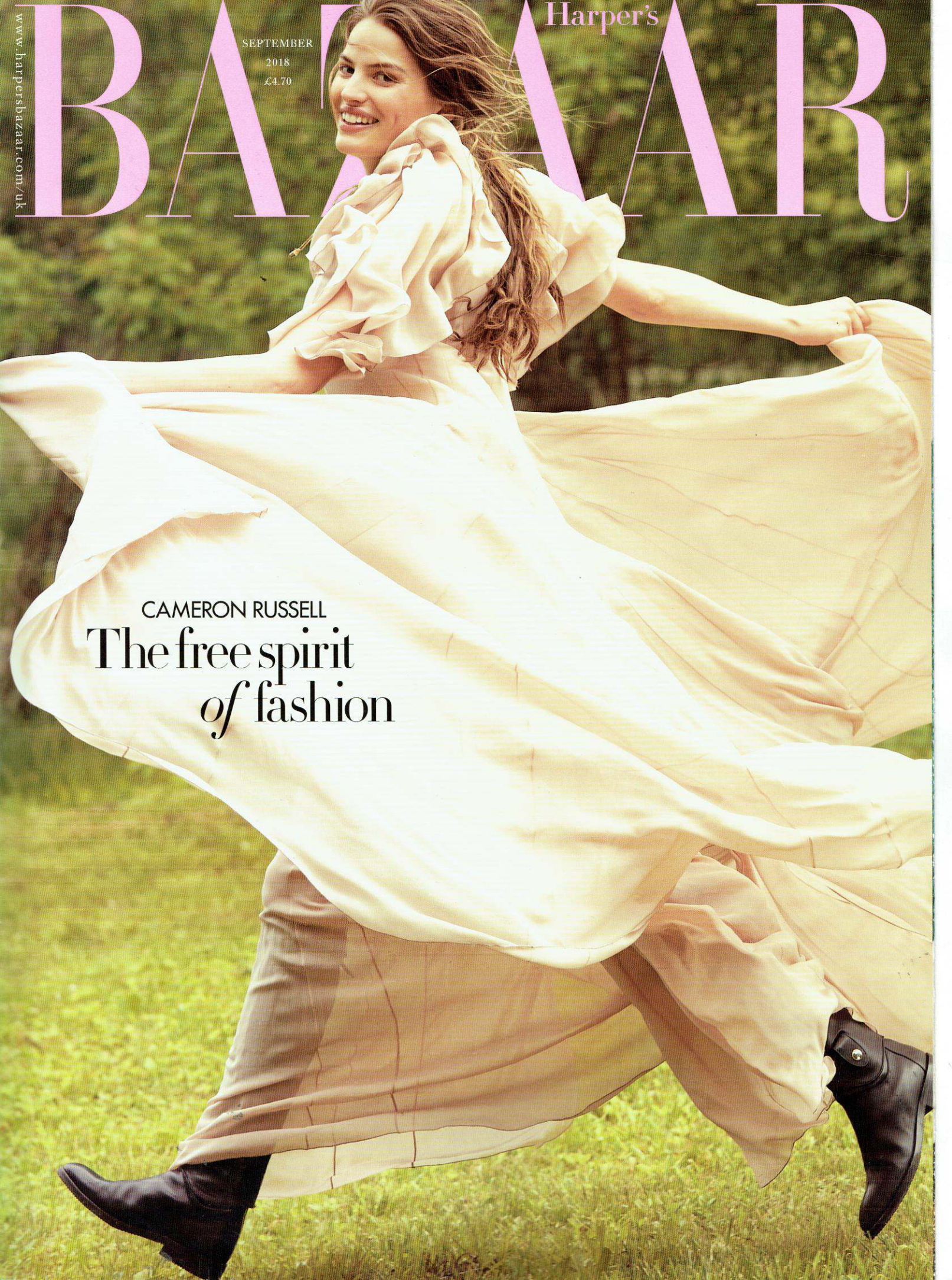


# Bazaar

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# BAZAAR

ESCAPE

Edited by LUCY HALFHEAD

## SEA CHANGE

Alex Preston voyages to Indonesia's hidden idylls.  
Plus: Europe's most romantic rooms with a view;  
and the best of Bordeaux

*Lombok, seen from  
the Gili Islands*

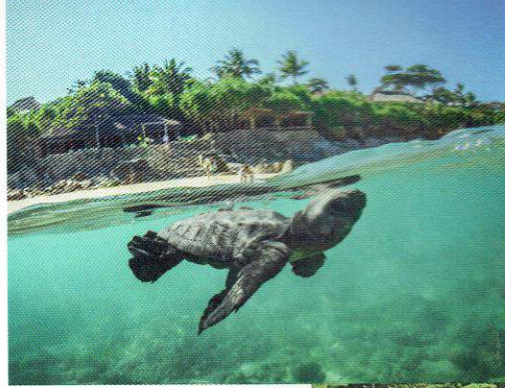


# THE SHAPE OF WATER

Away from the crowds of Bali, Indonesia's thousands of islands  
still offer the chance to discover paradise

By ALEX PRESTON

*Right: a turtle release at the Nihi Sumba hotel. Below right and bottom: Four Seasons Bali at Sayan. Opposite: Nihi Sumba*

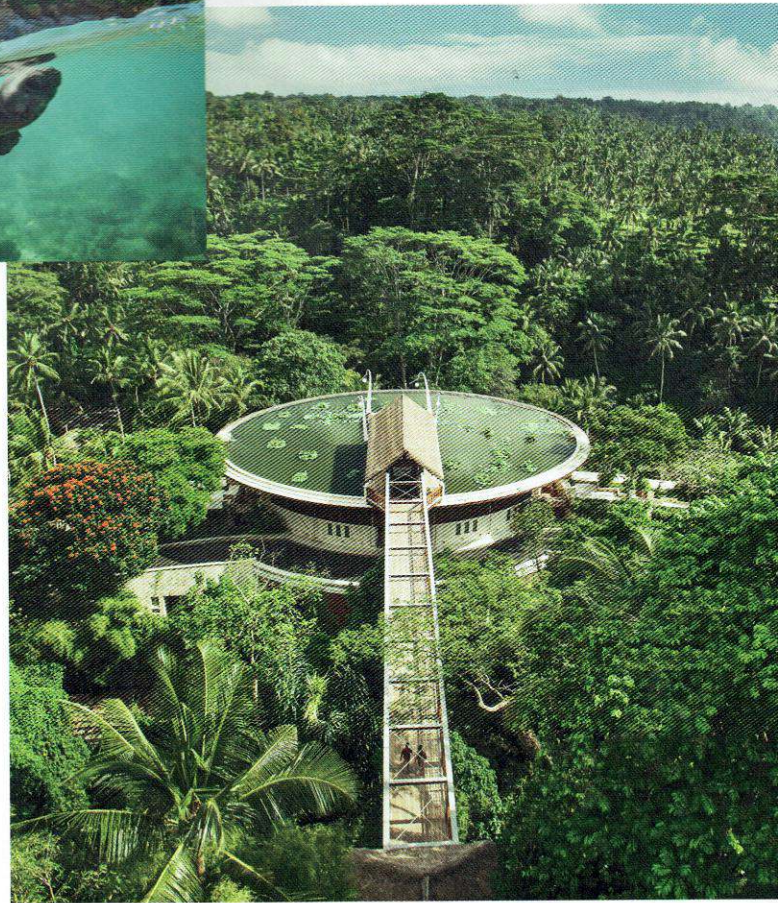


There's a rolling debate about exactly how many islands there are in Indonesia. Frequent seismic activity and the country's position between two vast, abrasive oceans means that the number veers from 16,000 to 18,500. Even at the lower end of the estimate, you could island-hop, one island a day, and it would take you the better part of a lifetime to cover the length of the archipelago. It's astonishing, then, that the majority of tourists never make it off Bali.

Bali has long been the hub in the wheel of Indonesia's tourism industry. Its art, dance and waves attracted first the Australians, then visitors from across the world, to its landscape of verdant hills leading down to white-sand beaches, ancient Hindu temples and elegant Dutch colonial architecture. Today, though, much of the island has been infected by the same scourge that has ruined Thailand's Koh Samui – rampant development, short-sighted planning and the remorseless pursuit of the tourist dollar.

We set off to find another side of Indonesia, one that hadn't been scrubbed of its ipseity by the homogenising trudge of tourism. There are two different types of traveller – those who leave home looking for simulacra of the world they left behind; and those who travel in pursuit of the endlessly deferred authentic moment, the sublime realisation of the unadulterated other. We were after the latter – in a country that, due to its sanguinary history and extraordinary topography, is nigh-on impossible to pin down. Like other immense, diverse and mutable states, Indonesia gives the lie to the very idea of trying to shape the Earth by national borders.

Inevitably, our journey started in the bustle of Bali's Denpasar airport, from which we jumped into an SUV and headed up into the island's mountainous interior. The Four Seasons at Sayan is an architectural wonder, its lily-pond roof rendering it practically invisible among the billowing jungle treetops. It offers a vision of what Bali must have been like before the tourist boom of the 1980s – terraces of rice paddies stepping down to a rushing river; wooden villas set amid vibrant heliconia and vegetable gardens planted with galangal, lemon grass, ginseng and turmeric; and kingfishers flashing bright wings from branches that overhang the river's white waters. As evening fell, the vivid colours of the day knitted themselves into a



bright tapestry of sound. We spent that first night in Indonesia listening to the roil of the rapids, the buzz of cicadas, the echoing calls of owls and frogs. In the small hours there was a storm and we woke to find everything freshened and luminous.

After a few heavenly days in Sayan, where we enjoyed the glorious spa, some intricate and delicate Balinese dancing, and a rijsttafel dinner during which we were brought countless courses of the most exquisite food, we returned to the airport. Our first destination was Tambolaka on Sumba, one of the southernmost islands of the archipelago, an unvariegated expanse of forested hills. We were on our way to Nihi Sumba, a multiple-prize-winning hotel on the island's southern coast. To get there, we boarded rugged-looking rally trucks with tarpaulins stretched over their roofs. Sumba is one of the least-developed islands in Indonesia, and the roads segued from tarmac to dirt tracks to stretches of bone-shaking rock.

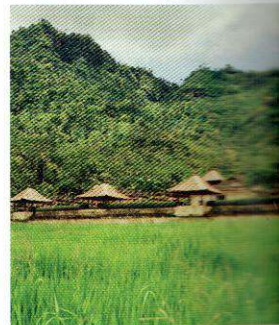
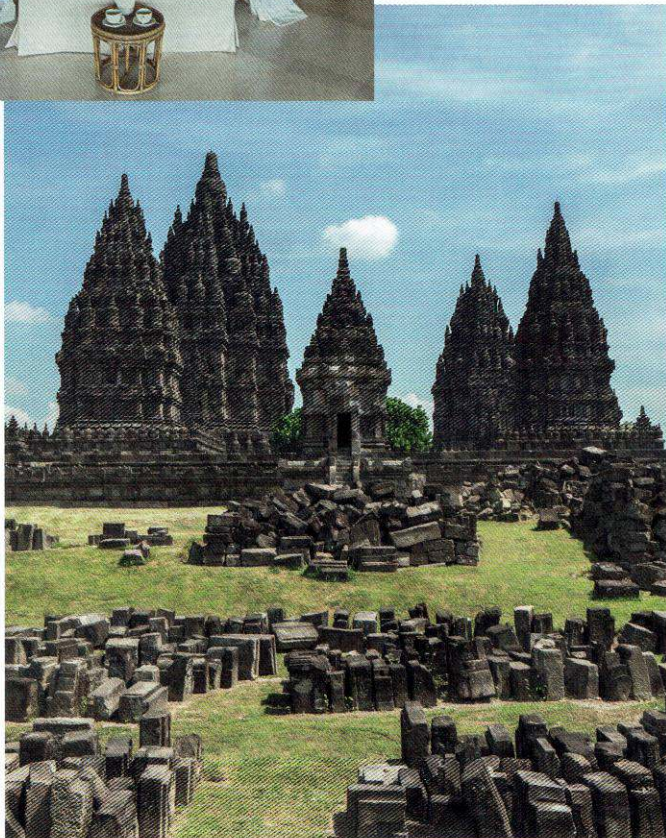
Sumba is a Christian island – a relic of Dutch imperialism – but local idiosyncrasies persist. Houses are built with metal menara roofs that look like stovepipe hats; it's thought that the souls of ancestors dwell in their smoky hollows. The bodies of the dead live elsewhere – in the sometimes lavish mausolea that sit in the gardens of the more well-appointed homes.

We drove for two hours, squally showers blowing in every so often, the people coming out to watch us as we passed. As if knowing that we were approaching, the clouds cleared when we began the descent to Nihi Sumba. The resort was founded in 1988 by Claude Graves and his wife Petra, who recognised the extraordinary potential of the long curving beach and the waves that build over the great stretch of Indian Ocean that lies between the island and the Australian coast 500 miles to the south. While we descended, shafts of sunlight picked out the immaculate beach, the sparkling sea, the white-crested breakers. Since the hoteliers Christopher Burch and





*Above and left: Nihi Sumba. Below: temples at Prambanan, near Yogyakarta on Java. Below right: Amanjivo*



James McBride took over Nihi in 2012, it has managed to succeed where so many hotels on Bali have failed, moving upmarket without losing the magic that first attracted people here.

We spent four days at Nihi but would have happily left our lives behind and stayed there for ever. It's almost painful now to think back on the beauty of the place, watching fiery sunsets from our villa with the wind gently rustling in the palm-frond roof, our feet trailing in the plunge pool, birds of paradise and hornbills picking their way homewards through the treetops. Or surfing out on the long breaks, water so clear beneath that we could look down through the waves we were riding to see iridescent fish and convolutions of coral. You're given your own major domo when you arrive at the resort and ours, Simson, was a gem of a man, on hand to bring iced coconuts when we were hot, delicious snacks when we were hungry, or to lead us through rice fields to Nihi's spa at Nihi Oka, a neighbouring bay, to receive massages in a setting that felt like a treatment in itself.

Nihi taught us that running a hotel is an art form, and one that requires every bit as much creative flair as more traditional disciplines. Every step we took felt like it had been carefully thought through, so that our days were lived in a constant flow of sensory stimulation, from the baby turtles that crawled on our palms to the crashing of the waves that roared through our dreams to the untrammelled joy of riding the hotel's horses along the tide-line. The owners have also continued to support the Sumba Foundation, a charitable organisation that the Graveses set up in 2001 that has helped half a million people across an area of 176 square kilometres. We were taken on a tour of some of its operations and helped to serve lunch to a group

of schoolchildren, beaming and boisterous in their shaded playground. This is a see-it-before-you-die, once-in-a-lifetime hotel. The best in the world? By a country mile.

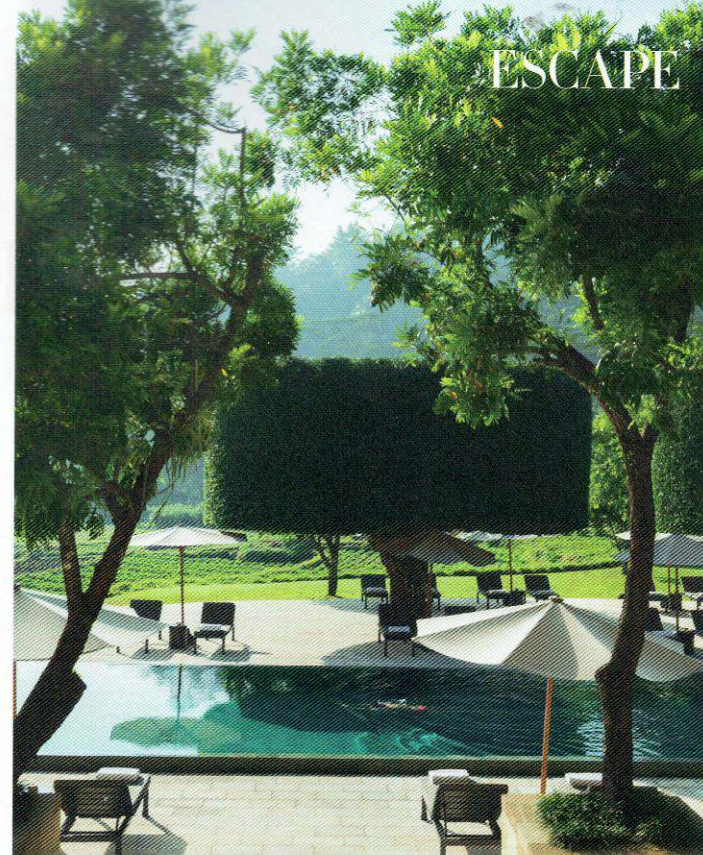
Hotel Tugu on Lombok could have been a let-down after the revelation of Nihi Sumba; in many ways it was the perfect accompaniment. Incredibly relaxed, unpretentious and overlooking gin-clear waters in one direction, the smouldering peak of Mount Rinjani in another, it is the kind of place that makes you feel that you've been coming here for years, and that it is your little secret. It too makes apparent the creativity at the heart of running a hotel, this time by adorning the place with a gallery of sculptures and *objets d'art*.

Tugu sits in a bay at the north-west of Lombok, looking out towards the Gili Islands and Bali in the far distance. The hotel is so beautiful that part of you never wants to leave, and our first day we lolled by the pool, ate the sumptuous food and then, as dusk was falling, kayaked out into the bay to watch the sun set, the mountains turning first blue, then purple, as evening fell. The next day, we took a dragon boat out to the Gilis and spent the day diving with turtles and parrot-fish, watching octopi jet themselves out of holes in the coral, schools of angel fish moving in bright jags. We made our way slowly home at the end of the day, mooring up for a last swim as the call to prayer drifted over the tranquil, turquoise water towards us.

Our final stop was Java, the most densely populated island on Earth and home to double the population of Britain in an area only just over half its size. We landed at Yogyakarta, the cultural capital of the island, a smart and sophisticated-feeling city, and headed off through endless suburbs, finally striking out north-east into the central highlands, past rice fields and tobacco plantations, banyan-trees and ancient temples.

The place we'd come to see, though, was Borobudur. Built in the ninth century, it is the world's largest Buddhist temple and it is to the credit of generations of otherwise more or less ghastly Indonesian governments that the site has been kept in such immaculate condition. It looks almost Mayan, rising in nine stepped terraces to a

The sun came up  
like thunder, wave  
after wave of  
intense colour,  
painting swathes  
across the horizon



central dome. We stayed at Amanjiwo, a hotel built around a framed view of the temple, and were woken to watch the dawn rise from the top of Borobudur. The sun came up like thunder, wave after wave of intense colour, painting swathes across the volcano-studded horizon; another experience never to forget. We spent the rest of the day by Amanjiwo's pool in a daze. To witness such magnificence does strange, deep things to the soul and we all felt it, the change wrought by the sublime.

On the way home, we spent the night in the high and opulent tower of the Singapore Ritz-Carlton. From our lofty bath, we could look out through a porthole window, over ships queuing up in the Strait, to our beloved Indonesia, winking merrily in the distance. It felt like a good way to say farewell to this jewelled necklace of islands that we will always return to but never fully explore, and which lives on in our minds as a place of extraordinary, life-altering beauty. □

*Black Tomato* (020 7426 9888; [www.blacktomato.com](http://www.blacktomato.com)) can arrange a 12-night family trip to Indonesia, from £4,750 a person (based on four people travelling), including stays at the *Four Seasons Bali at Sayan*, *Nihi Sumba*, *Hotel Tugu Lombok* and *Amanjiwo*, private tours and transfers, and return flights from London to Singapore with *British Airways*.

Above:  
Amanjiwo. Left:  
Hotel Tugu on  
Lombok. Below:  
Borobudur

