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# LUXURY

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# Nihi Sumba Island



Richard Beck of Classic Travel recently ventured all the way to Sumba to see if the hype he had read about a resort there was true. He's returned with this full report.

**I**s **Nihi Sumba Island** really the best hotel in the world?

Wow! Could this be paradise? Nihi Sumba Island, named the world's best hotel two years in a row by *Travel + Leisure*, certainly grabbed my interest. Where is it? How do you get there? I hardly think when telling someone the best way to get to Capri, Aspen, St. Bart's or Mykonos, but now I had to look at a map. Nihi is on Sumba. Sounds like it could be a new acronym I don't know, but it's an island one hour from Denpasar, the capital of Bali in Indonesia. Then, when you land, it's a 90-minute drive from Sumba's Tambolaka Airport (TMC). OK, it's not a weekend jaunt from most places!

I wondered how, in 2012, Chris Burch and hotelier friend James McBride found, and then bought, what was a beach hostel owned by a couple from New Jersey. What they developed and reopened as a luxury Subanese resort is unbelievably impressive. I spent time with McBride while I was there and there were so many questions running through my mind

that I was sorry I didn't make a list beforehand.

Before I went, I read most of the prerequisite reviews in many of the illustrious travel magazines. I was psyched. First, I spent a week of sublime luxury in Ubud. Since it was my third visit, feeling somewhat morally obligated, I fleetingly attempted to understand Balinese culture. By the time I left Bali, I was recharged, relaxed and ready for a new experience.

The check-in for Nihi begins at Bali's Denpasar airport. Here, Nihi hotel personnel assist you through security, obtain boarding passes and check your luggage after having taken iPhone pictures, which are e-mailed to their handlers at the Sumba airport. This is so you don't have to wait on arrival. You're met and taken immediately to the waiting vehicle while your luggage is transported separately.

It's a long day and after about an hour into the pretty, but not overwhelmingly so, drive, I was beginning to think that I was just either too jaded or maybe this wasn't all that fabulous. I was missing the Tegallalang Rice Terraces of Ubud. Just then the car went around a bend and the driver pointed to the left. There, for as far as my eyes could see, was a new "WOW" landscape — lush, tropical vegetation and in the far distance a crescent-shaped beach and then a continuation of more hills in the distance. The sun was at that perfect afternoon angle on a cloudless day and the colors of celadon and jade mixed with others in between. It's just



**THE INFINITY POOL** (left) at Nihl Sumba Island is directly over the beach.

**RICHARD BECK** (below left) is seen at the sand-floored Ombak restaurant.

**VILLA ROOMS** (above) have king beds and furnishings that blend with the surroundings.

a moment but one that's filed in my travel memory bank and can easily be retrieved with the word Sumba.

When I arrived, the first thing that I remember thinking was how appropriate the hotel's slogan is: "luxury on the edge of wildness." The other thing that struck me was the sincere friendliness I felt. The enormous amount of ongoing training that is continuous is obvious. Sumba is an island with a population of around 650,000 and Nihl is the only luxury hotel on this relatively large island, and the largest single employer. The profits from the hotel and individual benefactors fund the Sumba Foundation, which, in turn, supports medical clinics, schools and communal farms on the island.

Nihl started out as a special place for surfers and it still is. However, to maintain its exclusivity and, I suspect, the ecology of the area, the hotel allows a maximum 10 guests a day to surf "Occy's Left," the break that started it all. There's even the quintessential beachfront surf shop. It's all on this majestic stretch of seemingly deserted beach. Naturally, there's a resident surf instructor and resident yoga instructor.

The property seems large in area and is spread out. Privacy is key in the 32 villas that have one- to five-bedroom layouts. Each is so different and I can't say which, if any, I liked more than another. During my stay, I was shown most of the accommodations and what

I remember vividly is whether you're a couple, a family or friends traveling together there is an accommodation to suit all tastes. They have names like Kanatar, Lulu Amahu or Puncak. The villa rooms, which are all large, have quiet air conditioning and very comfortable king beds with masses of netting around them. The netting is probably as much for atmosphere as it is for practicality. The morning sun through the netting is another memory I'll try not to forget. Photos don't do justice to the understated furnishings, which blend so well with the surroundings. The outdoor areas of each accommodation are different in appearance, but they all have privacy, plunge pools and outdoor showers, and some even come with outdoor tubs.

The rates include three meals per day as well as non-alcoholic beverages, and there's no charge for the minibar, which is replenished daily. Laundry service is also included. Nihl is also probably one of the few luxury resorts in the world that you can travel to with just a "carry-on."

Nihl has created something they call the "Spa Safari." It can be done for either half day, full day or overnight. It's a must! The spa is built on a peninsula that's about a 90-minute hike from the main part of the hotel. I did the hike early one morning with Managing Director James McBride. It was terrific spending time with him — learning more about the hotel and a little about his life.

The treatment "rooms" are two covered areas that are outside, high on a cliff with jaw-dropping sea views. Another area which is perhaps a three- to five-minute walk is where the private pool area is located, and just a few steps away is a marvelous outdoor dining pavilion that overlooks another spectacular

beach, which you can access from the attached steps. There is also a "Spa Villa," where you can spend the night. It's extremely popular with honeymooners.

Dining venues include one restaurant named Ombak. Breakfast and dinner are served here. The setting is especially beautiful at breakfast when you can see the waves breaking below. There's no floor, just sand; it's very cool and sure to bring out the beachcomber in anyone. Nio Beach Club & Pool is where lunch is served. This restaurant is adjacent to the infinity pool, which is directly over the beach. And what a beach it is! I walked it each day at sunrise or immediately after breakfast and I almost always had the mile-and-half beach to myself. Immediately next to the Surf Shop is a beach bar like no other. If you've ever dreamed about what a beach bar should look like, this is it.

I can promise anyone that moments spent on this beach will be forever remembered. Finally, what beach resort do you know of that has its own chocolate factory? Far back in a jungle area is where this one is located. As I walked to it, I couldn't imagine how much fun it would be. Surely, this is for kids and they will love it, but so will adults. That night the chocolate that I made was beautifully packaged and delivered to my villa.

Is Nihl the best hotel in the world? I wouldn't have thought so before I went but it sure sells magazines. What they say about beauty being in the eyes of the beholder couldn't be truer. I've been to a few very special hotels in my life and Nihl may just be the best beach resort I've ever experienced. I need to go back.

— Richard Beck

**NIHL SUMBA ISLAND** is set amidst lush, tropical vegetation and is considered a surfer's paradise.

