

Mum and dad Aussies are getting in on the act too — buying land to develop private villa complexes or investing in high-end beachside mansions. The desire to own an offshore tropical haven— with up to 12 full-time staff catering to your every need—is clearly gaining bragging rights around the Australian suburbs.

"There's a trend for people to develop villas. There would be at least 2000 international standard villas, comprising a mix of private homes and villa complexes, in Bali at present," says Jon Stonham, chief executive, Marketing Villas Ltd, which specialises in renting out luxury property villas in the Indonesian archipelago.

Singapore-based Farah Khan recently developed Villa Voyage, a mini-mansion fronting the sea on Nusa Lembongan, an island 30 minutes by speedboat off Bali's southeast coast.

"I was totally taken by the site," says Khan, "which was shown to us by a friend of ours. The feeling is quite different compared to Bali, where we have had another home in Sanur for the past 15 years. Nusa Lembongan is all about the sea, it reminds me of the Mediterranean." Khan hired Dutch interior designer Anneke van Waesberghe to create a "luxury safari" look throughout the villa using concepts such as "floating tents" and stacked vintage Louis Vuitton monogrammed steamer trunks, as well as Prada, Tods and Aigner luggage to create the right ambience.

There's even a traditional outrigger fishing boat or jukung. The local villagers might still be drawing fresh water from communal wells and eking out a living drying seaweed, the island's main source of income, but Khan has developed Villa Voyage with a glamour theme—even the beach bags are genuine Longchamp.

Khan is so enamoured of Villa Voyage that she has just bought a development site on Sebabi Island in Flores for another potential villa project of "barefoot luxury".

Brisbane-based Grant Thornton partner Michael McCann and wife Nona bought a two-storey house, Villa Asada, near Candi Dasa last December.

Their reasoning? "Buying something in Australia has its limitations. If you buy a holiday house in Australia you have to open up, lock up and clean up. That dulls the holiday experience," Michael McCann explains. "In a location like Bali you have the luxury of having staff available who can look after you.

"We had a look around Asia. Compared to places like Phuket, Bali is a better-value option, and it has cheaper land and construction costs."

While the villa needs full-time security guards it doesn't have to be lived in permanently; in any case, it costs an average of less than \$2000 a year to hire a local employee. Michael McCann admits the downside of owning a villa can be an obligation to commit most of your holidays to one destination.

"But we have been able to vary it with a swap," he says — the McCanns's Brisbane neighbours own a villa in Tuscany. But there have been a few trials, including development issues with neighbours constructing a villa next door.

Villa Asada rents for about \$US800 (\$765) a night and attracts European and Russian holiday-makers as well as tourists from Perth. But most visitors are Asia-based expats. "While Seminyak has great restaurants and it's near the beach, and the suburbs of Legian are very expensive to buy beachfront property, we found the east coast is more remote but offers more of a feel of the old Bali," Michael McCann says.

"You are very much more immersed in the green space of Bali — it's a little bit like an Ubud on the coast. There are no immediate surf beaches but you have immediate access to the ocean, so you can swim and snorkel."

Peter Richter is another Australian in love with Bali. A former managing director of one of the island's most exclusive hotels, Richter has developed more than 100 villas on this so-called Island of the Gods.

"When we first went up there (to Bali) in the early 1990s and developed hotels like the Four Seasons there was very little (private) villa accommodation available.

"And there was no way of promoting villas," Richter says.

But with the internet and various marketing companies promoting luxury villas it is a lot easier to get the word out. "They have now become everything to everybody. There is the dream to build some sort of tropical retreat of their own design and Bali offers that opportunity to be creative. You are not inhibited by walls, by insulation, it's a pretty open canvas."

But it is getting more difficult to find new sites in Bali with land prices jumping as much as 50 per cent each year.

"The dynamic of Bali has changed over the past few years. "People used to congregate around Kuta but it got too big and the population flowed down to Seminyak . . . (but) Seminyak is turning into another Kuta. "What we are finding now with the outlying areas — Nusa Lembongan or Lombok—there is still an opportunity to experience that tropical dream of space, environment and all the facilities without being trapped in a

downtown environment where there are problems with infrastructure, transport and communication." Richter rents out his four bedroom Villa Sungai Tinggi beachside villa at Pererenan near Canggu from \$US875 a night plus 15 per cent tax.

But Nusa Lembongan-based businesswoman and real estate agent Shush Ingram, who is developing a resort on the island, sounds a note of caution about developing in Indonesia, saying there are many pitfalls for inexperienced foreigners.

Even Khan admits building the Villa Voyage on Nusa Lembongan was not without its challenges. "Practically everything has to be imported, including most of the workers . . . the house took three years to build," Khan says.

Lisa Allen stayed in Bali with the assistance of the Marketing Villas Collection of luxury private homes; marketingvillas.com

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