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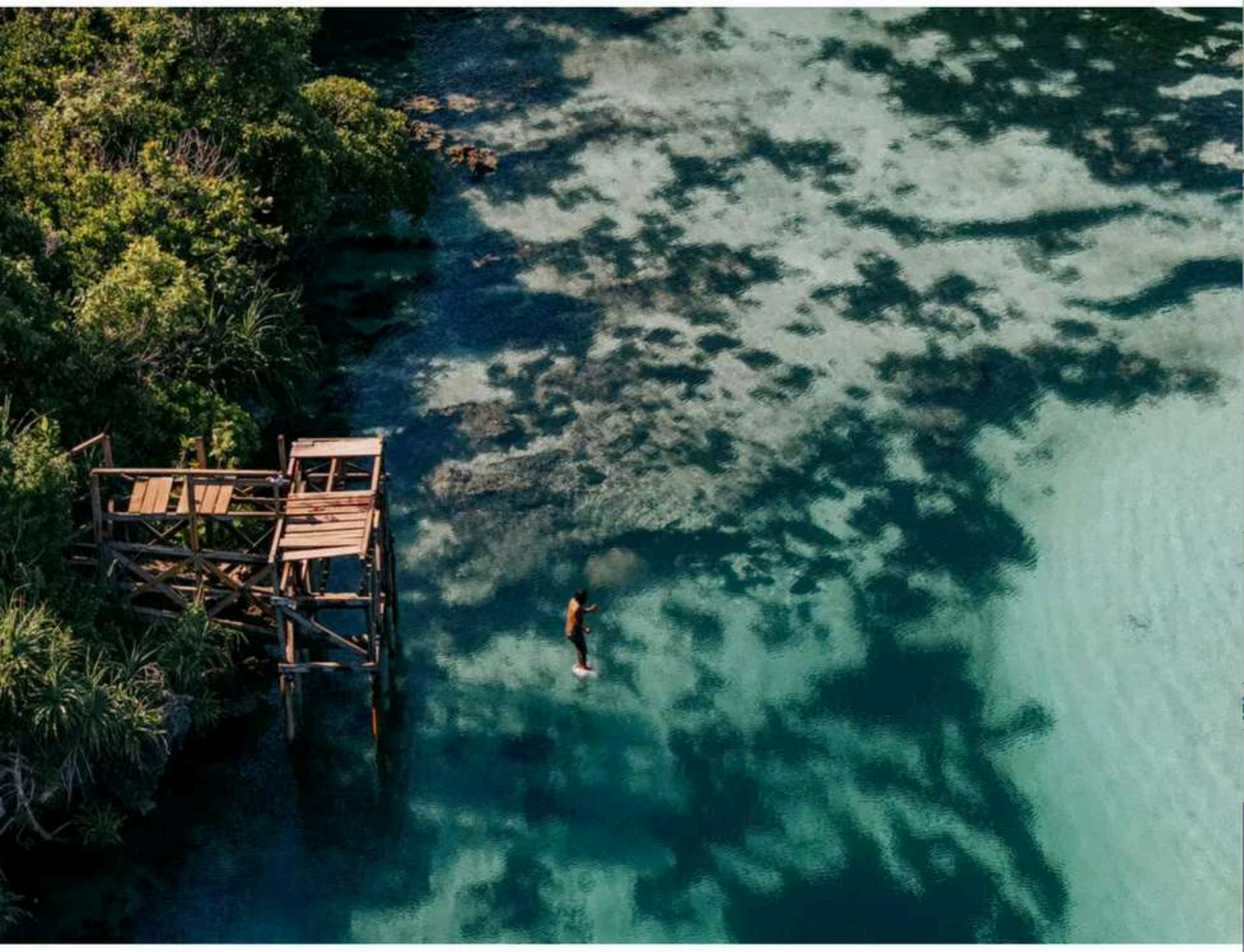
Houses in the village of Buku Bani. In the animist religion of Sumba, ancestors guide the living from above, so the traditional thatched roofs reach for a connection.

Sumba Is Not Bali. That Is the Point.

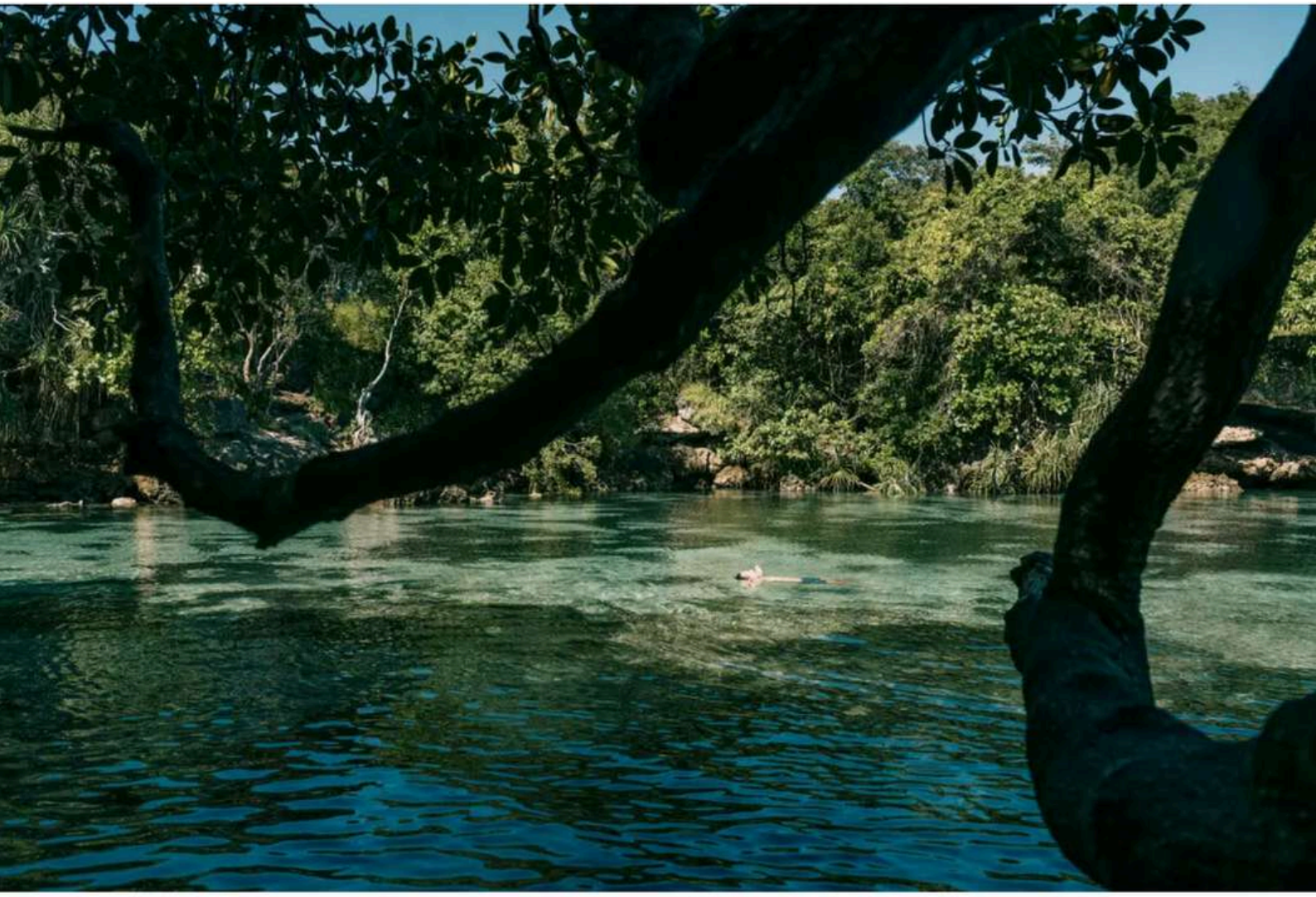
Just an hour away from the more famous vacation spot, the island does not have traffic jams, digital nomads or DJ parties. It does have deserted beaches, surfing spots and a low-key charm.

After a motorbike ride down an empty road, my daughter and I found ourselves jumping off a high wooden platform into a deep lagoon with salt-white sand, healthy coral — and no one else around.

As the Indian Ocean splashed, we swam, jumped again and laughed. We lost track of time.



The writer and his daughter had this wooden diving platform in Wakuri lagoon to themselves.



The deep lagoon has salt-white sand and healthy coral to explore.

Maybe we were just lucky. The platform had to have been built by someone, for the fun of many. But it was neither the first nor last time that we felt practically alone in Sumba.

Sumba, one of Indonesia's easternmost islands, is just an hour's flight from Bali. But Sumba is as quiet as Bali is thumping. There are no digital nomads, DJ parties or drones at sunset.

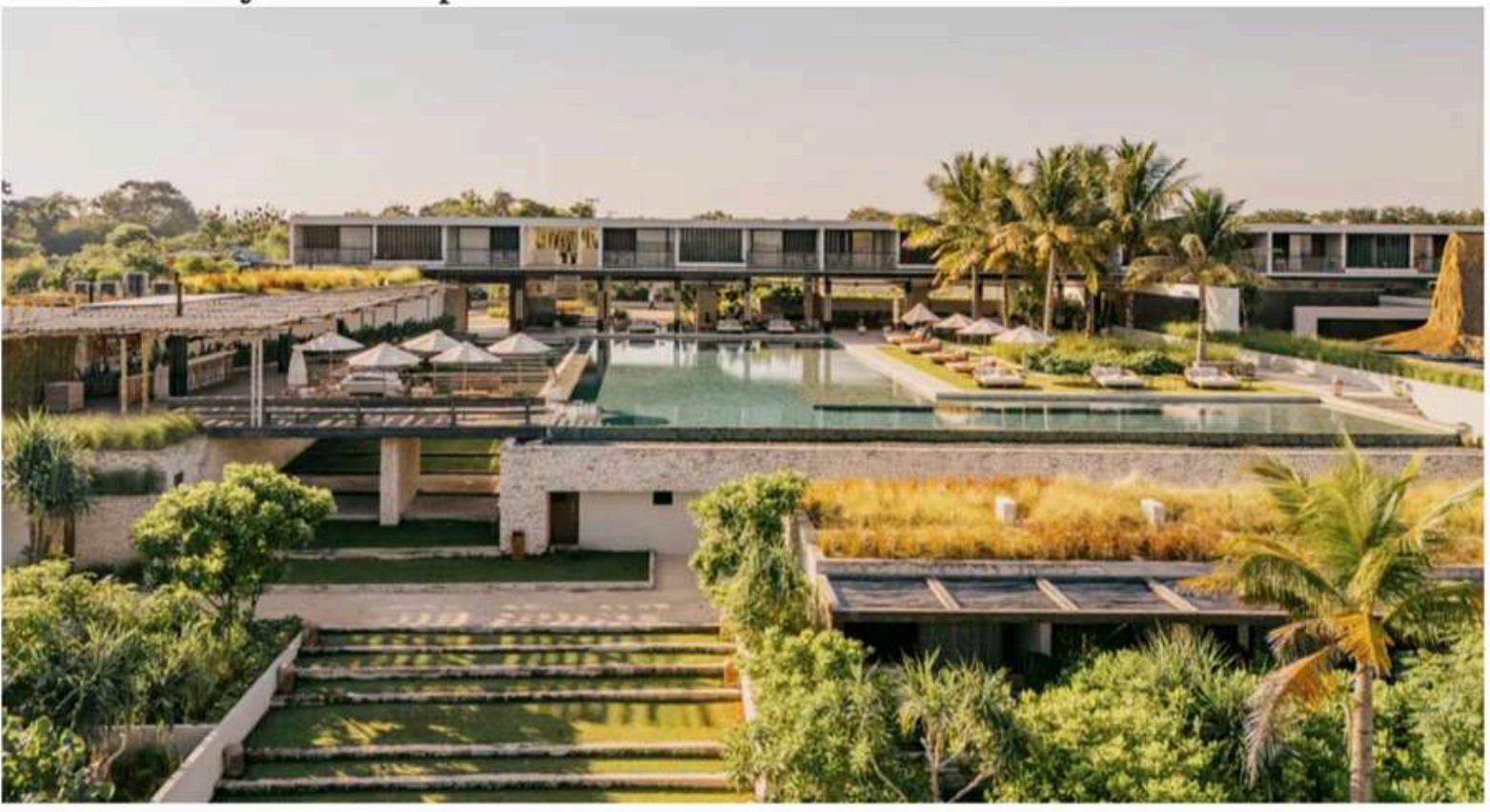
The island is twice the size of Bali with one-fifth the population. The airport is a walk-across-the-tarmac affair with one baggage carousel and, on the 40-minute drive to our hotel, we saw maybe a dozen people.

Whether Sumba can remain an anti-Bali is a question. It's just starting to reach a tipping point with enough hotel development and word-of-mouth buzz to draw more than just surf-crazy adventurers and celebrities with blank-check budgets.

We heard about it from surfer friends in Sydney, and when we planned a trip two months before departure, most of the island's handful of hotels (ranging from $180 per night for a double at Sumba Beach House to $1,300 for the award-winning Nihi Sumba) were booked.

Some would argue that means go now. Others will tell you, as they told us, that Sumba can never be Bali for many reasons, from infrastructure to size and local culture, which requires a great deal of community trust-building and approvals before anything gets built.

"There's just not much here," said Kiri Desborough, the wellness director at Cap Karoso, the hotel where we eventually ended up for a four-night stay, which is privately owned and still feels manageable and intimate. "It's a very different place."



The Cap Karoso hotel, with 44 guest rooms and 20 villas on more than three acres, is as big as resorts get on Sumba.

Room to spread out

Having come from Bali, we immediately noticed a difference in the landscape. Geologically, Sumba is an Australian continental fragment that drifted north, which means no volcanoes or towering cliffs. It's mostly plains of grass and corn, which serve as animal feed.

David Garcia, Cap Karoso's general manager, explains the hotel's ethos: "There's a lot to do, or this can be the perfect place to do nothing."

The hotel bar offers views of the sunset.

Space is part of the appeal, and like the other hotels spread across the island, Cap Karoso has made the most of it. The two-year-old property has 44 guest rooms and 20 villas on more than three acres of hilly land that rolls toward Karoso beach.

None of the major hotel chains have set up shop on Sumba so Cap Karoso is as big as it gets.

The owners are a French couple — Evguenia and Fabrice Ivara, a former luxury goods brand manager and a digital ad agency entrepreneur. Their aesthetic is minimalist, with modernist furniture and airy buildings, featuring plants on the rooftops and lemongrass bushes lining the walkways. We passed the hotel's organic farm on our way to the lobby.

Bananas grow at the farm at Sumba Hospitality Foundation, where many of Cap Karoso's employees have trained.

A piglet at the organic farm maintained by the Cap Koroso hotel.

Upon arrival, David Garcia, the general manager, welcomed us and explained the hotel's ethos: "There's a lot to do, or this can be the perfect place to do nothing."

After an around-the-world lunch at the beach club (poke bowl, pizza, bao buns and a club sandwich, for about $50), my family — myself, my wife and our two teenage children — chose to be active. We went for a surf with the hotel's longboards, which were free to use. It was a bit of a paddle into smallish waves, but the water was crystal clear.

The next day we embarked on a snorkeling trip that was included with our room rate. Our guides were chill — they brought spear guns and caught a red snapper for dinner — and there were only a few other boats on the water. Underwater, I've seen a wider array of fish in other places, but in a time of climate change and coral bleaching, the colors and health of the reefs brought a sense of deep relief.

Then, after our lagoon adventure, we booked a half-day surf trip, which sent us with a guide around the southwestern tip of Sumba. We bounced down dirt roads through traditional villages with thatched roofs standing several stories high. Officially, Sumba is mostly Catholic, but in the ancient animist religion of the island, ancestors or "marapu" guide the living from above so the traditional homes (and some government buildings) reach for a connection.

The gardens at Cap Karoso hotel, where the property rolls down toward the beach.

Nasi Goreng, or fried rice, from the hotel's Beach Club restaurant.

Wainyapu Beach offered perfect waves for a family of intermediate-level surfers.

Wainyapu, our destination, sat just beyond a river mouth and a village. There was no one else in the water. The waves were four to five feet, soft, clean and tons of fun for us intermediates — probably the best place we'd ever surfed together as a family.

Our guide, Julianto, said he came to Sumba for exactly that kind of experience, after growing up in West Java and working in more crowded places.

"Bali has so many people," he said. "I love Sumba because Sumba is still nature."

The Sumba Hospitality Foundation educates workers for the island's tourist industry and has on-site hotel rooms.

A view into one of the on-site hotel rooms at the foundation.

Students take a sewing class at the foundation.

The foundation has its own thatched-roof yoga studio.

The foundation's training restaurant, Makan Dulu.

Mr. Garcia told me that 90 percent of the hotel staff is Sumbanese. Many of them were trained through a partnership with the Sumba Hospitality Foundation, a local nonprofit, and perhaps because tourism is still so new and seems to be delivering local benefits, the relationship of guest, staff and community felt warm and unjaded.

Children from a nearby village swam at the edge of the hotel beach, waving, smiling and trying out a little English. When my daughter and I got lost on our way to the lagoon, locals pointed us in the right direction with a smile.

A place to relax

We managed to do a bit of nothing too. Sunsets by the main pool, which sits slightly higher than the villas, offered amazing views of sky, sea and a lighthouse in the distance.

One night, my wife and I signed up for dinner at Julang, Cap Karoso's fine-dining option featuring guest chefs who serve guests at a single long table from an open kitchen.

A dish of eggplant from the Cap Karoso farm served with a honey and herb emulsion at Julang, the hotel's fine-dining restaurant.

Local yellowfin tuna. with the hotel farm's tomatoes and fermented coriander seeds at Julang.

There were only six of us there for a meal from Robbie Noble, a British-raised chef based in Melbourne, Australia. His menu leaned into local seafood, offering chilled crab tea, grilled octopus (with tahini and shallots) and a steamed mahi mahi dish with morning glory, otherwise known as water spinach.

We worked through it all with a pair of American expats living in Amsterdam and a British couple who told us about their courtship on a 30,000-mile motorcycle trip from Alaska to Patagonia.

Luxury in remoteness can be costly: The prix fixe meal at Julang was around $90 per person, without wine; doubles at Cap Karoso start at $325, two-bedroom duplexes at $750 and three-bedrooms can cost as much as $4,000 per night.

More reasonable options at smaller boutique hotels or homes are available, if you book early. At all of them, you're likely to be on site for most meals and activities since other development is sparse (though the kitchen staff did mention a karaoke bar near the airport).

A local funeral celebration on the island.

Sumbanese wear sarongs at the funeral celebration.

A man dressed for the funeral celebration.

Participants in the funeral celebration. The island is officially Catholic, but other

Sumba's balance at the moment, with nature, its staff and food offerings like freshly baked pastries every morning, feels extravagant and fragile. As always, the rich-visitor poor-local divide risks distorting the culture of a place that has persisted, largely unchanged, for hundreds if not thousands of years.

At the lagoon, for example, a handful of vendors have set up stalls to sell local crafts and when we left, a few men and boys competed for who should be paid a small parking fee.

But compared to Bali — or much of Thailand, or Fiji, or so many other places — Sumba still feels like a secret getaway, a place to clear the mind, enjoy the breezes and the sea, and most of all, avoid the crowds.

"We don't have the infrastructure for a Four Seasons," said Ms. Desborough, who recently launched a seven-day wellness experience, with immersion into the nature, community and shamanic practices of the island. "And to be honest, we're OK with that."

Fishing at sunset on Karoso beach. The island still feels like a secret getaway.

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Damien Cave leads The Times's new bureau in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, covering shifts in power across Asia and the wider world.