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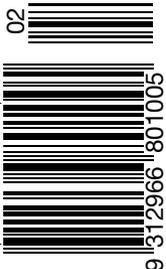
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Polo paradise

Sport doesn't get more British than polo, and an invitation-only event that mixes sport, business and pleasure to fly the flag for English heritage brings its chukkas to a tropical island paradise. *By Zara Wong. Photographed by Dave Wheeler.*

The earth of Sumba Island is orange-red and dry. It looks more like the dirt of northern Australia than that of Bali, from which you fly in. Technically, though, as if to prove a point in its isolation, it's actually closer to Darwin. Which explains why many of the clientele choose to fly in by private jet.

"Sumba, Sumba, Sumba," muses James McBride, the white-haired debonair managing partner of Nihiwatu resort. (As Ed Olver, co-founder and director of British Polo Day, says approvingly: "He's a cool dude.") Despite living for years in Singapore, London and New York, he's lost none of his thick South African accent. He begins to tell the tale of how he heard of the Indonesian island of Sumba through his friend Christopher Burch. McBride had once helmed The Carlyle hotel in New York, where he met Burch following his separation from his then-wife, designer Tory Burch. Now living between Bali, Singapore and Sumba Island, McBride and Burch oversee the development of the Nihiwatu resort, elevating its raw beauty without allowing it to be overrun with urban indulgences.

The resort sits on an expansive 2.5 kilometres of private beach, its white sand at odds with the arid earth in the island's north, where the airport is situated. The morning of our arrival, the team behind British Polo Day are tending their horses with the help of local trainers. The horses here are shorter and harder than the ones the riders are used to. The team, all British born-and-bred, are a long way from England and between them have the kind of connections that span international royalty, celebrity, fashion, art and entrepreneurship. They are all far too polite and well bred to be indiscreet (and when they are, it's all very strictly off the record), and all have the easy charm and social graces that can't be bought or taught. It's a marvellous skill to watch.

Christabel Abdy Collins, British Polo Day executive coordinator, grew up riding horses in the Cotswolds. Her parents own Little Faringdon House, and host country-house parties for the artistic community. She acknowledges the challenge in articulating exactly what British Polo Day is, even though she has worked there for two years. "I say I work for an events company that celebrates British heritage, all round the world, in emerging markets with polo as a platform to get all the incredible people together in one place and then just make these moments and to create an incredible experience," she explains. Throughout her time at Sumba Island she wears hippy-luxe dresses made from vintage saris that she designs in collaboration with her sister.

But before you hurry to secure tickets to British Polo Day, note that entry to it can't be bought. One has to be personally ►

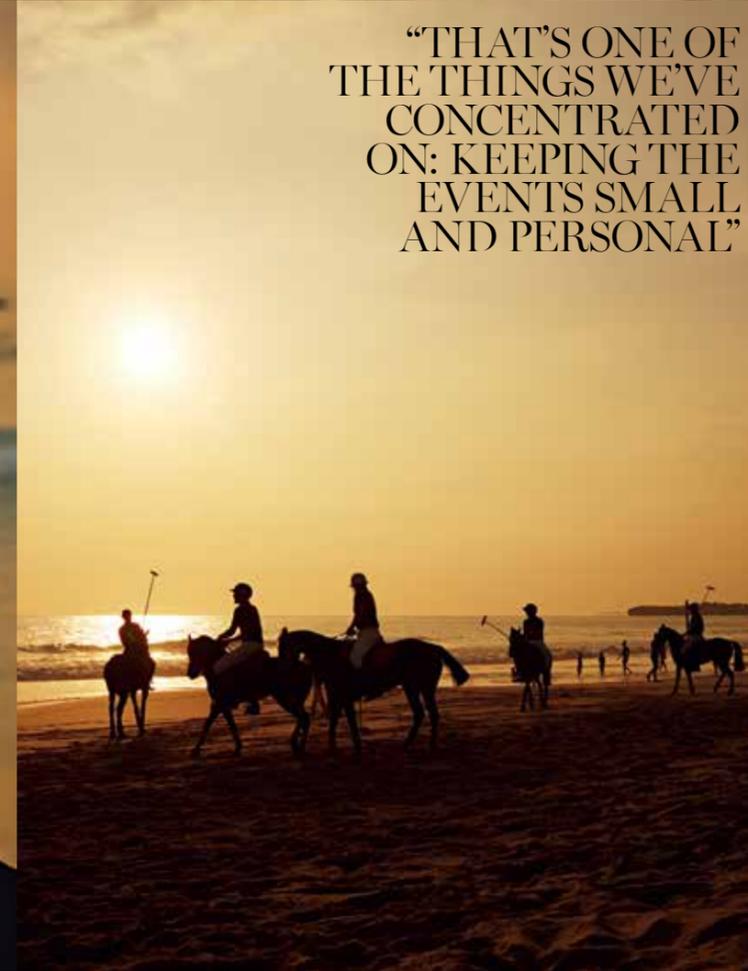
The polo team on the beach of the Indonesian island of Sumba in preparation for the British Polo Day event, hosted by the exclusive Nihiwatu resort.



This page and opposite: British Polo Day staffers, such as Christabel Abdy Collins (left) and players (top) take in the resort's quietly luxurious environs.

DAVE WHEELER

“THAT’S ONE OF THE THINGS WE’VE CONCENTRATED ON: KEEPING THE EVENTS SMALL AND PERSONAL”



invited, making the event a money-can't-buy experience (try telling that to the billionaires used to getting whatever they want). “Most of our guests are by recommendation, or people we already know,” says Camilla Hibbert, community manager of the event, who takes pride in her role as gatekeeper of the guest list. She knows what everyone’s passions are, and who they would like to sit next to at dinner. And the criteria for invitation? “Interested, and interesting,” she demurs. I’ve seen her navigate the social conundrums of guests stranded without a conversation partner and her unfaltering composure while ensuring everyone is enjoying themselves at myriad British Polo Day events during the week; jungle-themed cocktail nights, dinners and polo matches. “When someone new comes into our orbit, once you get a feeling for them, you meet them on a friendly basis, rather than a business basis, so then you can start making the connections that way. It’s about building this eco-system with our partners, with our guests and our whole community.”

Should one be chosen, one can expect an invitation made by the Grosvenor Stationery Company. “Our invitations are hand-held. People don’t want to be talked at, they want to be talked with so that’s one of the things we’ve concentrated on, keeping the events small and personal. Mass marketing has been such a huge concept and we’ve moved away from that,” says Hibbert. “We don’t just throw things at people!” she says, laughing.

Hibbert and Abdy Collins are childhood best friends, growing up with matching ponies in the English countryside; many of the team had known each other for years before working together. Take 18-year-old Lady Eliza Manners. Fresh out of high school and starting university next year, she is working for the company in her gap year. Like many of her colleagues, she is a confident horsewoman, and was introduced by her older sister, Lady Violet Manners, who had also worked for the company.

The sisters are the daughters of the 11th Duke of Rutland. I met Violet in 2014 at the Australian British Polo Day event when someone asked if I liked afternoon tea. When I replied in the affirmative, I was introduced to Violet, and told her family home, Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire, was the site of its invention.

“I’m not so good in front of the camera,” says the youngest Manners shyly when the photographer appears. “Not like my sisters, I’m more into making jokes and trying to make my mother laugh,” she says, referring to earlier shoots she had done with her sisters Violet and Alice for magazines such as *Vogue* China and *Tatler*. She’s currently ranked ninth on *Tatler’s* Most Invited List (Violet is seventh and Alice, eighth). The only names above theirs are members of the Cambridge house: Princess Charlotte, the Duchess and Duke of Cambridge, Prince George, the Queen and Lady Kitty Spencer, Princess Diana’s niece.

While not an official polo sport event exactly, British Polo Day prides itself on its espousal of the sport. Everyone in its ranks is linked to horses or the sport, even operations and partnerships manager Sophie Cahn, who is learning to ride (her partner is an Argentinean polo player). Managing director and partner Ben Vestey, born to a “polo-mad family”, likened the events to a wedding, filled with people who you would personally like to spend time with. A diligent polo player himself, he is the personification of the British Polo Day team member and guest. His sister, Nina Clarkin, is a top-ranked polo player who often plays with Prince Harry, and he is modest in admitting his Australian connection: a nephew of the current Baron Vestey, he is the grandson of Captain William Howarth Vestey and his ▶



Christabel Abdy Collins, Eliza Manners and Sophie Cahn enjoy Nihiwatu resort's private-jet exclusivity and natural beauty.



British Polo Day's Ben Vestey, Dave Burt, Ed Olver and Kit Logan and, above: Rose Farquhar and Camilla Hibbert.



Camilla Hibbert and Eliza Manners.



DAVE WHEELER

wife Pamela Armstrong, Dame Nellie Melba's only grandchild, which makes Ben the opera legend's great-great grandson.

The last day of British Polo Day on Sumba Island involved a polo tournament where local riders took part (after taking a short course in polo) and won the overall game, captained by McBride. He sees the sport as playing a pivotal part in his career; it is the sport that ignited his friendship with Burch, and the instigation of bringing British Polo Day to this small island. "I thought James had been in the sun too long," recalls Olver, who met McBride in Singapore through Indian property mogul Satinder Garcha (another keen polo player). "Someone once called Nihiwatu the 'Mustique of Asia', and both are that private-community-oriented, friendly, family sort of destination. You meet people all over the world who have been and it's like a club but with no rules and no membership, and that's very much like British Polo Day." Olver and his team take British Polo Day all around the world; after Sumba Island they travelled next to Mexico then India.

In 2014 it came to Australia, with the help of Swiss financier Urs Schwarzenbach, his Australian wife, Francesca, and their son Guy. The family hosted the event with a black-tie dinner and a day of polo events at Garangula, their estate just outside Canberra that features an extensive private gallery of Aboriginal art.

Olver credits his military career with cultivating his admiration for independence, clear in his entrepreneurial activities, including the investment firm Britannia Elevation Capital that uses British Polo Day as a platform. He has seen his company grow from a burgeoning idea to something that has travelled to many international destinations. "We've done more than 45 events in 16 countries and we've partnered with 12 different royal families and influential people. None of that actually matters but we're

challenging the status quo in how business is done because we're providing a better opportunity to engage with people than some of the traditional marketing routes," he says proudly.

Director for strategic partnerships Rose Farquhar, one of the longest-standing employees, is familiar with the social and business networking opportunities that British Polo Day provides. "It's a platform for elite engagement and organic networking so it's fun and relaxed. You're making friends who turn into business partners," she adds. I ask Farquhar for specific examples. "I probably can't tell you about too many of them, a lot of them are below the radar," she responds politely, before speaking animatedly of the landscape's beauty.

This was a familiar scenario for McBride, who remembers going to one of the British Polo Day events held in Morocco. It's difficult to explain what it's like; British Polo Day is more than a series of mere events, culminating in a singular, drawn-out experience where you meet people who are "interested and interesting", as Hibbert had put it. McBride was transfixed by his time in Morocco, making him even more adamant about bringing it to Sumba. He envisioned polo being played on the fine white sand outside his resort of Nihiwatu, a fantasy he had shared over a year ago while at Garangula. "You can't put a price on experience. If I had invited people to come, most wouldn't have come but when you involve British Polo Day, because of their track record and what they've done and what they've achieved, people say: 'We will believe you and we will follow you, and we will come to enjoy that,'" he says, sitting on a rug-strewn beach with a bonfire moments before the finale dinner. Olver agrees. "British Polo Day is about creating the unexpected in life, where it is filled with delight and surprise." ■