



Bali starlings have distinctive white plumage.

Saving *the* Starling

How a luxury resort rescued a beloved Balinese bird from extinction. **By Jonny Bierman**

THE MELODIC CALL OF the Bali starling once echoed across the island's forests, but decades of poaching and habitat loss reduced this strikingly beautiful bird to a heartbreaking symbol of near-extinction. However, hope takes flight at **Plataran Menjangan Resort & Spa** (plataran.com; rooms from Rp3,530,000), a sanctuary nestled within the pristine West Bali National Park. Through its Bali Starling Conservation Program, the resort has transformed the birds' plight into a story of renewal,

blending science, tradition, and tourism into an effort that has already reintroduced hundreds of these endangered birds to their natural habitat.

Set against the sun-dappled, arid landscapes of West Bali National Park, the resort feels worlds apart from the bustling, tourist-heavy southern coasts. Deer wander gracefully along mangrove-fringed shores, and the drier climate lends an otherworldly charm, compared to the lush central highlands nearby. Bungalows featuring private plunge pools offer an intimate retreat, while the seaside infinity pool provides a refreshing escape from the tropical heat. Nearby, the vibrant house reef and Menjangan Island, protected and thriving with marine life, invite snorkelling and scuba enthusiasts to immerse themselves in an underwater kaleidoscope of colours.

Here, nature's rhythms take centre stage. Animals far outnumber visitors, and the soft sea breeze carries the delicate calls of tropical birds—including the Bali starling, whose population has soared from just 10 in 1996 to an inspiring 400 to 500 in the wild today. This remarkable turnaround is thanks to the Bali Starling Breeding Program at the resort, a beacon of conservation success.

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"When the program began, fewer than 20 Bali starlings remained in the wild," explains Plataran Development Coordinator Gede Muliada as he leads me through the sanctuary. "Now, nearly 300 starlings have been released back into their natural habitat, with 98 percent originating from our breeding efforts and two percent from external sources."

Muliada is guiding me through Plataran's Trails of Life experience, a captivating journey that begins with a peaceful walk along gravel trails framed by lush greenery, winding through shaded coastal mangroves, towering endemic palm trees, and vibrant forest trails alive with the calls of tropical birdlife. Each step brings me closer to the heart of the forest, where the Bali Starling Sanctuary awaits—an inspiring haven where rare and resplendent Bali starlings, once on the brink of extinction, thrive within carefully tended aviaries.

"Out of eight pairs of Bali starlings, only three are able to produce offspring," explains Muliada. "These birds need strong chemistry to form a pair, which means they truly have to fall in love before they can mate for life."

Bali starling chicks stay under their parents' care for a month before moving to the baby cage, where they begin the delicate process of finding a lifelong partner. These birds form unbreakable bonds, making pairing crucial for survival. Once matched, pairs enter habituation cages to adapt to wild conditions. This is an essential step, as finding mates in nature is challenging.

This process reflects the dedication of Plataran Menjangan Resort's team of 28 specialists. Guided by the onsite Scientific Education and Research Center (SERC), they refine breeding techniques, monitor released starlings, and develop strategies to secure the species' future.



From top: Snorkelers at Plataran Menjangan Resort & Spa; a room at the hotel.

Across their portfolio of Indonesian-based properties, Plataran is grounded in three pillars: Plataran for the people, Plataran for the earth, and Plataran for the heritage. The resort's dedication to conservation stretches far beyond the Bali starling program, seamlessly integrating guests into a greater vision of ecological renewal.

A standout of the resort's conservation efforts is the endemic-tree planting initiative, which invites guests to plant native trees vital to the ecosystem. Each guest stay already supports mangrove planting, with the option to purchase and name an endemic tree as well. Marked by a custom wood plaque, the tree can be tracked for years to come, creating a lasting connection between sponsors and the land.

Gede hands me a shovel, and I plant a Manikara kauki tree, naming it after my nieces. The experience is deeply grounding and a moment to reflect on preserving the environment for future generations. These trees offset carbon emissions while supporting biodiversity, seamlessly blending conservation and personal impact while rebuilding Bali starling habitat.

Later, I ascend The Bali Tower at the resort, its striking wooden silhouette rising 33 metres above the lush forest canopy. From this lofty perch, I'm greeted by breathtaking 360-degree views that sweep across the untamed beauty of West Bali National Park and the crystalline waters around Menjangan Island. It's a panorama that feels as boundless as the horizon itself. I linger here, scanning the treetops in the hope of spotting a Bali starling in its natural habitat. Luck isn't with me this time, but I hold onto the dream that one day, when I return with my nieces to visit their tree, the starling I observed in the habituation cage will also be there, soaring free, as if to welcome us back to this extraordinary slice of paradise. 🌿

