

Nusa Tenggara



Indonesia's dazzling arc of eastern islands that stretches towards northern Australia is perhaps the most varied and rewarding part of the nation to explore. There are few regions of the world that can compete with Nusa Tenggara for sheer diversity – east of Hindu Bali are the largely Islamic islands of Lombok and Sumbawa, followed by predominantly Catholic Flores with its Portuguese heritage, while Timor and the Alor and Solor Archipelagos have Protestant majorities. On all of these islands, animist rituals and tribal traditions continue alongside the minarets, temples and chapels, particularly in rural areas. Though Bahasa Indonesia is a unifying tongue, each main island has at least one native language, which is often subdivided into dialects.

The spectacular terrain is almost as diverse: the fecund volcanic slopes and shimmering rice paddies of western Lombok contrast sharply with the arid hillsides of Komodo and Sumba, which turn dusty brown at the end of the long dry season.

If you've a thirst for adventure or nature, or if you surf, snorkel, hike or dive, the opportunities in Nusa Tenggara are almost limitless. Of the dozens of volcanoes, the sublime cone of Kelimutu – its summit crowned by three crater lakes of different hues – has to be the region's prime draw, though Lombok's towering Rinjani is a much more challenging ascent.

The cities and towns in this region are generally not places to linger long – with little in the way of cultural appeal and an excess of fumes, heat, noise and urban grime – though they are rarely threatening or dangerous; personal safety is not normally a great concern.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gazing at the lunarlike landscape atop **Gunung Kelimutu** (p561), with its three astonishing crater lakes, each a different colour
- Trekking up the lush slopes of **Gunung Rinjani** (p519), the sacred volcano that dominates northern Lombok
- Coming face-to-face with the mother of all lizards in **Komodo** (p541) or **Rinca** (p543)
- Exploring the villages of **Sumba** (p590), characterised by their extraordinary rocket-roofed clan houses, and marvelling at the island's unique tribal culture, tombs and textiles
- Snorkelling or diving in coral reefs teeming with marine life around the **Gili Islands** (p511), **Labuanbajo** (p546) and **Komodo National Park** (p546)



■ POPULATION: 8.2 MILLION

■ LAND AREA: 68,053 SQ KM

■ HIGHEST PEAK: GUNUNG RINJANI (3726M)

HISTORY

The region of Nusa Tenggara has always been, and remains, remote. Before the 15th century, virtually 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 first landed in (and named) Flores; they also named Timor and Solor and brought Christianity to all three islands soon after their arrival.

The Dutch began to muscle in on 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 rajahs.

Little changed after WWII, the vast majority of people continuing to make a living from fishing or subsistence farming. Periodic droughts could be devastating; famine killed an estimated 50,000 in Lombok in 1966, provoking the government to implement a *transmigrasi* programme 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), and many Nusa Tenggaraans are forced to move to Java, Bali or Malaysia in search of work. It's also quite common for women to work as maids in the Gulf states, Singapore and Hong Kong. The potential for tourism remains vast, but, due to political instability, poor infrastructure and transport links, and low educational standards, Nusa Tenggara looks unlikely to profit much from this sector for some time yet.

WILDLIFE

The region's real trump card is the Komodo dragon (see p542), the world's largest lizard, which can easily be 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 pipe fish to pelagic giants: manta and devil rays, pilot whales, 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 closer you get to Australia – the rusty landscapes of Sumba and Timor contrast strongly with well-vegetated Flores. See also the climate chart for Kupang, p848.

At almost 10°S latitude, Timor is also the only island in Indonesia that is far enough from the equator to experience typhoons (cyclones), but these are rare. Nearby northern Australia is not so lucky.

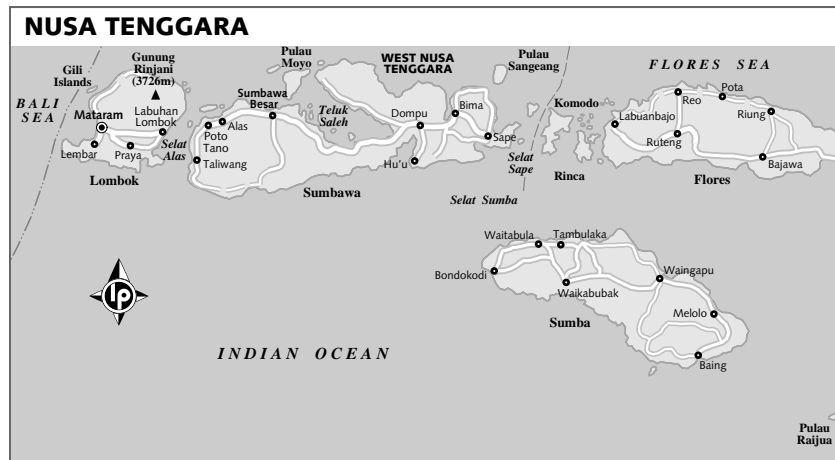
GETTING THERE & AROUND

Overland travel is very arduous in many parts of mountainous Nusa Tenggara, particularly in Flores. Lombok, Sumbawa and Timor have fairly decent surfaced main roads and some comfortable bus services. Get off the highways and things slow down considerably, however. Ferry services have actually worsened in recent years, partly due to the downturn in tourism (and several sinkings). Fortunately, several airlines now cover the main inter-island routes, as few travellers who have endured the punishing long haul across Nusa Tenggara by surface transport are willing to repeat the experience.

Air

There are twice-weekly flights between Darwin in Australia and Kupang, jointly operated by Air North and Merpati (Merpati Nusantara Airlines). Mataram has the only other international airport in Nusa Tenggara, with twice-weekly connections to Singapore on Silk Air and daily connections to Kuala Lumpur (KL) on Merpati. Most visitors use Bali as the international gateway to Nusa Tenggara, as there are so many more connections available.

Several airlines operate within Nusa Tenggara, but the main two are Merpati and Transnusa (which mainly operates



between the eastern islands). Other airlines, including Adam Air, GT Air, Lion Air, Batavia Air and Wings Air, concentrate on the main routes to/from Mataram and Kupang.

With Merpati, the delays or cancellations remain an inconvenience; however, it remains the best-connected airline in Nusa Tenggara. Transnusa is generally more reliable and punctual, but flight cancellations are common on all routes in Nusa Tenggara, particularly on the less popular (and less profitable) ones.

Nusa Tenggara is not well connected to other parts of Indonesia, and you'll have to travel via Bali to get to Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua.

It's wise to book early, and reservations are essential in the peak August tourist season. The most popular routes are to/from Bali and Flores (particularly Maumere–Denpasar). Overbooking often occurs, so make sure your booking is confirmed when buying the ticket, and always reconfirm. If a flight is 'full', it is worth going to the airport before departure, as there are often 'no-shows', which means last-minute seats are available.

Bicycle

Many people hire bicycles to get around the Gili Islands, but they are not a popular form of transport anywhere else in Nusa Tenggara. Long-distance cycling is an option on Lombok (though the roads are narrow

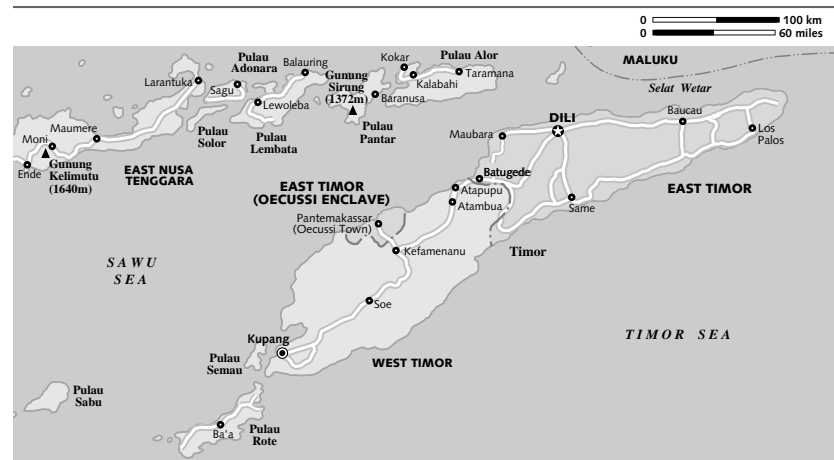
and traffic can be quite heavy) and across the undulating terrain of Sumba and western Sumbawa. Cycling on volcanic Flores or mountainous Timor requires Tour de France levels of endurance, though some riders do travel across both islands using buses to get their bikes up the steepest inclines and freewheeling downhill.

Boat

Pelni's *Awu*, *Dobonsolo*, *Dorolonda*, *Kelimitu*, *Sirimau*, *Tatamailau*, *Pangrango* and *Tilongkabila* ferries all service Nusa Tenggara. Schedules are provided under individual town entries in this chapter. Pelni's more basic Perintis cargo ships cover many routes and are an option if you get stuck. Ask at the office of the *syahbandar* (harbour master) or at the shipping offices. Conditions are primitive, but you can often negotiate to rent a cabin.

Somewhat dilapidated, slow ferries also connect many of the islands. There are very regular sailings between Bali and Lombok, and Lombok and Sumbawa. Between Sumbawa and Flores there's a daily ferry, but it does not stop at Komodo.

Other ferry connections include twice-weekly services between both Kupang and Lantuka (Flores) and Kupang and Kalabahi (Alor). Boats also connect Ende (Flores) with Waingapu (Sumba); Lantuka (Flores) with Lembata and Kalabahi; and Kupang with Rote. There are plenty of other possibilities; see the relevant sec-



tions of individual town entries for more details.

A popular way of travelling between Lombok and Flores or vice versa is on a boat tour, stopping at Komodo and other islands along the way. See p516 for more information.

Bus

Travelling by bus is generally uncomfortable, hot and slow in Nusa Tenggara despite most main roads being sealed. However, some of the main cross-island truck routes are covered by air-con express coaches: Mataram–Labuhan Lombok; the trans-Sumbawa journey as far as Bima; and Kupang–Dili in Timor.

Elsewhere expect an oven-hot bus with near-zero legroom, betel-nut gobbing passengers, and an excess of clucking chickens and dried fish. Buses constantly stop to drop off and pick up passengers. In remote parts be prepared for endless loops around town at the beginning and end of each journey as the driver searches for, and later drops off, passengers – a maddening local practice called *keliling* that provokes curses and vitriol from many a traveller. Even if the road is sealed, it is usually narrow and winding, and there are usually sections under repair that will rattle the fillings. Don't underestimate journey times – a trip of only 100km may take up to four hours.

Flores' interminable switchbacks and mountain ranges mean that there is no

comfortable way to cross the island by land unless you have all the time in the world and the patience of a saint.

Most buses leave in the morning between 6am and 8am, so be prepared for early starts. Where buses leave later in the day, they are less patronised, so they often spend longer looking for passengers. There are also night buses between Mataram and Bima. Long-distance buses usually meet the main ferries for those planning to travel straight through to other destinations.

Buying bus tickets for the right price can be a real hassle in Nusa Tenggara as foreigners routinely get overcharged. Touts are always around hotels and bus terminals, willing to 'assist', but this gets even more expensive. The same goes for many travel agents. The right price is only really available if buying from the actual bus company office or by finding out the correct tariff from fellow passengers. Good luck!

Car & Motorcycle

Self-drive cars can be found at very reasonable rates in Senggigi, Lombok (from 150,000Rp a day for a 4WD), though remember to inspect the car thoroughly first, as insurance is often extremely basic, and you'll usually have to pay for any damage. Consider hiring a car with a driver from 300,000Rp, including petrol. Elsewhere it's much more difficult and expensive to rent a car. Hotels are good contact points, but expect to pay 350,000Rp to 500,000Rp a