

THE  TIMES

L U X



EXTRA GLAMOUR



SPIRIT GUIDE

LISA GRAINGER IS THE FIRST JOURNALIST TO VISIT AN EXTRAORDINARY NEW HOTEL DEVELOPMENT ON SUMBA, A REMOTE INDONESIAN ISLAND WHERE SHAMANS STILL HOLD SWAY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX GRABCHILEV



WHEN A NATIVE SUMBESE person builds a house, traditionally with bamboo, wood and thatch, it will have three storeys. The first floor will house animals; the second, humans; and the third – a soaring, sometimes 25m-tall spire – will be reserved for ancestral spirits.

Spirits don't just make an occasional appearance in the life of a Sumbese animist. They're omnipresent. Which is why in many villages on this wild, "lost" Indonesian island of Sumba the dead are never far away. When a villager dies, often their embalmed body is kept at home for weeks or months. When the auspicious day comes to inter them, they will be carried with great ceremony, sometimes on the island's famously sturdy horses, to one of the megalithic tombs. There they will be sat upright, surrounded by the skeletons of their relatives. Pig hearts and chicken gizzards will be consulted by the rato, or shaman, to keep lines of communication open to the spirit world. Buffalo will be slaughtered on a sacrificial rock beside a pole from which, until the late 1990s, the heads of enemies were hung. Then, after a feast, everyone will go home – perhaps with another animal skull to dry and hang in the rafters to commemorate the occasion.

Sitting cross-legged beneath the shaggy palm roof of the head rato's house in the village of Buku Bani, on the island's west coast, I can feel my skin prickling as I look around. On the rafters above my head lurk rows of creamy skulls of indeterminate grimacing creatures, with and without teeth and tusks. On the walls, the empty eye sockets of slaughtered buffalo stare blackly. And before me sit ten wizened men, draped in colourful cloth and crowned with orange and red feathered headdresses, chanting and peering at the bloody gizzards of a chicken they've just beheaded to determine the future.

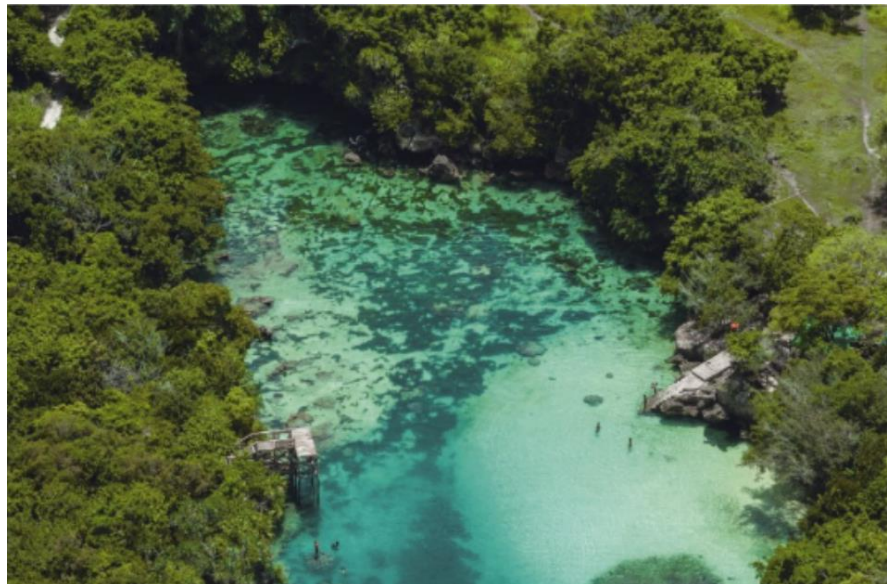
Without the presence of Fabrice and Evguenia Ivara, the owners of the nearby Cap Karoso hotel, and their village interpreter, I might not have hung around these fierce-eyed warriors and their arm-length machetes for long. But the French couple look

pretty relaxed. Since they bought three hectares of beachside land just up the road six years ago, they've become regular visitors to Buku Bani, giving villagers access to the hotel's borehole water (a precious commodity in Indonesia's driest region) and offering them buffalo to slaughter. The villagers have visited them too. At the inauguration of Cap Karoso, Evguenia tells me, more than 600 Sumbese arrived – including a contingent of feather-crowned shamans to give the project their blessing. "They're our new neighbours," she says with a typical Gallic shrug. "It's important we work well together."

They might be neighbours, but their lives could not be more different. Before the French couple left Paris in 2017, Fabrice, now 45, owned a successful online reputation consultancy and Evguenia, 40, worked in marketing for LVMH. Neither of the busy professionals had travelled much, so when Fabrice sold his business they decided to go adventuring. First they visited the Maldives, "but there was no culture; it was too Disney – and a rip-off", Evguenia says. They tried Bali, "but it wasn't for us. We didn't have tattoos, we didn't like traffic, we weren't vegan." When they arrived in Sumba, however, "and saw the wild tracts of forest, the blue water, the beautiful landscapes, we thought: 'This is us: it's adventure, it's real travel. Maybe we could stay. Maybe we could build a little guesthouse. Maybe we could have a little farm...'"

Cap Karoso, named after the westerly point on which their lighthouse now stands, is certainly no "little guesthouse". Set on three hectares, alongside another three they've rented from a neighbour (and investor) to create a vegetable garden, the modernist concrete resort spills down the gentle coastal slope like a futuristic township.

At the entrance, a triple-height wall lined with rust-coloured strings of ikat fabric glows above a "desk" of four partially polished blocks of travertine marble. Beyond that is an open-plan restaurant space with a communal table of 28 to accommodate a roster of visiting Michelin-star chefs. Then there's a rooftop,



Cap Karoso hotel on Sumba in Indonesia.
Right: the lagoon at Weekuri

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adults-only infinity pool and a tapas bar for casual Balinese-Basque tapas platters. And below – beyond the ten-room spa shaded by four thatched towers – spill layers of plant-roofed buildings housing 47 rooms, from studios to beach suites, and 20 villas with two and three bedrooms, more than half of which have already sold for between \$398,000 and \$1.68 million.

When I visit in late January the hotel is only a third finished. But considering the challenges of opening on a remote island – with the port an eight-hour drive away, changeable bureaucracy, strict food import laws and only basic stores – completing even this much is testament not only to the couple's gutsiness but their vision. When it's finished it could be one of loveliest beach hotels in Indonesia.

Its brutalist concrete shell is the work of the acclaimed Bali-based architect Gary Fell, and is softened by the jungly gardens and pared-back contemporary interiors of Bitte Design Studio, which is based in the capital, Jakarta. The Ivaras have succeeded in creating spaces that bring together European design sensibilities and Indonesian culture. Contemporary wood and string chairs sit beside betel-nut bags and Sumbese sculptures; bamboo fishing-net lamps next to Sumba-inspired contemporary art.

Evguenia is particularly proud of the art. She designed the enormous string-based installation at the reception herself, made by the master ikat weaver Kornelis Ndapakamang. The rest she commissioned: bespoke abstracts alluding to cultural icons by Yuki Nakayama, paper tapestries by Ines Katamso, contemporary woven panels by Alexander Sebastianus, and the menus' Sumba-inspired graphics by Claire Prouvost. Once the hotel is open – hopefully in the summer – a rotation of international artists will be invited to exhibit and give talks, alongside chefs, musicians, mixologists and DJs.

The idea is that there's always something interesting to do in the hotel, after, perhaps, a half-day excursion in electric Mini Mokes to the island's only Muslim village, Pero, where pretty dugout canoes are moored in the emerald bay. Or a walk around Sumba's tallest houses at nearby Ratenggaro, where tombs black with age are watched over by wild-eyed people with pointed teeth, and lips stained red by betel nuts. Or a trip to the palest turquoise lagoon at Weekuri for a picnic breakfast overlooking the ocean.

Although, of course, it's possible you may not want to leave the hotel at all. Teena Ngongo, the lead therapist at the thatched spa, exudes sunniness and delivers remarkably powerful (given her diminutive frame), herb-scented massages. The cheery local barman were trained for six days by Nico de Soto of Mace bar in New York (voted one of the World's 50 Best), and deliver tasty concoctions from cucumber-scented gin martinis to pandan-flavoured piña colodas. There are two pools, one with pretty

rattan daybeds sprinkled between coconut palms, overlooking a sea lagoon.

And then there's a French chef. The Burgundy-born Antoine le Vacon – who has worked at Les Airelles in Courchevel – has been at his stove for only one day when I arrive. Not that you'd know it. Working with Fabrice, who is a serious foodie and author of the gourmet blog *Coup de Fourchette*, he has already created the Mediterranean-meets-Indonesian menu, which over three days I willingly help to test.

Because of the remoteness of the island, all the produce has to be either grown in the hotel's organic veg garden or sourced from local farmers, so it is very fresh. Lunch might be just-caught squid, for instance, with sambal and curried mayonnaise. Or fish crudo with ponzu sauce. Or pizzas cooked in their Acunto oven, imported from Naples, followed by mango tiramisu. It's the sort of cuisine you might expect in St Tropez or Santorini, but certainly not on a remote, little-explored island. If this hotel works,

the couple hope to roll out their own brand of the FrenchMan eco-friendly and sustainable hotels, in which, like at Cap Karoso, they filter their own water, generate most of their electricity and hot water from solar panels, source their food locally and donate 2 per cent of each visitor's bill to community projects.

On a "lost" island like Sumba, where most of the 800,000 or so people still live a hand-to-mouth existence as their ancestors did, and where malnutrition is widespread, life expectancy poor and education limited, the opportunities offered by this hotel could be life-changing. As I sit on the beach looking over the lagoon at low tide, I count more than 100 Sumbese people trying to fish in dugout canoes, catch miniature crabs in rockpools or dig up worms.

"Before doing a spa job, I didn't know about hospitality," Ngongo tells me at one point. "I couldn't make any money. I grew rice and corn. We tried to find food from the sea. Now I can support my family. And I can help other people on my island to know about it too. Everything can improve."

IF ANY HOTEL can hold its head high for improving the lot of its community, it's the island's original five-star hotel, the legendary Nihi Sumba.

When its founders, Claude and Petra Graves, arrived in 1988 to surf the island's mammoth waves in the southwest, they camped. Their life was pretty much like everyone else's in the villages around them: they lived in the forest, suffered with malaria, struggled to find fresh water. So when they decided to build a little hotel on Nihiwatu beach, the wellbeing of the community was at the heart of their project.

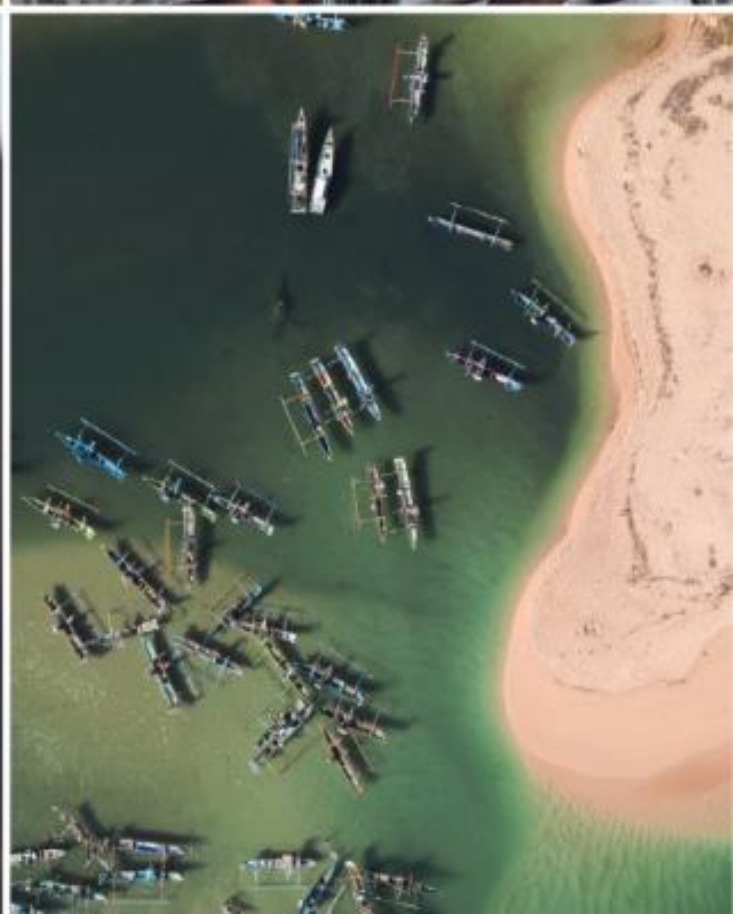
Today, 22 years after they launched the Sumba Foundation, and 11 years after the American financier Chris Burch and the hotelier James McBride bought the hotel, the foundation has become the area's unofficial NHS, water board, school board and hospitality college. So far, with donations from the hotel and guests, they have dug 80 wells, giving more than 30,000 people access to water. They have built five health clinics, serving 400 villages within 200 sq km. They have fed thousands of malnourished children each week, taught organic farming and lent agricultural equipment.

Although, staying at the hotel, you would never know any of this was happening. You could just bury your head in the 2.5km stretch of white-sanded Nihiwatu beach that fronts this world-class resort and have a fabulous holiday.

Unlike Cap Karoso, whose rooms lie on a gentle slope of the dry, rocky west, Nihi Sumba is set within 567 acres of steep, jungly forest. Its 27 Indonesian-style villas (some with their own pools and gardens) are sprinkled between the trees. If you fancied it, you could see no one else but the sweet staff for the whole of your stay, hence its popularity with guests such as the Beckhams, Ed Sheeran and Jennifer



A villa at Cap Karoso designed by the Bali-based architect Gary Fell. Opposite: a Sumbese village; a rato or shaman at Buku Bani; fishing boats moored in the lagoon at Pero; a Sumbese woman





Guests at Nihi Sumba can ride horses or even swim with them at Nihiwatu beach. Below: a bedroom at Nihi Sumba

Lawrence. Or you could, as many guests apparently do, make lifelong friends and return annually, trying different activities every day – the full day spa safari, for instance, a two-hour jungle walk followed by treatments in an open-sided, thatched pagoda, listening to the waves crash below. Or hiking into the forest to spot some of the 200 native bird species. Or taking cooking lessons, going paddleboarding, surfing on the famous 300m-long “God’s Left” wave, or fishing for creatures to eat in the six-seat Japanese restaurant (which serves by far the best food at the resort). And, of course, going horse riding.

On Sumba, every teenage boy who can lay his hands on a horse will have one. At Cap Karoso, villages often thunder by on their tough little steeds (which were developed on the island from horses gifted by the Middle East in exchange for sandalwood) practising for the Pasola: the island’s most anticipated festival in which tribal knights charge at each other with wooden lances. Nihi Sumba’s 22 horses, housed in stables beside the beach, are let out for regular gallops. Guests can ride them on the sand and in the sea because they can swim – which feels as magical as it looks.

That is, the guests who leave their rooms. Each of the villas at Nihi Sumba is different: there



are Robinson Crusoe-style treehouses and elegant Sumbese-roofed cottages, honeymoon hideouts and family duplexes with big tropical gardens, all with romantic netted beds and private pools, some with outdoor bath tubs and poolside salas.

My mistake was going to Nihi Sumba for only two days. Even if you take the most comfortable route from London – Singapore Airlines with meet-and-greet services from Original Travel to help to fast-track connections – it takes almost 30 hours to get there. And because the island is twice the size of Bali, journeys between hotels can take hours.

Sumba has only about 25,000 visitors a year, mainly backpackers and adventurers. But with these five-star stays firmly on the map, and the recent opening of two other “barefoot luxury” resorts, Alamayah and Lelewatu, those numbers are about to increase dramatically. That is, if the spirits approve. *Doubles at Cap Karoso from £308 B&B (capkaroso.com); at Nihi Sumba from £872 full board (nihi.com). Original Travel can arrange an 11-night trip to Bali and Sumba from £6,970pp, based on two sharing and including flights and transfers, four nights full board at Nihi, three nights’ B&B at Cap Karoso and four nights’ B&B in Bali (originaltravel.co.uk). For more information visit sumbafoundation.org*