

Lombok Escape

As Indonesia strives to maintain peace and stability, one island remains an oasis of bliss

When he's not guiding tourists through the Lombok Strait in his motorboat, Mr Brahamin weaves coconut frond bracelets for extra money.

"My children are nine and five years old. They need to go to school. My wife doesn't work, so I am the only one earning," explains Brahamin as he navigates his wooden boat through calm, blue waters. His grin is large and toothy and, like many Indonesians, he goes by only one name.

"Now there are not so many tourists, but I hope it will pick up soon," he says.

Brahamin's hope is unlikely to come true anytime soon. Lombok, the tear-shaped Indonesian island east of Bali, is heavily reliant on tourism and has for years struggled to gain a footing in Bali's shadow. Now the October 2005 Bali bombings could further

cast Lombok in the minds of international tourists as a backwater amid an ocean of instability.

With its chilled-out villas, stunning scenery and quality restaurants, Lombok could be the new Bali

Yet even as Bali continues to grapple with being a terrorist target, Lombok has emerged as a peaceful neighboring destination with a lot to offer. In many ways, Lombok appears a good fifteen years behind Bali, given the frenzy of development that characterizes the latter's tourism

infrastructure. But by picking a slower, more cautious path, Lombok has drawn out only the best of what its neighbor has to offer.

"[Lombok] is peaceful and beautiful," says the director of the Indonesian Center for Tourism Studies, Rini Raksadjaya. "But we must be careful not to overbuild and overload the island."

For now, that is not a concern. With its chilled-out villas, stunning scenery and quality restaurants, Lombok could be the new Bali. Or – more precisely – the old one. Tourists visiting Lombok will find an island retreat that recalls the Bali of old and prices are slightly cheaper than its western neighbor's. Lombok also boasts fewer motorbikes and tacky shops, and just a fraction of Bali's heavy tourist traffic. While over 686,000 tourists have already visited the famed



Lombok's empty beaches provide a perfect setting for romantic relaxation

island this year, only 123,370 foreign tourists visited the whole of Lombok's home province, West Nusa Tenggara, during 2004.

And though Lombok may feel simple and stripped-down, boutique places like Qunci Villas or giant resorts like the Oberoi promise that visitors need not stray too far off the beaten track. The mojitos and chocolate cake available at these upscale hotels have a way of keeping everything in perspective.

Six kilometers off Lombok's west coast lie the bright coral reefs of the Gili Islands, whose beaches feature colorful lean-to juice huts and the welcome shade of palm groves. Most of Lombok's beach-front hotels, as well as independent agents, arrange snorkeling and boating tours to the Gilis for US\$25 per person. Once ashore, the preferred mode of transportation is horse-drawn carriage.

Traveling with our guide aboard his outrigger boat, we stopped first at Gili Trawangan to take in the surrounding coral reef and its inhabitants. The reefs off the Gilis are the only location in the world besides the Caribbean known to have a rare species of blue coral. From Gili Trawangan we motored on to Gili Meno, where giant sea turtles swam through the depths with astounding grace. Our guide snorkeled with us, grabbing our hands and pointing out the turtles with emphatic gestures.

We then motored to a beach on the west side of Gili Meno to lunch at the shore's lone establishment, the Good Heart Restaurant, where huge platters of fresh grilled fish and cold beers await patrons. From our cushioned beach bungalows, we gorged ourselves on the day's kingfish and squid for less than US\$20. We then shoved off again to float, find more turtles and take in the school of zebra fish below us.

Later in the afternoon, our guide steered our boat around Lombok's jagged western coast, while we watched small monkeys scamper over a rocky outcropping above the white sand beaches. The water became bluer, more opalescent, as the sun began its hazy decline. After docking, we settled in for a clear night under bright stars.



Monkey business on the Gilis

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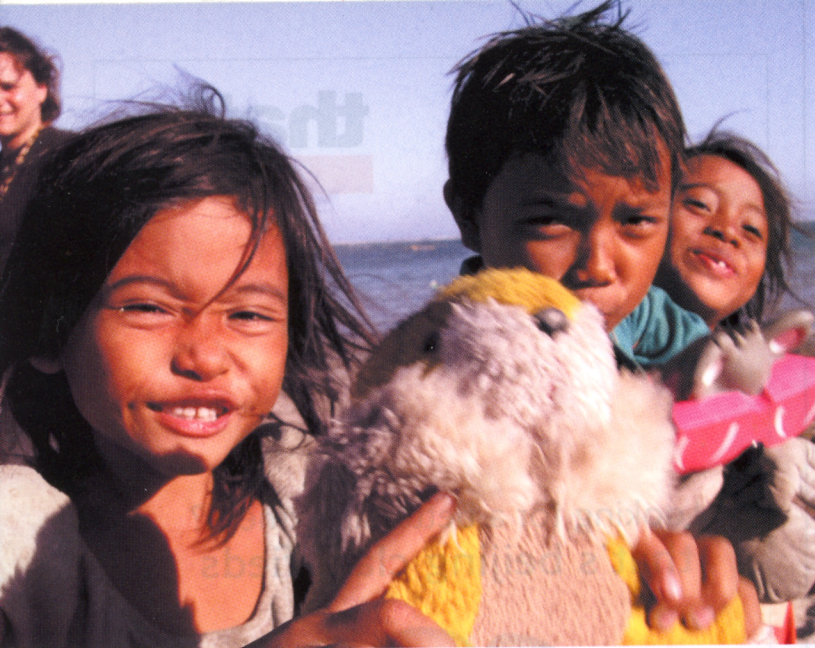
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Blue waters and silver sands of Sire Beach bring a warm reception from friendly locals

Simple breakfasts of both Western and Indonesian cuisines are Lombok's typical morning fare, and though a tray of eggs, toast and coffee showed up on our Qunci Villa deck the next morning, similar meals are available at the open-air cafes along Jalan Raya Senggigi.

Also readily available across the island, though in no way crowding Lombok's two-lane roads, are motorbikes for rent. Most hotels charge US\$4-8 dollars a day, which includes helmets and fuel.

Lombok unfolded with majestic yet rugged beauty as we sped on our bikes past rice paddies, palm-lined beaches and thatch huts selling petrol and coconut juice. Roads wrapping the circumference of the island afford motorcyclists with views of the coral waters and palm tree-crowded beaches below.

While the southern half of Lombok is more developed, the north offers natural, unobstructed views of the island, as well as access to Mt. Rinjani, the island's 12,224-ft.

peak. Many independent travelers trek the mountain to see its many waterfalls, a nearly 300-year-old Hindu temple at Lingsar and the countless paddy fields and beaches in between. The Trek Information Center at the mountain's base provides porters, guides and maps.

After a full day of motorcycling, we rode back to Sire Beach, where sounds of prayer from a nearby mosque wafted across the water. With the sun in descent, Lombok's greenery turned to shadows and spindly

black fingers of plant life wound into the sky. A bank of clouds obscured all of Bali except the crest of Mount Agung. We took in these sights as cocktail hour at a private drink hut came into full swing.

For dinner, we opted for a change of scene and popped into one of the town's local eateries. At Café Alberto we sipped red wine and supped on basic pasta and pizza. The meal was a good, earthy counterbalance to the refined elegance of villa dining. Dinner for two,

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including starters and wine, came to US\$25.

Lombok relies heavily on tourism and will most likely struggle in the wake of the October terrorist attacks on Bali. Still, the island is developing quickly. Its infrastructure will be upgraded according to a series of new government-led investment projects worth US\$22 billion.

Construction projects appear to be on the rise and there is speculation that several new resorts will be built. These changes are already giving rise to tension between small communities and big business interests. This, too, is a story with which Bali is familiar.

But for now, Lombok remains calm and low-key. While visiting the main town of Senggigi, passing by its dusty street-side cafes and eclectic art galleries, we chatted with a passing man who asked how long we would be staying on the island.

Upon learning of the brevity of our stay he responded, "Oh, that's very bad news. Very bad news indeed."

We couldn't agree more. ■

Travel Tips:

Getting There

Silk Air flies direct to Lombok from Singapore. Garuda Indonesia and Merpati flights arrive daily from Jakarta and every 40 minutes from Bali.

Where to Stay

The Oberoi Lombok, a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, features spacious private villas with spectacular views of Medana Beach and the Lombok Strait beyond. One of the biggest draws of the Oberoi is its spa, among the best in Lombok featuring traditional treatments including Ayurvedic and aromatherapy massages. The spa currently offers three or five-day spa packages featuring meditation, yoga, the traditional Indonesian bath of mandi lulur, trekking to a Buddhist village and plenty of massage. Prices range from US\$899 to US\$4,130, depending on room type and the offer runs from July 15 to December 26, 2005, and again from January 4 to March 31, 2006. Basic villas start at US\$240 per night.

The smaller, more understated Qunci Villas is a modern, elegant hideaway, designed by Bali-based architect Joost Van Grieken. It was completed in July 2003 and offers a relaxed minimalism. The villa's restaurant, featuring both Indonesian and Western fare, is located beside an infinity pool that appears to spill out into the rolling waters beyond of the Lombok Strait, over which Bali's Mt. Agung is visible. Poolside massages start at US\$10. Private villas with alfresco garden shower and simple dine-in breakfasts go for US\$70 per night.

The Oberoi Lombok

Medana Beach

Tanjung, Mataram Lombok

Tel: (62) 370-638-444

Fax: (62) 370-632-496

www.oberoihotels.com

Qunci Villas

Jalan Raya Mangsit, Senggigi Lombok

Tel: (62) 370-693-800

Fax: (62) 370-693-802

www.quncivillas.com

E-mail: stay@quncivillas.com

Café Alberto

Senggigi, beachside

(No further address provided)

Tel: (62) 370-693-039

(62) 370-693-313

Fax: (62) 370-622-344

Starters from US\$3 to US\$5, main courses from US\$6 to US\$8, wines from US\$9. Beachfront seating and live music most nights.