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The luxury Nihiwatu resort offers visitors seclusion, sand and surf as well as an authentic Indonesian experience.

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THE BEGINNING OF the story sounds like a prequel to a surfing movie: American surfer Claude Graves and his wife Petra hiked a small Indonesian island, east of Bali, in search of the perfect wave. They found it in 1988 on the south-west coast of Sumba; a consistent left-hand break off a remarkable stretch of white sand. They pitched their tent and set about building a paradise for surfers.

Graves secured land rights and built a small group of thatched villas, called Nihiwatu, so others could come and ride the wave. Named Occy's Left in honour of Australian surfer Mark Occhilupo, for almost 30 years it was one of a small number of private waves in the world, with just 10 surfers allowed to experience it at a time. Occy's Left remained under the radar of most until James McBride, former managing director of New York's The Carlyle hotel, received a phone call from entrepreneur and old friend, Chris Burch, asking him to check out the resort for possible purchase.

"It immediately struck me, I felt like I was in Africa. I'm South African and the resort was like an Africa in Asia," says McBride. "Burch asked me if I liked it and I replied 'sure'."

It took a visit in 2012, with Burch and his surf-loving sons in tow, for the entrepreneur to sign on — and a new Nihiwatu was born. Over the next three years, the team set about creating a luxury resort that truly connects with its unique location.

The soul of this — and I hesitate to use the word — resort, is its relationship with the local population. More than 95 per cent of the staff are Sumbanese, but Nihiwatu furthers its social impact through the Sumba Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation that was set up and is still managed by Graves.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The resort's food options are world class; inside one of the Marangga villas; hanging out on the verandah of the resort's Boathouse bar; Ombak restaurant.

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FROM LEFT The Raja Mendaka villa; Mamole Tree House, elevated on stilts, is one of the more whimsical places to stay in the resort.

As well as a perfect wave, Nihiwatu offers visitors off-the-map seclusion — it's surrounded by wilderness but with all the conveniences of modern life.

This sort of isolation takes some time to reach. After a short flight from Bali, we land at Sumba's Tambolaka Airport, where we're greeted by our personal butler, Jenny, who will be with us for our whole stay, and begin a 90-minute drive. We pass a town with crumbling buildings that house small art shops where you'll find the famed Sumba ikat tapestries, as well as vegetable stalls with chickens clucking in the dirt below. The further we travel, the more apparent it becomes that modernity hasn't yet made its mark on this landscape.

Thick forests, lush rice paddies and the occasional traditional village of thatched homes make up the island's heart.

Soon enough, we round a bend and the resort comes into view. A series of villas cascade down the cliff to a stretch of sand so perfect that, even as a beach-blessed Australian, my jaw drops.

The culture of the island is celebrated and embraced throughout Nihiwatu. Villas have been built using traditional building methods with little or no use of heavy ➤

machinery. Local craftsmanship is evident in the rooms, from carvings on the wooden beams to the ikat prints on cushions. But all the modern conveniences have also been considered in the design. Think air-con, private plunge pools and personal butlers. The Marangga villas boast a cliff-top deck where you can enjoy sundowners with uninterrupted views of the crashing waves below. The pinnacle, however, is the newly opened Raja Mendaka, a series of five one-bedroom dwellings that can be rented when Burch himself is not in residence. Overlooking the beach, each villa has its own pool screened by lush landscaped gardens, and can be booked for a group or leased separately.

Prefer to toast the sun with company? Head to Nio Beach Club. Here guests linger over cocktails and lunch in the open-air pavilion. Dinner is served at Ombak restaurant where the relaxed vibe is maintained with a sand floor — the epitome of barefoot luxury. Despite the many areas to loiter over cool drinks, this isn't a resort that only revolves around food and cocktails. When I visit, I take an hour's hike to visit Waihola, a rural local village. I walk through rice paddy terraces, squeeze between boulders and pass locals herding pigs to market — the activities aren't Disneyfied, and it's not something the owners are keen to change.

"If someone doesn't like the outdoors, or would be skittish about being on the edge of wildness, then this isn't the place for them," explains McBride. "We want to make sure our guests are like-minded people and everyone wants to have a good time."

There seems to be a symbiotic relationship between the resort, village and the local people. As we arrive, women shyly bring ikat weaves, small carvings and other trinkets to lay out over their ancestors' tombs, which are given pride of place in the middle of the village. In the dust, piglets squeal and dogs forage under the homes built of bamboo and thatched roofs. We're invited into one of the homes. Inside it's dark and cool, a fire burns in the centre where food is cooked. Mosquito nets, a gift from The Sumba Foundation, hang above the beds. The juxtaposition between the luxury of Nihiwatu and how the locals live can be jarring, and may be why so many guests end up volunteering during their stay.

The hike continues to Nihi Oka, where guests can experience the resort's new Nihi Oka Spa Safari, offering breakfast, yoga and luxury treatments among the treetops. You could also choose to spend your day swimming and relaxing, but to honour the heritage of Nihiwatu, a surf lesson is a must.

While Occy's Left is the star, it's not for beginners, so we head to a beach where the surf is gentler — but lessons aren't without an audience. Locals are bathing their prized native ponies in the sea while, on the jetty, bored teenagers watch in amusement as we try to catch a wave. Our instructor is endlessly enthusiastic, shouting encouragement and instructions as we frantically splash our arms to keep up with the moving ripple of water. The surf gives way before we do, putting an end to the lesson.

Back at the resort there's plenty on offer to keep you busy. Snorkelling from the beach can be challenging as the famous



ABOVE, FROM LEFT

A local takes to the water with a Sumba pony; the Nihi Oka Spa Safari.

wave dumps on the shore, so the staff arrange transport to a pontoon anchored near a reef. The currents are strong, but the team keeps a watchful eye over the group. We scan the coral, catching glimpses of colourful fish. You can also sign up for fishing and diving, or take one of the local ponies for a gallop along the waterfront.

Most Sumbanese people still follow the animistic Marapu religion, which is guided by keeping the peace with the ancestral spirits. While they host many ceremonies, one of the most spectacular to witness is the Pasola festival, held once a year in February or March. The pre-harvest ritual — which sees spear-wielding horsemen battle it out — traditionally demanded blood to be spilt to be successful, but these days the weapons are blunt. Headhunting was banned in the 1950s, yet rumours abound on how successful the ban was. "Here, the culture is visceral," says McBride. "The men still carry swords by their sides."

Not that any of this is keeping people away, as McBride explains, "about 70 per cent of our guests are return visitors. They come for their butler or for the kindness of the people. Really, Nihiwatu is just a canvas to provide that [experience] to our guests." Quite the canvas indeed. ☺

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