

# It's Bali's secret neighbour

*An island resort with a heart is the soul of Sumba.*

*Rachael Oakes-Ash stays longer than expected*

indonesia



ONCE found, it's hard to keep Sumba a secret. But it's not an easy island to find. Though it is only 400km east of Bali, next to Timor, most Indonesians have not heard of it.

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

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

No point kicking up a fuss. There are no landlines, email or mobile phone reception to tell anyone.

Surfers have known about Sumba for decades, though they kept it to themselves to keep the hordes at bay.

Claude Graves discovered it 16 years ago and bought a 160ha slice complete with private surf break. It is a far cry from his native New Jersey and he set up camp in a hut for the first two years.

Many land titles, red tape and an earthquake later, Nihiwatu Resort's six rustic ocean-view bungalows, two villas and infinity pools sit on the hill where he once camped. No more than 14ha will be developed, ensuring privacy for guests.

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

Why should cashed-up westerners enjoy nature's paradise when 30 per cent of the locals won't make it past eight years of age?

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

He is hoping to create further foundation resorts where guests con-

tribute to the charity simply by staying.

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

Motorbikes are a recent addition to Sumbanese life and entire families climb aboard a single moped. It is not uncommon to see livestock, pigs and fish being taken to market in this manner.

The population of Sumba is somewhere between 400,000 and 600,000, depending on who you talk to. They can be divided into practising Christians or practising animists with a handful of Muslims.

We had just missed an animist funeral when eight water buffalo were slaughtered in front of guests as part of a ritual.

**A**NIMALS predict the future in this religion. Their entrails and liver are used to foresee what's ahead and their blood is used to feed the land. We were told if "we were lucky" someone else may die while we were there.

The capital of west Sumba, Wai-kabukak, is a market town that sees few Anglo-Saxons. It's 45 minutes from Nihiwatu. Hordes of children follow you wanting to get a glimpse of the "western white woman with camera".

Claude Graves points out items of interest from the mini-van along the way to Nihiwatu: the prison where thieves and murderers are kept; the bridge on which, 10 years ago, hand-to-hand combat in tribal war meant bodies floated in the river.

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

The water looks harmless with its



**To market:** motorcycles are a recent addition to Sumba life and the villagers are very creative in the way they use them.



**Catch a wave:** it's surfers' paradise.

plethora of milky blue shades, but this is serious surfer territory with a reef break 100m out.

There's nothing to do at Nihiwatu. That's the selling point.

A routine develops: breakfast of banana pancakes watching the waves break; walk along the 2½km beach where you may run into buffalo being shepherded for a swim; lunch by the pool; afternoon nap; and horse ride at sunset or village tour to trade money for local craft.

On odd days we trek through the jungle to the waterfall for a dip, boogie board the waves when they're low, or take a dive.



**Fruitful:** villagers' food is basic.

The night before we are to leave the island (we are assured this time the plane will fly) new guests arrive.

"We're here for four days," one says. I laugh and say, "So were we."

As I sip my last pina colada, the sun dips below the horizon, exposing a red glow on the reef at low tide.

I pray for the airlines to ground themselves again because Sumba has worked its way into my heart. Besides, no one has died yet and we can't leave without a funeral.

**Rachael Oakes-Ash travelled courtesy of Australian Airlines and Select Hotels.**

## ✓ traveller's checks

### Getting there:

Australian Airlines flies to Denpasar three times a week. Connecting flights can be booked through Nihiwatu resort. [www.australianairlines.com.au](http://www.australianairlines.com.au)

**Staying:** Nihiwatu Resort is a member of Select Hotels and winner of Best Hotel for Responsible Tourism for 2005 at World Travel Mart.

Rates start at \$400 a night for a hilltop bungalow, transfers, three meals a day, snacks and non-alcoholic drinks.

**More information:** 1300 368 925 or [www.selecthotels.com](http://www.selecthotels.com)





**Buy my fish:** a market vendor enjoys her work.



**Splashdown:** locals and tourists cool off at the Sumba waterfall.



**Wet track:** local horses love the water as much as visitors do.