

Bali & Sumba

Residents of these tropical Indonesian islands tend to live in the moment. For visitors to their five-star resorts, the moment can be just about perfect.

Story & photographs by Margie Goldsmith

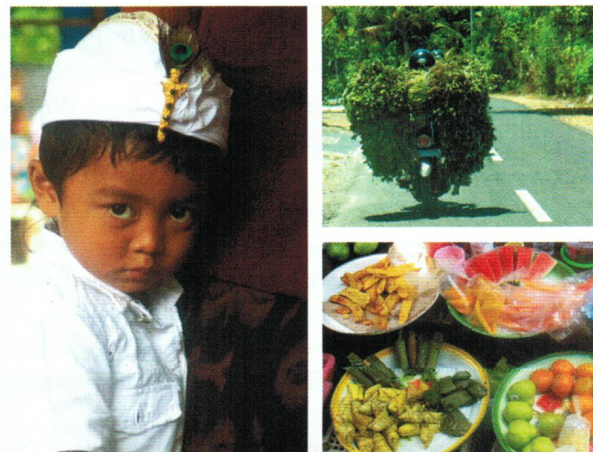
Motorbike riders buzz like black flies, beeping their horns and swarming in front of our car on the streets of Bali. My fiancé and I have just traveled 31 hours from New York City (counting stopovers in Vancouver and Hong Kong) to Bali's I Gusti Ngurah Rai International Airport. Thank goodness our tour operator, Ker & Downey, whisked us through customs in minutes, despite the long line.

Our guide, Dhana, dressed in traditional Balinese attire—batik shirt, sarong and a headband tied in a perfect knot on his forehead—leads us to our car and introduces us to our driver, Najib. We leave the airport and enter the congested parade of traffic.

"Why are there so many motorbikes?" I ask. "That's our main transportation," Dhana answers. His excellent



Above: shadow puppets at Bali's House of Masks and Puppets. Right, Balinese boy dressed up for a festival; one of Bali's ubiquitous motorbikes being used to transport shrubbery; and tropical fruits for sale at outdoor market.





English isn't surprising, as he teaches the language at a university in Ubud, Bali's cultural center. "We have four million people and two and a half million motorbikes. Some big families have two or three bikes because cars cost too much."

We whiz past stalls selling hubcaps, sarongs, fans, tiles, straw hats and T-shirts, past tire shops, motorbike repair shops and stalls offering bottles of gold-colored liquid. "Balinese wine," Dhana says with a grin, then explains that it is motorbike petrol. Huge statues of Hindu gods, wooden carvings and oversized pottery line the roadsides. Ahead is a highly decorated building with shrines, towers and bales (pavilions) poking up behind an ornate metal gate, one of Bali's



Clockwise from top left: Balinese stone demon with offering on his head; a Balinese woman; a cockfighting event in Bali



Women walk alongside the road with straw baskets on their heads. Inside them are offerings of flowers and fruits to please the Hindu gods and appease the demons.

Traveler Fast Facts

WHAT IT IS:

Bali and Sumba are two of the 18,000 Indonesian islands that constitute the world's largest archipelago. Hindus make up 80 percent of the population. Bali is a land of fertile rice paddies, sacred mountains and five-star luxury resorts. Sumba, 50 minutes away by air, is much less developed but just as noteworthy.

CLIMATE:

Indonesia, situated along the equator, is tropical. Temperatures average 80 to 89 F. The best time to visit is April through October.

GETTING THERE:

No airline flies direct from the U.S. to Bali's I Gusti Ngurah Rai International Airport in Denpasar. Cathay Pacific has flat beds in business class with four flights daily direct from New York to Hong Kong (16 hours), and from there to Denpasar (four hours). Korean Air, Singapore Airlines and KLM also fly to Denpasar. Private jets land at the same airport, which has a 9,842-foot runway. Contact Wando Suropto, mega@javajetasia.com +62 21 2983 8047; javajetasia.com

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO:

Bali and Sumba are casual—no cocktail attire needed. Use ATMs or exchange your money in banks, or with authorized money changers for the local currency, the Indonesian rupiah. Visas are required and can be purchased at the airport on arrival. To avoid long visa and immigration lines, choose a tour operator that offers VIP airport cut-line service.

Bali & Sumba

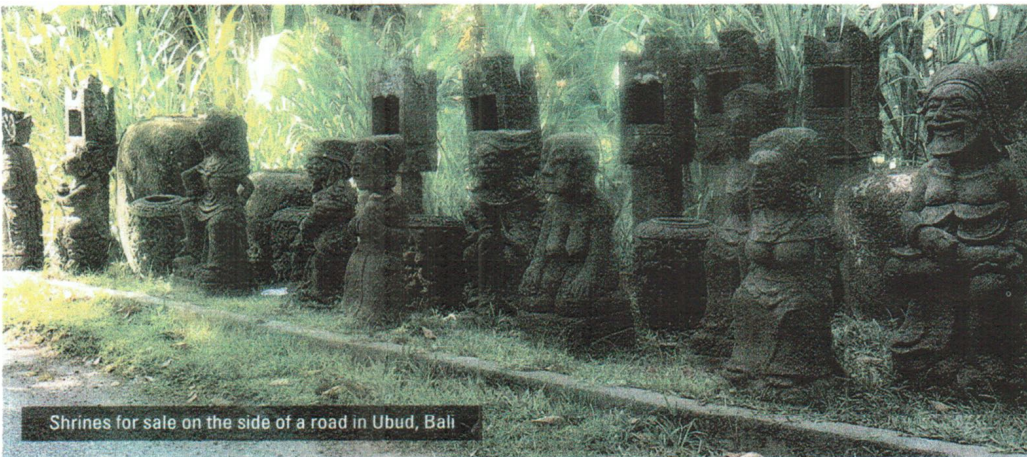
thousands of temples. In front of it are statues of deities draped in checkered black and white “skirts” to signify good and evil, right and wrong and happiness and sorrow.

We gaze at the lush green rice paddies sandwiched between the temples and endless stalls. Everywhere are Balinese scarecrows: swatches of white cloth tied onto poles. Women, their sarongs swaying, walk alongside the road with straw baskets on their heads. Inside them are offerings of flowers and fruits to please the gods and appease the demons.

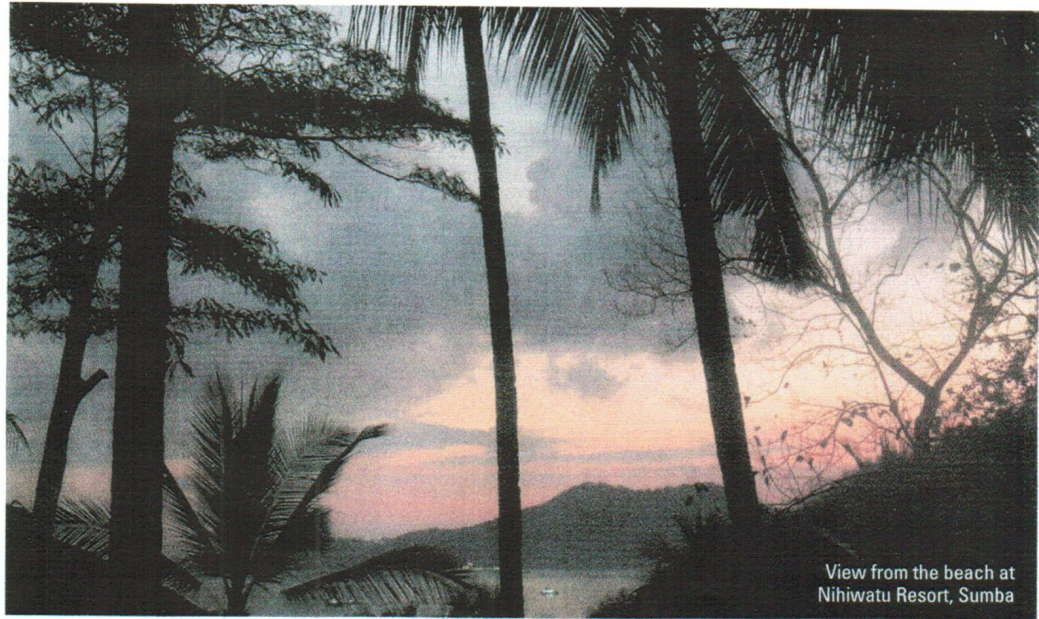
Dhana says that they make these offerings five times a day and that while they have little money, Hindus typically use half of their incomes for offerings and ceremonies.

At COMO Shambhala Estate, where we are staying, statues of deities line the driveway and offerings have been placed on the statues and fountains. Karti, our personal assistant, greets us with icy ginger drinks and fragrant tuberose necklaces before escorting us by buggy past trickling waterfalls, lotus flower-filled ponds and lush terraced tropical gardens to our accommodation.

A stone staircase and antique wooden door lead to our private courtyard garden suite, which is separated from three other suites by a large outdoor pool, sundeck and an oversized open-air living pavilion. It is off-season, and we have the entire palatial complex to ourselves. The bed is draped in a gauzy canopy beneath a 20-foot thatched-roof ceiling. The fragrant garden at the back of the suite has a freestanding bathtub, a rain shower and—hidden behind a bamboo fence—an outdoor “throne” with a “wow” view of the verdant rice paddies.



Shrines for sale on the side of a road in Ubud, Bali



View from the beach at Nihiwatu Resort, Sumba



We begin our holistic retreat package by receiving massages while listening to the cicadas, frogs and the rushing Ayung River below. Then we dine on corn soup and char-grilled Tokusen wagyu beef in the al fresco candlelit restaurant overlooking the pool. After dinner, we walk back to our suite breathing in fragrant tuberose beneath a universe of stars.

The next morning, exotic birds flit everywhere in the trees as we enjoy breakfast of buckwheat and pumpkin hot cakes. Dhana and Najib arrive to take us to the House of Masks and Puppets, a permanent exhibition with 1,300 masks and 5,700 Southeast Asian puppets, some more than nine feet tall. Then, we drive to a view of 5,600-foot-high Mount Batur, an active volcano. After that, we visit the sacred white cows of Taro Village, but the cows are on the other side of a fence in a smelly corral and there’s nothing sacred about that.

The magic is back as we pedal alongside a cycling guide for a two-hour downhill tour through



Balinese rooster owners with their birds before a cockfight

the rice fields, coffee plantations and chili and fruit farms. We pass a woman scrubbing laundry at a well, villagers carrying huge loads of banana leaves on their heads, craftsmen carving small owls and a woman painting a lacquer bowl. In the next village, we rejoin Dhana and Najib in the car but can’t move because the road is blocked. Every six months, community temples celebrate their anniversary, and a procession of villagers dressed in their “temple best” are walking along the road.

Some of the men carry roosters in large enclosed wicker baskets. “Cockfight,” explains Dhana. “Other countries gamble in casinos, but in Bali, we have cockfighting, which the priests allow because it brings money to the temple.” My fiancé wants to go—it’s a guy thing. He and Dhana sit in the bleachers while I wander around. Everyone makes eye contact and smiles. The Balinese live in the present moment, don’t obsess over the past and accept what is.

Bali is not just about a unique culture; it’s also known for its beautiful sandy beaches. Our sumptuous private pool suite at Amankila in East Bali sits beneath Mount Agung (the highest point on the island) and overlooks the azure Lombok

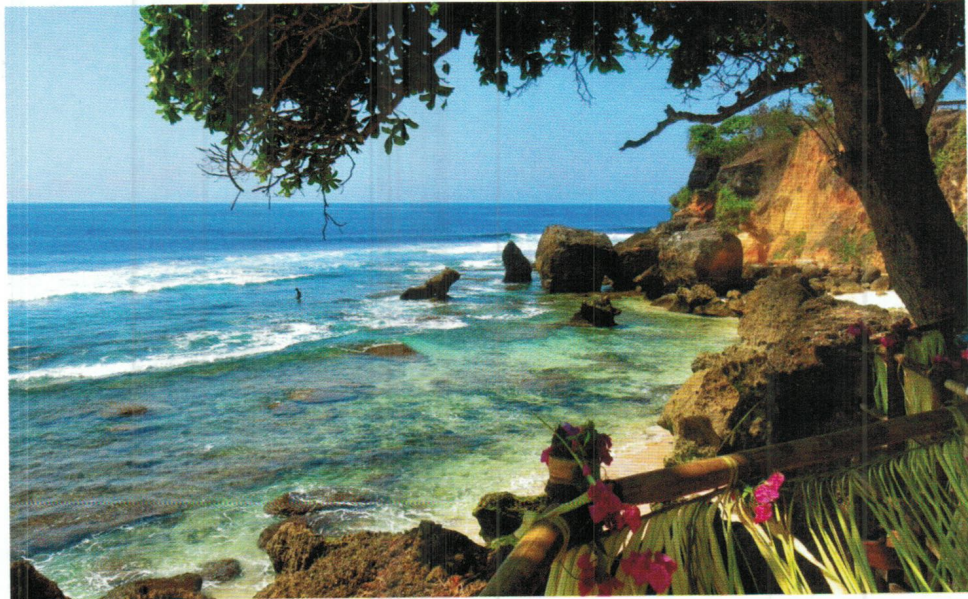
Strait. We take a dip in our pool as two massage therapists arrive to soothe us with Balinese treatments on our terrace. We've booked a private candlelit dinner overlooking the ocean, and we listen to the waves wash up gently on the shore.

The next morning, we walk on Amankila's private sandy beach to see the sunrise. We swim in the Amankila Beach Club's Olympic-sized pool, which is framed by coconut palms and frangipani trees, then head to breakfast, where the waiter puts down heaping platters of food.

Not far from the resort is Tenganen, a 14th century village surrounded by rice fields and mountains and famous for woven double ikat fabrics. (Using a complicated dyeing process, it takes a full year to make one sarong.) We walk up the steep dirt path to the elementary school where the children



Above, children at a Sumba Foundation-funded school. Below, open-air massage pavilion at Nihiwatu Resort's "Spa Safari."



sing us a welcome song, then walk back past cows and a water buffalo to the car. Our next stop is the fragrant Taman Ujung Water Palace, the former king's oasis with tranquil gardens and lotus-filled ponds.



Sumba is another of Indonesia's 18,000 islands, just a 50-minute airplane ride from Bali. Our chauffeur there meets us at the airport and we drive past small homes with corrugated tin roofs, rice paddies plowed by water buffalo, and goats and horses tethered on the hill-sides. Suddenly we're at the top of a hill, looking down at a crescent-shaped sandy beach, sapphire waves lapping at the shore.

This is Nihiwatu, the only resort on this island and one of the most authentic and unusual getaways you'll find anywhere. The relatively unknown facility has a one-and-one-half-mile private sandy beach where guests ride Sumbanese horses, dive, snorkel and surf the left-hand break wave directly in front of the resort. Nihiwatu limits admittance to 10 surfers at a time so it's never crowded.

Jenny, our Sumbanese moriuma (butler), escorts us to our sun-filled spacious villa with a four-poster canopied bed. Outside the floor-to-ceiling sliding-glass doors is an oversized ocean-facing deck with a private pool, pillow-filled double daybed, dining area, sun

Traveler Report Card

ACCOMMODATIONS (A+):

In Bali, we stayed at five-star resorts including COMO Shambala Estate, where rates for a three-night wellness program range from \$2,780 for a garden room to \$9,230 for a suite. (Those prices include airport transfers, meals, activities and a personal assistant.) We also spent time at Amankila, a beachside resort overlooking the Lombok Strait in eastern Bali, where nightly rates are \$950 for a garden suite to \$3,400 for a two-bedroom suite with private pool. Finally, we stayed at Amanusa, a beach resort in popular Nusa Dua in southern Bali. Nightly rates there range from \$950 for a garden suite to \$6,750 for a six-bedroom villa. In Sumba, we checked into Nihiwatu, the island's only resort, where rates are \$900 to \$1,800 per night and include full board.



FOOD (A):

The resorts we visited serve delicious Western and Indonesian fare, including stir-fried noodles for breakfast. Don't miss the seven-course Indonesian feast at Bali Asli as well as the three-course tasting lunch at Five Elements, a wellness retreat, which offers the island's tastiest raw food. And no visit to Bali would be complete without a dinner at local hotspot Bumbu Bali, which features entertainment by local musicians and dancers.

Table8 at the Mulia Hotel has Indonesia's best Chinese food and a "Kung Fu" tea master who pours flower tea from a cup with a five-foot-long spout.



ACTIVITIES (A):

Bali and Sumba offer every kind of water activity, cultural and temple visits, biking, hiking and museums. Hire a tour operator to set up a bespoke trip with a guide and driver for all touring, cultural visits and biking and hiking.



QUIETUDE (A):

All the resorts we visited are far from the madding crowd. During the day you'll hear only birds singing and trickling fountains. At night, listen to the frogs, crickets, geckos and the gamelan played during dinner. At all the beach resorts, the only sound is the ocean washing onto the shore.



Tour operator Ker & Downey arranged the trip described in this article and provided some services in Bali and Sumba as well as transportation between the islands. The resorts provided accommodations and meals, and Cathay Pacific supplied air transportation between New York and Indonesia.

Bali & Sumba

loungers, giant shade umbrellas and a grassy yard with a double wooden swing hanging from a tree branch. And that's not all. The pathway behind the swing leads to our private thatched-roof pavilion, which faces the Indian Ocean and is decked out with more sun loungers and a canopied bed. "If you would like, you can sleep out beneath the stars," Jenny says with a smile.

Jenny is much more than a butler; she takes our food orders, stocks our minibar, makes arrangements such as for our private sunset cruise, and escorts us

Families here live in three-story houses that their ancestors occupied. The lower level is for their pigs.

everywhere. The next morning she joins Nihiwatu's managing partner, James MacBride, and us on an excursion to Weihola. This is a traditional Sumbalese village where families live in the same three-story timber houses that their ancestors occupied a hundred years ago. (The lower level is for pigs, the middle level for sleeping, and the top for cooking and food storage.)

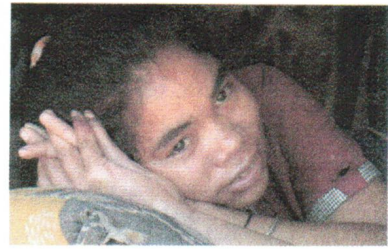
Nihiwatu has a charitable arm, the Sumba Foundation, created to protect the island and help the Sumbanese people. Weihola is just one of the villages

that benefits from the foundation. There's a malaria clinic that has reduced incidence of the disease in Sumba by 86 percent; the organization also provides clean water to almost 200 villages and addresses educational and nutritional needs. Later, we visit a school to which the foundation has supplied a water well. When we return to our vehicle, dozens of kids are staring at their reflections through the car's shiny exterior—none have ever seen themselves in a mirror.

Back at the resort, we snorkel with parrotfish, butterflyfish, damselfish and clownfish, then dig our bare feet into the sand while dining on grilled mahi-mahi baked in a banana leaf. After lunch, Jenny comes to our table and says, "I need you to come to the villa." We follow her and awaiting us are two masseuses with tables set up. But there's more: after our treatments, they wrap us in sarongs and lead us to our 50-inch-diameter round bathtub, now filled with hot water and with hibiscus flowers floating everywhere.

Later, after a five-course dinner, we return to our suite and see the bed has been decorated with red rose petals, which neatly border the sheets and pillows. The printed itinerary says we've come to Bali and Sumba; but by now, we know we're in paradise. **BJT**

Margie Goldsmith (mgoldsmith@bjtonline.com) conducted this issue's interview with Francis Ford Coppola and wrote about gorilla tracking in Rwanda for our October/November 2014 issue.



Above, woman resting in Sumbanese village of Weihola. Below, anamist tombs can be found in front of many houses in Sumba. Bottom, coned roofs of homes in Weihola are used to store food.

