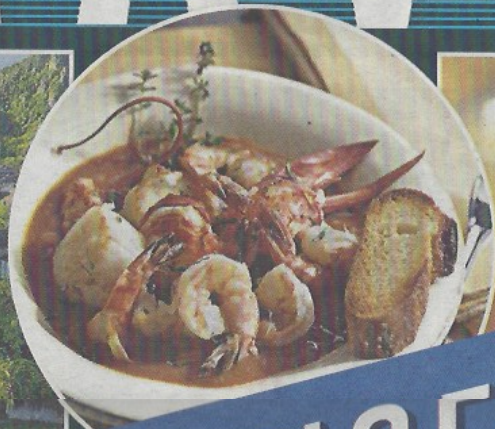
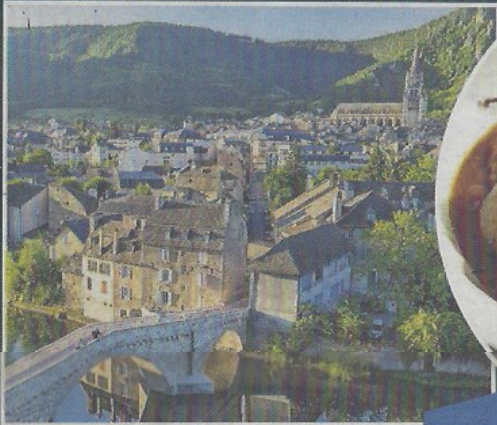


TRAVEL



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11-page guide



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Now that Bali's too busy, chill out on its prettier, cheaper sister island, Lombok, says **Susan d'Arcy**

Most people blame the movie *Eat Pray Love*, which starred Julia Roberts, Javier Bardem and Bali. When the film was released in 2010, the Indonesian island had about 22,000 hotel rooms. Last year, that number had rocketed to 55,200, with a further 67 hotels due to open by 2016.

This growth in popularity seems to have had a worrying effect on the locals, too. I stayed for one night on my way to Lombok. My driver complained at length about my flight being delayed — on my first trip to Bali, 20 years ago, such an inconvenience wouldn't have elicited so much as a shrug,

just a polite smile. Then we got caught in a traffic jam. They didn't have many of those 20 years ago.

Consequently, former fans are defecting — although they've not gone far. Twenty

miles away is Lombok. Once derided as Bali's backpacker backwater, it's increasingly fashionable, and more affordable — a package week is about £325pp cheaper here than on busier Bali.

The Gili Islands are the big draw: three tiny specks off Lombok's northwest coast, reached by ferry or hotel speedboat. Cars are out, horse-drawn carriages are in, keeping this archipelago

seriously slow-paced. Each isle has its own personality: Gili Air is easy-going, Gili Trawangan is the party animal and Gili Meno, my favourite, the quiet Crusoe type. A singlet or sarong over your swimwear marks you out as classy here. Add flip-flops and you'll be positively overdressed as you shuffle between the friendly beachfront bars.

Occasionally, someone summons up the energy to go snorkelling. I waded in from the shore and saw turtles within minutes, about the same time it took the jellyfish to find me. Several stings later, I was back on my lounge, consoling myself with a fresh banana juice and watching fishermen in bamboo hats tend to their wooden boats.

To sleep in style, though, you need to sail back to the mainland and the quirky **Tugu Lombok** hotel, on empty Sire Beach — Lombok's beaches are bone-white and epic, beating Bali's black volcanic sands hands down. Tugu's owner, Anhar Setjadjibrata, has sprinkled his collection of Indonesian art and antiques throughout the 36 rooms, to eccentric but magical effect (doubles from £165, B&B; tuguhotels.com/hotels/lombok/).

By contrast, the nine-room **Lombok Lodge**, at nearby Medana Bay, is as close as the island gets to designer decor, with a minimalist mood board of icy whites and slate greys, driftwood and artful sprays of orchids. The poolside dining is romantic, but the hotel lacks a decent beach (doubles from £260, half-board; thelomboklodge.com).

Next door, the **Oberoi** has an impressive stretch of golden sand. While its 50 pavilions and villas are a

tad predictable (polished teak, rattan, marble), the palm-lined infinity pool is stunning: it's dotted with cabanas where smart expats chill out. The spa is fantastic, too. There are few distractions from working your way through your supply of factor 30, apart from watching the barterers at Tanjung market or hiking up Mount Rinjani, an active volcano that looms large in the rainforested interior (doubles from £190; oberoihotels.com).

Senggigi is as close as Lombok gets to a "proper" seaside resort, with a string of hotels, including a Sheraton, some temples, plenty of souvenir shops — pearls are the thing to buy — internet cafes and roadside *warungs* selling delicious grilled fish. It remains laid-back, though, and its wonderful beaches are relatively crowd-free. I stayed at the eco-chic **Jeeva Klui**, where the rooms are comfortable and boutiquey, and the staff charming (doubles from £100, B&B; jeevaklui.com).

I wandered through the village of Pondok Perasi, the air laced with the scent of yesterday's catch being boiled to oblivion in

It's oh so quiet

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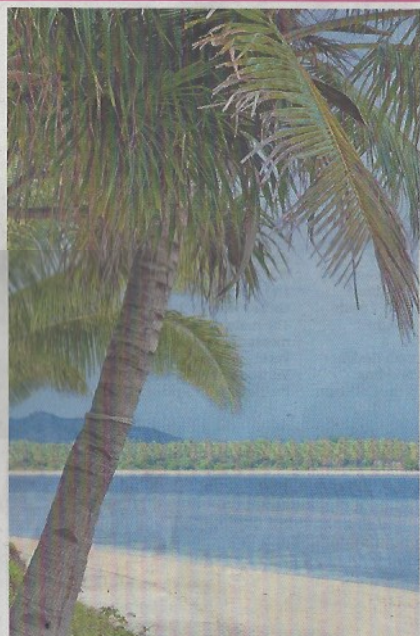




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Take a virtual tour of our
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Kierley Cook, Lyna Gill/Get



Good neighbour From top, the secluded bay at Tanjung Aun; the beach at the Oberoi hotel; and working the rice paddies

pots of seawater over open fires. The fishermen nodded as they mended their nets, and a group of toddlers were so busy waving at me, they forgot to shoo away the chickens pecking at their bare feet. And on a shady walk through the banana plantations to Benang Kelambu waterfall, a crocodile of teenagers, some with guitars strapped to their backs, were so delighted to spot a foreign tourist, they offered me some sugary fried sweets. I pretended to find them delicious and got a round of applause.

The south is more religious — Lombok's Sasak people are predominantly Muslim; Bali is chiefly Hindu — and as my car descended from the mountainous rice paddies to the flat tobacco fields, the women slipped behind veils.

By the time I had reached the parched tip of the Tanjung Ringgit peninsula, they had all but disappeared from view, as had any tarmac or phone signal.

Jeeva Beloam Beach Camp was never going to have wi-fi, but from the first sight of its pristine cove, looking onto the soft-focus outline of Sumbawa across the Alas Strait, I didn't mind at all. It is blissfully remote and unapologetically green, so the 11 handmade wood and bamboo villas are

appropriately pared-back: no TVs, limited air-con (doubles from £165, full-board; jeevabeloam.com).

The southern coastline is wild and mesmerising, with chunky pinkish cliffs and world-class surfing in the turquoise Timor Sea. Life can be raw here, and sometimes shockingly unregulated. If you venture to the market, be prepared to see buyers for restaurants in China snapping up a whale shark for \$30 or a baby hammerhead for \$10 — a practice that has environmentalists worried.

That's unlikely to concern the big hotel chains in the immediate future. There's a Novotel at Kuta Beach, and rumour has it other brands are scouting out locations in the south. Lombok won't be "doing a Bali" any time

soon, but don't leave your visit too long if you want those beaches to yourself.

THE BRIEF

Susan d'Arcy was a guest of Ampersand Travel and Finnair. Ampersand Travel has two nights at the Oberoi Lombok, B&B, two at Jeeva Beloam Beach Camp. Prices start at £1,695pp, full-board, including flights and transfers (020 7819 9770, ampersandtravel.com).

Finnair flies daily from Heathrow to Singapore via Helsinki; from £539 return in economy or £2,175 in business class (020 8001 0101, finnair.com). Fly on to Lombok with SilkAir; from £199 return (silkair.com).

Cars are out, horse-drawn carriages are in, keeping things seriously slow-paced

Not exotic enough for you?

If Lombok still sounds too developed for your taste, carry on east to Sumba — where head-hunting didn't die out until the 1980s.

The Sumbanese are Christian, but still in touch with their animist ancestry, so they regularly sacrifice livestock to the spirits. The scenery is an equally unusual mix. During the dry season, it has more in common with the African savanna, but then the rains carpet its hills in lime-green paddies, pulling the landscape back into Asia.

Most homes don't have electricity or running water. Life is tough and the people are tougher, as you'll discover if you visit during the pasola,

their version of a harvest festival. Rival tribesmen, all expert equestrians, bamboo spears in hand, battle it out on horseback. They believe the blood spilt represents fertility and ensures a good rice crop. These days, the weapons are blunted to prevent excessive blood loss, but it remains a brutal sport.

Western tourists who venture here stick to the few budget hotels on cappuccino-coloured beaches that could trick you into thinking this was the Seychelles, if it weren't for the buffalo sunning themselves on the sand.

But where there's paradise, hoteliers will follow. The once basic Nihlwatu has been



given a high-style makeover and is now as glamorous as anywhere in the Indian Ocean. The hotel hasn't traded in its right-on roots, however: all profits are ploughed back into the Sumba Foundation,

which works to improve the islanders' quality of life. Ampersand Travel has a week at Nihlwatu from £3,795pp, full-board, including flights and transfers (020 7819 9770, ampersandtravel.com).