If you’ve ever dreamt of powder-white sand, azure bays, frothing hot springs and hidden traditional villages, then Nusa Tenggara is your wonderland. Here’s an arc of islands that is lush and jungle-green in the north, more arid savannah in the south and in-between has some of the world’s best diving, limitless surf breaks, and technicolor volcanic lakes. It’s a land of pink-sand beaches, schooling sharks and rays, and the world’s largest lizard: the swaggering, spellbinding Komodo dragon.

You’ll also find a cultural diversity that is unmatched in Indonesia. East of Hindu Bali are the largely Islamic islands of Lombok and Sumbawa, followed by predominantly Catholic Flores, while Timor and the remote Alor and Solor Archipelagos have Protestant majorities. Throughout, animist rituals and tribal traditions thrive alongside the minarets, temples and chapels. Though Bahasa Indonesia is a unifying tongue, each main island has at least one native language, which is often subdivided into dialects. Eavesdrop on one of the weekly markets in the countryside and you’ll hear several.

The easily accessed and ultimately seductive Gili Islands see the bulk of the tourism here, along with the rest of Lombok and its towering Gunung Rinjani (3726m). But those with a hunger for adventure head further east to Flores, charter boats to Komodo and back, then keep moving south and east where the *bule* (foreigner) crowds and creature comforts are thin on the ground and the travelling can be challenging and incredibly rewarding. In fact, you may fantasise about your next trip here before the first one is over.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Gazing at the lunarlike landscape atop Gunung Kelimutu (p548), with its three astonishing crater lakes, each a different colour
- Trekking up the lush slopes of Gunung Rinjani (see boxed text, p508), the sacred volcano that dominates northern Lombok
- Coming face-to-face with the mother of all lizards in Komodo or Rinca (see boxed text, p530)
- Exploring the remote villages of West Timor (p564), characterised by their beehive-shaped clan houses, and experiencing the island’s unique tribal culture, markets and textiles
- Snorkelling or diving in coral reefs teeming with marine life around the Gili Islands (see boxed text, p497) and Komodo National Park (see boxed text, p531)

**POPULATION:** 8.3 MILLION
**LAND AREA:** 68,053 SQ KM
**HIGHEST PEAK:** GUNUNG RINJANI (3726M)
HISTORY

Before the 15th century, the only external contact these islands had were sporadic visits from Chinese and Arab traders in search of sandalwood, spices and tortoiseshell. In 1512 the Portuguese landed in (and named) Flores, then Timor and Solor and brought Christianity to all three islands.

The Dutch muscled into the region in the 17th century, taking control of Kupang in 1653 and later shunting the Portuguese off to East Timor. But, with few resources to tempt them, they devoted little attention to Nusa Tenggara, only really establishing firm control over the area in the 20th century by forming alliances with tribal rajas. Crowns were stolen and redistributed, which has had a lasting effect on local politics. To this day, locals bicker over who the real Timor royals are.

Little changed after WWII, with the vast majority of people continuing to make a living from fishing or subsistence farming. Periodic droughts have been devastating: famine killed an estimated 50,000 in Lombok in 1966, provoking the government to implement a transmigrasi program that moved thousands of families from the island to other parts of the nation.

Today there remains very little industry in the region, apart from a colossal mine in Sumbawa; various international NGOs are also helping to develop tourism and seaweed farming in Flores and Alor. Many Nusa Tenggarans move to Java, Bali or Malaysia to find work. Tourism is expanding, however.

Dubai investors are deeply entrenched in South Lombok, and smaller-scale tourism development is underway in West Flores. Throw in Bali’s continued growth and an increase in flights from Denpasar and Kupang, and the hope among local people is that this influx will help develop the region’s poor infrastructure and eventually trickle down to them.

WILDLIFE

The big brawny action hero is the Komodo dragon (see boxed text, p530), the world’s largest lizard, which is easily spotted on the islands of Komodo and Rinca. Small numbers also exist in western Flores.

The coral reefs of Nusa Tenggara are some of the richest in the world, and there’s an incredible array of marine life, from tiny reef dwellers such as nudibranchs, sea snails and pipefish to pelagic giants: manta and devil rays, gray and hammerhead sharks, pilot and blue whales, orcas and dolphins.

CLIMATE

On the islands east of Bali, seasonal differences are more pronounced. The driest months are August and September, and the wettest months are between November and February. However, the duration of the seasons varies from island to island. The seasons in Lombok are more like those in Bali, with a dry season from April to September and a wet season from October to March. Much the same applies to both Sumbawa and Flores. The duration of the dry season increases the