



### OASIS

(Above) The air-conditioned rooms have polished interiors where mosquito nets are disguised as beautiful canopies over comfortable double beds. (Right, and below) The resort has a 2.5 km long private beach which has an amazing surf wave. PHOTO: NATALIE COH, NIWATU RESORT





#### DAY OUT IN THE SUN

Activities outside the resort include a hike up to a waterfall where you may have a packed lunch in banana leaves, or a ride down the river on a stand-up paddleboard

Nihiwatu Resort adopts an Earth-friendly stance for both the environment and community. **By Natalie Koh**

# Private eco-playground

**F**OR any traveller staying in a hotel for more than a night, you know the drill – only towels placed on the bathroom floor go into the wash, and your sheets aren't going to be changed unless you indicate otherwise, usually by placing a "green" card on your bed. It's all in the name of saving the environment, which hotels believe gives them the right to call themselves "environmentally friendly".

George Vlachopoulos, general manager of Nihiwatu Resort, scoffs at the idea. "If you want to be eco-friendly, you shouldn't have to announce it. It should be a given," the 31-year-old says. "It used to be an initiative back in the 80s and 90s, but now, in the 21st century, we should be moving on to the next level."

For Nihiwatu Resort on Sumba Island, which is a 45-minute plane ride from Bali, that means making sure hotel operations are as sustainable as possible – not just for the environment, but for the community and culture of the island as well.

That's why beyond replacing your sheets only every other day, the 24-room resort creates its own biodiesel using crushed coconuts, converts wind power into energy, and, most recently, commissioned a researcher from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to look into using plasma to power some of the resort's rooms.

As for the community and culture, 95 per cent of the resort's employees are natives of Sumba Island, and Nihiwatu strongly encourages guests to get out of the resort and immerse themselves in the environment through guided activities such as village tours, waterfall hikes or paddle-boarding down the river.

It all sounds very rustic, which it could be if you wanted it to be, but the resort itself offers no lack of luxury. Recently bought over by bigwig entrepreneur Christopher Burch and hotelier James McBride, Nihiwatu Resort has doubled its occupancy with a dozen sprawling new rooms, each with access to personal or shared pools.

The rooms – or villas, really – are shaped like the traditional huts of the Sumbanese people, with elevated roofs topped with dried palm leaves and supported by four main pillars, which are commonly associated with ancestor worship, a practice many of the natives still follow.

But that's just about where the similarities end. You get air-conditioning, polished interiors where mosquito nets are disguised as beautiful canopies over comfortable double beds, a beautiful and serene "jungle" spot for yoga, and, with a ratio of service staff to guests at 10 to one, you can only imagine the attention you will get.

It almost feels like an oasis in the midst of a jungle, and the hour's drive from the Sumba Island airport to the resort proves just that. Villages are separated by endless stretches of trees, and your journey is often interrupted by stray dogs napping in the middle of the road, or herds of goats or buffalo walking along the roadside.

Adolescent girls in Catholic school uniforms sit by the road selling bananas, while skinny boys play among buffalo herds, jumping from one animal to the next, often falling painfully onto the ground, only to jump up laughing, before clambering onto another beast. If you opt to visit a village, one of the resort's drivers will take you to his own. From visiting their homes to check-



#### GOING GREEN

(Left) The journey to the resort is often interrupted by stray dogs napping in the middle of the road, or herds of goats or buffalo walking along the roadside. (Right) The 24-room resort creates its own biodiesel using crushed coconuts and converts wind power into energy



#### IN TUNE WITH NATURE

(Left) Nihiwatu Resort replaces your sheets only every other day. (Below) Tourists could choose to stay in the resort and lounge by the plunge pool



ing out their curious Stonehenge-like gravestones, you get a first-hand look at how the natives live. You could even purchase souvenirs from the villagers, which may include bottles carved out of gourds, and monkey skulls.

Other activities outside the resort include a hike up to a waterfall where you may have a packed lunch in banana leaves, or a ride down the river on a stand-up paddleboard.

The great thing about Nihiwatu is that instead of imposing outside cultures onto the environment, they offer plenty of opportunities for guests to learn about the Sumbanese culture. Since most of the employees are Sumbanese, a quick chat with any of them can be amazingly informative.

For instance, a barmaid, Jenny, 29, reveals that while most Sumbanese are officially Christian, many still follow their traditional Marapu beliefs – they still measure wealth by the number of animals you have, and sacrifice those animals from time to time, such as when a member of the family is ill.

She also shares that most adults go to other parts of Indonesia to find work, or choose to work as domestic helpers in neighbouring countries. In the meantime, their children are brought up by the grandparents such that they hardly remember their own parents.

"But it's okay," she says. "This way, they don't miss us as much, and it is not as hard to be away from home."

Sure, you could choose to stay in the resort and mix around solely with other guests – there is plenty to do: They've got an amazing surf wave, a 2.5 kilometre long private beach; you could go out deep-sea fishing, release newborn sea turtles into the sea, or simply lounge by your plunge pool all day – but then you would be missing the whole point of Nihiwatu, which is to build a strong social consciousness for the island.

When founder Claude Graves decided to build the resort back in the 1980s, it wasn't because he saw Sumba as a potential tourist goldmine. He was simply looking for his own private wave on islands around Bali, where he had a holiday home.

"Every time he visited Bali, he could see the exploitation com-

ing in and he didn't feel good about it. So he always had a boutique hotel with an eco focus at the back of his mind," shares Mr Vlachopoulos. After exploring islands for a few months, he stumbled upon Sumba Island, where he trekked for eight days with his wife before finding the beach where Nihiwatu sits today. A one-week trip turned into a four-year stay, and he grew fond of the people there. And the more time he spent with them, the more he realised he needed to do something for them. So he built Nihiwatu as a way to bring tourists in to give back to the community.

But that wasn't all he did. Soon after, Mr Graves realised that a resort wasn't enough – malaria was rife on the island, and life expectancy was horrifyingly low. Which prompted him to start up Sumba Foundation in 2001, a non-profit entity that aims to improve healthcare and education for the Sumbanese people.

Nihiwatu helps to bring in tourists, raise awareness about the island and its people, and "if people feel consciously okay to donate to Sumba Foundation, they can do so," he adds.

Sumba Foundation has since brought malaria down by 85 per cent, mainly through educating the people, providing healthcare and giving out mosquito nets.

Now that Mr Graves has hit 63, his goal is to find a way to let the spirit of Nihiwatu live on – which is where Christopher Burch and

James McBride come in. Although they've injected more luxury into the resort, Mr Vlachopoulos shares that "spirituality-wise, there are few differences between the new and old Nihiwatu".

The rooms may now be bigger, with higher ceilings and slightly more even floors, but the heart of Nihiwatu, which belongs to Sumba Island and its people, remains the same.

[btnews@sph.com.sg](mailto:btnews@sph.com.sg)

✦ The writer's trip was sponsored by Ayana Resort and Spa Bali, Lightfoot Travel and Nihiwatu Resort Sumba Indonesia. Lightfoot Travel is a luxury tour operator specialising in family holidays, honeymoons, corporate travel and short breaks to countries spanning 6 continents. To book a holiday to Nihiwatu, visit [www.lightfoottravel.com](http://www.lightfoottravel.com)



#### RUSTIC

(Above) Nihiwatu encourages guests to immerse themselves in the environment through guided activities such as village tours, waterfall hikes or paddle-boarding down the river. (Below) The housekeeping entrance, which is shaped like the traditional huts of the Sumbanese people

