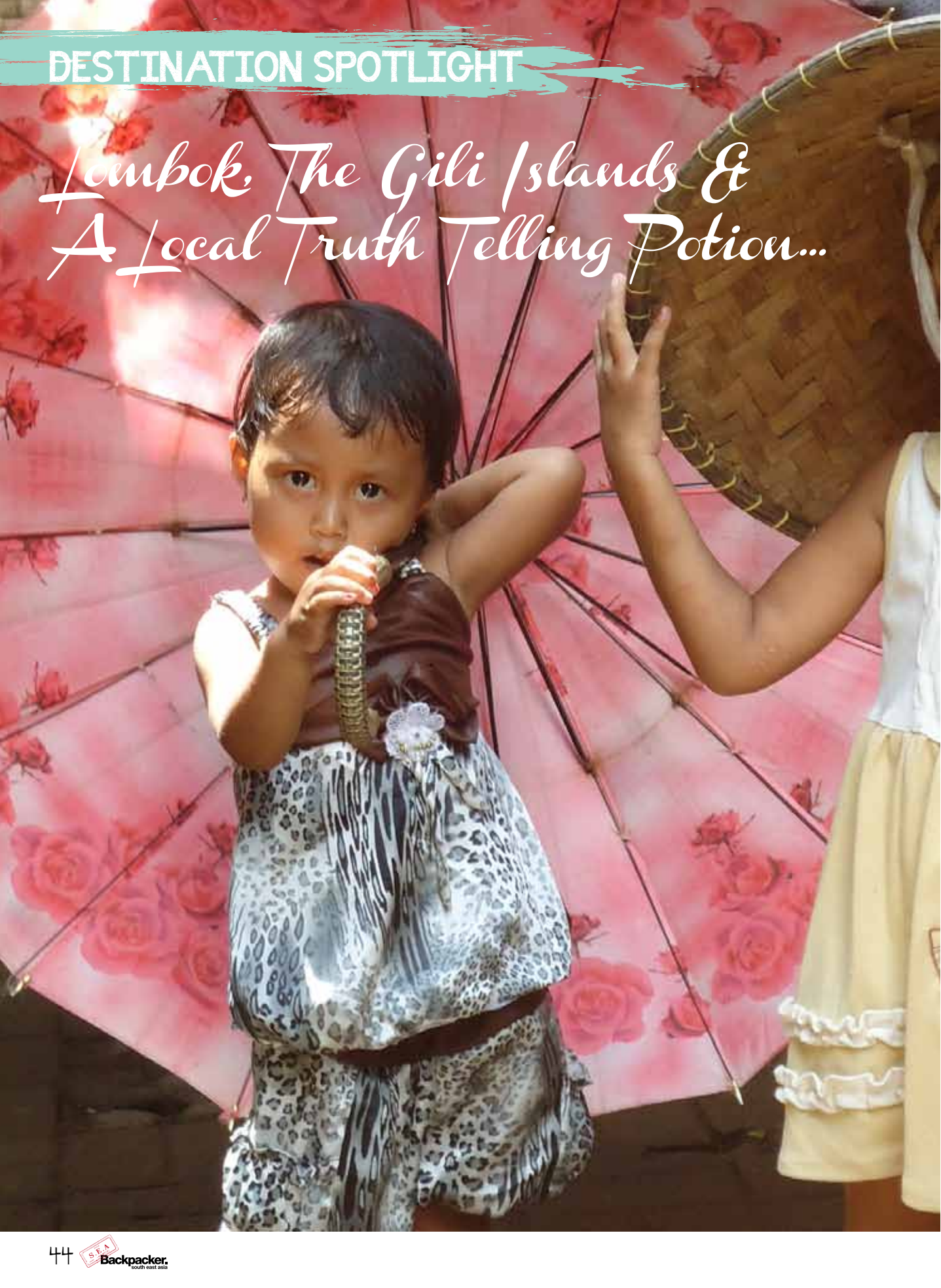


## DESTINATION SPOTLIGHT

# Lombok, The Gili Islands & A Local Truth Telling Potion...



By Johnny Early



**T**he kids. The first thing you'll notice leaving Bali and landing on its little brother island to the east are the beautiful local kids. The second, is that instead of school bags, they're sporting custom bracelet boards slung low over their shoulders. They'll approach you proffering these beautiful, colourful homemade trinkets - and they rarely smile at first. Neither do they ask for much, but as a Westerner you sometimes feel they're trying to guilt you into a sale; you're never quite sure how to react. But then, suddenly, they're laughing. Especially when they spot that snorkel amidst your things and are now off running into the ocean, stripping down naked, laughing and giggling with their new toy to share in the water before you've even had time to say 'yes'...

Kuta, Lombok. Not to be confused with its other, more commercial namesake in Bali, this place is home to clean, incredible surf, simple local food, unspoilt Indonesian lifestyle - and also, my French Canadian friend, Lys, who convinced me to pay her this visit by presenting such glories to me dressed on a plate, adding a liberal sprinkling of glowing white sand all over the top. I packed my bags.

## Day One in Lombok

My first morning in Kuta begins at 5am, when I'm startled awake by the sounds of Old Macdonald's Jungle Farm (you may as well have rolled in a bingo machine next to my head, exchanged the balls for chickens and roosters and cranked it to full spin cycle). I step outside to the day's first grey light with the sounds of Muslim chanting over a distant loudspeaker; sounds that remind me I'm no longer on the Hindu island of Bali, but instead, the Muslim island of Lombok. What with the chickens and the chanting I realize I'm not getting back to sleep any time soon, so I eat the hotel's complimentary papaya and pineapple pancakes and set off for a day's surfing.

Our new friends and local surf crew, Deo and Tony, are just waking up, yawning and stretching as they lay strewn over the wooden tables of the café they work at. They may not necessarily have had an Arak (local cheap booze) attack the night before (though likely), but it wouldn't have mattered either way. This, I soon discover, is where they sleep every night. They hook Lys and I up with a couple of surfboards and a motorbike for the combined daily rate of 100,000 rupiah (\$10). Since they are our friends, I battle hard to ignore my new instinct and the Indonesian custom of bargaining every price down. In many parts of South East Asia, it's always a fine line between bartering with poverty and trying not to get ripped off.

We follow them on our motorbikes, clutching our surfboards as we pass farm villages, vacant white sand beaches and water buffalo grazing in front of the many roadside warungs (convenience/food stands). We pull up to Seger beach where only a couple of other local surfers are in the water. "Good, small waves today. Sometimes too big to surf," Deo reassures me as I look out to see a massive wall of water, five feet off the lip, taking one surfer on a long ride whilst swallowing the others. Well, I would hate to see it when there are actual big waves...





Three local girls immediately run over to us from under their palmed shade, competing with each other to see 'who' will be able to sell 'whose' coconut to the 'new guy' first. (Well, there was never any question of me not having one at all; the sight of their fresh green coconuts is the first thing you see when you get out of the surf!) Nestled in one hand, the girls stand there ready with a machete to cut it open in the other before you've even stepped out of the water and got the water out of your ears. It's March, after all - just after the rainy season. Any extra sale goes a long way to their daily income...

## The Truth Potion

Halfway through my stay at Kuta Lombok, I meet Deo and Tony for breakfast. I'm no clairvoyant, but still, it's clear something must have happened overnight. When they translate their solemn conversation to me, I'm so amused with their explanation I find it difficult not to laugh out loud. Last night, an older man a few warungs down from them, was robbed of over two million rupiah (\$200) worth of jewellery, a very substantial amount for the people of Lombok. In order to catch the thief, the man promptly took it upon himself to summon all the locals in the area, where, once assembled, everyone would be asked to ingest a 'magic potion' made of water and special Lombok dirt. This, apparently, is standard practice when it came to the matter of petty crime. If someone denies the drink, I'm told, they can call the police on you. My brow furrows. "Well, what happens if you're the guilty one, but you don't deny the...erm, this 'potion'?" "Oh not good," Tony replies. "You get big belly full of sick and you have curse on your family and children's children."

Up until now, I'd been trying to suppress my amusement, but another look round the group wipes the emerging smile off my face. Deo isn't laughing either; in fact, everyone seems to be taking this very seriously. Lys and I follow them to the meeting place where all the locals have been beckoned. After hours of debate (which for me, largely consists of passing the time by helping a lady shuck raw peanuts for Gado Gado sauce), they realise one man still hasn't shown up. Bingo! The matter is thus resolved; and, as the rules command, the police are immediately called in. (Later, we find out he had actually confessed before the cops got involved. Wow. If only Canada had such superstition and honesty within the people... although that would likely involve a lot of 'magic mud' drinking...)

## Gili Paradise

Before I know it, almost half my 30-day Indonesia visa has already been whiled away surfing and playing nightly gigs with the locals. It was time to move on. After a reluctant goodbye to Lys, Deo and Tony, I head north across Lombok to a set of smaller islands called the Gilis for the remainder of my trip. Laced with dive sites, the Gilis are Indonesia's answer to the Greek Islands, and your journey from Lombok there will involve two buses, a taxi and a fishing boat - the taxi definitely being the highlight and also perhaps the most in need of a pre-emptive 'you must be this high to ride' sign. Like most Asian transport, it offers you a very cramped space to call your own, with bags and live chickens towering on the roof as the driver doubles the speed limit whilst veering down the wrong side of the road, cell phone in one hand and concentrating for the most part on the lyrics on the built-in LCD screen (well, he doesn't want to miss a single beat of the Indonesian karaoke that's blasting from the broken speakers, does he?!). Asian taxi culture at its finest...

The Gili Islands (so named by all those of us who don't realise that 'Gili' actually means 'island!') consists of a total of three: Trawangan, Air and Meno. All forbid cars and motorbikes, leaving the transport to bicycles and decorated horse buggies. When my wooden longboat pulls on to the golden shores of Trawangan - the busiest of the three chill islands - it immediately becomes apparent that this is a bustling diver (and backpacker)'s paradise. After finding accommodation at a home-stay, inland from the main road for 120,000 rupiah (\$12) a night, I rent a bicycle to tour the island.



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I'm told that the circumference of Trawangan only takes roughly one hour to either cycle or walk, but it's only when my front tyre hits the deep sand of the only path that snakes round the back half of the island that I truly understand why walking is deemed just as fast as cycling! Beneath the glaring rays of the sun, I carry on pedalling through as hard as I can to keep momentum, though the journey does involve some well-earned respite at a reggae shack bar I pass along the way, accompanied by a few chilled locals and the resident fire spinner...

Diving and bar-hopping is of course great fun, but if you want to see the real heartbeat of the Gilis, all you need to do is walk just one road inland, away from the main drag, where you'll so effortlessly stumble upon the quiet simplicity of the Indonesian people. And so, the following day, this is where I head, to hike up the only hill on the island and watch the sunset bask the view of Lombok and the Gilis as it sets behind Bali. As it sinks into its deep reds, I look out towards the juxtaposition of paradise, and the slum villages that are too far inland to be bought up by a tourist contractor.

Are these locals happy? Do they realise the environment that surrounds them? Or do they just compare their minimalism to our lavish consumption and wish they had flushing toilets? I perch myself on what I think is a big tree-covered rock, until a local comes jogging by and asks if I'm aware I'm on a Japanese-built World War II lookout. He has family in Toronto, he tells me, as the pair of us walk back down towards the pier to eat together at the night market – a place that provides the best option for cheap street food and fresh fish in the midst of plenty of local chatter...

So, in a nutshell? Both Lombok and The Gili (Islands) are fantastic places to travel to, although according to what I've heard and read, only the Gilis are regularly visited by tourists and backpackers heading east of Bali. If you can help it, though, then do try not to miss out on Kuta Lombok! It has such beautiful people, culture, surf and empty beaches. Just make sure you get down to Seger Beach, and say hello from me to Deo and Tony if you happen to meet them. Surf's up!

