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TRAVEL

The Indonesian island of Flores rivals Bali, here's why

Once the stronghold of divers and academics, this hidden gem has had a \$500bn investment and has new resorts, great restaurants and no crowds.

By ANDREA DIXON

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21 Comments

A one-time stronghold of divers and academics, the Indonesian island of Flores is emerging as the least-known destination that could rival Bali.

The former port town of Labuan Bajo (LBJ) in recent years has morphed into a stylish, under-touristed launching pad for Komodo adventures.

The dragons-lair islands of Komodo and Rinca are a 90-minute speedboat ride from LBJ, while the wider UNESCO-protected marine park has 27 smaller isles with pristine reefs, coral gardens, atolls and secluded beaches all within easy reach.

In the past, the town was a grimy container terminal, where kids leapt off abandoned hulks into water greasy with diesel.

The old port is now a thriving and clean marina while the decrepit harbourfront has been redeveloped into a pedestrian corniche with seafood cafes and sensational sunset views. Last year more than \$500bn in investment was channelled into LBJ.

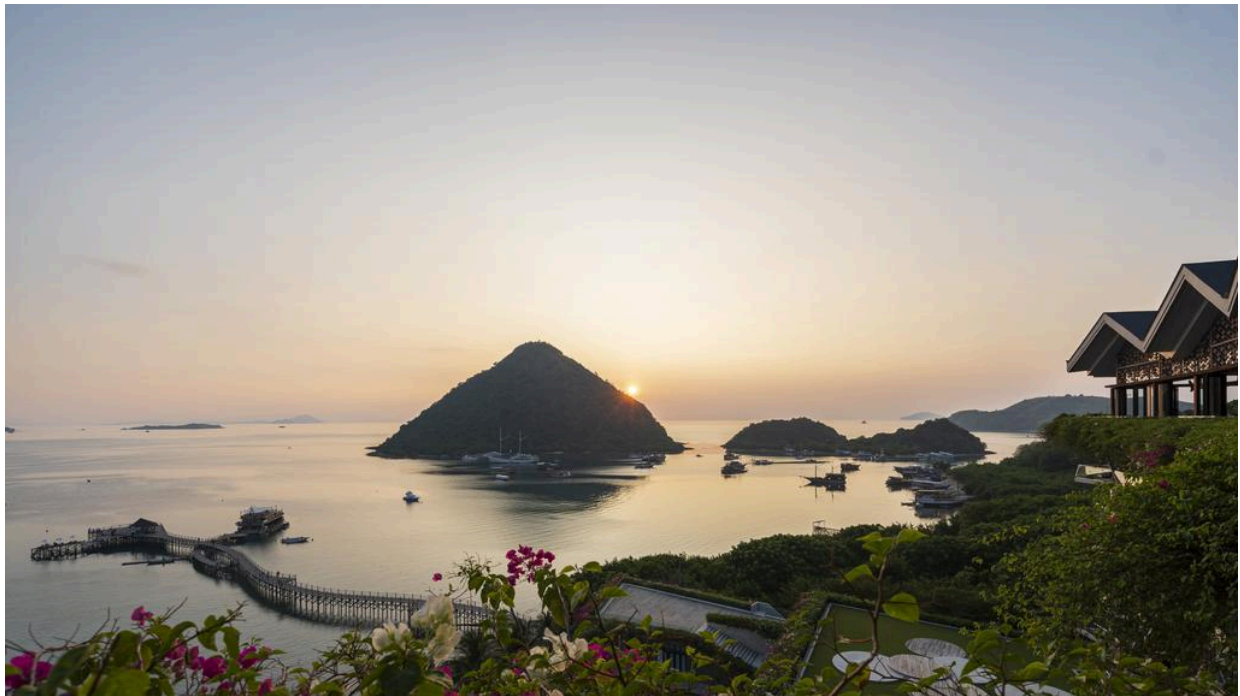
Is Flores better than Bali?

In September, Komodo airport landed its first international flight, from [Kuala Lumpur](#); direct flights from Australia are expected next year.

Like [Bali](#), Flores has volcanic activity, as evidenced by the recent eruption of Mount Lewotobi Laki-Laki. Other features include the ancient rice-paddy systems and the indigenous Manggarai people's culture. It is also one of a handful of Indonesia's Christian islands.

Where to stay in Flores

Ayana Komodo Waecicu Beach



Ayana Komodo Waecicu Beach, Flores, Indonesia.

This was Komodo's first five-star operation when it opened in 2018. [The serene retreat](#) has sea views from its 192 comfortable guestrooms and 13 suites. The resort swimming pool is stepped down to the seafront and pier, from where the Ayana speedboat whisks guests off on excursions in air-conditioned, leather-seated comfort. The jetty also has a coral nursery cared for by an in-house marine biologist, and a bar and sun lounge. Don't miss the seafood barbecue – the pitmaster knows how to handle his lobster. Ayana has an exquisite nine-berth phinisi boat for slow travel; resort rooms from \$315 a night.

Sudamala Resort on Seraya Kecile Island



Sudamala Resort on Seraya Kecile island, Komodo.

A 45-minute boat trip from LBJ leads to [Sudamala Resort](#) on Seraya Kecile island, where the friendly staff encourage guests to go barefoot. A string of 31 colonial-style wooden bungalows with flowering bougainvillea face seaward. Throw the doors open and sleep to the sound of the sea. Patchy wi-fi and no television are digi-detox blessings. Instead, wear yourself out sailing, kayaking and snorkelling on the reef. The restaurant serves quality Indonesian and Western favourites such as chicken satay and fish curries, pasta and steaks; from \$300 a night.

Ta'aktana



Ta'aktana on Flores in Komodo, Indonesia.

Ta'aktana is Komodo's newest resort, and part of the [Marriott Luxury Collection](#) group of properties. It opened in May with 70 premier guestrooms, 25 villas and 45 suites across the 16ha property, plus seven over-water villas. The conical roofs of the traditional huts found in the Flores village of Wae Rebo are reworked to create well-appointed villas that incorporate tribal motifs; from \$850 a night.

Go on a yacht cruise

Small-ship cruise operator Aqua Expedition's opulent [60m Aqua Blu yacht](#) sails between Bali and Komodo from May to July. Its all-inclusive itineraries are a seven-night exercise in nautical bliss on a 15-suite former British Naval explorer. Apart from snorkelling, scuba-diving and paddle-boarding, guests can hike rugged mountains, bathe under waterfalls and visit the famous monitor lizards. Australian chef Ben Cross is behind the menu, which is paired with premium wines; from \$15,200 a person, twin-share.

Private villas in Flores



Paradise Garage villa on Flores.

Paradise Garage, a [sleek two-villa estate](#), maximises sea views from its hillside eyrie. The seven-bedroom villa has a 15m pool that can accommodate private scuba-diving

lessons, while the surrounding deck is perfect for a party. Each villa has dedicated staff who can arrange everything from a massage to helicopter transport; from \$1700 a night; \$1500 for the five-bedroom option.

Where to eat in Flores



Ta'aktana on Flores in Komodo, Indonesia.

Fish markets

Labuan Bajo's harbourfront has a nightly fish market where fisherfolk sell their catch, and prawns, squid, lobster, crab and fish are cooked on wood-fired grills. Expect to pay about \$20 a head for three dishes. Claim a picnic table on the waterfront to enjoy your feast. Don't miss The Dockers Arms, a gastropub with a beer garden under an enormous tree. Draft beers, spirits, cocktails and whole coconuts are served icy cold. Insta @thedockersarms

Italian

Italian food is popular in LBJ and the standout is Baccala Bajo, where Chef Pepe reigns as the town's king of carpaccio. Snapper and barracuda are the favourites, the gnocchi is light and fluffy, and the service smart and knowledgeable. Insta @baccalabajo

Japanese

Happy Banana is a Japanese fusion cafe that specialises in creating vegan and vegetarian versions of its standard dishes. Try the lush ramen with bok choy that substitutes tofu for the usual prawns. The butter-soft ceviche is deftly handled, and the sushi, sashimi and poke bowls are fresh and satisfying. Insta @happybananakomodo

Seafood

Taman Laut Handayani Seafood is an Indonesian seafood diner with epic hilltop vistas and sea breezes. It's a top choice for a sunset dinner and to explore local cuisine. Crab in Padang sauce, grilled octopus with rice and sambal, and rich fish curries deliver complex spices and fiery finishes. Insta @tamanlauthandayani

What to do in Flores



Rangko Cave in the Komodo region, Indonesia.

Island adventures

See the magnificent dragons on Rinca and Komodo islands. Beyond these, the diving and snorkelling is world class. A one-day excursion on a charter boat can include a hike on Padar Island, where the view spans three beaches with black, pink and white

sand, a visit to the dragons, plus lunch on the pink beach, where Timor deer chill out in the sea. Guests snorkel at Takamakasar atoll for turtles and Manta Point for rays.



Komodo dragon in Komodo National Park, Indonesia.

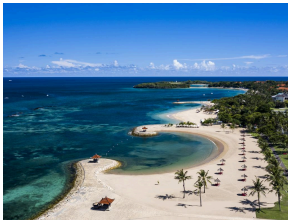
Caves and culture

Flores has mesmerising cave systems. The nearest to LBJ is Batu Cermin, or mirror cave. Named for its sparkling limestone walls, it also contains the fossil of a sea turtle. Further afield is Rangko Cave, which has a stunning pool for swimming. In 2003 archaeologists discovered the remains of *Homo floresiensis* – also known as Hobbit man – at Liang Bua cave, now open to the public. Tie in a Liang Bua trip with a look at the lingko spider- web rice fields. Waterfalls are abundant and Cunca Wulang is among the best. Pair a visit with a trip to Melo village, where Manggarai people maintain a traditional lifestyle.

Andrea Dixon was a guest of Ayana Komodo Waecicu Beach and Sudamala Resort.

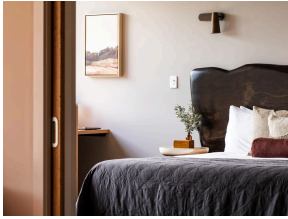
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