

# Sumba, a secret surfing island para

Rachael Oakes-Ash

ONCE discovered, it's hard to keep Sumba a secret. To start with, it's not an easy island to find. While it sits 400km east of Bali, below Komodo and next to Timor, most Indonesians have not heard of it.

Even the airlines have difficulty maintaining a regular service from Denpasar to Tambulaka in West Sumba and Waingapu in the east.

A three-night sojourn to this island turned into eight nights when both Merpati and Pelita Air grounded their flights for mechanical reasons.

No point kicking up a fuss; there are no landlines, e-mail or mobile phone reception to be able to tell anyone. Best to wait for your fate.

Surfers have known about Sumba for decades, although they kept it to themselves to keep the tourists at bay. Claude Graves discovered Sumba 16 years ago and bought his own slice of 200ha paradise with private surf break — a far cry from New Jersey.

He set up camp in a basic hut for the first two years.

Numerous land titles, red tape and one earthquake later and Nihiwatu Resort's six rustic ocean-view bungalows, two villas and infinity pools sit on top of a hill where he once camped.

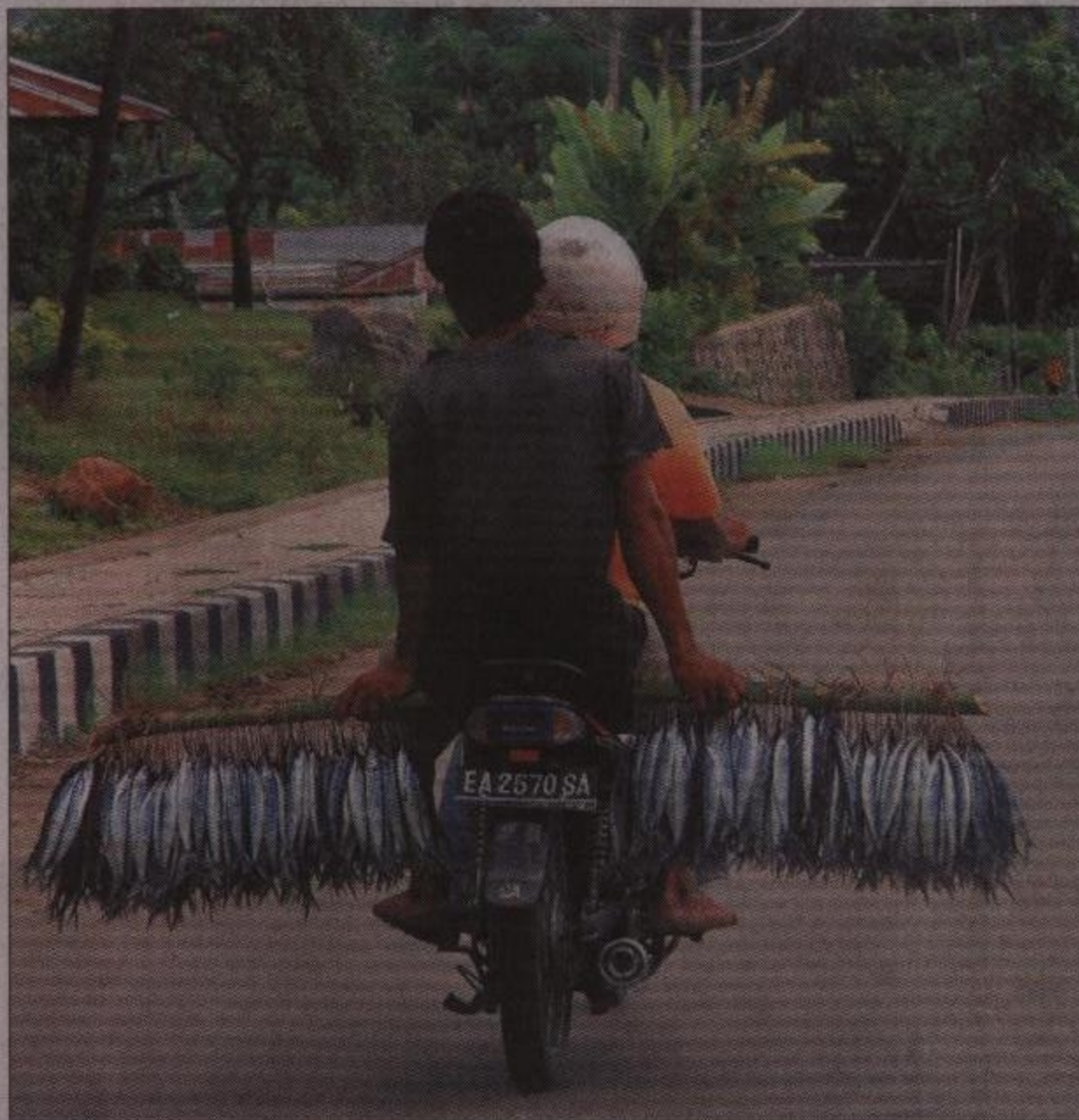
No more than 10ha of his land will be developed, ensuring total privacy for the guests of Nihiwatu.

Moved by the poverty of the Sumbanese, Graves set up the Sumba Foundation to help bring medical supplies, sanitary conditions, education and clean water to the nearby villages.

Employing local Sumbanese to run the resort, Graves trains the staff in hospitality, taking some to his family home in Bali to learn English.

For most, this is their first sight of street lights, running water and telephones. The training is all part of his Foundation Resort blueprint.

It is a two-hour drive from Tambulaka airport to the southwest enclave of Nihiwatu.



Stepping on to Sumba soil is like stepping back in time, where soil is not considered fertile unless touched by blood.

The capital of West Sumba, Waikabukak, is a market town that sees few westerners. It's 45 minutes from Nihiwatu. Walk these streets and children follow in your wake wanting to get a glimpse of the "western white woman with camera".

Graves points out items of interest from the mini-van along the way to Nihiwatu — the local prison where thieves and murderers are kept; the bridge on which less than a decade ago hand-to-hand combat in tribal war meant bodies floating in the river.

It's all part of the culture, he says with a smile as I inquire about alterna-

tive methods of leaving the island.

Arriving at Nihiwatu, guests are taken down a stone path for welcome drinks at the bar — an open-air pavilion with sand as the floor, strategically positioned to capture the vista of ocean, beach, jungle and a nightly sunset worthy of an Oscar.

I am a rare entity at Nihiwatu, a single woman travelling alone. The resort caters to surfers and couples, though groups book out the family villa with its private cliff-top pavilion and pool. Peruse the guest book and you'll see the fashion houses of Hermes have dropped by for surf lessons and time out.

The American dive master doubles as boat captain, deep-sea fisherman and snorkel guru, though if the surf's



TO market, left and far left; curious youngsters, above.

up, forget booking a day trip as you won't find him. He'll be in the "green room" waiting for the next wave.

Enter at your own peril, the water looks harmless with its plethora of milky blue shades, but this is serious surf territory with a reef break 100m out.

My fellow four guests are honeymooners and I feel like the fifth wheel. Thank God for Marcus, Jack, Martin and Rofi, the four main Sumbanese barmen who become my back-up singers when I dance on the bar at 3am. You can do that here.

There's nothing to do at Nihiwatu. That's the selling point. A routine quickly develops: breakfast of banana pancakes at the bar watching the waves break, a walk along the 2½km



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## Getting there

Nihiwatu Resort is a member of Select Hotels.

Rates start at \$US300 for the hilltop bungalow, transfers, three meals a day, snacks and non-alcoholic drinks.

Bookings: 13000 368 925

[www.selecthotels.com](http://www.selecthotels.com)

Sumba Foundation donations:

[www.sumbafoundation.org](http://www.sumbafoundation.org)

Australian Airlines fly from Sydney to Denpasar three times a week, with daily connecting flights from Brisbane to Sydney.

[www.australianairlines.com.au](http://www.australianairlines.com.au)

Both Merpati and Pelita Air fly from Denpasar to Sumba, however Nihiwatu is hoping to charter a weekly flight to Sumba for guests in 2006.

The writer was a guest of Select Hotels.

private beach where you may run into a herd of buffalo being shepherded for a swim; lunch by the pool; a mid-afternoon nap; a horse ride at sunset or perhaps a village tour to trade money for local craft.

Back to the bar for pre-dinner drinks, a three-course meal, then some cocktails.

On odd days we trek the jungle to the waterfall for a dip, boogie board the waves when they're low or take a dive with the captain. The Nihiwatu staff invite us to chew betel nut on the porches of their homes and we oblige, though the bitter taste stays with us for 24 hours.

The night before we are finally to leave the island (we are assured this time the plane will fly), other guests arrive. The five of us have become Sumba siblings, I suspect I have provided comic relief for the honeymooners, and we are reticent to break the spell with newbies.

Two more couples and a single male surfer have made the trek. "We're here for four days," they say as we laugh and say: "So were we."