



The Mother of Ubud: Finding Bali's Soul at Murni's Houses

STORY & PHOTOS BY MIKE JAMES

For me, that moment came on my third day in Ubud, sitting across from a remarkable woman named Ni Wayan Murni, a plate of fried bananas between us, listening to her tell me the story of her life. By the time I left Bali, I understood that finding Murni's Houses had been one of the great strokes of luck of my traveling life.

Ubud: Cultural Heart of Bali

Ubud is one of the most visited cultural destinations in Southeast Asia — and it shows. The main streets are busy, the traffic can be genuinely challenging, and motorbikes weave through crowds of tourists at every turn. Bali itself welcomed 6.3 million visitors in 2024, and a great many of them find their way to Ubud — drawn by its temples, its rice terraces, its art galleries, its gamelan music, and its reputation as the spiritual and cultural soul of the island.

Which makes what happens when you turn off that main road and walk five minutes up a hill to Murni's Houses all the more remarkable. The noise stops. The crowds disappear. You step through a traditional Balinese gate and into what feels like an entirely different world.



MIKE JAMES AND NI WAYAN MURNI

The Woman They Call the Mother of Ubud

I met Murni on my third day, in the dining area adjacent to the open-air lobby of her property — a beautiful, unhurried space of dark timber and warm light that feels nothing like a hotel reception and everything like someone's home. She appeared, greeted me with a warmth that immediately put me at ease, and within moments had her staff bring out fried bananas.

It was a small gesture. But as I would come to understand, it was also a deeply meaningful one. Because fried bananas — simple, sweet, and made by hand — were among the first

things Murni ever sold as a child. Growing up in Bali just after World War II, she was sent to live with an aunt in Denpasar, who woke her at 2 a.m. each morning to prepare food to sell. Only after everything was sold was she allowed to go to school. Those mornings taught her how to work, how to read people, and how to persevere.

By her early twenties, Murni was cycling down to Sanur beach with batik and paintings loaded on the back of her bicycle, watching tourists' eyes to know what they wanted. She had four shops on that beach before she turned thirty. Among her customers were President Sukarno — and Mick Jagger.

In 1974, she took a piece of land on the edge of a gorge overlooking the sacred Campuhan River and opened Ubud's very first restaurant: Murni's Warung. She started with a bamboo table and two chairs. No electricity. No refrigeration. She ran it that way for years, learning as she went, expanding table by table, building a reputation that would eventually make her name synonymous with Ubud itself.

Murni's Warung is still there today, just a short walk down the hill — four levels of candlelit tables perched above a jungle gorge, the sound of the sacred river rushing below. It has been feeding travelers for more than fifty years. Neither it, nor Murni, shows any sign of stopping.

Her marriage to her American husband Pat — Patrick Moore Scanland, a customer of the warung who had fallen for both Murni and her cooking — was not without cost. Being married to a foreigner caused a serious rupture with her family. For a time, the only family member who would still speak to her was her father. That loyalty, as I would later discover, runs through every corner of this story.



NASI CAMPUR — SIGNATURE RICE PLATTER FROM MURNI'S WARUNG



A Place Unlike Any Other

In the early 1980s, Murni began building. On land adjacent to her father's property — ground where she had grown up — she started constructing what would become Murni's Houses: a compound of residences and open-air pavilions set within gardens that feel more like a private world than a hotel grounds.

Today the complex has grown to eleven individual residences, each designed with Murni's characteristic eye for Balinese art and authentic detail. Arriving through that traditional roofed gate, guests step from the noise and bustle of Ubud into a world of fountains, tropical gardens, ancient stone statuary, carved teak, and almost miraculous quiet.

I ended up in the very first building Murni constructed on the property — a detail she shared with quiet pride when she showed me around. My room opened onto a veranda where I took breakfast each morning beneath the canopy of trees, listening to birdsong and the sound of water features below. It felt less like a hotel and more like being a privileged guest in the home of someone who genuinely cares.

That sense is not accidental. Murni lives on the property. She is present — moving through the grounds, greeting guests, sitting down for conversations when the moment calls for it. Her black Labrador Flo — apparently the only Labrador in all of Bali — wanders the gardens with the easy confidence of someone who owns the place.

Throughout the property are pieces from Murni's personal collection of Balinese and Asian art — gathered over decades of travel, study, and an expertise that has taken her to lecture halls at San Francisco's de Young Museum and exhibition floors at some of the world's most prestigious tribal art shows. Every corner offers something new to discover. Every piece has a story.

The property has earned an impressive list of awards — Boutique Hotel of the Year in Bali, Wellness Hotel of the Year Indonesia 2023/24, consistently rated among the top accommodations worldwide on TripAdvisor. But these feel almost beside the point when you are actually there. What Murni's Houses offers cannot easily be captured in an award category.

One Australian guest, a repeat visitor, summed it up perfectly in a recent review: it feels, she wrote, like visiting your rich aunty. I understood exactly what she meant.

Tamarind Spa: Healing as Art

On the grounds, beneath a tamarind tree in the tranquil gardens, sits one of the finest spas I have ever had the pleasure of visiting: Tamarind Spa.

Murni built it, she told me, because like most people, she gets stressed. The result of that impulse has collected awards across the board — UK Luxury Travel Guide Awards year after year from 2017 through 2024, TripAdvisor Hall of Fame, Spa of the Year for Indonesia multiple times over. The therapists are trained under Murni's guidance by expert trainers brought in from around the world, and the treatments draw on centuries of Balinese healing tradition. The organic oils are made in Bali from 100% natural virgin coconut oil and local herbs.

I had two massages during my stay. Both were exceptional. I walked back to my room afterward feeling as though I had been put back together.



A Temple, a Father, and an Invitation

On that third day, after our conversation over fried bananas, Murni offered to show me something that I suspect most guests never see. She led me through a gate onto the family property adjacent to Murni's

Houses, to a temple that her father had built over many years on land the family had held for generations.

I was not prepared for what I found. The temple was breathtaking — ornate stone shrines, vivid gold and crimson paintwork, intricate carvings at every level. And there inside, presiding over it all from a gilded frame, was a photograph of an elderly Balinese man wearing a traditional head cloth with a white flower tucked above his ear. Murni's father.

It dumbfounded me. Not just the beauty of the space, but the story it held. This was the man who stood by Murni when no one else in the family would — the one person who kept speaking to her when she married a foreigner, the one who helped her build on this land. And now his



THE HOUSE DOG FLO RESTING IN THE OPEN AIR LOBBY



photograph watches over the temple he built, on the ground where his daughter created her life's work. I stood there reflecting — on the loyalty between a father and daughter, and on my own family, my own ties across generations.

Murni told me that this coming October, her extended family — children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren — will gather at this temple for a Metatah ceremony. It is the sacred Balinese tooth-filing ceremony, a rite of passage rooted in the unique spiritual tradition of Balinese Hinduism. The filing is gentle and symbolic rather than dramatic — what matters is what it represents: the release of the six negative human traits, the formal passage into adulthood, the renewal of spiritual connection.

Murni invited me to return in October for the family ceremony. I am currently making travel plans.

This ceremony flows from something important to understand about Bali: the form of Hinduism practiced here — known as Agama Hindu Dharma — is unlike any other on earth. It blends ancient Hindu teaching with Buddhist philosophy and indigenous Balinese animism into something found nowhere else. It is not a religion confined to temples. It breathes through daily life, through the offerings placed at doorways each dawn, through every ceremony, gathering, and act of community.

I experienced this firsthand during my stay at Murni's Houses, quite by chance. One morning I heard the sound of gamelan music drifting across the compound. I inquired at the lobby and was told that a traditional cremation ceremony — a ngaben — was taking place at the temple next door, and that I was welcome to attend. I walked over and stood among the Balinese community as the ceremony unfolded around me: the music, the smoke rising against a brilliant blue sky, the vibrant colors of traditional dress, the peaceful faces of the people gathered there.

I felt extraordinarily fortunate to be able to experience this ritual rarely seen by most tourists.

The Partner

No portrait of Murni's world is complete without mentioning Jonathan Copeland. A former London solicitor, Jonathan spent years returning to Bali before eventually settling there to photograph, research, and write about the island. Today, he and Murni are close friends, collaborators, and partners, sharing their



THE SAWO APARTMENTS. ONE OF THE UNIQUE HOUSES.



deep knowledge of Balinese culture through books, photography, and countless conversations with guests.

Together they have co-authored several books, including *Secrets of Bali: Fresh Light on the Morning of the World*, widely regarded as one of the finest books written about the island in a generation. Between the two of them, they carry an uncommon depth of understanding of this island and its culture — and they share it generously with anyone who takes the time to sit down with them.

The Spirit of Bali

What Murni's Houses offers is something increasingly rare: authenticity. A place where the art on the walls was collected over decades by someone who genuinely understands it. Where the owner lives among her guests and greets them by name. Where the gardens were planted with intention and the silence is real. Where a plate of fried bananas can arrive at your table carrying fifty years of history.

For travelers who want to feel Bali rather than simply visit it, I cannot think of anywhere better.

Murni's Houses & Spa, Jalan Raya Ubud, Ubud, Bali. murnis.com. Tamarind Spa is available to both guests and non-guests.



PART OF THE FAMILY TEMPLE



ONE OF THE MANY TREASURES FROM MURNI'S REMARKABLE PRIVATE COLLECTION.



THE VERANDA OF THE ROOM