Hot property

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.
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-Sydney sider Dee Mytton, who has lived in Bali for 10 years, chose Franklin to build Villa Kubu, 14 villas which are rented from $US$265 a day. She has been averaging 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 $US$150,000 to $US$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. For 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 to offset 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 the 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.

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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 is built 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 about it, you put in gardens and 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.”