

Finding refuge in Flores

As tourists swamp Bali, some are escaping to a quieter island retreat. Yasmin Ghahremani joins them

The peaceful village of Labuan Bajo on Flores offers an escape from the tourist hordes in southern Indonesia.

I left the touts and Aussie pubs of Bali behind in Kuta and boarded an Air Merpati Fokker 27 for the 90-minute trip to Flores, in the heart of the island chain called Nusa Tenggara.

There are only limited flights from Denpasar every week and tales abound of cancellations due to under-booking.

It was a bumpy ride, but I was duly rewarded when we touched down in Labuan Bajo, a sleepy little coastal town. Bajo, as it is called by locals, lies on the western tip of Flores and is still primarily a fishing village, defined by a small but well-used harbour.

The fishermen often cast their nets by lamp-light after dark so that on a clear night it is hard to tell where the starlit sky ends and the inky, boat-filled water begins.

That is about the extent of the night life though. "Tourists who find Bali too busy are going to Lombok and those who find Lombok too busy are coming to Flores," said Sylvester Wangel of the New Bajo Beach Hotel where I stayed.

Labuan Bajo is located in the Manggarai region of the island and populated by Manggarai, Bugis people from Sulawesi and Bimanes from Sumbawa.

The minority Muslims - mostly the Bugis fishermen - live largely in peace with the majority Catholics.

The tourism industry here is still fledgling and accommodation is basic.

The Waicicu Beach Hotel, for example, is set on a remote lagoon complete with a shipwreck, and is only accessible by water taxi.

The thatched-roof bungalows have beds with mosquito nets, private toilets and even hammocks, but there is no running water and the lights are turned off at 10pm.

I opted instead for one of the few facilities that offer round-the-clock electricity and which even had an ailing air-conditioner. It was run-down and largely characterless, but the staff were friendly and it was located on a pretty little beach away from town.

The beaches are in fact one of the main attractions of Labuan Bajo.

The surrounding clear blue waters are as smooth as plate glass and dotted with more than 100 islands, most of which are deserted. It is easy to charter a boat to one, to enjoy some spectacular diving and snorkelling.

The corals are said to be home to 60 to 70 per cent of the world's marine species. Myriad rainbow fish ply this dreamscape as well as octopus, shark, rays and turtles.

Kent Techritz, an Australian who set up a dive operation in Labuan Bajo about a year ago, says: "This offers some of the best diving in southern Indonesia and compares with other world-class



Camera-shy ... a Komodo dragon turns away from a group of tourists at the Komodo national park. Photo: AFP

sites. It's really just been opened in the past 12 months. The only way to get here used to be from Bali, on live-aboards [boats]."

Some of the best sites are in the marine park fringing nearby Komodo and Rinca islands. Those islands are, conveniently, also the home of the world-famous Komodo dragons.

I decide to trek through Rinca because it is closer to Labuan Bajo and also features water buffalo, deer, wild pigs and horses. Of course, the dragons are the highlight.

Despite all the hype about them it is still hard not to be impressed when you see one of these prehistoric creatures in real life.

They are actually giant monitor lizards - the largest and oldest living lizards on Earth. Their direct ancestors crawled the Earth 50 million years ago. Today, they are only found in the Komodo area. Because of their limited range, the dragons are endangered, but they certainly rule the roost on what is left of their home turf.

The big adults usually weigh in at about 90 kilograms and can run 18 kilometres per hour. The dragons have no predators except others of their kind and will feed on

animals much larger than themselves.

To be frank, their dining habits have to be some of the more distasteful of the animal kingdom. If they cannot kill their prey outright, they will bite it, slobbering their septic saliva into the wound, then follow it until it dies from blood poisoning.

When it is time to eat, moderation is nowhere to be found. Dragons can push whole goats down their gullet and eat up to 80 per cent of their body weight at once.

I saw a large one feasting in the bushes on the remains of a deer that had been killed the day before. It gulped down huge chunks of the fly-covered carcass and I swear it smirked proudly at my shocked expression. No wonder they are the stuff of horror legends are made of.

Still in a prehistoric mood, I made my way to Mirror Rock Cave one afternoon.

Coral and marine fossils embedded in the cave's limestone hint at the watery history of this volcanic area.

Hundreds of bats now make it their home. Local animists consider the site sacred on account of a huge, multi-coloured wall - Mirror Rock - which is lit through a

crack in the ceiling about twice a year.

There is a sacrificial corner behind the wall, where many a goat and chicken have given their lives to appease the great spirit of Mirror Rock.

In any event, the cave is a cool escape from the blazing afternoon heat. With all this to offer, Labuan Bajo seems poised to be discovered.

The economy can certainly do with a boost, especially if it is locals who lead the way.

The currency crisis has hit hard here and squid, one of the mainstays of the economy, is in danger of disappearing from overfishing. But some fear too many visitors too soon will ruin the very things that make Labuan Bajo attractive.

Tour guide Wensislaus Yusuf prodded the government to let him set up compulsory ranger tours at Mirror Rock Cave two years ago after vandalism and litter became a problem.

He wants to make sure that tourist dollars go to the local people and to conservation costs. "It is very important to do site planning so the tourism is sustainable. Ecotourism is the only way to preserve nature," he says.



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GETTING THERE

Garuda flies direct to Bali on Wednesdays and Saturdays. There are flights to Jakarta on the other days of the week, with connections the following day.