve operates Serene Villas just like a five star hotel. "We are aiming to emulate the service element of a luxury hotel by offering chefs, concierge service and

personalised amenities. In addition to high levels of service of course we are also a self catering environment, so guests get an option not available in the big chain hotels."

A night at Serene Villas is very reasonable, just US\$50 per person when 6 adults share a three bedroom villa in the low season, going up to US\$84 per person in the peak season.

Steve wanted to tell me about some of the other concierge services available at the villas, but you're just going to have to book a Serene Villa to find out what they are because he kicked me out! His group from Australia had just checked in and they wanted to start their holiday. ✿

At least I was ejected serenely. See you next month.
www.serenevilla.com
www.triadibali.com