

Nestled just off the western coast of Lombok, the three Gili Islands sit like jewels in the Bali sea. Surrounded by stunning coral and green sea turtles, the islands are really a must-see. Sadly, when most Australians say they are off to Indonesia for a holiday they are talking about the party/resort island of Bali. For the few that have their travel horizons set a little more zoomed out, the Gili Islands offer something for everyone. It's also the gateway to the less crowded and gorgeous Lombok.

How far away is it?

The Gili Islands remain within easy reach for Bali travellers and Lombok explorers alike. It's 2.5hrs by fast ferry from Bali or 2 hours by minibus followed by a short local ferry hop from Lombok's Praya Airport.

I lived there for half a year, and so got to know all three of the islands very well. After 6 months on Gili Air, I was shocked to realise I had encountered just a handful of other Australians. I joked while living there, the sea must contain a swirling vortex that stops Aussies leaving the shores of Bali.

The Gili Islands are easy to reach if travelling to Bali or Lombok.

Gili Trawangan (AKA Gili T)

Gili Trawangan (Gili T) is the party island. Apparently, it is becoming known as the Ibiza of Southeast Asia, with parties every night. It's the island of choice for young backpackers seeking sun, sand and cheap Bintang Beer.

Gili Meno

If Gili T is the party island, Gili Meno is at the opposite end of the scale. As it's the less developed of the 3 islands, it is also the smallest and quietest. We often joked that if you didn't place a dinner order at one of the few venues by 7:30 pm, you had better like Pringles for dinner. It's the home to numerous yoga schools and is a perfect location for those wanting to disconnect. Or to just soak up the sun and sand and maybe smash through those books on your Kindle you've been meaning to get to.

Meno also boasts some of the best snorkelling in the Gili Islands, with the north of the island home to a huge Green Sea Turtle population.

Gili Meno is the most chilled of the three islands.

Gili Air

If you were looking for the perfect balance between the other two Islands, Gili Air is that island. Gili Air is perfect for families as the island is quite safe. Kids can ride their bikes or paddle on the shallow protected northern beaches away from the tidal channels of the east and west of the island.

Having two main beach parties a week, five nights for yoga and sunset drinks, not to mention

great diving and great food... can you see why it was my home for 6 months?

Gili Air is a mix of fun activities and a relaxed atmosphere.

Transport

All three of the Gili Islands possess their own micro-culture, with a common quirk of the islands being they are devoid of all motorised land transport. That's right, no cars or motorbikes. The main modes of transport are either pushbikes or good old foot power. However, for larger items or groups there is the Cidomo or horse cart common to all three islands.

Far from being a tourist gimmick, these carts are vital for moving heavy loads like luggage or scuba tanks around the islands.

There isn't any motorised transport - just these guys or pushbikes!

4G and Wi-Fi service

While you can feel like a million miles from anywhere laying in a hammock watching the sunset with Bali's volcano, Mount Agung, backlit by the setting sun, you can get 4G high-speed mobile phone service almost everywhere! At one stage, I was paying the equivalent of AUD\$27 for 42 gigabytes a month. But on the flip side, Wi-Fi is available but barely usable. Understandably, I rarely used the Wi-Fi and suggest it as more a source of frustration rather than a connection - you'll be much happier just using the mobile phone network.

The Wi-Fi isn't the greatest, but you'll be able to disconnect and relax!

Accommodation

Each of the islands has great options for accommodation - ranging from hostel dormitories, homestays, hotels through to resort style accommodation. With prices ranging from a couple of bucks per night through to hundreds. The islands live and breath TripAdvisor so that is your best bet for reviews on specific resorts or locations.

I was lucky to snag a home-stay with a shared kitchen, aircon and bathroom for \$300AUD a month. If you do stay in a homestay, there is rarely hot water available. It's the tropics, you just get used to 'cold' showers.

I stayed in home-stay accommodation, here's a snap of my little bungalow.

Money and payment when you're there

One of the first thoughts I had, when I was planning my 6-month stay, was, how will I pay for things? Well, credit cards are available for larger purchases such as accommodation and scuba diving. The standard Indonesian 3% surcharge applies to all card purchases. There are ATM machines available in multiple places across all three islands with bank

branches scattered throughout neighbouring Lombok.


You can kick back and relax with a view like this on the islands.

Food and cuisine on the islands

Unlike Bali & Labuan Bajo (the Komodo Region) the Gili Islands are part of the Muslim adhering area of Indonesia, so you would have to be quite lucky to find a BLT or bacon on the breakfast menu. When you do, it's often "beef bacon".

I have to admit I was a bit cheeky food wise. I found a great beachside warung (cafe/food seller) that made, by hand authentic ravioli with tomato sauce (paired with a coke for just \$4.00AUD). That was my lunch most days. Dinner consisted of BBQ chicken, fried rice and sambal (local chilli paste) for around \$3.00AUD.

While I had limited culinary adventurism, there is gorgeous seafood, bbq street food options through to finer dining on the beach... where the stars twinkle and the palm trees sway.


A typical lunchtime view for me during my stay.

Watersports and other activities

The Gili Islands are a watersports playground for parasailing, water skiing, snorkelling to scuba diving. The islands have a 'pricing agreement' for scuba diving so the prices are all the same (with a small environmental levy applied on Gili T, this is likely to also spread to the other 2 islands in the future).

I highly recommend one of the group snorkelling tours for the less adventurous water-goers. You will have the chance to see Green Sea Turtles as well as Hawksbill Turtles. A snorkelling visit to the underwater statues off the beach of Gili Meno is also a must-see.


A local turtle I spotted while snorkelling.

Diving

If you do wish to do some diving, there are three options. The first is you could already have your diver's qualifications. The second is to do a 'try diving program' requiring only an hour or so of training then a guided underwater tour of a shallow dive site. Or the final option is to do your dive qualification. This takes only 3 days and at the end, you'll have a lifelong qualification to explore the underwater world.

All equipment is provided by the dive shops so there is no worry there. I may be biased, but diving on the Gili Islands are the perfect mix of big turtles, deep reefs, a wreck to explore, as well as tiny creatures that never fail to amaze and mystify.


There are so many water activities to do on the islands.

The Gili Islands really need to be added to your next Indonesian adventure, whether it's just for a few days to detox from the craziness of Bali's Denpasar or for a longer disconnect from the big wide world. I hope one day I meet you there!