

World Traveller

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SUMBA'S SOUL

An island holiday of a lifetime awaits in Indonesia

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Into the wild

As a resort, **Nihi Sumba Island** delivers a dream holiday in a remote setting, but the opportunities to engage with and help one of Indonesia's most unique and fascinating tribes is what sets this place apart.

WORDS: Tiffany Eslick

Sumba is an intriguing place that is satisfyingly off the grid. Unlike many of its neighbouring Indonesian islands, it is not volcanic. Instead, its landscape suggests both Asia and Africa with its mix of undulating mountains, rugged savannah, maize plantations, rice paddies and thick jungle.

Dotted throughout the countryside are hilltop villages with thatched-roof houses that look like giant wizards' hats. They cluster around monumental tombs, where traditional Sumbanese (many of whom are Christian) still practice animistic Marapu beliefs. Sacrificial ceremonies run deep in this culture's roots – I was confronted with this soon after leaving the island's tiny airport as I drove past two big-horned buffalo being slaughtered in the street. And rituals such as the annual mock-war Pasola in February shed light on how rival clans would hurl spears at each other on horseback in order to 'fertilize' the soil with human blood. Headhunting is also said to have taken place among the territorial tribe, but this custom has long been outlawed.

As a destination, you might say Sumba is still a best-kept secret. But for those who do visit – most are probably lured by its untouched beaches and cult surf breaks. And many of these travellers, have probably, like me, stayed at Nihi – a resort on the south-western coast.

Founded by former co-owner and surfing enthusiast Claude Graves, who fell in love with the island in the 80s, Nihi (formerly called Nihiwatu) was born from his vision to create a place that would preserve and share the breath-taking beauty of Sumba with those who would truly appreciate it. American entrepreneur Chris Burch and South-Africa-born hotelier James McBride took over in 2012, and in keeping with Graves' original philosophy, they've continued to drive huge social responsibility projects, while expanding and adding luxury touches to the resort. All this is what captures the attention of eco-conscious travellers, who of course appreciate the resort's pampering aspects, but more importantly, believe in its purpose.

“Every aspect of the resort – from its construction and design to the food and activities – pays tribute to the Sumbanese culture”

From wherever you're coming, Nihi is a long haul. Located about an hour's flight east of Bali, Sumba is situated in the East Nusa Tenggara province, and once you've arrived with the daily flight, it's about two hours of hard driving to the resort. When you finally arrive, however, it's obvious as to what all the talk is about.

Life at Nihi

'The edge of wildness' is carved into a wooden sign that welcomes you to the resort. It stands atop a mountain and the view from up there is unforgettable. Looking down, over banana palms and trees smothered by creeping vines, you can make out Nihi's own collection of pointy thatched roofs. Beyond these and to the right, a wild, white sandy beach with striking rock formations stretches for miles. And to the left, a vast expanse of the Indian Ocean sweeps towards the horizon, its colour changing from turquoise and cerulean to cobalt blue.

Every aspect of the resort – from its construction and design to the food and activities – pays tribute to the Sumbanese culture. The villas, which vary in size and style are constructed from indigenous timbers, stone and grasses. Meandering paths connect them, and their layout resembles that of the local villages. Interiors are decked out in colour palettes and patterns of the hand-spun ikats (cloths) for which the islanders are renowned. The majority of the genuinely friendly staff hail from nearby settlements.

And where possible fresh produce is sourced from either Nihi's onsite organic garden or from local suppliers.

Life at this haven can be as solitary or as social you wish it to be. Most of my interactions with fellow guests happened around meal times. In the early evenings, we gathered at the Boat House to take in the glorious golden sunsets while snacking on sashimi, before moving to the breezy main restaurant Ombak for dinner. I chose to skip any Western offerings on this outlet's menu, and dined on Indonesian specialities such as nasi goreng, and fragrant curries instead. There's also the Kapten's Goa (Captain's Cave) for laid-back fare and the option to dine at Nio Beach Club, which has an idyllic infinity swimming pool, too. It's perched over the main beach and offers spectacular sea views.

Yoga is an integral part of the Nihi Sumba Island experience. And practising sun salutations from an open-air pavilion atop a cliffside ridge was extraordinary. Mary Tilson is the Yoga & Wellness Director who is highly skilled in a variety of styles. In addition to daily group classes, she holds private sessions that can be arranged at just about any location on the resort you wish.

Another quintessential 'Nihi moment' is cantering along the sand and through the rolling waves on the back of a Sumba Pony. These quick, athletic animals descend from Mongolian horses and ancient Chinese stock that was crossed with Arabian thoroughbreds. I went for a ride at dusk, as the sky turned from orange to fiery shades of pink and then red. It was romantic, but I must admit that much to my faithful steed's dismay I opted for a slow trot due to nerves.

Out and about

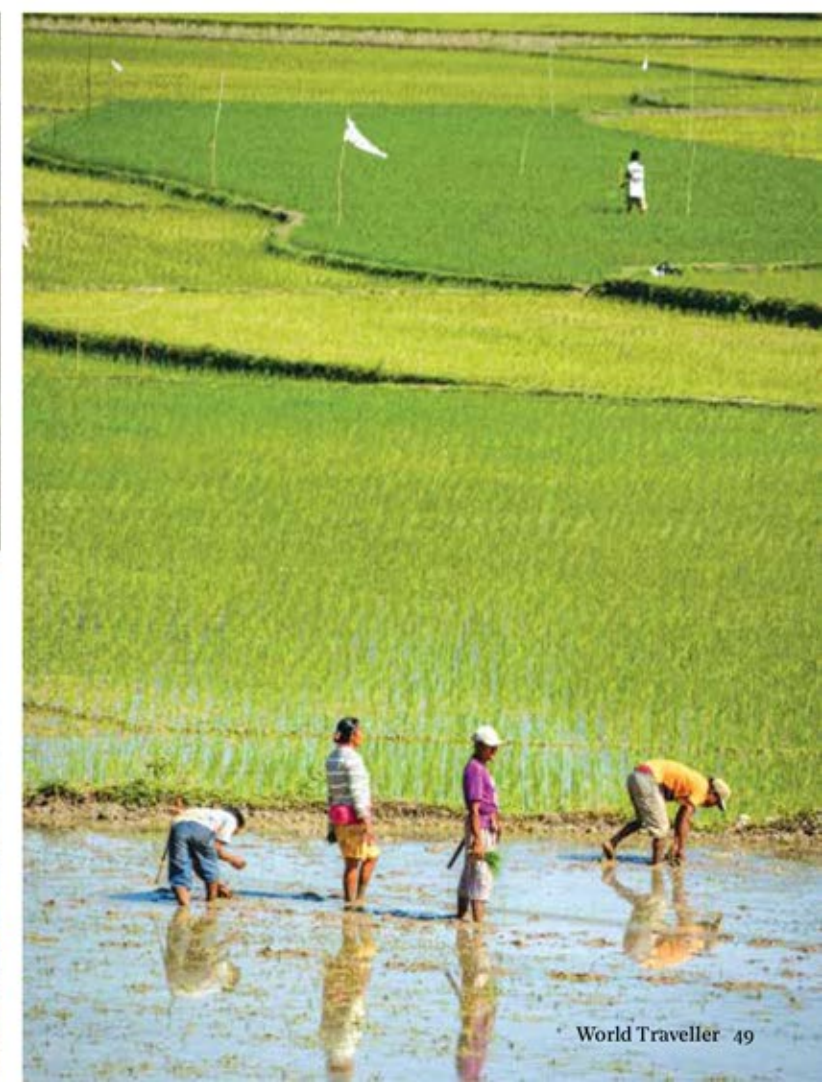
Nihi also offers a number of excursions including paddle boarding down a river, hikes to waterfalls, fishing trips and surfing.

'Occy's Left' is a legendary left-hander break in front of the resort that beckons top-class surfers from all over the world, but beginners (under the guidance of a Tropicsurf teacher) can head to Coconut Cove's calmer waters not too far away.



Previous spread: Nihi's breathtaking infinity pool

Clockwise from this image: Only 10 surfers per day are permitted to ride 'Occy's Left'; Lansoro villas are perfect for families; Sumbanese children; daily work in the rice paddies; open-air 'suites' at NihiOka spa; Wheihola village



It's easily the 'safari' to NihiOka spa, which was one of the most memorable experiences for me. And this is not because of the endless hours of indulgence in an al fresco treatment room, but mostly because of the journey that happened before.

An approximate 90-minute trek (these adventures start early in order to avoid the heat) took me walking across luminous green rice paddies, up and down hills and through patches of dense forest. Along the way, my dagger-wearing daredevil guide Tiger sporadically scaled towering palm trees to procure me fresh green coconuts from which to drink. And I was fortunate to enter Wheihola, a remote village, engulfed by jungle and boulders.

There, in a muddy courtyard amid a collection of humble clan houses, I met with shy people, who quietly laid out their beautiful hand-woven wares. Their wide-eyed children kept me within fixed stares, and occasionally one of the scrawny dogs barked, but most of the time they weren't too fussed by my presence, and just lay about in the morning sun.

A good cause

The Sumbanese are among the poorest people of Indonesia. Most of the approximately one million strong population live in settlements like Wheihola and it's only after visiting this local village, a school and one of Nihi's self-funded clinics, that I understood the severity of the situation and just how untouched the island still is.

The construct of a traditional thatched house on Sumba is primarily built around a central fire, with beds laid on the perimeter of this. All family members, from infants to the elderly, are constantly exposed to smoke and soot and breathing this in is hugely detrimental to their health. Upper respiratory infections are a result of this and are one of the biggest health concerns on the island, followed by malaria.

The Sumba Foundation, which was established by Graves, is committed to lessening the consequences of poverty on the island, while still preserving and respecting the culture and traditions of its people. Nihi's profits and donations from guests, provide aid for clean water and wells, health, education and economic projects.



Clockwise from this image: Sunset rides along Nihi's wild beach; a Pasola horseman; paddleboarding down a river, is one of many excursions offered by the resort



To date, more than 25,000 people have been treated by the four health clinics built and staffed by the foundation; malaria rates in the area have been reduced by 85 per cent; more than 60 water wells and 240 water stations have been developed; and 16 primary schools have been provided with water, toilets, books and supplies. Eleven of these schools are also provided with three meals per week. In addition, the foundation provides scholarships for students to attend nursing and trade schools, with the best students offered employment within Nihi and the foundation. And this year, new

endeavours such as piloting smokeless burners in homes will be launched.

It's impossible not to be moved by all that you see on Sumba. And in my experience as a travel journalist, it's rare to find a resort so dedicated to its surroundings. There's a lot left more work to be done on the island, but this does not detract from what has been achieved. Amid the wild and mysterious setting, I was privileged to stay at a place that's left a lasting impression with me about how important it is to get out there and make a start.

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