

Travelling right

Sustainable tourism has a double benefit, providing a memorable travel experience for visitors and making life better for local communities. Rachael Oakes-Ash explains how to take a holiday and make a difference.

Ethics has become a hot topic in the travel industry, and sustainable tourism is a growing part of the holiday market. It's all about minimising your impact on the destinations you visit, and returning something to the local community.

Some big tourism players, such as Starwood hotels, have aligned themselves with charities. The Starwood Check Out For Children campaign, launched in 1995, encourages guests to add US\$1 to their bill for a donation to UNICEF. The US\$16 million already raised has funded more than 700,000 vaccinations against potentially fatal childhood diseases.

Other high-end resorts have gone a step further and created their own charitable foundations to ensure the sustainability of the environment and the communities around their exotic retreats.

The unspoilt sands of the Nihiwatu Resort in Indonesia have attracted the fashionable Hermès family, as well as the surfing elite who travel there for its legendary private surf break.

Set on beachfront land on the island of Sumba, 400km east of Bali, this small resort was founded 18 years ago by New Jersey expat Claude Graves and his wife Petra. Its cluster of bungalows run mostly on a generator, the area has no mobile phone access, an erratic landline and a blue satellite phone for emergencies. Its remoteness attracts stressed-out urbanites wanting serious time out.

But when the Graves first came in 1988, they found a poverty stricken island where malaria was rampant. There were from 400,000 to 700,000 inhabitants, depending on who you talked to (a census doesn't exist), and many children died before their eighth birthdays.

After opening Nihiwatu Resort in 1991, Claude helped out the villagers, but the scale of their problems was overwhelming. He then had

the idea of setting up a formal organisation. Sean Downs, a software executive, arrived at Nihiwatu for a surfing holiday, read Claude's 10-page plan and offered to help. The Sumba Foundation was launched in 2003, delivering practical aid that has made a big difference.

'When we put in a well close to a village [they've installed 25 so far], the women no longer need to spend the day walking miles to get water. Now we see them weaving in the villages, and the weavings provide income for families. And instead of having to help fetch water, children can now go to school,' says Claude.

Five years of funding health clinics and supplying mosquito nets to combat malaria has also changed lives. 'Compared to five years ago, the amount of farmland has doubled and in some areas quadrupled,' explains Claude. Healthier people means more able bodies to work more land and grow more food which, in turn, further improves their health.

The Foundation raises funds through strategic partnerships and through guests' donations.



A BETTER LIFE Tackling Sumba's malaria has enabled the villagers to be more productive.

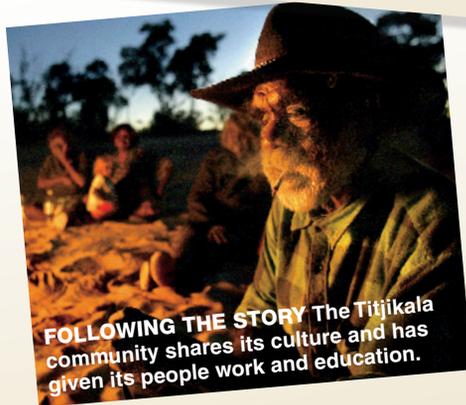
CATCHING THE WAVE Surfers come to Nihiwatu Resort on Sumba for the legendary break, and come back again because of its people.



'The guests become involved, so they have a vacation with a purpose.'



TOURISM IN TENT Luxury under canvas at Gunya Titjikala Resort.



FOLLOWING THE STORY The Titjikala community shares its culture and has given its people work and education.

At the resort itself, Sumbanese staff are given English lessons and hospitality training – skills they can take elsewhere.

Often guests visit the local villages or The Sumba Foundation's clinics and schools, and offer to fund improvements. They may sponsor a nurse, purchase a motorcycle for health workers or adopt and treat a village against malaria. 'The guests become involved, so they have a vacation with a purpose,' Claude says.

The Foundation supports a series of medical and midwife clinics, dental and eye clinics, and funds a resident Foundation doctor and registered nurse. There's even a plan to create bio-diesel from coconuts; the money saved on fuel will be pumped back into the community.

Nihiwatu Resort: www.nihiwatu.com
The Sumba Foundation:
www.sumbafoundation.org

Local heroes

A similar philosophy drives Australia's Gunya Tourism, a joint venture program with the indigenous Titjikala community. Half of the profits of Gunya Titjikala, an exclusive safari resort of five deluxe tents, 120km south-east of Alice Springs, goes into the Titjikala Community Foundation to fund health, education and training for local people.

'We're accidental tourism operators,' says Gunya Tourism Managing Director Paul Conlon. 'We're actually community developers.'

Further feelgood destinations

AFRICA FOUNDATION: Created in 1992, this foundation works in partnership with CC Africa, a safari travel company with more than 40 luxury lodges in 16 destinations. CC Africa has raised more than US\$5 million for the Africa Foundation through donations from guests. The charity funds education, healthcare and income-generating activities in the regions surrounding their lodges. It trains local entrepreneurs and has set up a project in the Mduku community in South Africa to 'bridge the digital divide'.

CC Africa: www.ccafrica.com

Africa Foundation: www.africafoundation.org

THE COMO FOUNDATION: Como Hotels and Resorts, the creation of Singaporean hotelier Christina Ong, runs a charitable foundation with an emphasis on grassroots organisations specifically for women and girls. Not restricted to helping communities in proximity to its premium resorts in Bhutan, Indonesia and the Caribbean, the Foundation has worked to help women in Nepal, Brazil, the Philippines and Morocco.

Como Resorts: www.como.bz

We chose tourism to help this particular community because of the need for entry-level jobs. Tourism gave us the ability to train people on the job and utilise the indigenous community's natural storytelling attributes. The outcome is a knock-out experience and it helps the community.' And there's evidence it's working.

When the Titjikala resort first opened, there was only one child who regularly attended the local high school, now there are 24. Parents and elders are telling the kids that if you want to work with tourists you must be able to read, write and speak English.

Prior to Gunya Tourism, the community was 100 per cent reliant on government funding, explains Paul. 'Now the community generates 50 per cent of its own income. People are sticking around now – they used to turn 14 and were out of there in a flash.'

Gunya Tourism is opening a second resort in Coorong in South Australia, working with the Ngarrindjeri community.

Gunya Tourism www.gunya.com.au

At Nihiwatu, Gunya Titjikala and other resorts (see above), this emphasis on integration between tourism operators, the land and community around them points to a rewarding future. For travellers, the resorts offer a more intimate view of the world and a way to make a positive impact at the same time.