

# THE ISLAND TIME FORGOT

Four hundred kilometres east of Bali lies Sumba, a place where animal sacrifice and animist rituals are part of everyday life. Here, Cathy Wagstaff checks in to Nihi Sumba, renowned as one of the world's best hotels 'on the edge of wildness'.

**N**ihiwatu stretches along the southern coast of West Sumba, a white-sand arc of 2.5 kilometres. This beach is home to a sacred stone where animist priests, known as *rato*, divine the success of the harvest, and *ikat*-wearing farmers watch over docile buffalo. It's a place of simplicity, where sturdy Sumba ponies cavort in the waves as a tangerine sunset stains the sky.

It's easy to see what first lured Claude and Petra Graves to this idyllic corner of Sumba – an Indonesian island twice the size of Bali, but with not even a quarter of its population – back in 1988. The landscape of rice paddies, savannahs and low hills (once covered in the island's main historical export of sandalwood) has a rare, untouched and rugged beauty, while the Sumbanese culture is proud,

marital and largely unchanged by the passing centuries. The biggest drawcard for the Graves, however, was the break just offshore from Nihiwatu, named 'Occy's Left' in honour of Australian champion surfer Mark Occhilupo.

The humble surf retreat they created is but an echo of the resort that lies above the beach today. Bought by Christopher Burch, along with his managing partner

and hotelier James McBride, in 2012, and rechristened Nihi Sumba in 2017, the resort now stands at the pinnacle of sustainable luxury. As if to prove its success, it has twice been voted the Best Hotel in the World (2016 and 2017) by the readers of *Travel + Leisure*.

At first glance, Nihi Sumba has all the hallmarks of an exquisite – and exclusive – beach retreat. Its 27 residences containing 38 villas all offer sea views and private pools; a selection of restaurants make the most of local produce; there's an extraordinary spa located in the next valley; and staff, of which 93 per cent are local, bend over backwards to fulfil your every desire. But I quickly realise that as fabulous as the 'resort' aspect of the resort is, it isn't what makes Nihi Sumba special.

## Scenes of island life

This thought dawns on me as we follow a path through the lush jungle and across

narrow banks separating rice paddies and crisp fields. The Nihi Oka Spa Safari begins at 7.30am with this trek across the valley. It should take about 90 minutes, but we prefer to take our time, enjoying encounters with grazing horses, women carrying water on their heads for their village, and families doing their laundry in the river, the children taking a welcome dip to cool down. We hear kids crying out in the distance and see men with deeply lined faces and menacing swords at their hips. These are the sorts of experiences that have made Nihi Sumba so vociferously and widely acclaimed, and make guests feel as if we are the lucky ones for the Sumbanese to share their world with us.

When the Graves were choosing where to settle, they were looking for an opportunity to contribute to an Indonesian community in need. Consequently, the non-profit Sumba Foundation has been a part of the Nihi story since the beginning,

working on projects for clean water, education and health, particularly malaria, all on one of Indonesia's poorest islands. Claude is still managing director of the foundation, which derives much of its funding from Burch, McBride and Nihi's guests. Through their efforts, The Sumba Foundation has contributed to more than 70 humanitarian projects, and has seen malaria rates on the island drop by 70 per cent. Guests can even go to a school to serve the daily lunch provided by Nihi. In return, the smiles of the Sumbanese people warm our hearts and compel us to treasure their home and culture.

When we eventually arrive for breakfast at the spa, hemmed in on three sides by the jungle, waves crashing onto rocks below, we have to pinch ourselves. This is certainly one of the most beautiful spots on the planet. As if the setting wasn't enough, I choose six treatments from the blackboard and commence a full day of



indulgence. Massages, reflexology and natural mud facials blend together in a haze of relaxation that is only interrupted by lunch, served in the *bale* (spa pavilion) on a tray laden with suitably wholesome dishes: fish in banana leaves, grilled pumpkin, quinoa and kombucha. Throughout the afternoon, I drift in and out of sleep, massaged into oblivion.

### The cowboys of Indonesia

When we arrive back at the resort, a celebration seems to be taking place down at the water's edge. Boys clinging to beautifully decorated horses parade along the beach. A race is about to begin. Guests are eagerly placing generous bets – today, all funds go towards replacing a village water tank that was damaged in a recent storm – as the young bareback jockeys line up against the sunset. Champagne glasses clink, and then they're off, sand flying while onlookers cheer.

These races take place regularly, but the island's cultural highlight is *pasola*. This spear-throwing ritual warfare on horseback is held in early February to usher in a fruitful harvest, signified (historically) by the amount of bloodletting on the field. More recently, however, the tips of spears have been removed, and police are present to ensure spectators aren't caught up in the mêlée. It's still enough to make you remember that the Sumbanese clans were feared headhunters into the 20th century.

Fortunately, the people are far friendlier today, and they're delightfully curious about visitors. While visiting Kabukarudi market in the Lamboya area, we generate quite a gathering with our cameras.

Each person I photograph is delighted and giggles with embarrassment to see their photo on my tiny screen, while our arrival at Welowa Elementary School later that day is announced by a mass exodus from the classroom, our Jeep swamped by excited, screaming children. The sight is heartwarming.

Catering to no more than 80 guests at a time makes such enriching close encounters possible. We visit Pakata, a village of 13 houses built in the island's vernacular style with steep-pitched conical roofs – said to allow the Marapu, the ancestral spirits, to enter – and, on an 'island' in the midst of a sea of rice paddies, we nibble at a picnic lunch, sprawled on a huge daybed.

### On the edge of wildness

Nihi Sumba encourages us to get lost in its 270 hectares of jungle, coconut groves and rice terraces, but there is nothing quite like returning to my Marangga residence to watch the sun set from my private cliff-side *bale* above the Indian Ocean.



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01 Stunning sunsets on the beach of Nihiwatu © Alexandre Ribeiro 02 *Pasola* is Sumba's cultural highlight © Djuna Ivereigh 03 Villa interiors are breezy and beautiful 04 Buffalo roam the beach 05 Villas have fabulous views of the sea 06 Each residence has a private pool. Images 03-04 © Tania Araujo. Images 05-06 © Read McKendree

Like the villagers' homes, the villa's thatched roof is pitched and rustic, although the interiors are rather more sumptuous. White curtains cascade over my bed, and a circular black-stone bathtub has pride of place in the generous ensuite. Outside, a large daybed perches at the end of the pool, and a path meanders down towards the water.

Most other residences are set back from the coast, nestled into the hills. The Mamole Tree House seems to be designed for the young and young-at-heart, with three villas built around the trunk of a grand old tree. Raja Mendaka is the owner's residence above the central Boat House, a five-bedroom estate dotted with pools, outdoor bathrooms and exquisite spaces for entertaining family and friends.

The dining options are never the same, moving from breakfast in the sand-floored main restaurant, Ombak, to lunch beside the lap pool at Nio Beach Club, to sampling the wares of Chris & Charly's Chocolate Factory. Sunset drinks are at the Boat House, followed by an *omakase*-style dinner at the six-seat beachfront sushi bar, Kaboku. Our Guest Kapten is adept at arranging delicious picnic lunches to accompany us on our adventures, and even sets up private dining moments on the sand under a canopy of scarlet hibiscus. Nihi Sumba also creates beautiful themed dinner parties for guests, where we gather and mingle under the stars.

As the sun sets on our final day, we make our way down to the Sandalwood Stables and mount up for one last frolic in the waters of Nihiwatu. Our ponies seem delighted to trot through the shallows, not noticing that the humans on their backs have become rather pensive.

I'm sad to leave this place that has shared so much of its soul with me, and I can't help the apprehension that comes from seeing a new resort rising in nearby Wanukaka. Sumba won't remain undiscovered for long. My advice is to go now, while buffalo still amble along the postcard-perfect beach and horses swim in the swell. Go now, while Nihi Sumba is still 'on the edge of wildness'. ♦

### Travel file

**Accommodation**  
nihi.com

#### Getting there

There are two 50-minute flights a day from Bali's Ngurah Rai International Airport to Sumba's Tambolaka Airport operated by NAM Air, a subsidiary of Garuda Indonesia, or Wings Air. Nihi Sumba arranges transfers for the 1.5-hour drive from Tambolaka. [traveloka.com](http://traveloka.com)

#### When to go

Surfers visit from August through October for the best waves. Maximum numbers apply on popular breaks such as 'Occy's Left'.