

DEPARTURES

January • February 2017

The
DEPARTURES
100

A Guide to People,
Places + Things That
Matter in 2017

FINDING REAL
LUXURY IN
THE JUNGLES
OF INDONESIA

FRANCIS FORD
COPPOLA
BUILDS HIS
DREAM ITALIAN
HOTEL

HOW TO
DO ANTARCTICA
RIGHT

Plus
The Best
Cruises, Ships,
and Itineraries
This Year



Surfing at
Nihiwatu Resort,
Sumba Island,
Indonesia

It's not that serial entrepreneur Chris Burch was bored or anything like *that*. He just wanted peace, calm, the opportunity for adventure, and 550 stress-free acres of jungle, waterfalls, and perfect beaches in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

NIHIWATU, HERE WE COME

BY RICHARD DAVID STORY



PREVIOUS SPREAD AND THIS SPREAD: TANIA ARAUJO

Asian water buffalo walk the beach in front of the infinity pool at Nihiwatu's Nio Beach Club.

If I may, let me set the scene for you as we prepare to land. Nihiwatu is a “luxury” resort with 33 accommodations ranging from villas to tree houses on the Indonesian island of Sumba. All told it takes nearly 30 hours of flight time to get here, and one pretty much has to overnight in Bali. From there, it’s a 50-minute flight on Garuda Indonesia. Sumba is so completely different from the hustle and now bustle of Bali that I mention it only to give you some indication of just how far, far away it is.

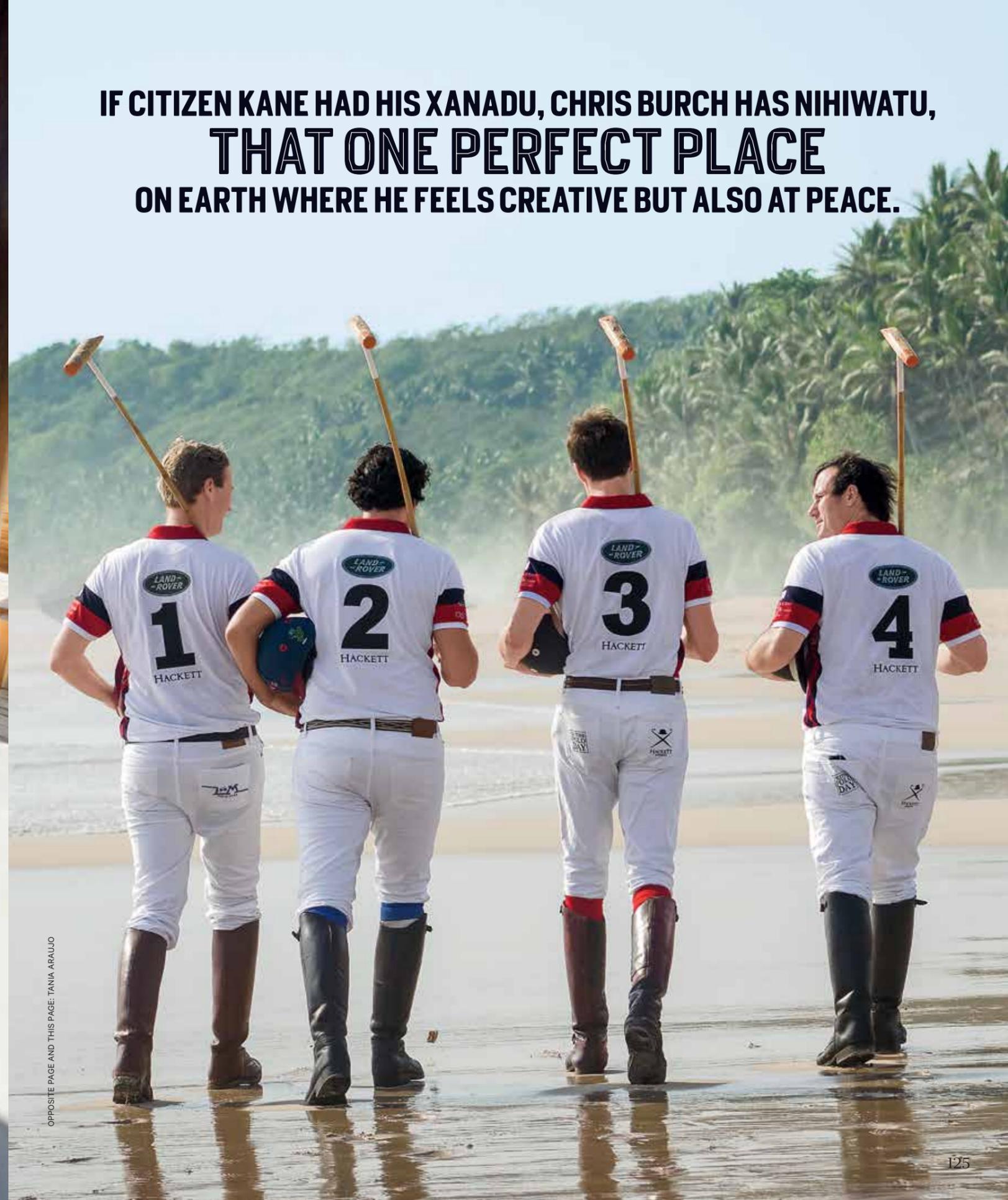
Financed entirely by New Yorker J. Christopher Burch, aka Chris, a Philadelphia-born entrepreneur and bigger-than-life Near Billionaire. You may know Burch best, if you’ve even heard of him at all, as the ex-Mr. Tory Burch, the mega-successful fashion designer. (“I’d have to invent a cure for cancer before I’d be remembered as anything else,” says Chris quite matter-of-factly of his wife of more than ten years, of whom he speaks very respectfully and with whom he helped create the iconic fashion brand and with whom he has three sons.) James McBride is Burch’s business partner and the very well-pedigreed hotelier whom you might remember from Caneel Bay, Little Dix Bay, or most likely, Manhattan’s Carlyle hotel at 76th and Madison. Point counterpoint: McBride is most comfortable in suits by the Neapolitan tailor Mariano Rubinacci, shirts from Hong Kong tailor Peter Cheung, shoes by Berluti, belts and ties by Hermès. And Burch? For day our visionary Near Billionaire prefers drawstring pajama bottoms, T-shirts, flip-flops, and baseball caps. “Formality is out the window these days,” he says, stretched out on a chaise holding his ever-present electronic device. “Luxury’s changing, and besides, I’m not into suits and all that kind of stuff.” Luxury is changing...

I arrive in Sumba mid-May to skies a bit overcast. August and September are the months to go, high season, when rooms run upward of \$2,000 per person per night, including most everything. (Otherwise, rates are around \$1,400.) I’ve come because Burch, whom I’ve known for several years socially, is convinced that this is the most beautiful place on earth and that he has found a kind of serenity that he’s never experienced before. Though he has many different businesses in many different locations, this is the one that he cares about the most. The landscape is wild, breathtaking, really, as we bump and grind our way for a little over an hour from the airport to Nihiwatu in an SUV. The terrain makes me think of Peter Jackson’s remake of *King Kong*. But this is real jungle, no digital effects needed—and it suggests both Asia and Africa. En route, a couple of half-finished houses, thatched cottages, but today’s busiest business seems to be: local kids swatting the flies off the back of an ox crossing the road. In the distance, more mountains, more jungle. Kong could easily emerge any moment. **CONTINUED ▶**



The outside living area of one of the two Kanatar Sumba Houses. Opposite: The resort hosted British Polo Day in November 2015, and again this past year.

**IF CITIZEN KANE HAD HIS XANADU, CHRIS BURCH HAS NIHIWATU,
THAT ONE PERFECT PLACE
ON EARTH WHERE HE FEELS CREATIVE BUT ALSO AT PEACE.**



OPPOSITE PAGE AND THIS PAGE: TANIA ARAUJO



Sumba's Lapopu waterfall is accessible to hikers.

SUKI BELAUSTEGUI

This is exactly how Burch found the place when he bought the majority of his 550 acres back in 2012. Few roads, little infrastructure. All that, he would have to develop, along with world-class deep-sea fishing expeditions, horseback riding, snorkeling; morning treks to the Blue Waterfall; candy-making lessons with the island's resident chocolatier; basket weaving; and early-morning yoga. All of these are part of the Nihiwatu experience—but then again so is complete and utter slothfulness, in which I indulged. And then there is surfing, specifically on a wave called Occy's Left, which has long been embraced by surfers throughout the world, including Claude Graves and his German wife, Petra, who came upon it in 1988. Graves would later secure the land rights, build the first accommodations, and christen the place Nihiwatu, which means "mortar stone," so called after the isolated rock formations along the resort's beach. Chic French families, like the ones behind Hermès and Sisley, and assorted global nomads flocked soon after. So, too, Silicon Valley's surfer billionaires, like Zynga cofounder Mark Pincus, and designer Yves Béhar.

Burch, whose investment now totals more than \$30 million, bought the land and its 12 cottages, leveling most of them to build his idea of barefoot luxury. Along the way, he has embraced the Sumbanese ancient tribal ways of genuine kindness (an old-fashioned word often heard here) and sense of humility. Burch, a proud nonsurfer, always wanted it to remain a surfer's paradise, but he needed it to become more than that.

Burch is a big fan of Adrian Zecha, another visionary, who created Aman Resorts in 1988. Zecha's taste and aesthetic were impeccable, and his choice of locations inspired. Interestingly, he too began his empire in Southeast Asia. Burch's story begins back in 1976, when he and his brother started selling stylish midpriced Shetland sweaters and preppy-ish shirts for young women under the label Eagle's Eye. (According to the *New York Times*, the brothers sold 70 percent of the company 12 years later for \$60 million.) "I'm actually not driven by money," says Burch. "I'm actually driven by great ideas and fun *sh@t*. If it makes money, that's just a side benefit. My companies that make a lot of money? You'd be bored out of your mind if that's what I talked about. You're not really *that* interested, I suspect, in inexpensive office furniture and supplies." Luckily, Nihiwatu seems to be doing well in its second year; tariffs are high and occupancy has hovered at around 50 percent.

If *Citizen Kane* had his Xanadu, Chris Burch has Nihiwatu, that one perfect place on earth where he feels creative and also somehow at peace. Yes, the place is beautifully designed, a true "design" hotel, but one that's well integrated with its environment. And though he's committed to local *everything*, he also relies



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on impeccable curation from all over the world, whether it be managers Loraine and Jason Trollip from Singita's Grumeti safari camp in Tanzania or the Australian and South African boathouse staff. It also helps that the property is enormous. Burch provides significant funding to the Sumba Foundation and makes philanthropy a part of the equation for himself...and for guests. He takes great enjoyment in detailing how profits from the resort go into helping the local community with everything from eye examinations to school lunches.

The couple of years leading up to Nihiwatu had been tough for Burch. His marriage to Tory had ended and was followed by acrimonious legal battles and the demise of his biggest post-Tory investment, \$70 million, in a retail fashion and design company. The *New York Times* headline was "Revenge Retail Gone Awry? Tory Burch's Ex-Husband Describes C. Wonder's Fall."

Ouch!

McBride calls Nihiwatu a cross between an African game lodge and an Aman resort. That seems pretty accurate, except it's one with a three-bedroom tree house and spa safari that you reach by crossing rice paddies and forests of coconut trees for a daylong healthful indulgence. Burch has always had impeccable taste, and he seems to most enjoy those projects that embrace taste and the imagination. He and McBride are already thinking about new projects, one on the island, an hour boat ride away, which would "reset the old Club Med formula" and bring chic all-inclusive "cottages" to a younger generation. They also are looking into Mozambique and New Zealand. "This is an ever-evolving partnership," says McBride, "and an amazing one. Chris has the belief—and the balls—to make things happen." ♦

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