

A

battered motorbike rolls up to a Legian beachfront restaurant, sputters and comes to a halt. Its owner, sporting an open-necked shirt, shorts and old pair of sandals, saunters to a table, swinging a briefcase that's seen better days. The appearance of architect Ross Franklin, who pioneered the Bali villa extraordinaire in the early 1980s, in no way reflects his precise vision and meticulous approach to designing dream homes and luxury resorts for foreign investors, many from Australia. Master of the hybrid villa, Franklin applies traditional Balinese architecture to Western concepts: sweeping light spaces against backdrops of dark, native wood and walls in shades of white or cream. The cutting-edge designs appeal to big and small property players looking for cool, relaxed living with a dollop of romance. "I merge the tropical aesthetic with good old-fashioned New Zealand practicality," he explains.

Franklin, some may say, leads a charmed life on the "island of the gods", his home for the past 30 years – but they don't know his strict work ethic. At 60, the talented Malaysian-born New Zealander – who's often labelled Bali's seminal "Australian" architect – has no plans to put his feet up. "I will never retire," he says, conceding it would mean certain death. Architecture is his passion, providing the perfect balance with his other loves, wife and businesswoman Ardriani and their two-year-old daughter, Alexandria. "The thing I love is sitting down at the drawing board and balancing it all." Balance is what defines Franklin; everything must co-exist in harmony. His modus operandi, some say, is coloured by his hippie past, when Bali was a blank canvas and he used to hang out at the beach. He eschews complications and doesn't even have a website. "I don't need one" he says. Probably true. His designs are highly sought after by Bali's smart set: expats from overseas, including CEOs, doctors, artists and fashion designers.

Lauded in architectural magazines and the book, *Bali Modern: The Art of Tropical Living* (2000), by Gianni Francione, Franklin is credited with designing the first significant project in the modern Bali idiom. Built for Angela Vestey, whose family owns a vast cattle empire, it was commissioned as a holiday home. Franklin created a radical contemporary building with a circular living room and a kitchen separated from the dining room by a covered walkway. For most jobs, Franklin relies on a word-of-mouth network, and people actually knock on his door. "I'm like Teflon – I haven't gone a week without a project," he says. Despite the economic downturn and terrorist threats, Bali remains popular for astute property investors, many of whom spend several months of the year on the island.

An Australian executive (who asked not to be named) enlisted Franklin's company, Kuasa Alam (Natural Power) to design SABA, a complex of five luxury villas that include private pools. Set among rice paddies, the villas are close to a beach and slightly north of Seminyak's trendy bars, restaurants and shops. Completed in December, they're available from \$US250 (\$380) a night. "Franklin has good style; he's innovative and knowledgeable," the executive says. During construction he visited the site just three times, leaving the interior detail up to Franklin. When the executive decided to invest in Bali, villa occupancy rates averaged about 60 to 70 per cent (compared with about half that now). Yet the executive and his partner paid about a third of the cost of what they would pay in Australia. "It's most definitely cheaper and value for money," he says.

Another sweetener is the attractive Indonesian tax system, which exempts foreign investors from paying land tax, though Australians must pay the customary tax on offshore profits. The executive is pragmatic about the economic slump: "We may lose Australian clientele because of the bad exchange rate but we should be able to

Hot property

Story Deborah Cassrels

In some parts of Bali land values are at a premium and demand for dream homes as strong as ever, which is excellent news for architect Ross Franklin



● One of the luxury villas that makes up the SABA complex near Seminyak



Privacy and tranquillity are hallmarks of Franklin's design

“Bali is actually booming. It’s a unique international place ... and an investment haven for the wealthy”

pick up well-to-do Europeans, Japanese and Americans. People will still go there; it’s still cheap. If we can have an occupancy rate of 25 to 30 per cent we should be OK. If it falls below that we will discount.” He is also attracted by “the lifestyle thing” and holidays there with his family several times a year.

Ex-Sydneysider Dee Mytton, who has lived in Bali for 10 years, chose Franklin to build Villa Kubu, 14 villas which are rented from \$US265 a day. She has been averaging a 70 per cent occupancy rate, mostly repeat guests and through referrals from Australia, Singapore, Jakarta, Korea and Malaysia. “Ross’s villas are special because no matter how tight the workable area is, he achieves a sense of space,” Mytton says. Steady occupancy rates reflect Franklin’s edge over steep competition, she adds. “He’s been around the block a few times yet he’s still passionate about each of his creations.”

Working on budgets that range from \$US150,000 to \$US1.5 million, Franklin controls entire projects, from the design, building and development through to execution of swimming pools, gardens and interior fitouts – right down to the artworks and even cutlery. He and his staff of 10 (plus up to 120 workers on each project) say clients are generally content with the arrangement. “I’ve been here so long and the tentacles go out a long way. I know art dealers going back 20 years and more about Indonesian art than most people who come here. It probably costs clients no more than if they were to do it themselves.”

Also, as Franklin puts it, not seeing a project through to the end is “like coitus interruptus”. Not to mention the ghastly decorations some people put in his homes, which is sacrilegious as far as he’s concerned. “There are some whose taste has been just appalling,” he says.

A self-taught architect – with a psychology degree – Franklin’s expertise harks back to his childhood, when he helped his engineer father build boats in New Zealand. “Everybody built their own boats then. New Zealand is the land of the home handyman.” Later Franklin had a stint gutting and rebuilding terraces in London before living in Australia for a short time.

Despite pessimistic forecasts from the Bali Tourism Board about the effects of the global economic crisis, Franklin says villa investment is still healthy. He sees none of the doom and gloom seeping into the well-lined pockets of foreign investors, whose luxury villas are dotted mostly around the upmarket districts of Seminyak and Oberoi. “The place is actually booming,” he says of the construction under way and developments in the pipeline. “It’s a unique, international place, a little mecca and an investment haven for the wealthy.”

Most of his clients can afford a half a million dollar house in Bali, which is considerably less, he points out, than the cost of an exclusive home in Australia. Certainly, foreign tourist arrivals in 2008 attest to Bali’s continuing popularity, with some reports citing a 25 per cent increase on 2007. And as the slowdown starts to bite elsewhere, Australians who previously headed to Europe for skiing holidays are expected to opt for cheaper luxury trips to places such as Bali.

While Franklin’s single dwellings remain popular, there has been surge in demand for clusters of villas – small groups of private houses functioning as boutique hotels. “It’s a business model that’s developed but they are privatised units. For many people who are part-time residents it’s financially viable to be part of a

village cluster,” he says. The villas, while not identical, have a similar look, which makes the marketing easier. Foreign owners can run the businesses while offloading their management to agencies. The package includes full-time security guards, gardeners, maids, chefs, butlers, managers, and drivers for shopping trips.

Frenchman Jean Pierre Reyes finds the investment set-up ideal. He spends eight months of the year in Bali and four in Paris, where he owns a dance studio called Harmonic. After Franklin built Reyes’ first villa six years ago, the relationship continued. The third, most recent, project comprises 11 villas in the Legian district. Catering to wedding parties and other occasions, the Villa Bali Asri hotel is sophisticated, with spectacular gardens. Reyes describes the concept as “Paris meeting Bali”. Indeed, the gardens and a tree-lined avenue resemble something from an impressionist painting, while the sumptuous villas, renting from \$US210 to \$US425 a night, boast Franklin’s signature cross-cultural stamp.

While Australian investors enjoy much higher gains in Bali than at home, building regulations also have wide parameters, says Franklin: “It’s still fairly Wild West.” And what distinguishes his villas? “It’s about dreams here. Most foreigners are romantics so I try to make places that have some sort of romance or drama, but which are practical.”

His first clients in the 1980s were quite adventurous. “People were taking risks to live here, therefore requests were unconventional.” Hence the circular design built for Vestey. But Franklin found the style impractical and now his designs are rectangular, with clean, modern lines. But as an old Bali hand, he’s not about to deviate from his dream-home formula. His dictum: “Don’t compete with Mother Nature. Enhance, encourage or accentuate but never compete.”

The ideal villa, Franklin says, must be first practical, with good aesthetics, shape and airflow. Bali presents a challenge for architects trying to counteract its heat, moisture and monsoons. To avoid creating heat-traps, he uses water and heat-resistant materials. “Everything has to give shade and produce airflow. Knowing how the weather works is essential.” Cool stone – limestone, granite, terrazzo, ceramic tiles and polished cement – are used and the outside is brought in with the traditional *alang-alang* (thatched roof), under which living areas open to gardens and pools to allow ventilation. Where possible, owners are encouraged to spend more on green technologies, such as LED or PLC lighting, and alternatives to energy-greedy airconditioning. Eco villas are becoming popular.

Clients say Franklin has a knack of achieving exceptional privacy and tranquillity. On entering one of his villas, there is the feeling of being transported to an island within an island, where pools and gardens interconnect with the home. “Pools are the focal point, a counterbalance to concrete,” he says. “There’s nothing more beautiful than a pool of water catching the light – a house is empty without it.”

So it is with his gardens, which become an inextricable part of the building. “The fresh building is a bit like a nudist colony – there’s nothing sexy about it. Once you put in gardens it softens the building and it’s sexy. It’s what makes the house special. Your home is where you spend a lot of your life ... if your architecture is balanced you will feel better.”

