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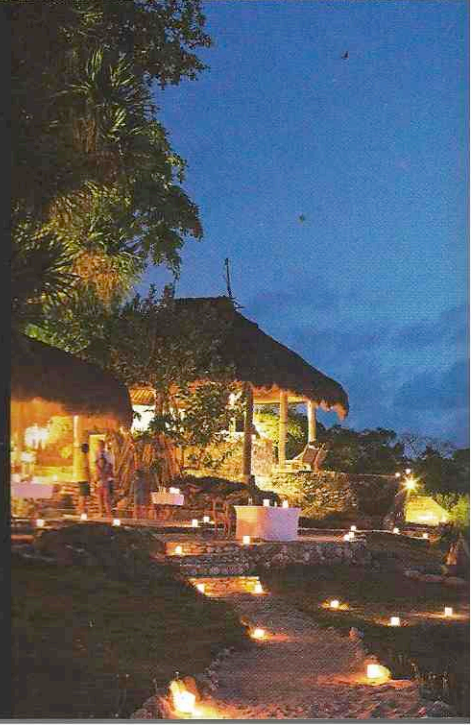
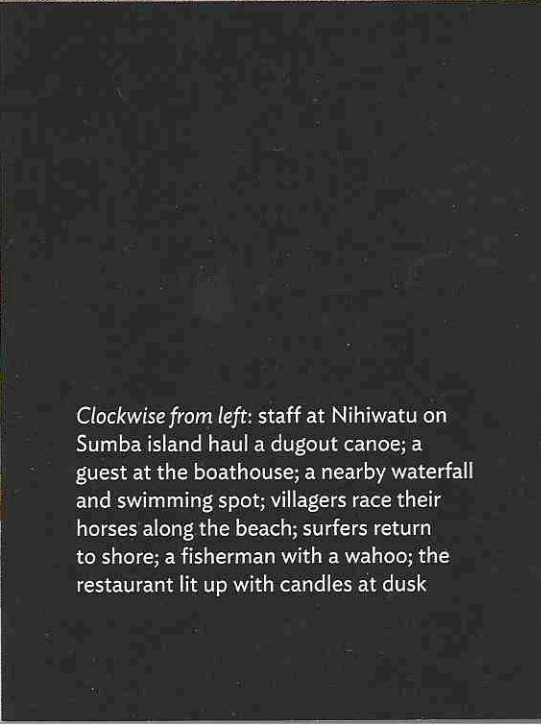
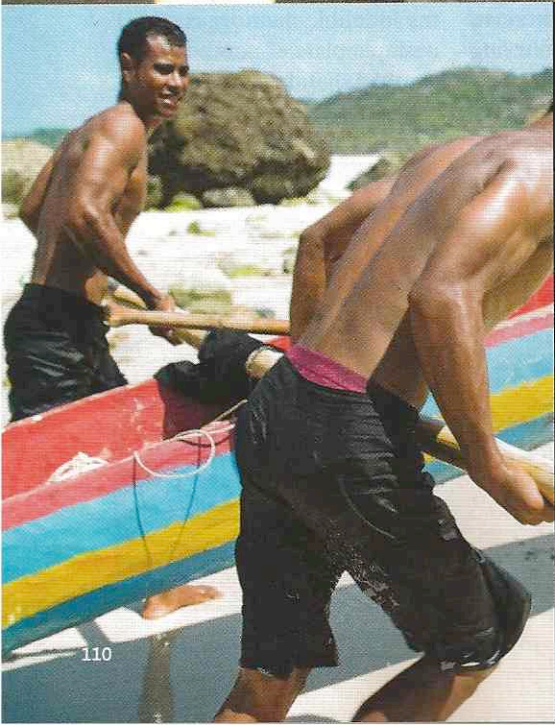
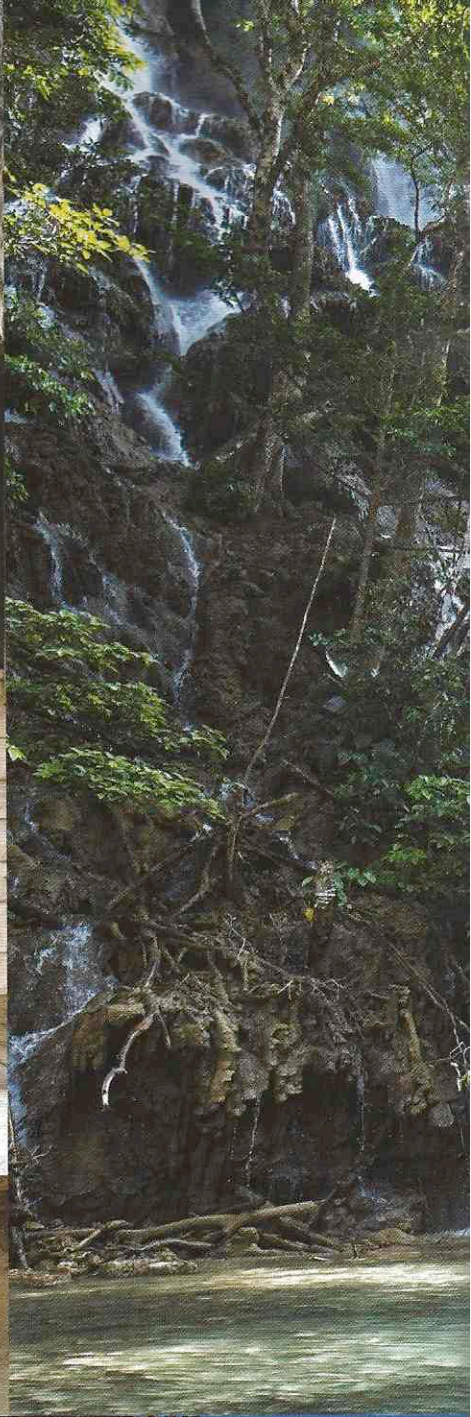
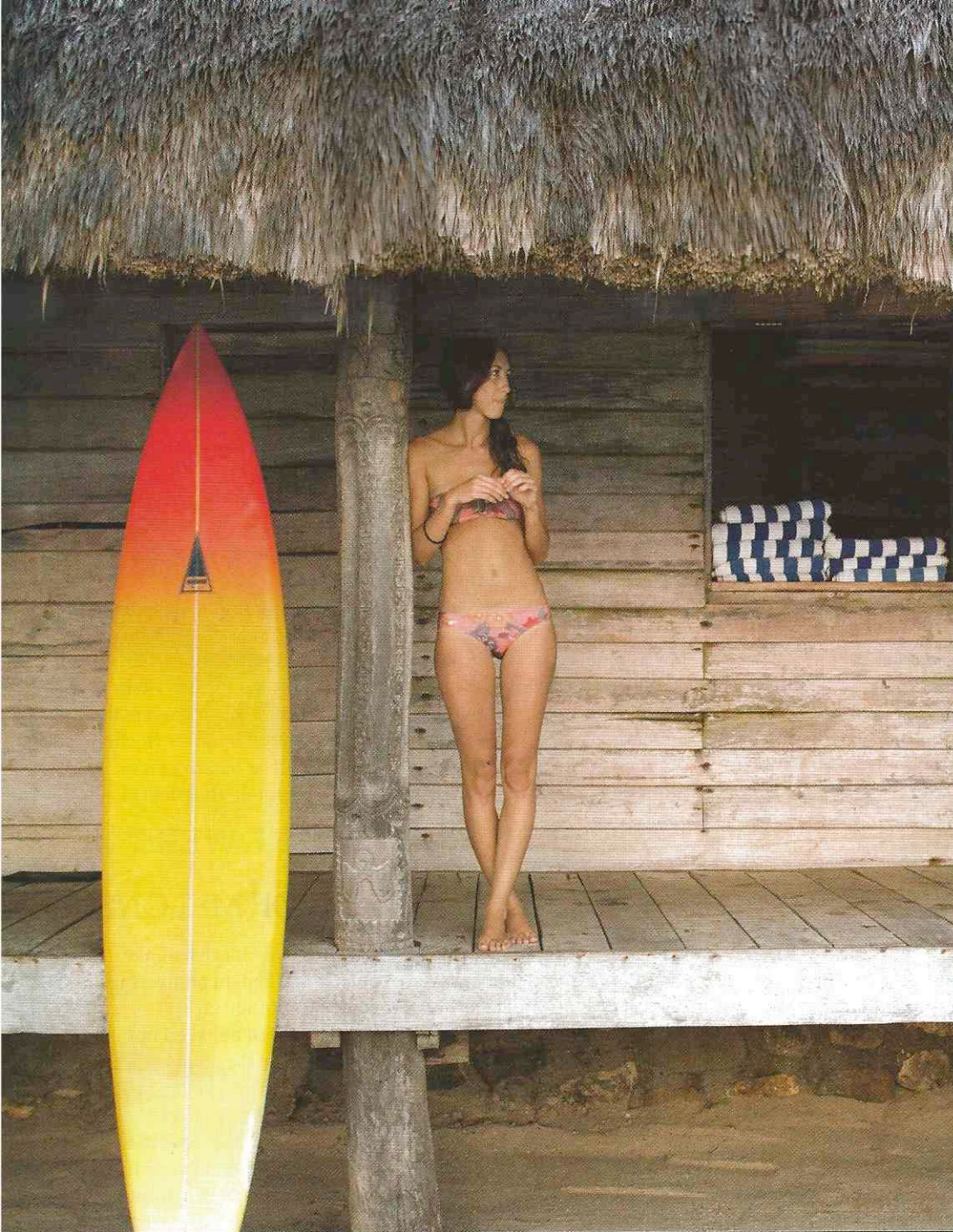
# BRAZIL

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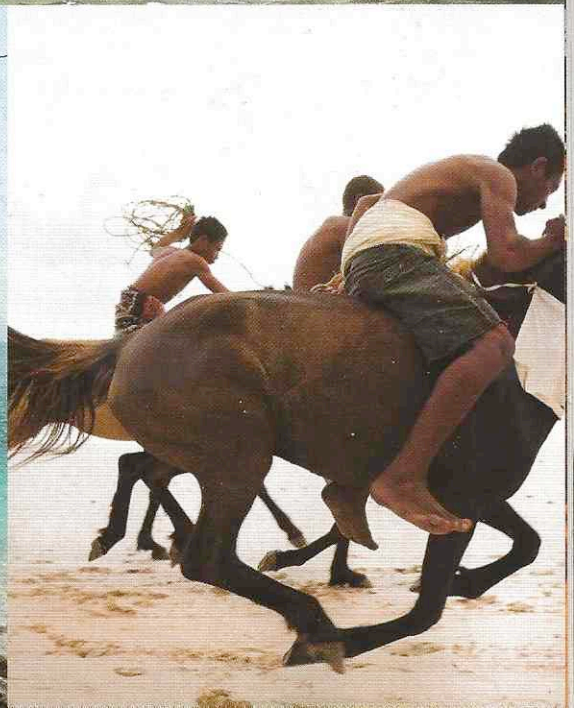
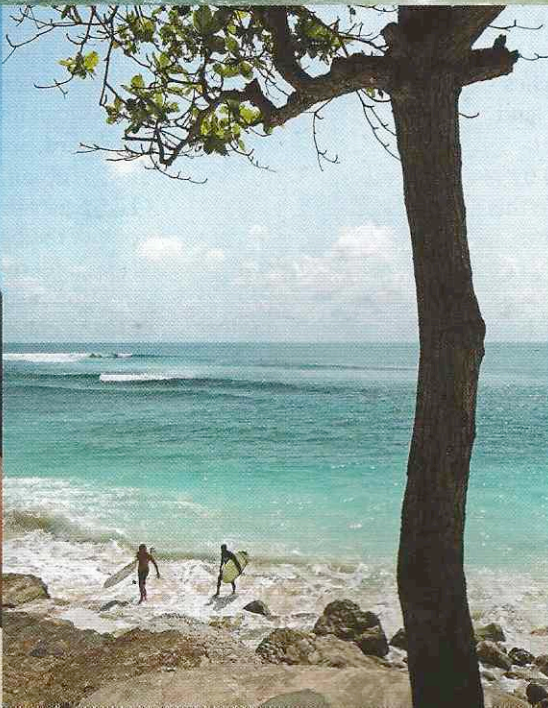
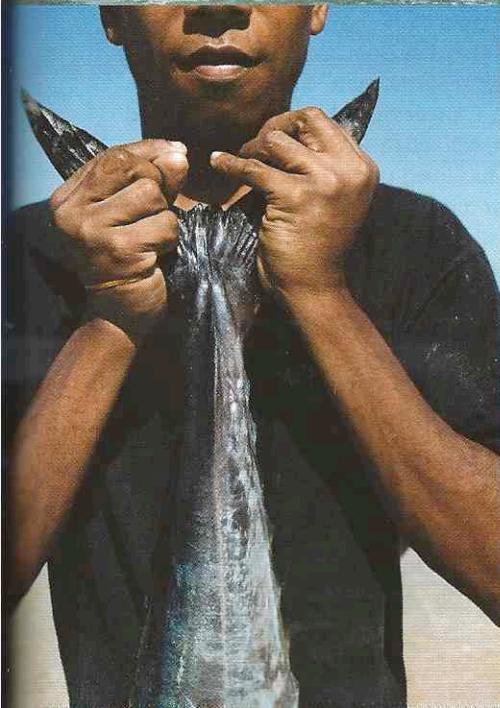




*Clockwise from left:* staff at Nihiwatu on Sumba island haul a dugout canoe; a guest at the boathouse; a nearby waterfall and swimming spot; villagers race their horses along the beach; surfers return to shore; a fisherman with a wahoo; the restaurant lit up with candles at dusk

# A new wave

THIS IS A SALUTARY TALE FOR HOTELS IN THE 21ST CENTURY – THE STORY OF A SURF BREAK WITH CULT STATUS THAT PULLED ON THE HEARTSTRINGS OF A TRAVELLER WITH A CONSCIENCE, WHO ATTRACTED A MILLIONAIRE INVESTOR, WHO APPEALED TO THE FASHION ELITE, WHO ARE ALL HELPING THE LOST-WORLD ISLAND OF SUMBA FLOURISH AGAIN. BY SOPHY ROBERTS. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL TUREK





Hawaiian yoga teacher, hangs out on the steps with her two little children, their skin the colour of caramel.

The hotel's new owner, Chris Burch (the US retail entrepreneur and co-founder of Tory Burch), lounges in an Adirondack chair nearby. He's on the island to formalise his relationship with Nihiwatu's creators, Claude and Petra Graves. The deal should extend the resort's visibility beyond the surfing community, while ensuring future profits will be channelled into The Sumba Foundation, which is the philanthropic concern Graves will continue to help drive. This includes tackling the very real issue of malaria, so far reduced by 86 per cent within a 20km radius of Nihiwatu with a convincing strategy overseen by health director Dr Claus Bogh. But that is not the only strand of the foundation's work: it has already provided 172 villages with clean water and is also addressing education and malnutrition. Evidence of success in every village I visit is brought into sharp relief by those island communities that haven't yet been reached by the foundation. Indeed, there's still much to do: another five to eight years work and about £5 million, says Bogh, and there's a chance malaria can be eradicated island-wide. It's a bold statement, and one the resort's new owner says he will take on board. First, he has to ensure Nihiwatu turns a decent profit – and attracts the kind of traveller who might engage with local issues. For this, Burch will rely heavily on another shareholder, James McBride, the South African-born former manager of The Carlyle in New York, who originally brought Graves and Burch to the table. 'When I first came here, the rawness and the tribal culture felt like Africa,' says McBride. 'Then I dug deeper and began to understand the foundation's goals and the islanders, and that changed everything. I had to help make it work.'

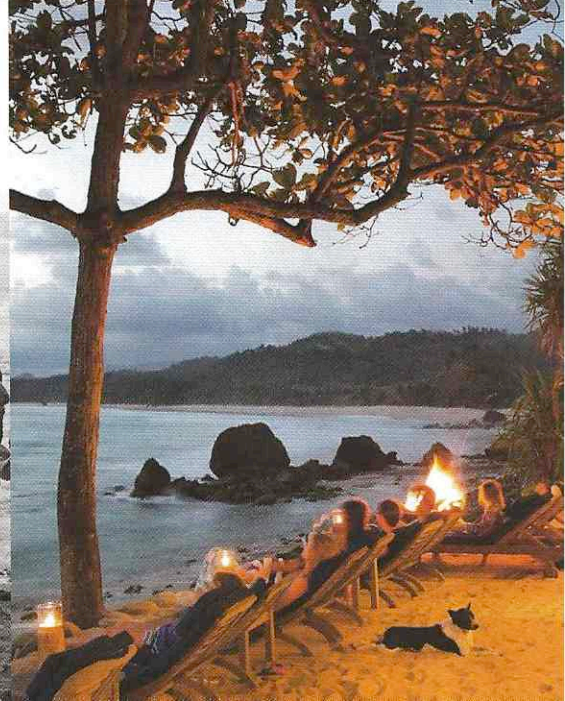
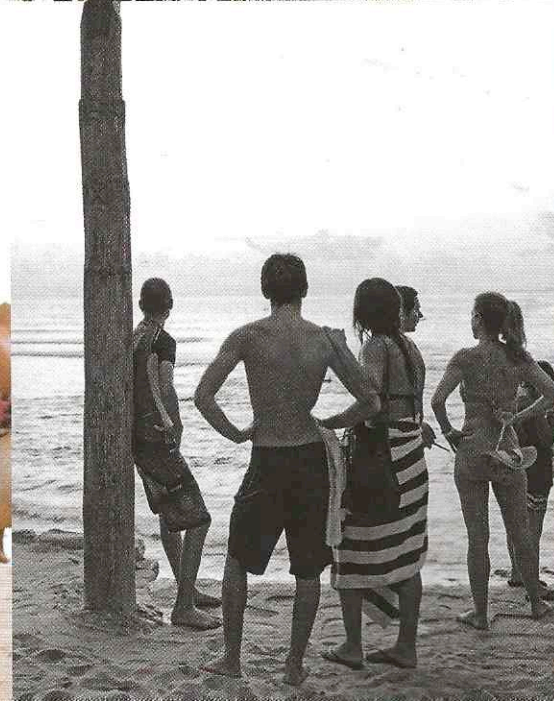
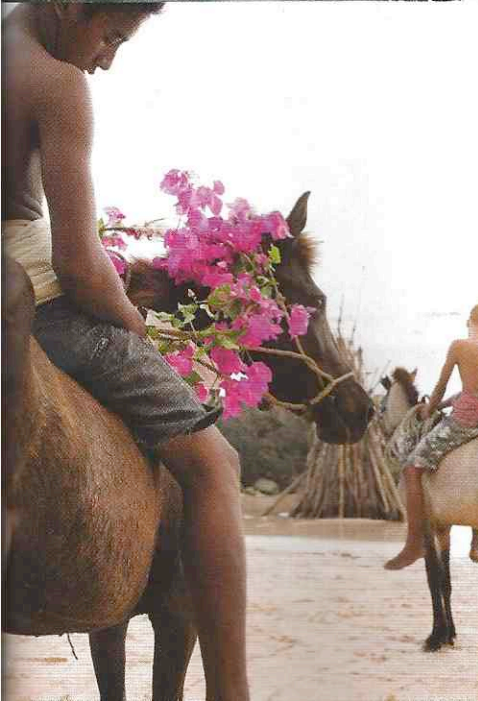
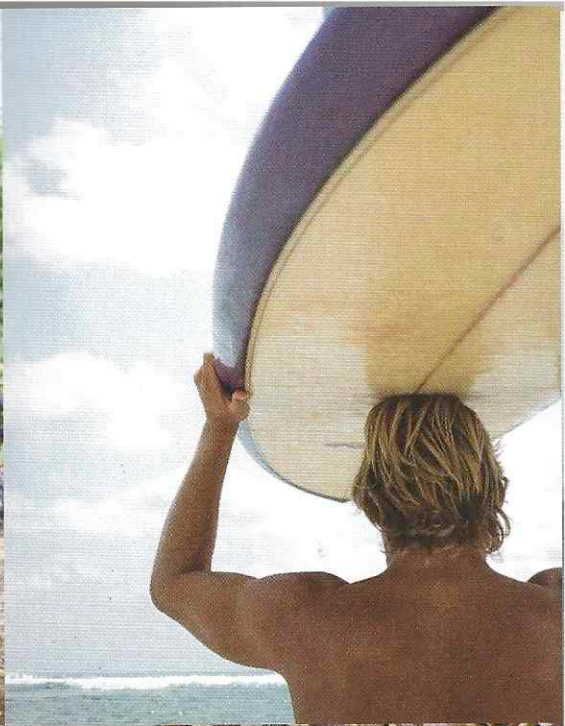
But there would be no hotel and no foundation without The Wave. Christian Sea, Ka'ale's husband, nods in assent. 'It's true, man,' he says in his soft American lilt. A professional skipper, surfer and lifeguard, Sea, who changed his name in homage to the ocean, has lived on the island for six years. He speaks reverently of Nihiwatu's left-hand break, one of the best in the world. Limited access to it (the hotel restricts the number of surfers booked into the resort to 10 at any one time) has given Sumba cult status. If he hadn't protected The Wave, says Graves, the beach would now be a Bali 'surf slum'. And without the wealthy guests attracted by the exclusivity of Nihiwatu – whose donations account for around 90 per cent of the foundation's funds – the islanders, who are among Indonesia's poorest, would be considerably worse off. Graves set up the foundation in 2001 with Sean Downs, a US tech millionaire who came to Sumba on a surfing holiday in 2000. It now has chapters in

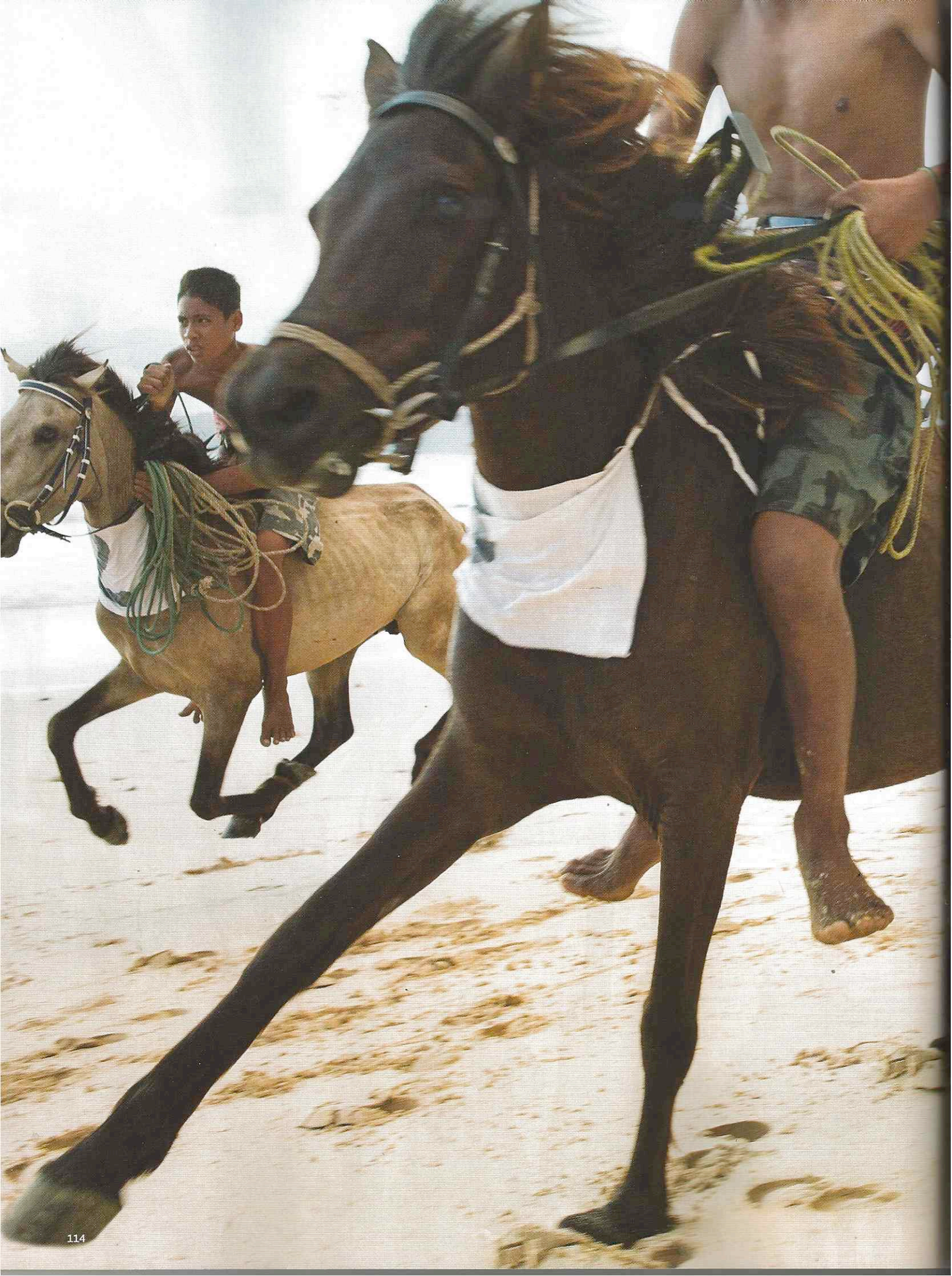
## In the late afternoon

Indonesia's honeyed light performs its alchemy, turning the white sands of Sumba island – a 55-minute charter flight east of Bali – into dazzling bullion. A 2.5km-long beach stretches off into the haze, the line between sea and land softened by ocean spray. A cluster of black rocks stands as tall as houses, bases eroded by the surf. Sometimes buffalo are led down to this beach to be washed, and when the tide draws back over the reef, villagers emerge to gather seaweed, urchins and crabs.

But for guests at Nihiwatu, the laid-back beach hotel where I'm staying, this view is all about The Wave, at this moment an impressive curl of pale turquoise crested with white froth. A couple of Australian girls sit swinging their long, bronzed legs from the edge of the boathouse veranda – a clinker-built construction redolent of 1950s Cape Cod. Around the bar, an American investment banker and a super-yacht broker from Monaco stand in animated conversation. Ka'ale, the hotel's

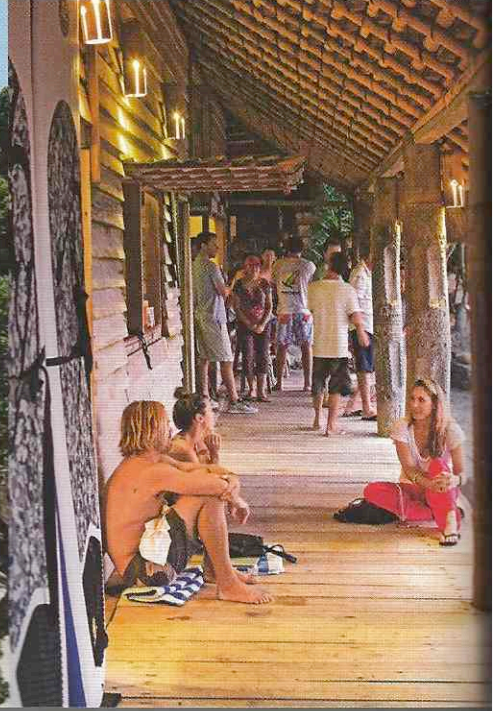
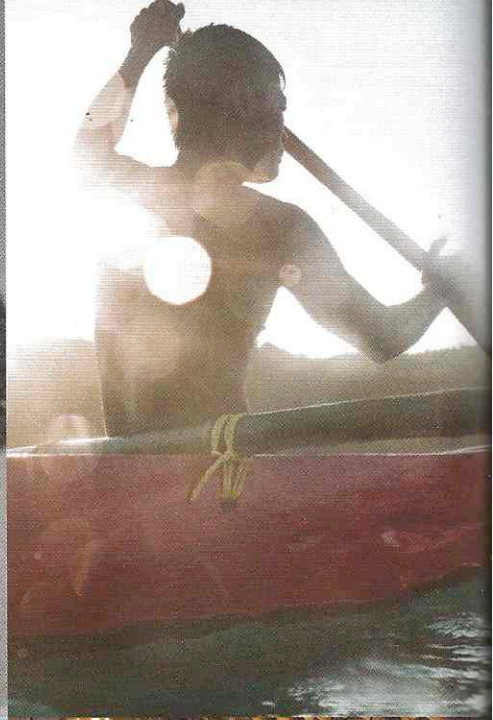
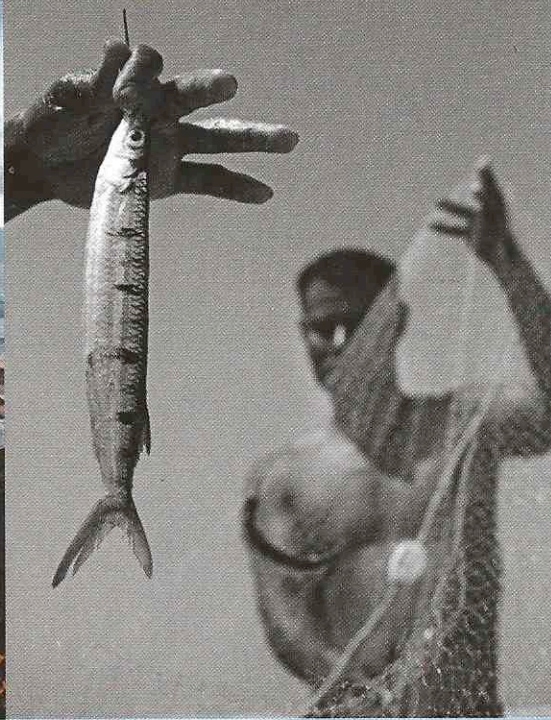
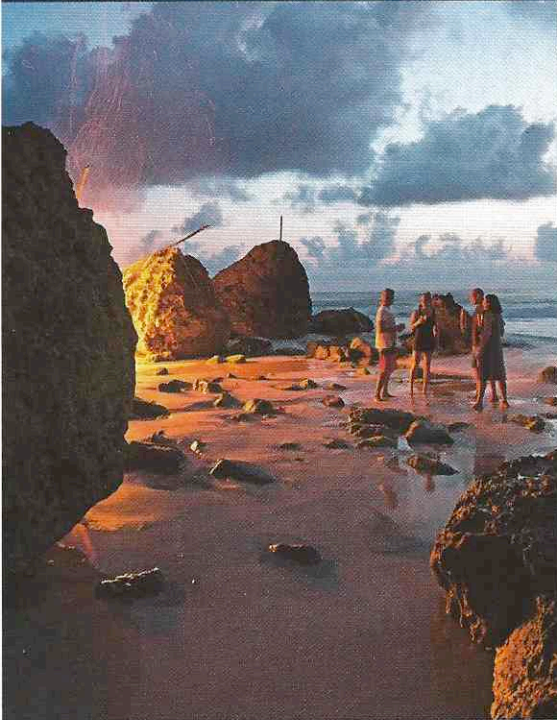
*Above, islanders gather before a horse race. Opposite, clockwise from top left: surfboards in the boathouse; some of the villagers; a surf instructor; a bathroom in one of the new villas; watching the sunset; guests on the beach; after the race; sun through the trees*







Fifty years on from independence, Sumba  
is in many ways a forgotten world





both Australia and the USA, and around 20,000 islanders currently benefit from its work.

FROM THE EIGHTH to the 18th century, Chinese and Arab traders came and went, bringing horses (still central to Sumbanese culture) and taking away sandalwood and slaves. The Dutch East Indies took control of the island in 1866, but it did not conquer the hearts of the fierce, headhunting islanders. The Dutch finally handed over sovereignty to Indonesia in 1950, independence following in 1962.

Fifty years on, Sumba is in many ways a forgotten world. Animist priests read the duodenum of a chicken to determine if a sick child will live or die. The annual festival of Pasola, held when seaworms swarm the coast each spring, is still celebrated, although these days the lances thrown by riders are blunt. Funerals involve the sacrifice of horses and buffalo that most Sumbanese can ill afford to make. In an attempt to curb such profligacy, a limit of three large animals per funeral was declared in 1990. But, as ever on Sumba, the rule of law has proved hard to impose. One day on the island, I drive past a site where, on the previous night, three times that number of buffalo had their throats cut, the severed heads lying in bloody pools upon the ground.

This is the Stone Age world into which Nihiwatu, the hotel, was born and continues to coexist with compelling interdependence: the Sumbanese lend their support to Claude and Petra Graves and, in return, the hotel and foundation benefit local communities. Both strands, while financially independent of each other, seem to capture the attention of wealthy visitors (various Hermès and du Ponts, Lorenz Bäumer from LVMH, the d'Ornanos from Sisley cosmetics, Santander bank's Botín family), who return to Nihiwatu again and again, and are significant donors to the foundation.

'The difference comes when you can meet the people you are helping,' says Graves, 'and experience for yourself how your money is spent. Our biggest worry was that we'd be catalysts in the breakdown of Sumbanese society. And it's happening. The other day an Indonesian newspaper called Sumba "the new Bali"; now there is this rapid acceleration in land speculation by people who flash money around to the poorest of the poor. Unless we protect Sumba now, downstream there could be nothing left.'

Graves knows and understands how many pig sacrifices it will take to win a tribe's trust; he can also hot-wire a broken vehicle and tinker with a hammer to make a generator restart. Born in Munich to an American father, he moved to Kenya by way of New Jersey and, by the age of 21, was working for his Hungarian uncle, a professional white hunter. By 1980, he owned Stardust on Malindi beach, the hottest nightclub in East Africa. When he sold it in 1984, Graves took off with his wife on a mission to find the most perfect surf break in the world.

The couple washed up on Sumba in the summer of 1988, and camped on the beach for the next four years, drinking water from a creek and spearfishing



## Sumba essentials

**Nihiwatu** (00 62 361 757149; [www.nihiwatu.com](http://www.nihiwatu.com)) has doubles from about £740, full board. A surf slot has to be reserved at the time of booking, and a week-long minimum stay is recommended to take advantage of the private-charter flights out of Bali, which the hotel can organise.

**Ampersand Travel** (020 7289 6100; [www.ampersandtravel.com](http://www.ampersandtravel.com)), an Asia travel specialist, can smooth out logistics, combining a stay at Nihiwatu with a longer Indonesian itinerary. It offers two nights on Bali and a week at Nihiwatu from £4,798 per person, including Singapore Airways flights from Heathrow to Bali via Singapore, and charter flights to and from Sumba.

**Opposite, clockwise from top left: a guest waiting for a wave; staff build a pyre for a beach party; a Sumbanese man in his canoe; guests hanging out at the boathouse; Villa Haweri; the beach at night; another fish netted**

for food. Undeterred by several bouts of malaria, they started to build a small hotel, one that would tread lightly in its environment and benefit the local people they had come to love. So they set about acquiring some 583 acres to create a protected reserve of which only 65 acres would be developed.

I congratulate Graves on the low-impact look of the place. At night, it is lit by a thousand candles winding through the trees. There are 12 simple villas on the principal headland, all with thatched roofs, woven-reed floors and basins carved out of stone. Bedrooms open onto private verandahs, where guests sink into daybeds and books; plunge pools will be added later this year. There's also the Graves' original home, Haweri, a three-bedroom villa full of precious ikats, which has views of a secret bay. Last August, three new four-suite villas opened, which have the potential to compete with the best boho beach resorts in the world, with sand-floored, open-air bathrooms like Soneva Fushi in the Maldives. The design is more about fresh air than air-con, more natural cottons than rich silks; and the food is straight from the sea and earth, presented with warm service nurtured by Petra over 15 years.

Graves takes a glug of whisky. 'Just don't call it a f\*\*\*ing eco-hotel,' he says, despite the fact that all the hotel's energy is created by copra, which is in turn converted into biodiesel (a micro-business in itself), and the kitchen waste makes gas for the stoves. 'F\*\*\*k eco,' reiterates Graves, who believes 'eco' should be a given at hotels, not a marketing strategy. 'The key thing is community responsibility.'

'To be honest, I only bought Nihiwatu because of the powerful effect it had on my three sons,' says new owner Chris Burch. 'But now I see how it can provide a positive philosophy others can take away with them. What Claude has done – well, it's remarkable.'

Graves leans in towards me. 'You know, when Petra and I first heard Chris wanted to invest, she made me promise I wouldn't swear during the meeting,' he says. 'In the first five minutes, I'd said f\*\*\*k three times.'

Burch laughs. 'We're soul mates in a way. It's Claude's vision. James and I are just the caretakers. All we have to do is try not to f\*\*\*k it up,' he says. **1**