

Vetiver Root Crafts in Bali

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The subject of vetiver and its different scents is a fascinating subject all by itself. How is it that some vetiver has an outgoing, attractive fragrance while some has practically no smell at all? I got to appreciate this fact only recently.

Many craft shops in the tourist towns of Bali, Indonesia carry items made from vetiver but I didn't know this until I visited the only one of these shops that advertises itself as specialising in vetiver products. Only in this shop, De Art Creative Handicraft at Kuta, did the sales people know it was vetiver. All the others had mistakenly described their products as made from sandalwood or cinnamon roots, or simply as 'akar-wani' meaning perfumed roots.



Vetiver root products by De Art Creative Handicrafts shop, Kuta, Bali. Clockwise from top: Roman shades, large hampers, vetiver balls in net bags, hand bags, coasters, boxed placemat gift sets, newspaper hampers, placemats, tassels.

It was also in this specialist shop that I finally understood the scent I'd been catching in many places was not incense but the aroma that vetiver is famous for but which I'd never smelled before. As Balinese use incense several times a day in religious offerings set in their homes,

temples, shops and outdoors, I had assumed the lovely scent I often smelled was incense. Now I recognised that where these products are sold, it is the scent of vetiver wafting out the shop door, often detectable from several metres away down the sidewalk.

The only other place I've handled vetiver roots is Bangladesh and there they have practically no smell. I've also seen craft products from vetiver in Thailand, but those are made not from the roots, but grass stems and those have only the faintest scent. On Bali, all the products are made from the roots and these are harvested in Java, as apparently even Bali's vetiver roots are not as aromatic.

The roots are collected from Java farmers who harvest them in the wild, dried in the sun then combed to straighten them and remove waste. Root stems are then inserted by hand, one at a time between fine cotton threads strung on a handloom, a slow process.

Given the limits of loom widths and root lengths, products can still be quite diverse by color and function. The roots are left their natural pale tan colour with the threads custom dyed so products can be any desired color, from matching natural to bright or dark colors. To add sparkle, metallic gold and silver threads are also used sometimes. The products are place mats, table runners, coasters, Roman shades, hampers, hand bags, mats, room dividers, etc. (see photos)



Detail of weaving vetiver roots. De Art placemat.

Most of these vetiver products are made by small home-based weavers who sell to middlemen, but this arrangement is rapidly declining and being replaced with a few large producers, such as

De Art which keeps about 100 people employed in production. Considering the work is so labour intensive, prices are very reasonable. For example, at the current exchange rate of the rupia to the US dollar (9,300 rp/\$1US), placemats are about \$1.00 each (retail).

The products make great gifts and household items. I have bought several pieces to use and just to keep around for the pleasure of the smell: my personal aroma therapy. As I travel a lot, I keep one vetiver placemat on the bottom of my suitcase as the smell of home. Clothes that touch the vetiver absorb the scent and disperse it further.

Leaving Bali, I treat myself to another vetiver root surprise: a traditional massage followed by a long soak in a warm bath where jasmine, ginger and cinnamon bark has been steeped in a nest of Java vetiver roots and rose petals. Ahhhhhhhhhhh.....Now what were you engineer-types saying about embankment stabilisation and erosion control?

I would like to ask the experts about the vetiver scent and for them to comment on how it varies from place to place in its natural state. It would also be interesting to know why its different products smell so different from each other. The Java root smell is a sweet, spicy scent while vetiver essential oil located, has a strong almost medicinal smell. The Vetiver eau d'toilette marketed by the perfume company Guerlain, is yet again a completely different smell.

De Art is interested in making contacts for export of their vetiver products. For more information contact owner:

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