



The coastline near Maumere (left); at Wuring, children are able to laugh once more

Paradise regained

A mighty tidal wave struck the Flores coast in 1992. The people are still rebuilding today. Story by **Annemarie Hollitzer**, photographs by **Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer**

In the soft morning light, the Flores Sea shimmers like silk in front of our bamboo cottage at Sea World, Waiara, a few kilometres east of Maumere. The sapphire water is crystal clear and close offshore the coral reef, reputedly one of the world's best diving sites, provides home and hunting ground for a host of brilliantly coloured tropical fish.

A young girl smiles shyly when we ask to see the beautiful shells she has just collected. Along the sandy beach fishermen mend their nets and prepare their boats for the evening's fishing expeditions. Here, at the end of



our travels through rugged, volcanic Flores, we feel we have landed in paradise.

However, the very existence of this paradise was threatened when, in De-

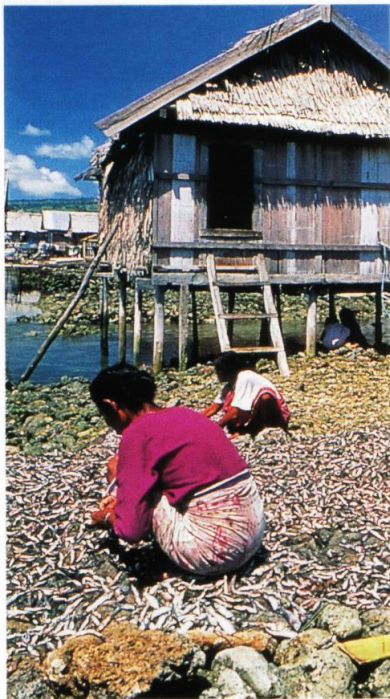
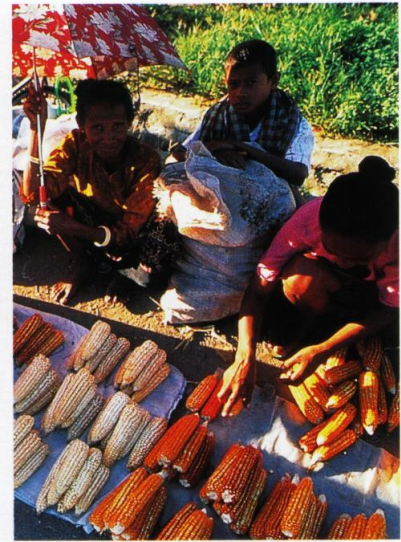
cember 1992, a destructive underwater earthquake created a mighty tsunami, which wiped out many villages along the Maumere coast. Miraculously, this bay was spared. But, in all, more than 2500 people lost their lives and many more lost their homes and possessions.

Father Heinrich Bollen, a friendly, jovial German, who first came to Flores more than 35 years ago, describes how the small Bugis village of Wuring was swallowed up by the huge tidal wave. Only the mosque survived. Many of the fishermen had to be resettled in quickly erected rows of plywood houses.

Farther inland, massive earthquake damage was caused to many large buildings. However since the stone and concrete buildings were the ones hardest hit, the erection of traditional bamboo houses has enjoyed a resurgence. As one part of the Flores Earthquake Reconstruction Project, a new earthquake-resistant bamboo house has just been developed.

In Wuring the scars are healing and when one early morning we visit the village, it once again bustles with noisy children playing among the piles of glittering fish laid out to dry. Although fishing is an important industry in this region, traditional *ikat* weaving is what has brought both local and overseas fame to the Maumere district.

Wherever we drive along the quiet



Maumere market; casting the net at Waiara Beach; fish laid out to dry at Wuring; reconstruction is still taking place after the 1992 earthquake

village roads we pass women wearing their beautiful hand-woven *ikat* sarongs, and from almost every house the industrious click-clack of the wooden weaving shuttles rings out. To escape the searing heat, most of the women work in the shade of their verandas or in the cool space under their raised stilt-houses.

Like their ancestors, they lean into their simple backstrap looms, working with homespun cotton, dyed with natural colours.

The work is time-consuming and takes enormous concentration, especially when the warp is set up and tied into its traditional patterns. The *ikat* (dye-resistance) method used in Flores occurs on many of Indonesia's islands but the unique motifs produced here



have become especially treasured world-wide.

For an insight into Flores culture, Father Piet Petu's overflowing museum, Blikon Blewut, in Ledalero is worth a visit. The museum is part of a large Roman Catholic seminary, St Paulus, where around 300 Indonesians are trained for the priesthood. It is run by the international order of SVD missionaries—the Society of the Divine Word or, in Latin, Sodalium Societatis Verbi Divini, founded in Holland in 1875 by Arnold Janssen.

In a collection started in the 1960s, tools from the Stone Age jostle for space with Ming dynasty porcelain, local pottery, shells, gems and coins. A highlight for anyone interested in textiles is the priceless antique *ikat* cloths from Flores and other nearby islands showing the varied motifs produced by the weavers in this region. Father Piet Petu is also the author of a book on the art of weaving on Flores.

From Ledalero we head south towards the Sawu Sea and the small fishing village of Sikka, once the capital of the Sikka kingdom. This was one of the first Portuguese settlements in Flores dating back to the early 17th century.

Rising on the site of a church that existed in Portuguese times, is the fine 100-year-old church erected by the Jesuit Father Armand Lecoq d'Armandville. The interior of the building is decorated with local *ikat* cloth, and *ikat* motifs are painted on the long side walls and also behind the altar. Thanks to its wooden construction, this large church survived the earthquake without any structural



Cotton is still spun by hand at Sikka village (left); a young girl (above) shows off the local ikat; a detail (right) of the famed ikat cloth

damage. Since Portuguese times, the presence of the Church has been strong in Flores and today it is estimated that approximately 85 per cent of the population are Catholic. In the Maumere region we found a strong Dutch and German influence, both in the churches and in schools and hospitals. And, as a legacy of their school-days, many of the staff in our hotel spoke German. Although not everyone would agree about the benefits of such a strong foreign religious influence, one aspect that really impressed us was the hospitals.

Hidden away in a tiny office at the back of the Rumah Sakit St Elisabeth in Lela, we find the calm

To help make ends meet and provide fresh produce for meals, Sister Linelde has a large market garden

and homely figure of Sister Linelde. Born in eastern Germany in 1929 Sister Linelde came to Flores more than 30 years ago. Despite a constant shortage of money she had watched the hospital grow and improve until it was struck by the powerful earthquake three years ago.

Although a few buildings could be repaired, most were beyond saving. In one devastating blow, 70 per cent of the buildings had been destroyed.

When we visit the hospital, large areas still look like a building site. Reconstruction is taking place under the supervision of a young Dutch engineer who has volunteered his services. Two young men from a technical college in Leiden are also here to help.

Many buildings are already finished and Sister Linelde proudly takes us on a guided tour. There are three classes of accommodation in the hospital with prices starting at Rp.3000 per day. And after seeing the private rooms with attached bathroom, at a price of Rp.15,000 including three meals, you feel almost tempted to fake

a minor illness just for a few nights' lodging.


To help make ends meet and to provide fresh produce for the meals, Sister Linelde has

developed a large market garden. Here rows of vegetables thrive, shaded by leafy brazil nut trees and papaya trees weighed down with the plumpest, healthiest papayas we have ever come across.

It's late afternoon when we leave the pristine, white and blue hospital and take the road north through lush green hills glowing in the warm light. Sheltered behind simple bamboo fences tall yellow and red flowers brighten the front gardens of many houses. A row of *ikat*-clad women are heading home, their stunning rust-coloured cloths set off by the brilliant green of the hedges lining the road. The recent rains have saturated the land and there is no sign of the



droughts that often plague this region of East Nusa Tenggara.

This is our last day on Flores and it's high time we return to our bungalow at Waiara Beach. Hurrying along the sandy path to the beach we arrive just as the fishermen push out their dugout canoes laden with large nets. One lone fisherman stays close to shore and silhouetted against the setting sun he casts his net, breaking the smooth burnished gold of the ocean. We watch the circles in the water spread slowly until the whole scene is swallowed up by the sudden darkness of the tropical night. 

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