

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

For Nanda Haensel, Flores and its many and diverse attractions are an open invitation to leave civilisation behind and discover nature's true beauty

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT Flores that is rather unearthly. This diverse island in Eastern Indonesia, with its savannah landscape, pristine oceans, impressive volcanoes and lakes, resembles a wilderness that seems to belong to another place and time. Though it is just an hour's flight from Bali, Flores is an island still shrouded in relative obscurity.

Travelling in Eastern Indonesia is to drift into another universe. I have done it a few times thanks to an obsession with the world's largest archipelago, and I have explored untouched beaches, and come face to face with amazing wildlife and exotic cultures. I have cruised in different areas across the region, from the Flores Sea, taking in the islands of Komodo, passing by the beauty of Mt Kelimulu and its lakes, and to the furthest reaches of the remote villages near Bajawa. It

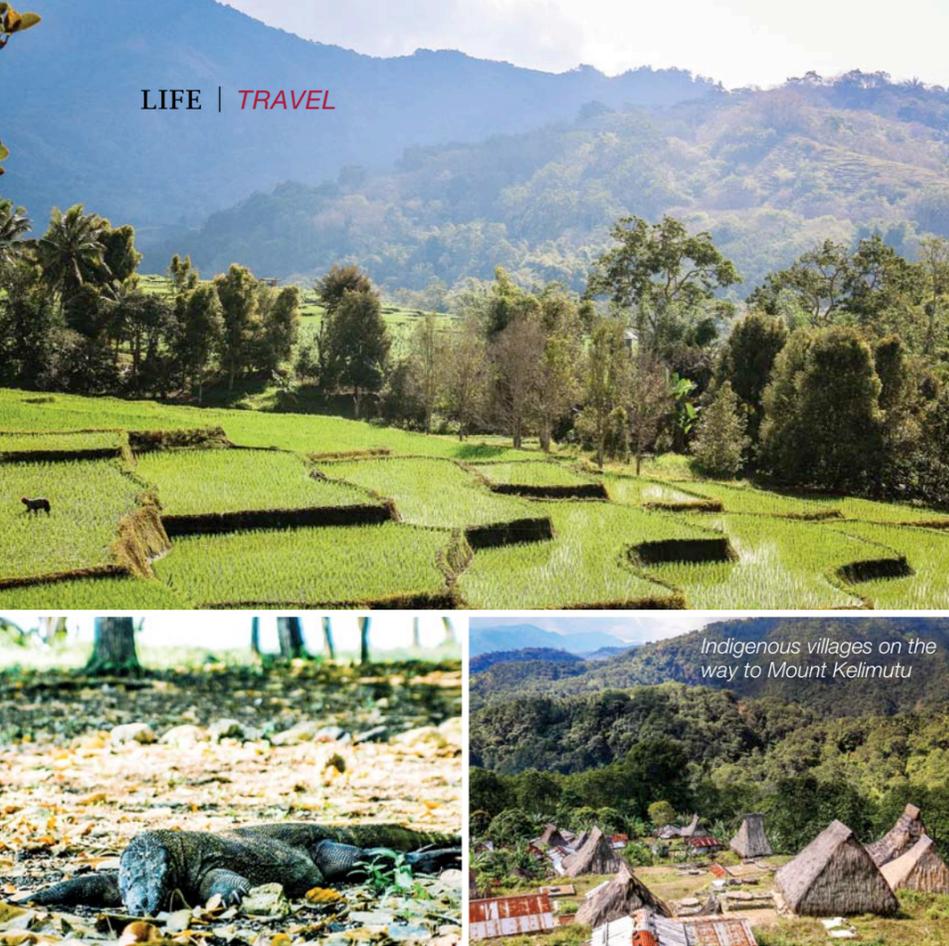
is so diverse that every time I return to Flores, it feels I am charting completely new territory.

It all started two years ago, in Labuan Bajo. I first landed in this small fishing village on the westernmost tip of Flores. From there, I boarded an elegant woodwork and white-painted former cargo boat. I sailed on *Alexa*, perhaps the most beautiful boat I have ever seen, across the Flores Sea, including the Komodo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. I dived with giant manta rays, walked among dragons, hiked on barren mountains, and admired peaks of green and mangrove forests.

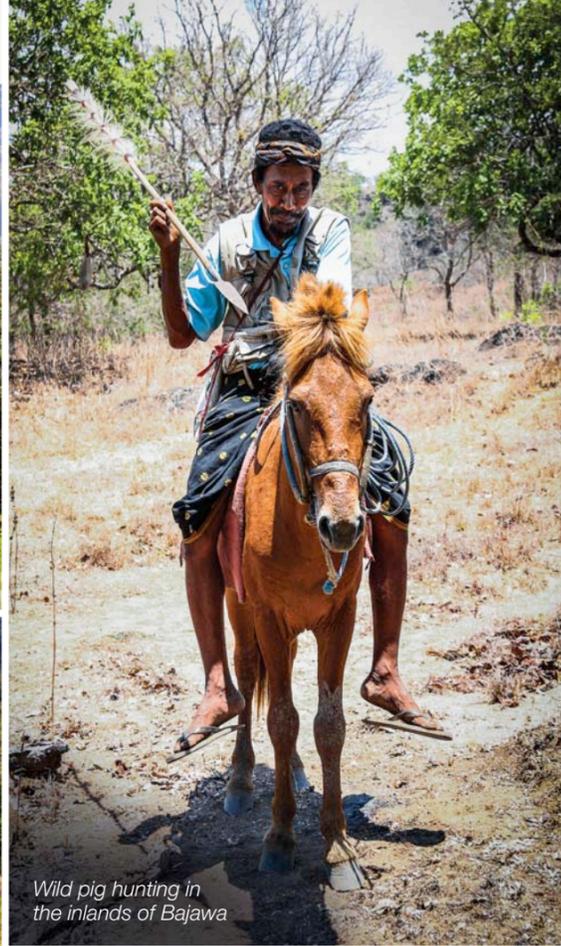
At night, I saw a world of phosphorescence and saw flying fish catching the moon in silver flashes without even the light of a single fishing boat on the horizon. For three days, I travelled like this, onboard an original *phinisi* sailing ship on my way to one of the best dive spots on Earth. Some months later, I find myself in Ende on the southern coast of the

Sunrise on the summit of Mount Kelimutu





Indigenous villages on the way to Mount Kelimutu



Wild pig hunting in the inlands of Bajawa



Alexa live aboard in Komodo Island National Park

island, this time on a motorbike expedition across the in lands of Flores. As I kick off this new adventure, my memories still bring me back to remarkable encounters with giant animals on the Flores Sea. But here I realise that Indonesia's diversity is hardly limited to wildlife. From the back of a motorbike, I travel across black- and white-sand beaches, rice paddies and traditional villages around Ende. The landscape stirs the imagination with its exotic hillsides covered by dry savannah and green vegetation contrasting starkly with the brilliant blue water beaches.

Our guide, also driving a motorbike, is called Rio: a young friend of the man who rented us his own bike. He knows the empty roads by heart as he drives us along villages and then towards Maumere, on the north coast of Flores. It is not surprising that each stop ends up involving religion and traditions, which are a precious part of life almost everywhere on the island. And it's definitely not surprising that they are intimate experiences. We enter inside villages and discover the distinctive architecture of traditional houses, and, more importantly, we discover the people.

We disembark in Moni, a little village surrounded by rice paddies and landscapes dotted with palms and banana trees. The vibe is relaxed, and we take pleasure staying in a

simple accommodation near local houses. We are at the foot of the volcanic Mt Kelimutu, a popular spot for travellers (well, popular for Flores), whose lunar landscape is beyond comprehension. The main attraction happens during sunrise when one can appreciate the brilliant colourful lakes housed inside the crater of the volcano. Depending on the oxidation state of the lake, the waters change colour on an irregular basis, ranging from bright red through to green and blue. This lends the whole area a surreal atmosphere that has led to many myths and speculations about the origin of Kelimutu. Only later do I learn that to the Florenses, Kelimutu is considered a resting place for souls.

When I think I have seen enough of Flores, one year later I get invited to join an assignment in the archaeological grounds near Bajawa, a city in the central highlands of Flores. Once again, I land in Ende. With a team of filmmakers, we drive the coastline of the Savu Sea, reaching the settlement where the local tribe Nagakeo lives. Moving inward, the interior of Flores is a lost world of tribal cultures and archaeological sites. The feeling is remote, as we were in one of those holes in the map where no one else had ever been or possibly never would.

I am accompanying the Indonesian artist Kinez Riza, who is filming a documentary about human origins. Flores is home to

a wealth of archaeological findings and our primary purpose on this journey is to document the fascinating work of archaeologists in search of "hobbits". Around 10 years ago, scientists excavating a cave in this area discovered evidence of pre-hominid people smaller than pygmies, known as *Homo floresiensis*. They are thought to have lived on the island some 20,000 years ago and to be an extinct species of human.

We stay at one of the houses belonging to the Nagakeo tribe at the Mangeruda village. We sleep on mats and take bucket showers. I enjoy the evenings with the archaeologists. One of them arranges a day-trip for me to Riung (a proper blue-water beach paradise two hours' ride from the village) on the back of a motorbike.

If Indonesians have one thing in common, it's that foreigners are truly welcomed into parts of their lives. I take the opportunity to learn about their traditions as I hear stories about wild pig hunting with poisoned spears and bamboo blowpipes and religious rituals. In front of each house, there is a grave set for the members of the family. The tribes have retained its traditions despite the influence of Catholicism, which was a courtesy of the Portuguese colonisation.

Indonesia does not lack variety. And neither does Flores. As I descend into the

island, it feels like I am stepping back in time. And it doesn't matter whether I head deep into its uninhabited waters or to its remote ancient villages in the dry savannahs. For all these reasons, Eastern Indonesia is where Asia gets more interesting—especially for those who are open to embracing the wild. 🌿



Nanda Haensel travelled across Komodo Island onboard the Alexa on a three-day trip. Alexa offers a liveaboard experience including accommodation,

meals, dive instructor and private guide. She flew from Bali to Labuan Bajo. Four months later, Nanda returned to Flores and travelled on a motorbike on a three-day trip from Ende, on the southern coast of Flores, to Maumere, on the northern coast. Along the route, she visited several traditional villages and enjoyed sunrise at Mount Kelimutu.

She flew from Bali to Ende and returned from Maumere to Bali. She returned to Flores once again, one year later, and journeyed across Bajawa for six days on assignment for documentary focusing on the archaeological sites of Flores; she stayed at a homestay in Mangeruda village and flew from Jakarta to Ende, and from Bajawa to Jakarta, with a stopover in West Timor.