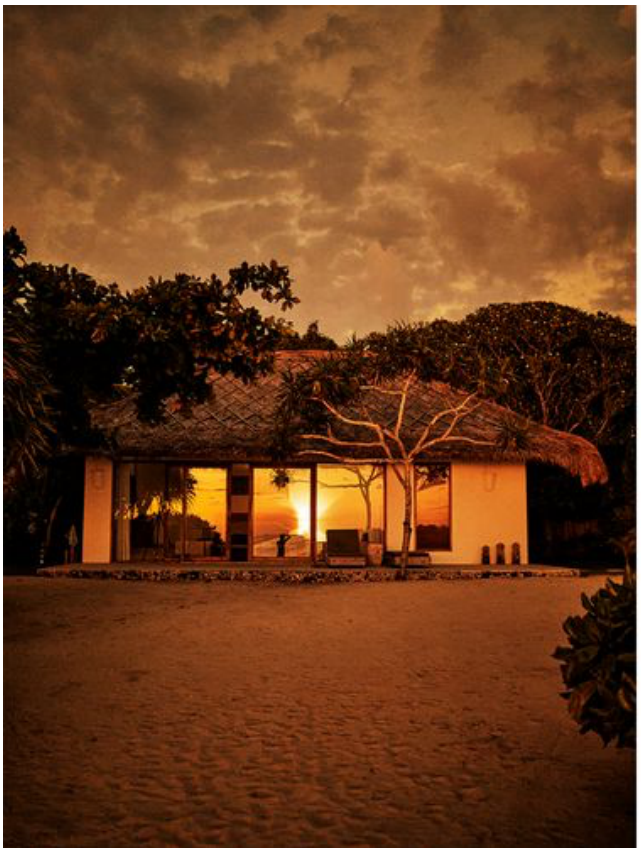
For miles, the only buildings we saw were traditional bamboo houses, their towering thatch roofs poking up above the trees. It was early September and my wife, Charlie, and I were driving south from Tambolaka Airport on the Indonesian island of Sumba. The place was still in the grip of its long dry season. All around us, a landscape of parched, golden grassland was dotted with villages. Buffalo grazed in the fields. Along the road we passed young men riding bareback on lean, sinewy horses. The rice fields were punctuated with billowing white flags to scare the birds away.



From left: Sunset reflected in the windows of a villa at the Sanubari, a resort on the island of Sumba; the lobby at the Alamayah hotel. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

Sumba is only an hour by plane from Bali, but I felt like I'd been taken to a different world. Bali has been one of the most popular holiday islands for decades. Its best beaches are lined with hotels, and many of its roads crowded with traffic. On Sumba, by contrast, the outside world seems hardly to have intruded.

From left: The conical roofs of a typical Sumbanese village; a student at the Sumba Hospitality Foundation's hotel school, which runs the Maringi Sumba resort. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

But now the island, which is home to about 800,000 people, is undergoing a slow and delicate metamorphosis. Charlie and I were on our way to Alamayah, a tiny hotel on the southwestern coast that opened in early 2020, promptly closed because of COVID, and relaunched in mid 2022. It is one of three hotels that are beginning to lure a trickle of visitors to this wild corner of the Indonesian archipelago.

From left: The Weekacura waterfalls in western Sumba; a gardener and his students at the Sumba Hospitality Foundation's organic farm. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

Alamayah is more like a house than a hotel, resembling a Mediterranean villa with a whitewashed exterior and doorless archways of pale stone. When we arrived in the baking afternoon heat, a breeze was blowing from the sea through the grove of coconut palms that separates the hotel from the beach. We were ushered through a garden with ornamental ponds full of lilies and colorful fish, then into the cool, open-plan ground floor, which has a bar, deep sofas in mint green, and a long communal dining table. Two German teenagers were playing a voluble game of pool while their parents lounged under umbrellas outside. The hotel's scale lends it a stylishly domestic atmosphere: it has only six suites at the top of its curvaceous white staircase.

From left: Bamboo accents adorn a bungalow at Maringi Sumba; the beach at Cap Karoso. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

Alamayah was founded by an Australian couple, Daniel and Jess Leslie. The Leslies are surf fanatics who first came to Sumba in 2017, drawn by the perfect breaks that roll in from the Indian Ocean. They were so beguiled by the raw beauty of the island that a couple of months later they decided to quit their jobs in Melbourne, where Jess was an architect and Dan worked in construction, and move to Sumba full-time. “We’ve barely left since then,” Dan told me.

At the top we were greeted by a lagoon fed by a waterfall that tumbled over the limestone cliff above.

Back then Sumba had a single, ultra-high-end resort called Nihi Sumba, which was opened in 2001 as Nihiwatu by the American surfer Claude Graves and his German wife, Petra, and is now owned by entrepreneurs Chris Burch and James McBride. Nihi draws intrepid, well-heeled visitors with its luxurious isolation: guests pay upwards of $1,500 a night to stay in one of its secluded beachfront villas.

The Leslies wanted to create an alternative that offered high style at a more affordable price. And like the Greaveses before them, they also saw a chance to support Sumba itself. The island is poor — by some measures, the poorest in Indonesia — and most of its people scratch out a living through subsistence farming. “We had an ability to help the community,” Dan told me. The Leslies hired 120 people from nearby villages and trained them to build in stone rather than the wood traditionally used for housing on Sumba. Once Alamayah had been built, they hired many of those villagers to work as servers, chefs, gardeners, massage therapists, and guides.

After arriving at Alamayah that first afternoon, we went downstairs for a drink at the bar. We got talking to Herijuniar “Aditya” Sainjo, a 22-year-old bartender, as he mixed up a couple of delicious gin sours. Sainjo comes from a village in western Sumba whose evocative name, Lokory, translates as “lake of bones.” When he was growing up, he assumed he’d become a farmer like his parents, growing corn and beans. But now his hotel job has given him an alternative to that future — and a route to the world beyond the island.

From left: Elephant-ear leaves in the central Sumba village of Prai Ijing; children swimming near Mandorak Beach, a short distance from Cap Karoso. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

The next morning Charlie and I set about exploring. After a short drive along a rough, potholed track, we met up with a guide named Petrus, who led us on a trek through the jungle. At the start of the path was a steep uphill section that involved scaling 507 steps. Petrus, 68 years old and walking barefoot, gamboled up them without breaking a sweat, leaving us wheezing in his wake.

At the top we were greeted by a lagoon fed by a waterfall that tumbled over the limestone cliff above. We undressed on the boulders at the lagoon's edge and had a cooling swim. On the way back to the hotel we passed a parade of about a hundred people, all wearing clothes with traditional ikat designs, leading a small herd of buffalo. They were on their way to a village ceremony. Animals play a central role in the ritual life of the island.

From left: Traditional Sumbanese houses at the village of Ratenggaro; the pool at Alamayah. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

That afternoon we traveled up the hill behind Alamayah to the village of Yarowora. With us was Alexis "Lexi" Togu Pote, who was hired to help build Alamayah and now works at the resort. Pote was born in Yarowora and still lives there with his family in a bamboo house, one of about 35 arranged in family clusters. That day a new dwelling was going up — a grand collective endeavor involving most of the men and boys, who were ferrying lengths of bamboo along dusty pathways toward a building site.

Many Sumbanese still hold to their Indigenous faith, Marapu, which is based on ancestor worship. The tall roofs of their houses are designed to promote a harmonious relationship between the living and the dead, who are buried in huge megalithic tombs in the village. Their spirits are thought to live in the towers of the houses, and families store sacred heirlooms up there to propitiate them.

From left: One of Cap Karoso's two-bedroom villas; a staff member in uniform at Cap Karoso. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

Pote showed us to his house and beckoned us inside. Lining the doorway were buffalo skulls, stacked eight high, along with pigs' jawbones strung up like bunting. In Marapu, he explained, animal sacrifice is associated with good fortune. Every special occasion on Sumba — be it a wedding, a funeral, or the construction of a new house — is marked by sacrifice. "The more skulls you have, the luckier you are," Pote said, gesturing toward his collection. Inside we sat down on bamboo platforms to drink coffee and chew betel — a small, bitter, gently stimulating nut that turns your lips and teeth red.

> The arrival of tourism in a place where ancient tradition holds sway can be fraught, which is why the islanders and the hoteliers who are coming to Sumba are embracing one another so carefully.

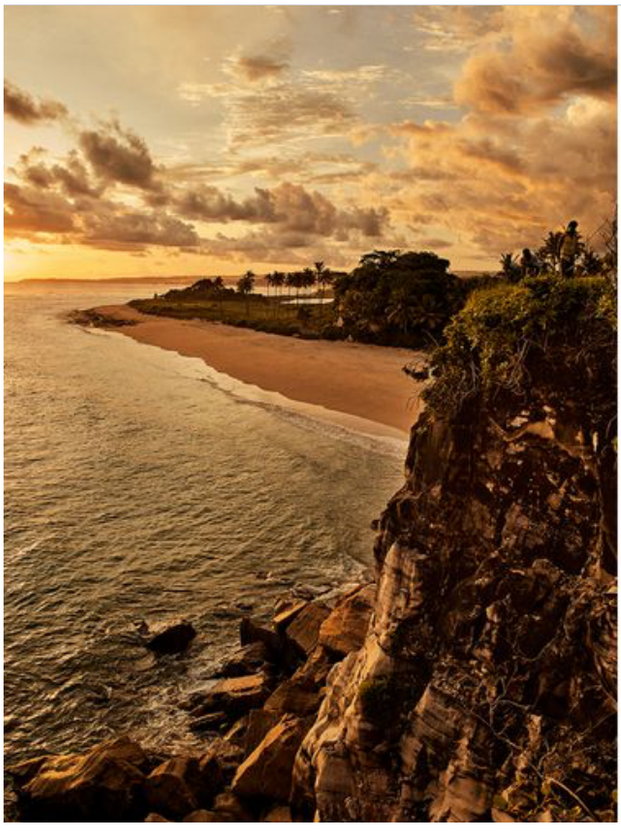
Sumbanese houses are richly ceremonial as well as domestic, Pote explained. Their dark interiors are divided between these two functions. Only men are allowed to occupy the ceremonial side, where precious possessions are kept and the dead are laid out for burial. A central fire was burning. Smoke from the embers percolated up through an array of woven baskets hanging from the rafters and up into the tower. As Pote showed us around, his wife tended the stove while one of their children napped under a mosquito net.

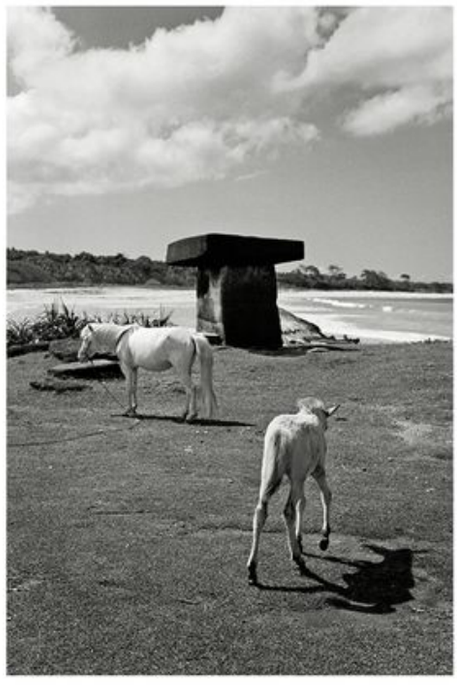
From left: A view of the Air Terjun Matayangu waterfall; the Sumbanese jungle at night. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

The arrival of tourism in a place where ancient tradition holds sway can be fraught, which is why the islanders and the hoteliers who are coming to Sumba are embracing one another so carefully. Opening a hotel on Sumba involves a long and delicate process of persuasion, and it can take many years of patient ingratiation before the islanders accept new arrivals.

One afternoon we borrowed a motorbike from Alamayah and took a ride up the coast to the Sanubari, a hotel that opened in the summer of 2022. When we visited, Indonesia had just celebrated Independence Day, and the villages we rode through were decorated with red and white Indonesian flags. Eventually we turned off the road onto a bumpy, unpaved track that led through rice fields toward the hotel, which occupies almost 300 acres of reserve along a glorious white-sand beach.

There we met Rowan Hopi, an affable Anglo-Australian who is one of the Sanubari's cofounders. "The island is in a state of transition," he explained. "You've got this younger generation, who have Internet and friends with jobs in Bali who are bringing money in, who want a more modern life. And you have the older generation, some of whom are a bit confused by it and find it hard to adjust." Before opening the Sanubari, Hopi and his Bali-based business partners had to work hard to bridge the divide between modern commerce and Sumba's spiritual life. "We went to a lot of ceremonies, some to see if we were worthy of the ancestors," Hopi said. It took them four years to get approval to start building.





From left: Watu Bella Beach, on Sumba's southwestern coast between the Sanubari and Alamayah hotels; horses and a megalith tombstone in the village of Ratenggaro. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

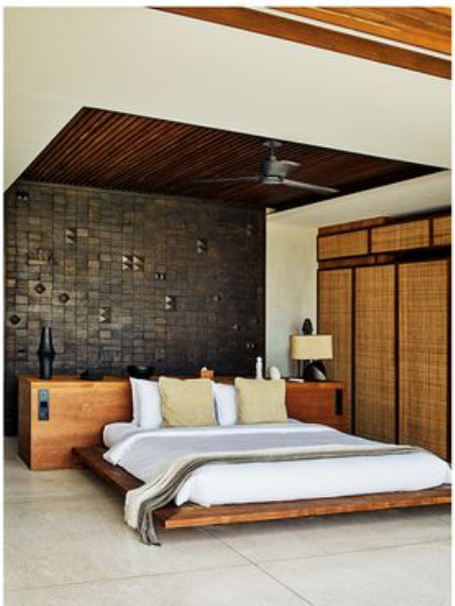
Like Alamayah, the Sanubari is tiny. It has nine villas, most with their own pool, and a wooden beachside restaurant with a roof, held up by carved pillars, is modeled on that of a traditional house. The villas are hidden so discreetly in the landscape that from the restaurant you can't see them at all. As we sat down to a late lunch of black-pepper chicken and beer, we watched glinting waves rumble onto the beach. At one point greeny-blue iridescent flashes appeared in the surf: dolphinfish leaping from the waves.

In some ways, the person most responsible for preparing Sumba for tourism is a Belgian, Inge de Lathauwer. Before she visited the island for the first time in 2013, de Lathauwer had worked in both philanthropy and the hotel business. She knew that visitors could bring jobs and prosperity, but she also knew that unless Sumba had a means of training its people to participate in this new economy, they would be excluded from it.

Many Sumbanese still hold to their Indigenous faith, Marapu, which is based on ancestor worship. The tall roofs of their houses are designed to promote a harmonious relationship between the living and the dead, who are buried in huge megalithic tombs in the village.

De Lathauwer decided to build a hotel with its own hospitality school and permaculture farm. She opened Maringi on Sumba's northern coast in 2016. Located on the same site is the Sumba Hospitality Foundation, whose students live on campus and work at the hotel, learning on the job. When Charlie and I arrived at Maringi, we were guided to the bamboo pavilion where we would stay, one of nine set amid the shady garden or around the pool. Its cylindrical shape and oval windows and doors gave it a cocooning softness. The students, dressed in neatly pressed blue-and-white uniforms, went about their work impeccably. When we arrived in the dining room to eat that evening we were greeted by three smiling waiters, standing in a line with their hands behind their backs, and a careful recitation of the menu.

Students come for a year and are divided among five different departments: housekeeping, the restaurant and bar, the kitchen, the spa, and the front office. They all take intensive English classes three times a week. The next morning, I was walking through the hotel grounds when I came across a cavernous open-sided classroom where an English lesson was in full swing. Nearby some of the other students were tending to the hotel farm, where crops like passion fruit, guava, banana, and pineapple are grown in neat rows.



From left: A bedroom in a Cap Karoso villa; the coast near the road to Cap Karoso. PHOTO: FREDERIC LAGRANGE

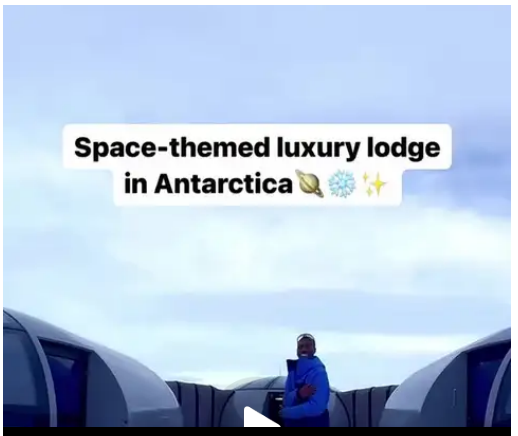
For young people on the island, the foundation's school serves as a gateway to the wider world. Back when she started the place, de Lathauwer established an internship program with Nihi, which gave her students a taste of international tourism. (Nihi also partners with another philanthropic organization, the Sumba Foundation, which aims to reduce poverty and improve public health on the island.)

De Lathauwer's pupils have gone on to work in hotels throughout Indonesia and farther afield in places like Dubai and the Maldives. Now, though, the success of the Sumba Hospitality Foundation is helping lure hoteliers to Sumba, too.

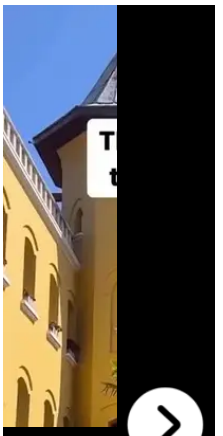
"Without it we wouldn't have come here," said Evguenia Ivara, a French hotelier who, along with her husband Fabrice, opened Cap Karoso on Sumba's western tip last March. Cap Karoso is the largest of the island's new hotels. Designed by Gary Fell, a British architect now based in Bali, it has 44 rooms and 20 villas in a complex of Modernist buildings whose flat roofs are covered in plants and soft, feathery grasses. The Ivaras have created a cultural destination as well as a beachfront one. Their "Talent Residency" program is luring chefs, artists, and designers from around the world, who work at Cap Karoso for weeks or months at a time, absorbing inspiration from the island. As at the Sanubari, opening the hotel involved meeting with village elders one by one. "The local people demanded ancestral approval before we began construction," Fabrice said. So far, the Ivaras have hired about 60 staffers from the Sumba Hospitality Foundation. "A resort like ours requires a lot of locals," Fabrice said.

Tourism may be coming to Sumba, but its arrival is gradual. The islanders are controlling the pace of change, to give themselves time to adapt to this new ecosystem and to benefit from it. Thanks to the foundation, Cap Karoso's new hires are both well trained and connected to the island and its culture. As Fabrice put it, "You need the right people."

A Lakeside Getaway to One of Italy's Most Exclusive...



Chilling in the White Desert of Antarctica



The Hot

Powered by Firework

Where to Stay on Sumba

Alamayah: A stylish, Modernist boutique hotel with six suites.

Cap Karoso: The newest and largest hotel on Sumba is attached to a farm that supplies the on-site restaurant.

Maringi Sumba**:** Bamboo pavilions are set among several acres of gardens. It is staffed by students from the Sumba Hospitality Foundation.

Nihi Sumba: The beachside villas at Nihi offer the most luxurious accommodation on Sumba.

The Sanubari: This secluded property, set on a private beach, offers such experiences as surfside horseback rides and tours of local villages.

A version of this story first appeared in the February 2024 issue of Travel + Leisure *under the headline "Simply Sumba."*

Was this page helpful?