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Sumba: Wild beaches away from Bali's crowds

A luxury resort on the Indonesian island of Sumba makes a point of celebrating local culture including the infamous pasola festival



A man throws a spear in the annual pasola Photo: Nihiwatu

By Natalie Paris

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Datu recalled carefully picking out the horse he would ride for his first pasola – a spear-throwing mock war, in which spilt blood signifies a good harvest – from those owned by his father. He was a child at the time (boys take part from the age of around 11) but the memory lingers decades later.

As we walked, he touched his forehead, feeling a scar from a later tournament. “A stick hit me here,” he said. “I had to stop because my eyes were covered in blood.”

Five years before that, a man had a stick thrown through his eyeball; he was taken to hospital but died. “His family were sad of course but not angry,” Datu explained. “No one went to jail, no one was in trouble, because it is our tradition.”

Tradition is important on Sumba, an hour’s flight east of Bali. Despite the island’s accessibility, its unique, colourful culture is only just beginning to be properly explored.

Surfers were the first to camp out on its wild beaches, having discovered a mesmerising left-hand break that barrels on to pristine sand in front of

what is now the luxury resort of Nihiwatu.

While Occy's Left is famous in the surfing world, it was the pasola that made Sumba leap out at me from a guidebook – a violent, old-world tradition celebrated every February across the island.

"If there is blood it will be a good year," said Datu, a staff member at Nihiwatu, as we zig-zagged along the edges of rice paddies towards his village one morning.

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Riders prepare the day before, getting out their ikat cloth and tying bells around their horses' necks Photo: Nihiwatu

Everyone goes to watch the spectacle. Riders prepare the day before, getting out their ikat cloth, tying bells around their horses' necks, attaching pom-poms to their reins, and carving their spears. A few years ago, "one side got angry because there were too many hits, so they started throwing stones". These days the police attend, just in case.

Back in trading times, Sumba did not have the spices of other islands in the region, but its sandalwood was highly prized and stripped by Asian, Indian and Arab traders. The forests were replaced by rolling grassland. On the 90-minute transfer to the resort from West Sumba's tiny airport you can spot young boys training their spirited horses on the resultant plains.

Sumba horses are small, strong and quick. Not all are ridden – some are eaten – but those that are broken in need no encouragement to gallop, mane flying, full pelt down the resort's long and gloriously empty beach.



Sumba horses are small, strong and quick Photo: Nihiwatu

Riding horses from Nihiwatu's stables alongside crashing rollers is one of the resort's greatest pleasures and makes for enviable holiday photos. The sun was sinking into the coastline of unbroken forest as a group of us softened the tide-wrinkled sand with our hoof marks and bounced up to the giant boulder from which Nihiwatu takes its name. It stands alone among clouds of sea spray, marking the beach as a sacred place.

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On our return, the local boys spread their arms as if they were flying and galloped their hot horses, no-handed, into the surf. It was thrilling to watch, even if I didn't quite have the courage to follow suit.

If Sumba feels untouched by the modern world, it isn't really. Mobile phones, motorbikes and satellite dishes are everywhere. It's more that the islanders' strong adherence to tradition has yet to be diluted. Tourists – surfers and a handful of backpackers keen to see the pasola – have trickled through in recent years, but the island has mostly been left to its own devices by the Indonesian government – it contributes little to the economy.



Lunch looking over Nihiwatu's beach Photo: Nihiwatu

Sumbanese society is based on exchange – from the betel nuts carried in woven bags to be given and received when you greet someone, to the buffaloes and hand-woven ikat cloth swapped before a marriage. Some of the earthy and indigo-hued ikat, which visitors can buy in villages and at market, depicts skull trees, the macabre collections once displayed in villages by headhunters.

The Sumbanese are officially Protestant but in reality most honour their Marapu spirits and a particular form of animism. Around the island, striking megalithic stone tombs are found outside each family home. While the occasional cross can be spotted in villages, most homes are decorated with buffalo horns.

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Datu, with a sword that Sumbanese men carry

It could have been the malaria tablets but the island's culture is so raw that during my stay my dreams were a riot of warriors in headscarves,

crinkly-faced priests and unruly buffalo. And this seems to be Nihiwatu's intention.

What makes the resort so special – and it really is – is that it neatly and subtly incorporates elements of tribal culture. Owned by Chris Burch, a US investor, and hotelier James McBride, formerly of The Carlyle in New York, the resort, which opened last year, is expensive for Indonesia. Rooms start at \$550 (around £352) a night but each is an adoring tribute to the island.



Sumbanese houses have distinctive, tall thatched roofs that poke up above the treetops like witches' hats Photo: Nihiwatu

Sumbanese houses have distinctive, tall thatched roofs that poke up above the treetops like witches' hats. At Nihiwatu, these are replicated on a magnificent scale above individual villas, held up by four-poster beds resembling totems.

Particularly stirring is the resort's reception lounge, with its thatched roof standing 72ft high, which draws you in until you are tipping your head right back to look up into it. Beneath it is a table big enough to feed an entire clan, while a ladder of replica buffalo horns scales the wall, of such width as to suggest that, if real, this would be the house of a very great family.

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The doors to our villa had handles shaped like horns – just gripping one made you feel like you were going into battle. Inside, the grimaces of Marapu spirits were captured in stone slabs above the sofa, while heavy conch-shell necklaces decorated the dresser. The huge copper bath, encased by glass doors leading to an alfresco shower, resembled an upturned drum. Fire wells blazed next to our table at dinner.



A villa on the Kasambi Estate in Nihiwatu Photo: Nihiwatu

Lazy afternoons were spent gazing out at the beach from the villa's mini infinity pool or a private cliff-top bale, reached by following sandy steps

down from our garden of frangipani trees and long grass that attracts butterflies.

When Chris Burch first arrived on the island, looking to take on the surf camp that had been run by Claude Graves since 1988, local people were afraid. "He went to the priest in each village to explain what he wanted to do," said Datu. "Now they see he is a good Indonesian."



The view from a pavilion at Nihiwatu's spa Photo: Nihiwatu

We talked as Datu led us to Nihiwatu's spa in the neighbouring valley, where guests can enjoy a day of serious pampering in private bamboo bales set above two coves, with two spa therapists at their disposal.

One, a young woman with twinkling eyes, called me "Ibu" – mother – wrapped me in avocado, honey and yogurt, slathered a smoothie on to my hair and excised the knots from my shoulders.

Other activities at Nihiwatu include yoga sessions, held at a wooden pavilion set high above the beach and a luscious tangle of rice fields and forest – a location so beautiful that emptying your mind of anything except "wow" is easy.

Divers can head out to an artificial reef beneath a small pontoon an hour's speedboat ride away – and olive ridley turtle hatchlings are incubated so that they can be released into the sea. The most relaxing experience, though, was a paddle-boarding excursion down the river.

After a couple of tight bends, the river became lackadaisical and a gentle paddle was all it took to scoot past men fishing, children shouting and waving, and the odd buffalo glaring from out of the water. Walking trails include two to waterfalls on the island, plus one in search of bird life.

Malaria, once a big problem, has been eradicated in the area around the resort, thanks to the Sumba Foundation that uses Nihiwatu's profits to provide wells, clinics and schools.

Staff are cared for, too. At all resorts there is talk of staff being like family, but at Nihiwatu an end-of-the-year thank-you party is laid on for workers. One year, the employees travelled to the venue en mass – hair gelled and dressed up – in a stream of jeeps and motorbikes, similar to the commonly seen processions of clan vehicles before a funeral. For the villagers who spend all day sat on their verandas, it served as a reminder that the Nihiwatu family also has a place in island society.

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The resort certainly is successful in making Sumba's culture more accessible – and not just something you can discover, as with so many other luxury resorts, on a day trip outside its perimeter.

And Nihiwatu is still expanding. Handsome treehouse villas are opening in time for October, offering privacy and arguably the best views of the beach.

Next to these, Claude Graves, the owner of the original surf camp, has kept a slither of land that he didn't want to part with, right in front of his beloved break, just along from Nihiwatu's sacred rock.





The surf shack at the resort's boathouse Photo: Nihiwatu

When the tide is out, the surfers retire to the shade and are replaced by local boys who run from the forest to the same spot, to fish with spears and nets among the rock pools.

Nihiwatu works because it manages a rare thing – to mean many things to many people.

Getting there

Red Savannah (01242 787800; redsavannah.com) offers six nights at Nihiwatu, Sumba, and one night at Alila Villas Uluwatu, Bali, from £4,394 per person. This is based on two people sharing a luxury one-bedroom villa at Nihiwatu on a full-board basis, and a one-bedroom pool villa at Alila Villas Uluwatu on a b&b basis, and includes international flights from London Heathrow to Bali with Qatar Airways, domestic flights and private transfers.



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