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How tourists can give back to Bali: The Jodie O'Shea Orphanage

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Tourists can give back to the Bali community by helping the local orphanages.

Ian Lloyd Neubauer, [Escape](#)

THE Balinese are masters of hospitality — the human element that's made the most visited of Indonesia's 18,000-odd islands and one of the most iconic holiday destinations in the world.

Yet for many visitors, especially those who keep on returning, there comes a time when they start thinking about how they can give something back to the people of Bali.

For Alison Chester, a clothing manufacturer from the UK who's lived in Bali for 30 years, the answer was to donate her time, energy and fundraising skills to a local orphanage.

"In 2002 I found a small orphanage and started paying for the children's school fees, to take them out on their birthdays and buy other things they needed," Chester says.

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“They were going around to poor villages on the neighbouring island of Sumba and promising parents they would take care their children, when in fact they are using the children to get allowances from the government and donation from tourists — while neglecting the kids.”

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Bali's orphanages are often exploited. Source:Supplied

Chester's experience was not unique. An investigation by the BBC disclosed that in the past 20 years, the number of orphanages in Bali has doubled — and that many of these orphanages are effectively rackets that exploit children and holiday-makers alike. In some case, the children are even forced to work without pay.

When Chester and her friends cottoned on to the scam, the orphanage in question cut off her access to the children. “So we decided we had to walk away — or do something else,” she says.

AN ANGEL AT DEATH'S DOOR

That something else is the Jodie O'Shea Orphanage. Set in the grimy backstreets of Bali's capital Denpasar — a city few foreign tourists ever see — it was named after one of the victims of the 2002 Bali bombings — a 29-year-old dog groomer from Perth who Chester comforted in her final hours.

“A few hours after the bombing, I went into the Sanglah Hospital to see if I could do anything to help,” Chester recalls. “I met a doctor from Perth who took me to the ward where Jodie was and he asked me to stay with her because she was in a really bad state.

“Despite her terrible pain, Jodie was totally dignified and selfless. When they finally got her some painkillers, she told the doctor to give them to the girl in the bed next to her who was bleeding badly. And when I got Jodie's mum on the phone, she refused

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Kids at the orphanage in a cake-making class. Source: *Supplied*

That was a Sunday. On Tuesday, O'Shea succumbed to her wounds. But her death was not in vain, for O'shea's selflessness inspired Chester to create an institution that's now regarded as the benchmark for orphanages in Bali.

"We managed to get 13 children out of that dodgy orphanage," Chester says. "At first they were scared of us because people had warned them that if they went with us, they'd all go to hell. But within 20 minutes — pretty much as soon as they'd all had a hug and something to eat — they were fine."

The next thing Chester did was send all 13 of the children back to Sumba to determine which, if any, were genuine orphans or from families so poor that they couldn't even afford to feed them. A few days later, she got her answer when her husband pulled her out of bed to tell her all 13 had returned — along with seven new children and a brood of chickens their relatives had sent as gifts.



The orphanage has space for up to 100 children. Source: *Supplied*

FROM 20 CHILDREN TO 100

Over the past 12 years, the Jodie O'Shea Orphanage has had hundreds of needy children come and go through its doors. On a few occasions, babies have literally been dumped on the doorstep. Other times, Chester has begged expectant single teenage mothers not to sell their babies to dodgy orphanages and instead give them to her. And in other cases, single fathers whose wives have abandoned them have pleaded with Chester to help care for their children.

"We can take no more than 100 children at any one time but of course we would never turn away a child in need," Chester says. "Right now we have 94, but there are always more on the way."

The Jodie O'Shea Orphanage does not apply for allowances from the Indonesian Government because it's too time-consuming with too much red tape. Instead, it's 100 per cent dependent on donations from the 1,000-odd tourists who visit every year — people like Shae Fleming, a schoolteacher from Sydney.



Alison Chester founded the Jodie O'Shea Orphanage. Source: *Supplied*

“What brought me here? Well, you come to Bali and it’s all hedonistic, you stay at nice hotels and eat great food and buy whatever you want really cheap,” she says. “But I thought I should do something that actually has meaning rather than just enjoy a holiday.”

“I really didn’t know what to expect because there are a lot of orphanages in Bali and people warn you not to go because they’re tourist attractions,” she says. “But I’m a schoolteacher. I can tell what healthy, happy kids look like, and this is the real deal. The children here are very well taken care of.”

Fleming’s partner Anthony Nunan, who spent the day playing soccer with the children and took a few of them out for lunch, also found the visit highly rewarding.

goes to the kids. Alison and her staff don't just put a roof over their heads and feed them. They've created a really caring and nurturing place to for them to live."



A German volunteer leads a cake-making class. Source: *Supplied*

AN ONGOING STRUGGLE

And therein lies a problem. The Jodie O'Shea Orphanage so well stocked with books, musical instruments and food, and the children are so clean, happy and healthy, that many prospective donors think their money would be better spent elsewhere.

expensive. Every month we have to come up with money for our rent and every two years we send the kids from Sumba back to their villages with a staff member to ensure they maintain their family ties. We're also spending money digging wells in Sumba — we've dug 20 so far — because the lack of clean drinking water is one of the root causes and why parents there are so desperate that they give away their kids"



Some tourists bring their children to interact with the orphans. Source: *Supplied*

She adds: "We're very lucky because we get tourists who visit us and go food shopping with members of our staff and that keeps our freezers full. But what we really need now are people who will fully sponsor a child to the tune of \$1,200 a year — which covers most of the cost of their education, food, medical needs etc. In fact, it costs us \$2,000 a year per child, but sponsorship really helps take the pressure off."

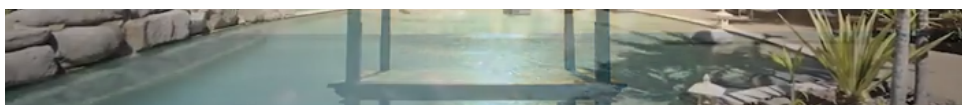
Ryan, a 15-year-old boy from Sumba who's sponsored by an anonymous Australian couple, is living proof of how sponsorship can change a child's life.

"I like it here because there is lots of food, I'm never hungry and I can go to school," he says. "When I finish school I want to be diesel mechanic because it is an important job. I can already fix bicycles and motorbikes. I even fixed a car once."

To visit or make a donation to the Jodie O'Shea Orphanage, visit careforkidsbali.com.

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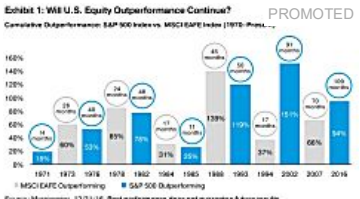
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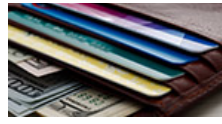
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