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TRAVEL

# A Wave on the Wild Side

Once the preserve of savvy surfers, Nihiwatu on the remote Indonesian island of Sumba has evolved into a ruggedly luxurious destination for the global jetset. PAUL KAY discovers there's a lot more to the resort than a world-class wave



**BEACH PARADISE** Clockwise from left: A table set for lunch on picturesque Nihiwatu beach; intriguing underwater wildlife; snorkelling is just one of the many watersports available

**T**HERE'S NOTHING in the world quite like catching a wave at Nihiwatu. The rush of adrenalin as you rise on your surfboard with the wind whistling in your ears, the euphoria as you ride the famous left-hand break with several tonnes of Indian Ocean water crashing down behind you, all against a backdrop of one of the planet's most beautiful—and exclusive—stretches of coastline; it's simply sublime.

Or so I'm told by the real surfers at the bar back on land as I recount the string of awkward wipeouts and dumpings that was my surf lesson: Waves 6, Paul 0. You were almost there; you'll get it next time, they counsel as I nod doubtfully. But fortunately for neophytes like me, Nihiwatu's attractions stretch far beyond its legendary break.

For more than a decade, Nihiwatu has possessed a near mythical status among

surfers. Partly it's the history of the place—a small and remote resort on the undeveloped Indonesian island of Sumba carved out against the odds by US surfing maverick Claude Graves and his wife Petra in the late 1980s and '90s. Its cult status also has a lot to do with its exclusiveness—access to the world's only private wave, and a cap of just 10 surfers in the water at any time. But mainly it's about the wave itself—an extraordinarily consistent, world-class break nicknamed “God's Left” that is spoken about in hallowed tones by all who come to pay homage at its crashing altar.

Outside of the surf community, however, the buzz about Nihiwatu has been building faster than an inbound swell since it was acquired by US billionaire Christopher Burch in 2013. Since then, the former husband of fashion designer Tory Burch and co-founder of her eponymous label has spent US\$30 million redeveloping Nihiwatu into a world-class resort that caters to non-surfers every



**CATCH OF THE DAY** Fresh seafood prepared by former Amanresorts chef Bernard Prim

haired South African, McBride has had a long and illustrious career in the hotel business, including a stint as managing director of New York's famed The Carlyle, where he would personally ensure guests

bit as much as those who come to ride the waves. Featuring nine new villas, extensive renovation of the existing 12 villas and a host of new and improved facilities, Nihiwatu Mark II opened its doors in March last year and has already welcomed the Rockefeller and Hermès families among a slew of other A-listers and well-heeled surfers.

What hasn't changed is the setting, a glorious sweep of beach backed by greenery so lush it seems painted on. On first sight, as we arrive from the airport in one of the resort's all-terrain vehicles, it's easy to imagine how its founders must have felt when they first set eyes on the then-inaccessible and untouched coast, and perhaps even why they endured more than a decade of trials and tribulations—from local clan wars and animal sacrifices to earthquakes and financial meltdowns—to bring Nihiwatu to fruition.

But while the resort might owe its existence to the Graves, its present incarnation is very much down to the vision of managing partner James McBride. A silver-

such as Roger Federer, Morgan Freeman and Paul McCartney were well taken care of.

In Nihiwatu, McBride seems to have found his Xanadu and his enthusiasm is infectious. He is animated enough when he shows us what they have built so far—in addition to the villas, there is the Ombak restaurant, the sun-kissed Nio Beach Club and a spacious family area replete with games and activities—but McBride really lights up when he starts explaining what's in store. By April Nihiwatu will add 11 more villas, including an 80,000sqft five-bedroom resort within a resort. Also under construction are a hilltop yoga pavilion with breathtaking 270° views of the coastline and a tree-house jungle spa.

Despite this expansion, Nihiwatu's impact on the environment is minimal. Only a little more than 10 per cent of its 230 hectares can or will be developed. Indeed, its impact on the environment and the local community is something that Nihiwatu takes very seriously. That there are numerous ecologically responsible initiatives underpinning the



## GETTING THERE

To travel to Nihiwatu from Hong Kong, it's necessary to stop for a night on Bali. While hotel options on the island are myriad, Alila Villas Uluwatu is an excellent choice for its relative proximity to the airport (flights to Sumba leave around 10am), not to mention its dramatic cliff-top location and striking design. Those with a passion for sustainable tourism will also be glad to know that, like Nihiwatu, Alila Villas Uluwatu employs environmentally sound principles and supports the local community through its involvement in the ROLE Foundation and the Bali Life Foundation. [alilahotels.com/uluwatu](http://alilahotels.com/uluwatu)

Our flights were arranged through luxury travel specialist Jacada Travel's newly opened Asia-Pacific office in Hong Kong, where the company has three expert travel designers on hand to curate every aspect of your trip. [jacadatravel.com](http://jacadatravel.com)

For more information on Nihiwatu and its history, visit [nihiwatu.com](http://nihiwatu.com)

To learn more about the Sumba Foundation and its work, visit [sumbafoundation.org](http://sumbafoundation.org)

For more travel tips, visit [hongkongtatler.com](http://hongkongtatler.com)

way the resort operates is not so surprising perhaps, but the fact that all Nihiwatu's profits are invested in a foundation to benefit the people of Sumba is.

Set up in 2001 by the Graves and a regular guest, the Sumba Foundation has funded numerous schools, clinics and wells on the island, supplying close to 200 villages with clean water and reducing malaria by 85 per cent in the neighbouring areas. It also runs organic farming, scholarship and humanitarian projects that aid people on one of Indonesia's poorest islands, and all of them exist in symbiosis with the resort, which is also the biggest employer on the island. Nihiwatu organises visits to some of the projects it supports so that guests can see the work being done. Most leave generous donations; some even return as volunteers.

True to the resort's focus on sustainability, a high proportion of the produce served up is grown by villagers. The fish, too, are freshly caught by local fishermen as far as possible, and the food is cooked in a kitchen helmed by former Amanresorts chef Bernard Prim. Food and drink are offered on an all-inclusive basis, and meals can be taken whenever you like by dropping by one of the restaurants or using the walkie-talkies provided to summon your personal butler. Unlike most luxury resorts, Nihiwatu is very sociable, and we end up getting to know our fellow guests better over sundowners or dinner most nights—although privacy is not hard to find.

Numerous activities are included in the price at Nihiwatu, with others available for a surcharge, and there's no shortage of ways to spend your time. In addition to surfing,

there is excellent snorkelling, scuba diving, kayaking, fishing and spearfishing, while pleasure cruises are an option for the less adventurous. On land, there's horse riding on the beach, yoga classes and opportunities to learn about the local culture—as well as a host of secluded daybeds and hammocks for naps between exertions. A dedicated staff photographer can be on hand to professionally document your



**SECLUDED BEAUTY** The stunning natural beauty of Sumba island

activities. Perhaps most interesting of all, however, is the resort's guru programme, through which visiting experts in fields as diverse as yoga, meditation, photography and surfing give guests the benefit of their knowledge. To this end, the resort has created a "guru village" complete with space for 12 experts as well as a pool and barbecue area.

The accommodation for guests, as one might expect, is even more alluring. Surfers tend to snag the Wave Front Villas, but we had the pleasure of road-testing the prototype for the next generation of villas, a tree house of sorts based on traditional Sumbanese homes. Downstairs features a private infinity pool, lounge and gardens, while upstairs consists of a large bedroom with stunning ocean views and an open-air shower room. Everything is handcrafted from local materials such as teak and rattan. The highlight, however, is the elongated chimney-like expanse that stretches up some six metres above the bed—a space that would play host to the ancestor shrine in a Sumbanese house—which seems like a pathway to infinity when the bed is enclosed by its white drapery.

Impressive as Nihiwatu may be, many of its greatest attractions are not in the resort at all. One of the highlights of our trip was visiting the Wanukaka waterfall, an incredible site of natural beauty at the end of an hour's trek through the jungle. Cascading into a wide natural pool enclosed by a small canyon, it wouldn't have looked out of place in *The Lord of the Rings*, and to have it virtually to ourselves made it doubly special.

Likewise, a visit to Nihi Oka beach is highly recommended. A secluded spot a few kilometres along the coast, Nihi Oka is set to be developed into a miniature resort. For now, it features a cliff-top platform set up for a romantic breakfast or barbecue lunch, and a tree-house mini-spa to up the bliss factor. It's these kinds of touches that ultimately define the Nihiwatu experience; just when you think you've seen all it has to offer, the resort has a knack of surprising you anew with novel twists, bright ideas and forward-thinking philosophies. Like its signature wave, it's quite simply a force of nature. 🌊

IMAGES: TÂNIA ARAÚJO, ALEXANDRE RIBEIRO DOS SANTOS

*For more than a decade, Nihiwatu has possessed a near mythical status among surfers*



**RIDING THE WAVES** Clockwise from top: the world-class break at Nihiwatu has been nicknamed by surfers as "God's Left," environmental sustainability is a prerequisite; horseback riding on the beach

