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PARADISE FOUND

*Travel a path rarely trodden around Sumba Island,
a real-life Nirvana in Indonesia*

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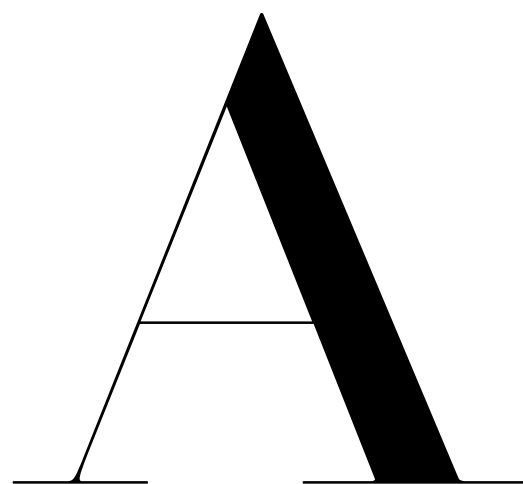
Rice paddies
overlook the
island's lush
ocean views

Right: Sunset from the pool at Puncak villas
Bottom: Inside the serene bedroom of the new Mamole Tree House hotel



CULTURAL CURIOSITY

The Sumbanese thatched roofs form straw-umbrella-topped villages dotted around the countryside. Most front yards feature megalithic sculptured stone tombs, as each family encases their loved ones close by after they pass away, rather than burying them. Some of these stones are carved and decorated with local folklore to engage the spirits.



little over fifty years ago Sumba was the land of humble warriors, where the blood that was shed during yearly Pasolas and the sacrifices made to honour ancestors seeped into the ground to incite a better harvest. On this indigenous island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, on the southern stretch of Indonesia, these age-old rituals remain, passing the passage of time due to its remote location.

Sumba is one of the poorer islands of the Indonesian archipelago, in the Lesser Sunda Islands and in the province of East Nusa Tenggara. Set on dry land far away from neighbouring volcanic shores, Sumba breathes a unique rawness, which modern-day travellers do not easily come across anymore. The countryside is little more than patches of green and brown rugged terrain, where long white paths weave through the fields up and down the rough and rocky peaks. Small clouds of smoke rise out of the rolling hills, like the puffs of mist hanging around in the forest below. The land is full of smiles; from young children waving on the side of the streets to old women carrying bunches of sticks on their heads, curling up their red-stained lips coloured from the many beetle nuts they chew every day. As you drive past, these “Sumba lips” radiate a warm welcome, which makes Sumba one of those places you wish would never change.

NIRVANA OF NIHIWATU

Nihiwatu is the only resort on the island and retains unique appeal to travellers worldwide. It is here in Nihiwatu where close friends Chris Birch, an American brand-building entrepreneur, and James McBride, a South-African-born hotelier in charge of YTL Hotels in Singapore, came in search of a truly unique nirvana, in the shape of their own island retreat on the edge of wilderness.

Nihiwatu, or Nihi for short, is home to some of the world’s best left-hand surfing waves. With bookings restricted to only ten surfers at any one time, such limited access to these ►

Mamole Tree House is a whimsical three-bedroom complex, elevated on wooden stilts between Nihiwatu’s ancient trees



FUN IS A SHORE THING
 While Nihiwatu is famous for its "God's Left" wave, coveted by surfers, it boasts many different waves for both beginners and pros. Let staff know you are a surfer as the resort hosts a maximum of ten a day. For a serene morning, drive or gallop through the countryside to Nihi Oka Safari Spa, set on the beautiful shores of Sumba. There are plans to extend the Safari Spa, with larger facilities and more beauty treatments and massages available.



Above: Movie night at Nio beach club; The villas at Pancak, Nihiwatu

"SUMBA BREATHES A RAWNESS WHICH MODERN-DAY TRAVELLERS DO NOT COME ACROSS ANYMORE"

majestic waves means Sumba has maintained a rare cult-status amongst surfers. On these shores the waves meet the coral reef and shallow waters of the island's pristine beaches, and makes Nihiwatu the beautiful gem it is today.

Serving up the original organic "farm to the table" concept, vegetable plots have been added along the resort's curvy roads, filled to the brim with mango and papaya trees, kiwi bushes, eggplants, chillies, lettuce and cauliflowers. On the edge of the resort, tucked away in the hilltop forest, the chicken farm supplies Nihiwatu's kitchen with eggs for a delicious selection of breakfast options, and satisfies the hungriest of early morning surfers after riding that left-hand wave. The juices are healthy and fresh, and come with a sidekick of energy. The Balinese coffee is strong yet soothing, and a perfect way to start the day.

INDIGENOUS DESIGN

The resort has 21 individually designed villas, all named after Sumbanese jewellery: Lama, Marranga and Puncak to mention a few. Some of the villas can be booked as a small family compound for larger groups of visitors. The newly opened Tree House, or Mamole, is just as stunning as it is unique – as if Peter Pan has flown past with Tinkerbell sprinkling magic fairy dust. Curved around one of Nihi's oldest trees, the circular rooms upstairs are connected by a hanging bridge. Private infinity pools on each side of the secluded villas make a stay here perfect for honeymooners.

My villa was the spectacular Mendaka 1. Raja Mendaka is Chris Burch's estate, in a prime position offering the best views over the resort, of breathtaking sunrises and the famous Nihiwatu coastline. The villa's entry appears unassuming as I step through a swinging wooden gate, but it's a vast surprise once inside – the 100-square-metre villa spans two floors,

housing Indonesian artefacts, locally crafted woodworks and Sumbanese Ikats, which have become iconic textiles worldwide due to their beautiful designs woven into the dyed fabrics. Every significant space of the villa displays standout prints and pops of colour. Bright tangerine and sunny yellows are splashed across vibrant sofas in the living room and the cushion covers that decorate the hand-carved four-poster bed, which is centre stage in the intimate bedroom upstairs. A golden oval bath stands in the corner of the expansive balcony, so you can soak up the best views of the mesmerising sunset over the Indian Ocean.

The roof of the Mandaka villa is the distinct high-peaked alang-alang grass thatched roof, seen peeping throughout the Sumbanese landscape. It pitches high into the sky as the Sumbanese believe that the spirits of ancestors, Marapu, reside in the peak, on top of a sloping wider rim. At the highest point of the roof, the four-poster structure is divided right and left. The front right-side has a masculine balance and is reserved for



Freshly grilled catch-of-the-day with cous-cous and locally grown vegetables



communication with the spirits; a spear in the top beam indicates the spirits have answered the owner's life questions. The left side is feminine and stays "unharmd". Two wooden statues, a male and female, pay direct homage to these beliefs on top of the roof, facing each other to protect and behold – an important aspect in Sumbanese culture.

DISCOVER THE UNDISCOVERED

Start your morning early in search of the beautiful Blue Waterfall spring, a finding that's only five years old, or canter horses through the lush rice paddy fields. Head to one of the local schools the Sumba Foundation supports, and give the kids a healthy school dinner – a truly rewarding moment while on holiday. Even with all these exciting days packed with back-to-back exploring, I made sure I squeezed in an indulgent afternoon dip in my private Mandaka plunge pool, served with the best views I could ask for.

In the evenings I dined on Asian dishes infused with a Western twist, plus creative choices highlighting the catch of the day: Savoury lobster bisque with squid and shellfish, and chicken with honey and jasmine rice were plates I wish I could order again. The wine list was a well-edited selection of deep reds, light whites and Chris Burch's favourite rosé, locally brewed beers and exuberant cocktails. These accompanied the shared snacks and delicious mains, with the sound of the waves in the background making paradise fall into place. Evenings such as these, where the enchantment of the company, great stories, divine food and refreshments, would make any visitor want to extend their stay ... forever.

With its signature landscape looming in the background, Nihiwatu is so much more than a sustainable luxury island retreat, it is a place of warmth and homage to the Sumbanese people and its culture – a rare, honest and fine-tuned luxury resort with a clear conscience. ■

Clockwise from top: Surfing the island's famous left-hand wave; Traditional Pasola games; A seaturtle swims by; Divers explore the island's vibrant coral reefs