

spa profile

looking AFTER Bali's SPAS

Lulu Widjaja, President of the Bali Spa and Wellness Association

writer **Catharine Nicol**

As the world's economy slides into depression there are still stories that warm even the stoniest of hearts, and one of these is the success of the spa industry on one of the most popular islands in Asia Pacific – Bali.

the world knows Bali as an island with gentle, welcoming inhabitants, spectacular beaches, an exquisite tapestry of paddy fields and an ancient spiritual culture that lives on in the present day. Who wouldn't want to holiday here? And bringing all those elements together are the spas that can be found in every corner of the island, and which account for a large proportion of the tourism income.

According to regular e-newsletter *Bali Update*, the numbers of visitor arrivals to the island in January 2009 were almost 20 percent up on last year, impressive news considering 2008 was one of the most successful years for tourism in Bali, and Asia in general. While the economy this year may yet throw some curve balls in terms of tourist numbers, Lulu Widjaja, President of the Bali Spa and Wellness Association (BSWA), reassures that "despite a slowing down in the number of travellers to Bali, the wellness industry in Bali is certainly still booming." She estimates that there are over 1,000 spas on the island.

While Widjaja is originally from Sumatra, she's been working in Bali for nine years. Her career started in Jakarta in hospitality, and her profound understanding of the spa industry began to take hold when she moved to Bali to manage the 18,000 square foot award-winning Kirana Spa in Ubud. "It was a very precious experience and made me who I am now in the industry," she says. She is currently working with Mandara Spa Indonesia,

overlooking five outlets in Bali and one in neighbouring island Lombok.

The BSWA provides the support for the island's spas. Officially in place since 2005, even in the few years it has been operating the association has gathered together over 50 spa and hotel brand members. It was originally the brainchild of Ronald Dexter and Julie Dharma, who started regular lunch meetings to improve the spa industry in 2004. Explains Widjaja, "These days our

great headway here thanks to the EU Grant Program procured by Filipino spa owner Jomar Fleras.

The standards of Asian spas differ wildly as many therapists, while gifted at various therapies, have little or no official training. "The goal of this program is therefore to train up 1,000 therapists to achieve the European standards of spa operations and safety," says Widjaja. "A significant outcome of this program is that therapists are given more respect as professionals, rather than just being seen as masseuses."

As work continues to improve the standards, working conditions and reputations of Bali's therapists and spas, the future holds much in the way of industry awareness. "We will strive to maintain the culture and values of the island, which are reflected in the spa industry," promises Widjaja while adding that the quality of treatments and therapists and keeping up

with trends are also essential. Going green is also a serious business, here as in the rest of the world, and the BSWA is working to help all spas become eco-friendly.

At the end of the day, Widjaja reminds us that this is an industry where the important improvement of standards, education and certification are essential. "This is not simply service and hospitality; working in a spa involves a lot of heart. Most importantly what we provide makes people feel better and this brings a satisfaction that is truly from the heart."

www.balispawellness-association.org



meetings are far more than lunches. They help spas improve their networking and encourage an exchange of information related to the spa industry and tourism." As with many associations the main players volunteer their time, fueled by a passion for the spa and wellness world, and for Bali itself.

Over and above ensuring an improvement in standards across the spas of the island there are several sub-committees of education, environment, membership and survey. Additionally the Asia Pacific Spa and Wellness Council (APSWC) has been making