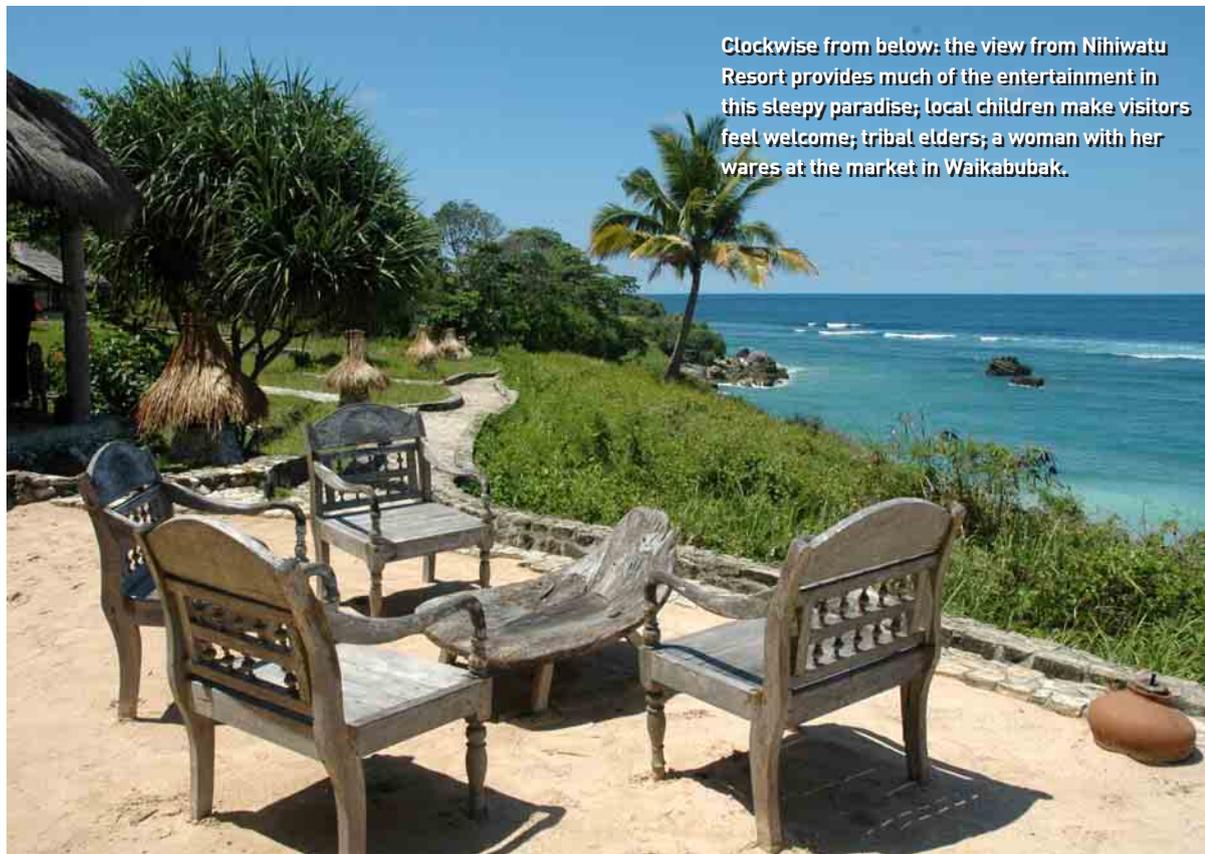


travel

with Stephen McCarty

# Destination unknown

“Discovered” by surfers decades ago, the little-visited Indonesian island of Sumba is difficult to reach and sometimes even harder to leave, writes Rachael Oakes-Ash.



Clockwise from below: the view from Nihiwatu Resort provides much of the entertainment in this sleepy paradise; local children make visitors feel welcome; tribal elders; a woman with her wares at the market in Waikabubak.



It's not hard to keep Sumba a secret. For starters, it's not an easy island to find. While it sits 400km east of Bali, below Komodo and next to Timor, most Indonesians have never heard of it. Tell them you're going to Sumba and they will probably confuse it with Sumbawa, an island to the northwest.

Even the airlines have difficulty maintaining a regular service from Denpasar to Tambulaka, in west Sumba, and Waingapu, in the east. My three-night stay turns into one of eight when local carriers Merpati and Pelita Air ground their flights for mechanical reasons. There's no point kicking up a fuss; there are no landlines, internet-cafe computer terminals or mobile-phone services to let you tell anyone. It's best to accept you're in an episode of *Lost* and wait.

Surfers have known about Sumba for decades, but kept it to themselves to keep hordes of tourists at bay. Claude Graves discovered Sumba 16 years ago and bought his own 160-hectare slice of paradise, complete with private surf break. A far cry from his native New Jersey, he set up camp in a basic hut for the first two years. Numerous land titles, a lot of red tape and one earthquake later, Nihiwatu Resort's six rustic ocean-view bungalows, two villas and infinity pools sit atop the hill where he once camped. No more than 14 hectares of his land will ever be developed, a policy that ensures privacy for Nihiwatu guests.

Moved by the poverty of the Sumbanese, Graves set up the Sumba Foundation to help bring medical supplies, better sanitary conditions, education and clean water to the villages. Why should cashed-up westerners enjoy paradise, he wondered, when 30 per cent of the locals weren't making it past eight years of age? Graves employs Sumbanese to run the resort; he trains the staff and takes some to his Bali home to learn English. For most, it is their first experience of street lights, running water and telephones.

The population of the island is anywhere from 400,000 to 600,000, depending on whom you talk to. Most are either Christians or Animists, with a handful of Muslims. Unfortunately – or fortunately – we arrive to discover we've missed by a day an Animist funeral, at which eight water buffalo were ritually slaughtered in front of guests. Animals are believed to predict the future in this religion, their entrails and liver being used to see what lies ahead. We are told that if we are "lucky", someone else might die while we are here.

The capital of west Sumba, Waikabubak, is a market town that sees few foreign faces. I stroll the streets to the tune of "Hello missus!" called from colourful stands as

throng of children follow, wanting a glimpse of the "western white woman with camera". Forgetting the simple rule – if you're a woman, don't walk alone – I find myself approached by an older male who makes some crude hand gestures and removes his wedding ring. It seems I am now the red-light district.

While travelling in a minivan to Nihiwatu, Graves points out places of interest: the prison where thieves and murderers are kept; the bridge on which, less than a decade ago, hand-to-hand combat between tribes left bodies floating in the river. It's all part of the culture, he says with a smile, as I inquire about alternative ways to leave the island.

On arrival at Nihiwatu, guests are led down a stone path for welcome drinks at the bar – an open-air pavilion with sand for the floor strategically positioned to capture a vista of ocean, beach, jungle and a daily sunset worthy of an Oscar. I am a rare entity at Nihiwatu: a single woman travelling alone. The resort caters to surfers and couples, although groups often book the Family Villa, with its private cliff-top pavilion and pool. Peruse the guest book and you'll see employees of fashion house Hermès have dropped by for surf lessons and time out.

An American dive master doubles (or more) as boat captain, deep-sea fisherman and snorkel guru, but if the surf's up, forget booking a day-trip because you won't find him. He'll be in the "green room" waiting for the next wave. Enter at your peril; the water looks harmless with its plethora of milky blue shades, but this is serious surfers' territory, with a reef break 100 metres out.

There is nothing to do at Nihiwatu. That's the point. A routine quickly develops: breakfast of banana pancakes at the bar watching the waves break; a walk along the 2.5km private beach, where you may run into a herd of buffalo being shepherded for a swim; lunch by the pool; an afternoon nap or yoga with master Pete; a horse ride at sunset or perhaps a village tour to buy local handicrafts. Then it's back to the bar for pre-dinner drinks, then a three-course meal followed by cocktails. An iPod – the only sign of 2006 – plugged into the stereo, which runs on a generator, provides the soundtrack for disco Nihiwatu.

Some days we trek to a jungle waterfall for a dip;



sometimes we ride the smaller waves on boogie boards. The Nihiwatu staff invite us to chew betel nut on the porches of their homes and we oblige, although the bitter taste remains for 24 hours. Football at the local school breaks down language barriers and, as with most cultures, it is the children with whom we connect.

The night before we are finally to leave the island (we are assured the plane will fly), new guests arrive. The five in my group have become Sumba siblings and we are reticent to break the spell with the new arrivals. Two 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."

As we sip our last pina colodas, the sun dips below the horizon to expose 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 else has died – and we can't leave without a funeral.

**Getting there:** Cathay Pacific ([www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com)) flies from Hong Kong to Denpasar, Bali. Connecting domestic flights to Sumba can be booked through Nihiwatu Resort. Resort rates start at US\$300 a night for a hill-top bungalow, including transfers, three meals a day, snacks and non-alcoholic drinks. Visit [www.selecthotels.com](http://www.selecthotels.com). For more information, call 62 361 757 149 or visit [www.nihiwatu.com](http://www.nihiwatu.com).