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Tribal revival: Sumba offers sun, sand and soul

At the philanthropic Nihiwatu resort in Sumba, visitors can sample surf and sustainability, writes Holly McDonald



TOWERING LIMESTONE OUTCROPS OVERLOOK THE RESORT. PHOTOS: DJUNA IVEREIGH

"THAT WAS HEAVY, MAN."

A minute ago we were crossing the swirling eddies of Sumba's Wanukaka river, slinking past hushed villages and the occasional child on a horse. Now I've slammed into a tangle of tree roots and fallen off my paddle board.

Christian Sea, our guide from the nearby Nihiwatu resort, eases my board into the current as I scramble back on. I wonder what I've got myself into. I'm not the adventurous type. We're cruising eight kilometres to a beach, but the start has fast-running patches and sharp corners.

As the adrenaline eases, the river turns sedate and the scenery - coconut and banana palms, papaya trees, emerald rice and traditional Sumba rooflines - enchants our group of seven. Women with betel-stained teeth do their washing, men nod and splashing children hitch rides on the back of our boards. What don't we hear? Traffic. This is Sumba, a remote island in eastern Indonesia, three times the size of Bali, but with just 650,000 people, in all its raw glory.

We pull over to a grassy spot to stop for fresh coconuts at a local house. A muscled man stirs a pot of bubbling coconut oil, steam rising and blackening the roof above. Another shimmies up a palm and hurls down a coconut for each of us, shucking them open with machetes. A family gathers to chat with Christian.

"This family is wealthy by Sumba standards," Christian says. "They have water, they're next to a paddy, there's a pig pen, and they have coconut palms."

Even by standards in developing Indonesia, the Sumbanese live hard lives. The people are one of the last surviving "megalith" cultures in the world. They practise their own blend of Christianity and Marapu, the indigenous religion; massive stone tombs feature in villages where pictures of Jesus and Mary are stuck to the bamboo walls of homes, next to buffalo horns and pig jaws.

"The odds are stacked against them," says Claude Graves, who arrived on Nihiwatu beach in 1988 with his then-wife Petra. The couple founded a resort of the same name and the Sumba Foundation, which has transformed the lives of many in west Sumba by, for instance, providing clean water, reducing malaria and feeding children. The foundation is supported by many Nihiwatu guests, directly and indirectly.

"It's harsh, living without water," says Graves. "It's harsh not being able to farm, and not being able to eat right, and not being educated well enough to even know what good food is about for your kids."

When Graves arrived, he says the main hardship people faced was collecting water. "You'd see the women and the children hiking for miles in October, when it's super dry. The first spring closest to the village would dry out, so they'd go to the next one. And they could be doing a four-mile round trip, with a bucket of water."

While about 310 square kilometres around the resort has now seen massive change, the rest of Sumba remains much like this, Graves says. Yet it costs only about US\$2,000 to build a well for a village of 100 people. The foundation will also help with mosquito nets, and schools. "It'll change their lives," says straight-talking Graves.

The toddlers are devouring plates of green bean porridge. Rainy Octora, who works for the foundation, calls out the names of the 28 children being weighed here today; some have walked several kilometres for the privilege. These kids, aged six months to five years old, have just started a six-month nutrition programme.

"Sometimes they are two years old and weigh seven kilograms - they should weigh 15 or 16," Octora says. Within a month or two of giving the children seven eggs, powdered milk, and a bowl of porridge once a week, the improvements are dramatic. The families are also given seeds to grow high-protein beans; if they grow more than they can eat, they sell them back to the foundation.

"Lots of the children have never drunk powdered milk ... they only have cassava, corn, or sometimes rice," says Octora. "They have carbohydrates only." Chicken or fish, even eggs, get sold at market.

Octora is Sumbanese; she trained in Jakarta for most of a medical degree, returned home, and applied to work at Nihiwatu. Graves interviewed her five years ago and said she'd be better placed helping out at the foundation. Does she want to finish her medical degree? "I'm happy with this. I have two kids now."

"There is no other example in the world that can more define experiential tourism," says Nihiwatu resort general manager George Vlachopoulos. "It's not about the tangibles and the facilities that the hotel offers. It's about the journey you go through from arrival to departure, and the things you've seen in between, the relationships you've made with guests."

The tangibles, it should be said, are luxurious. My suite has its own plunge pool, overlooked by a rocking chair and daybed. The look is tribal but modern, with semi-outdoor bathrooms, oversized wooden furniture and built-in wardrobes. One might feel guilty staying at such a resort, but at least guests are made to feel part of the community here, and are encouraged to visit the foundation projects to see the efforts being made.

I do yoga in the morning with Ka'alemalu Sea, Christian's wife. I venture out for deep-sea fishing - we don't catch anything, but we see dolphins, jumping Spanish mackerel, and wild, rugged coastline. I help release some 20-minute-old turtles into the Indian Ocean. I visit the village of Wegali, where houses are arranged around graves hundreds of years old. I trek to a 98-metre high waterfall along rickety bamboo bridges. Evenings are spent dining watching the play of light on the horizon at sunset.

On my last morning, I have my first surf lesson. Nihiwatu is a world-class left-hand reef break, spectacular for advanced surfers when there's a swell on, but also great to learn on, says Christian, a Hawaiian.

The waves are ideal. We're looking out at ocean that continues all the way down to Antarctica, while the currents moving past us hit no land as they move around the globe. We feel like we're on the edge of the earth.

And then we're paddling out, fast discovering muscles we never knew we had.

"Perfect, perfect! You won't find waves better to learn on anywhere else in the world," Christian says, as we wait for a ride.

Then suddenly I'm on my feet, soaring into shore. Then I'm tumbling, rolling, scrambling for breath. I pop out of the surf and I know there's nowhere I'd rather be.

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Getting there

Cathay Pacific and Garuda Indonesia have daily flights to Bali and Hong Kong Airlines fly twice a day to Bali, starting from US\$500 return. Charter flights to Nihiwatu run every Thursday, starting from US\$490 return. You will need to overnight in Bali to make connecting flights (Holly stayed at Ayana Resort and Spa, Bali). Lightfoot Travel have an exclusive offer of complimentary return flights from Bali to Sumba on both commercial and charter flights for holidays booked before the end of August. lightfoottravel.com

Where to stay

Ayana Resort and Spa, Bali: Resort room starts at US\$299 and Cliff Villas start at US\$1,130. ayanaresort.com

Nihiwatu, Sumba Island: Rates start at US\$595 per person for room, food, non-premium alcohol and most activities. nihiwatu.com