

JUN 6, 2016 @ 10:33 AM 395 VIEWS

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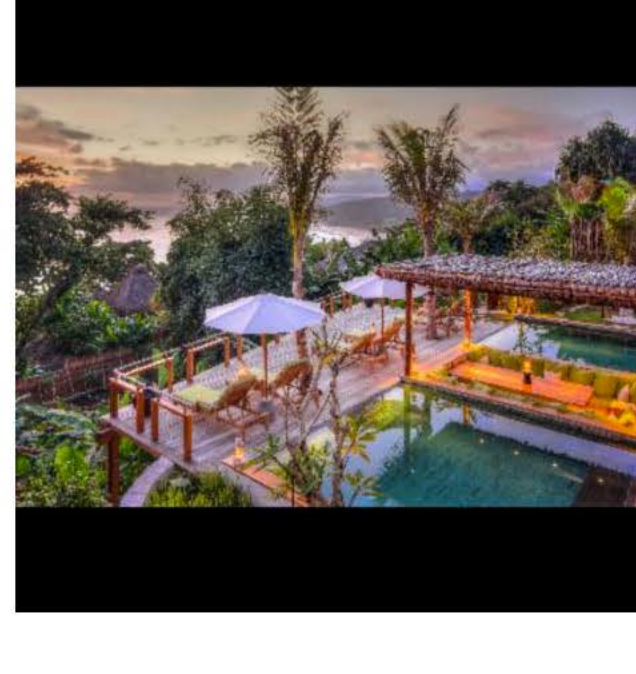
A Tropical-Island Luxury Playground With A Soul: Nihiwatu



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“Should you fancy a bath, there’s a bathtub on your terrace,” said the manager as she showed me into my villa at [Nihiwatu](#), the deservedly ballyhooed luxury playground on the Indonesian island of Sumba. Hoteliers can be careful not to overpromise, but that may be the biggest understatement I’ve heard.

That tub is a hefty half-sphere that’s black on the outside and gleaming golden on the inside and, like most spaces in the villas (especially this one, Puncak, which sits atop a hill), has tremendous views over the sea below. Inside, the three big bedrooms have cheerful fabrics and enticing window seats. Seemingly trivial details are handled right. Is this really the first time that my mosquito net has not been tucked under my mattress like a sleep-time straitjacket but left to hang on the outside of my nightstand, leaving my water and book within easy reach? (Sadly, yes.) But then, nothing at Nihiwatu is merely anything.

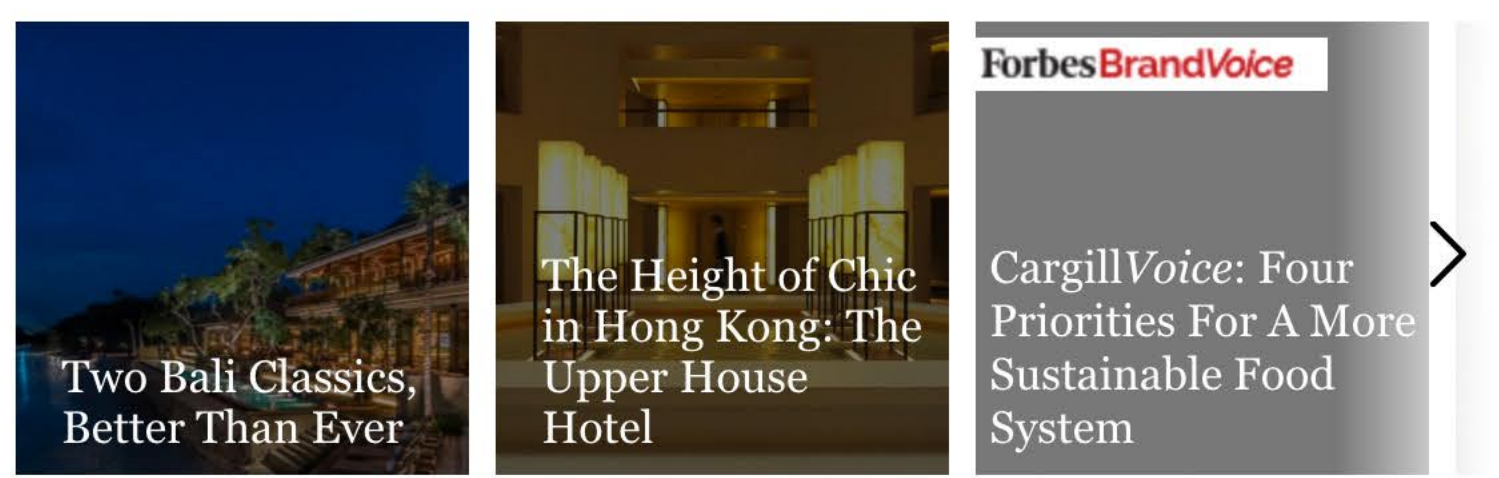


The private pools and stunning views from the Puncak villa

That doesn’t mean anything feels overblown or excessive. Rather, everything is the essence of comfort and pleasure without feeling showy. Tagged “the Edge of Wilderness,” Nihiwatu is the kind of place where no one wears shoes. Some people wear board shorts to dinner. Guests form fast friendships—one honeymooning couple invited a friendly near stranger to join their romantic private beach dinner—and, more important, connect with the island they’ve traveled a long way to reach.

And Sumba is not just any exotic island. Three times the size of Bali with just 650,000 residents and one resort, Sumba has kept its traditional culture intact. Houses have thatched roofs shaped like dromedary humps, women dye and weave beautiful *ikat* textiles, and elaborate caste and dowry systems still exist. Nihiwatu’s current owner, Christopher Burch, tells me he’s been to Sumba 40 times and he’s still learning. Something about the island surprises him every time, and “I’m amazed by how much I don’t know.

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“It’s like Bali 400 years ago,” says the brand-building entrepreneur, who visited Nihiwatu in 2012 after learning that the original owners, Claude and Petra Graves, were looking for help to expand it. He acquired it later that year and, with the help of highly regarded hotelier James McBride as managing partner, transformed it from a surf retreat for passionate wave chasers—there’s an exceptional left-hand break—to a romantic, convivial hideaway with broad appeal.



The signature wave

Their mission statement, in fact, was to “evolve Nihiwatu into one of the best resorts in the world, an example of a sustainable operation in harmony with the environment and the Sumbanese people.” Mission accomplished.

Surfing remains a draw. Skilled surfers pay \$100 per day on top of the room rates (from \$650 per villa, almost all inclusive) for one of ten spots on Occy’s Left, the wave that —along with Sumbanese culture—started it all. A surf school in calmer waters was just added for those who aren’t up for Occy’s.

There’s a gorgeous yoga deck where a skilled instructor teaches almost every morning and evening (sunsets are spectacular) and a serious equestrian program with arena lessons and meditative “horse whispering” sessions as well as galloping along the mile and a half of beach. A cool kids’ club is in the works, as is a cocoa-bean-shaped outpost of the popular Charly’s Chocolate Factory in Bali—the real beans are already growing.

The spa, in the nearby valley of Nihl Oka, is a showstopper. Burch calls it the most beautiful place in the world. Guests make a “spa safari” day of it, riding over in a jeep or hiking a couple hours through rice paddies and villages to a collection of open-air *bales*, one on a promontory for breakfast and lunch, another for lounging, and three on a hillside for treatments. Couples pay a day rate for unlimited spa services; some don’t return until sunset. Perhaps that demand is why Nihiwatu just added an overnight spa safari, in which guests stay in an air-conditioned villa that’s as comfortable as the ones back at the resort.



The lounge bale at Nihl Oka

Admittedly, an island whose people can pull this off is not completely lost in time. And “400 years ago” is of course an exaggeration. But Burch tells me (over a feet-in-sand dinner that started with just-caught sashimi) that when he first visited, several years ago, Sumba had barely any roads and even fewer motorbikes. Nothing was recorded on paper. His goal with Nihiwatu is to preserve that innocence. With close to 400 people on staff, Nihiwatu is one of the island’s biggest employers—Burch speculates that he’s about as a significant an employer as the government. And the government has taken notice, embracing the resort’s high-luxury, low-footprint plan, a major goal of which is to encourage similar projects and preventing Sumba from devolving into the next Bali.

With nearly 400 staff for 32 villas, Nihiwatu has one of the most impressive staff-to-guest ratios anywhere. Even more impressive: The staff is caring and genuinely curious about guests’ lives. When I rolled up for lunch at the beach bar close to 3, when everyone else was well into their afternoon surf or nap, a server stayed to chat and keep me company even as his shift ended.

They’re almost all from the island, and as personable as can be. An exception (the accomplished Australian-born chef Ben McRae, who makes ever-changing gastronomic meals out of daily-caught fish and produce and animals raised on Nihiwatu’s farm. Everything tastes better when the sound track is crashing waves and the views are of endless turquoise seas or shimmering stars, but McRae’s food would be good anywhere.

While plenty of guests stay put and sunbathe—there’s a new 20-meter infinity pool that makes that even more enticing—or stick to the on-campus activities, many more explore the island on guided hikes, waterfall treks and village visits. Every few days, the resort organizes tours to see projects of the Sumba Foundation, the core of Nihiwatu.



Traditional dress in Sumba

Burch has significantly expanded the work of the foundation, which the Graves started in 2001. While keeping Nihiwatu profitable, he’s turned it into a philanthropic vehicle for community projects. Over the past 14 years, the foundation has set up more than 15 primary schools, built 48 wells and 5 medical clinics, supplied 172 villages with clean water and reduced malaria by 85%.

When guests remarked on what we’d seen—the sophistication of the medical clinic, the orderliness and cheer of schoolchildren receiving a free lunch—the foundation director nodded. “If that doesn’t pull your heart strings, you probably don’t have a heart,” he said. No wonder many guests end up donating.

Burch thinks they will eventually do more “The travel world is ready for change,” he says. The idea of a traditional five-star resort, in which we bring all our expectations of glamour and home with us, then sequester ourselves in a gated property that tries to deliver them, is fading. Instead, we increasingly want “basic humble things” and a meaningful connections. And of course, “people want authenticity.”

They’ll find it here. He looks around the dining room and the night sky beyond. “How can you not feel embedded in this place?”

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