



Wild, Wild Life

Lombok Island is so close to Bali, but a zoological world away. **BRIAN SPENCER** trails in the footsteps of pioneering naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace to a tropical paradise on the ecological edge. PHOTOGRAPHED BY **LAURYN ISHAK**

Trekking to Benang Kelambu waterfall in Rinjani National Park.

“DO YOU KNOW WHY I’M SO SMALL? BECAUSE WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I CARRIED SO MUCH GRASS ON MY SHOULDERS THAT IT PUSHED ME DOWN!”

Ron might reach 1.5-meters-tall on his toes. But the swaggering 37-year-old isn’t close to that height in the purple kid-sized flip-flops he wears on a hike deep into the terraced rice paddies surrounding Tete Batu, a sleepy farming community in the verdant forests of Lombok’s Mount Rinjani National Park. We’re in pursuit of animals that reside on the east side of the Wallace Line, such as the floppy-eared *Sunda sambar* (Rusa deer) and the rare black *lutung* (ebony leaf monkey), a forest-dwelling herbivore that seldom strays from trees. I’m particularly curious about the latter, which are native to Indonesia and one of the few mammals found on both sides of the Wallace Line. Sightings are sporadic in Lombok yet still more likely than in Bali, where development threatens the monkeys’ already-shrinking habitat. However, in diminutive, quick-witted Ron, a lifelong resident of Tete Batu, I find as much local color as anything I see in the wilderness.

Wearing basketball shorts (sized small but well past his knees), Ron dashes nimbly in his flip-flops down a slippery trail with no footholds and stops next to a plot teeming with red chili pepper plants. We hear lilting birdsong, and cascading water pummeling rock at Tibu Topat waterfall, and nothing else—until Ron picks a pepper and exclaims in his high-pitched, raspy voice, “The Lombok chili peppers are like the Lombok people: short and spicy. Ha ha.”

On November 3, 1859, Welsh naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who forwarded the theory of natural selection and was a colleague of Charles Darwin, presented field research on the Malay archipelago, from his eight-year scientific tour of the region, that revealed surprising ecological changes between the Lesser Sunda Islands of Bali and Lombok, which lie just 30 kilometers apart. After observing barbets, thrushes and other birds, for example, in abundance in Bali, Wallace went to Lombok and found no traces of these and other common Balinese species. Furthermore, the Welshman was baffled that the islands’ distinct zoological contrasts did not coincide with a likewise fluctuation in topography or temperature. In other words, the two places were geographically the same, but the animals were conspicuously distinct.

“In a few hours,” he wrote, “we may experience an amount of zoological differences which only weeks or even months of travel will give us in any other part of the world.”



Ten years later Wallace published further studies in *The Malay Archipelago*, his influential 19th-century account of the region’s geography and inhabitants, which formed the basis for what became known as the “Wallace Line.” This theoretical boundary cuts through the Lombok Strait between Bali and Lombok, delineating the sudden faunal shift from Sundaland, to the west, and Near Oceania, to the east. Apes, tigers and other mammals once or now found on Southeast Asian land masses west of and including Bali were never recorded on or east of Lombok, where the Rinjani Scops owl—the island’s only known endemic bird species—and many of the bats, rodents and reptiles more closely resemble those found in Australia. Wallace acknowledged some faunal overlap—distinct but related species of *babi hutan* (wild boar) roam both islands, for instance—but found the abrupt overall transition of species unmistakable.

I continually stumble upon traces of Wallace’s legacy in Lombok, which boasts no traffic jams, and thinner, more infrequent crowds than in Bali. During wildlife chases that span fertile interior pastures, arid southeastern coastal tracts, and damp western beaches with charcoal-black sand that sparkles like smoky quartz in the sun, I have the consistent feeling that it’s not just the rare animals living a secret life but the island itself.

At Jeeva Klui Resort, where 35 suites and villas are tucked into a beautifully landscaped seaside strip north of mellow Senggigi Beach, the common room is the Wallace Library, and on the shelves I find three copies of Wallace’s books. At dusk I sip a fruity Wallace cocktail at the resort’s *warung*, watching from under the canopy of a *ketapang* tree the sun falling behind Bali’s rugged coastline across the strait.

“This island is part of Wallacea,” says Afif, referring to the island chain east of the Wallace Line. I meet him in the central highland village of Teratak at the entrance to

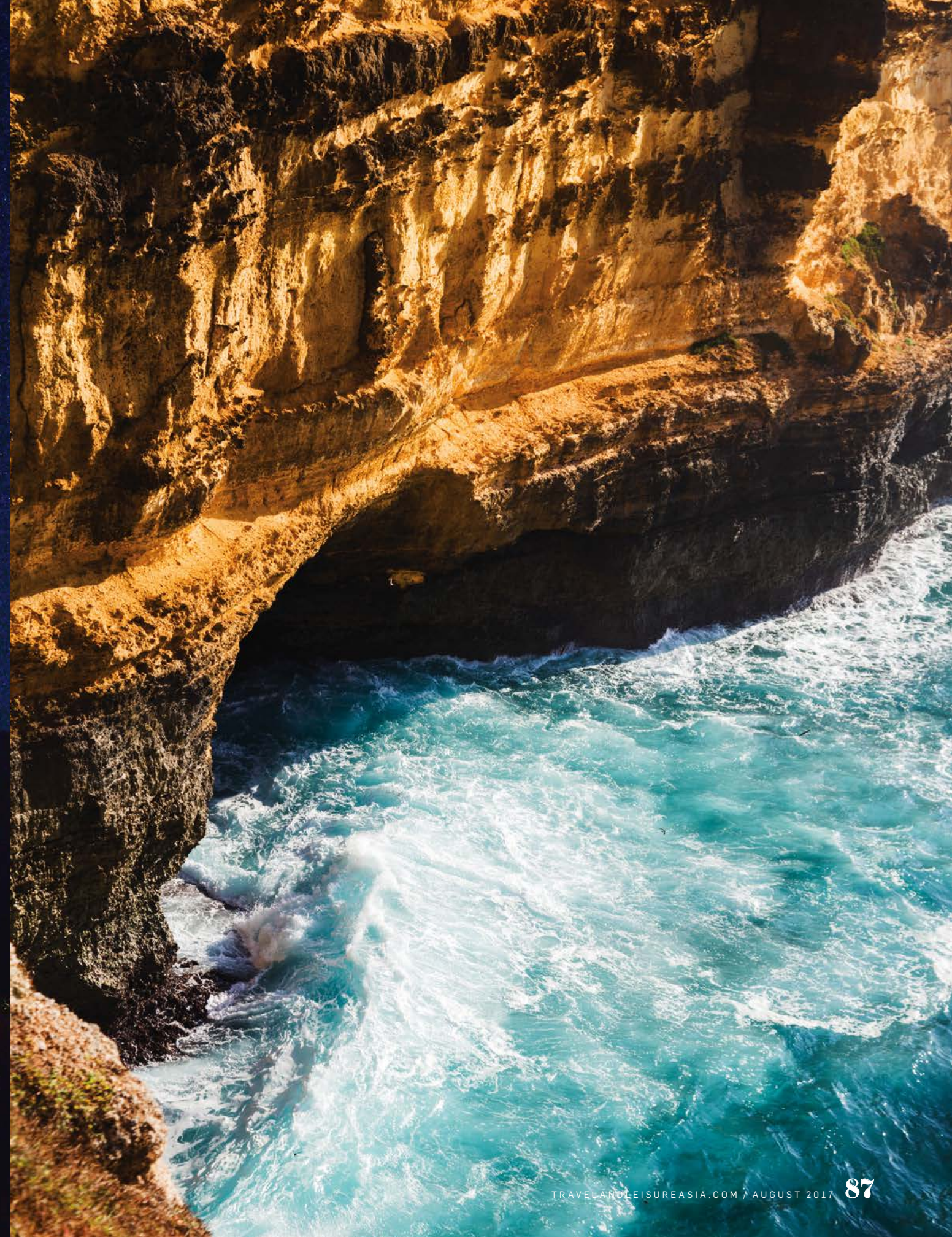


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In a harem of rare black *lutung*; barbecued fish for lunch; ripe cacao; Afif, a founding guide in Rinjani Geopark; in a zero-connectivity room at Jeeva Beloam; fishing boats off the coast of Ampenan.



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Off the grid and into
the light at Jeeva
Beloam. OPPOSITE:
Rugged Tanjung
Ringgit Peninsula.



FROM TOP: The elusive *Sunda sambar*; an ocean-view villa at Jeeva Klui; Tangsi Beach, at Jeeva Beloam.



Geopark Rinjani Lombok. A member of the indigenous Sasak people, soft-spoken Afif is one of 43 guides who escort visitors in the park's jungle; once each guide completes a tour, his name drops to the bottom of the list and he waits 42 more turns before doing it again.

I draw this earnest fellow by lucky chance. After the park opened in 2000, he recognized the positive impact tourism might have on his village, and soon after initiated the guide program. Today the park gets thousands of visitors every month and is maintained by the local guides, *ojek* (motorcycle taxi) drivers and shopkeepers who benefit from the foot traffic. "Each group takes turns cleaning the park twice a week," Afif says—which doesn't stop him from picking up errant trash throughout our two-hour hike, or from reminding a food vendor to serve his fragrant meatballs in something more sustainable than plastic bags.

The park's main draws are its waterfalls, Benang Setokel and Benang Kelambu (one of the few waterfalls in the world fed only by lava rock; Afif is hopeful it will gain UNESCO World Heritage status in the coming years) but before we reach them, we get a lesson on the wildlife. "We have owls and *luwaks* [civets] endemic to Lombok here, and sometimes you see a flying lizard with wings in the trees," Afif says. What about *Sunda sambar* and black *lutung*? "Yes, we have those, but the deer only come out at night, and those monkeys are shy."

The cheeky troupes of macaques scurrying in the undergrowth are an everyday sight in rural Lombok—and the only mammals we meet in the geopark, though daredevil humans put up strong competition for our attention. We watch kids no more than six years old taking leaps of faith into a clear blue quarry. Nearby, two streams flow from the emerald jungle 40 meters above to a rocky canyon floor. Locals take turns standing beneath the thundering falls, and when I join them I become a temporary celebrity asked to pose for pictures with ecstatic families and bashful teens. For

them, the novelty of a nearly two-meter-tall white guy with a bushy beard might be the equivalent of me spotting a black *lutung*.

During the hike back from the falls, my Wallacean wildlife hunt becomes a crash course on Lombok's herbaceous plants and folk medicine. Afif plucks one root, breaks it in half, and reveals a sticky, gooey substance—natural white glue. He asserts that *jambu* (rose apples) alleviate symptoms of dengue fever, and that leaves from a certain flower, which also produces ink, cure asthma. "It's a long process, but it permanently kills it," he swears. Mangosteen, papaya, avocado, pineapple and 17 different types of bananas are among the long list of fruits and vegetables that he says grow naturally in Teratak.

A day later in Tetebatu, Ron shows me wild candlenut, cinnamon, durian, jackfruit, guava, pomelo and cacao trees. There are cassava shrubs, as well as coffee plants taller than any I've ever seen. He pats one of the countless mahogany trees that fill a dense woodland once ravaged by deforestation and says he planted it 25 years ago. Near Tibu Topat waterfall, he forages in the brush, returns with a small pink flower, and squeezes clear liquid from its pistil into his eye. "This is for eye infections," he says. "In Lombok, we only go to the doctor if we cannot cure something first."

Snacking high atop a green bamboo thicket, long black tails hanging like rope swings, a harem of black *lutung* clamber from branch to branch, the rustling of leaves and cracking of twigs in the trees resounding through the mute forest. We've spotted one of our elusive targets. Although many are shrouded in lush foliage, I make out tufted fur, like shaggy sideburns, on the one nearest us. "We are lucky," Ron says in a hushed tone. "They usually run back into the forest if they hear somebody."

Lucky indeed. Though they live on both sides of the Wallace Line, the black *lutung* are only found on a few select Indonesian islands and there is a minor population in Lombok; in fact, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources considers the species "vulnerable." Researchers are uncertain as to how these monkeys, and other Lombok mammals, reached the island—some believe humans introduced them from Bali, perhaps when the Balinese invaded Lombok in the 17th century, while others argue that they migrated via a Pleistocene land bridge that once linked Bali and Lombok.

In some ways, the evasive wildlife defines my journey as much as the scarcity of people—particularly at the remote Jeeva Beloam Beach Camp, a cluster of 11 wooden bungalows with views of Sumbawa to the east. Here, luxury means pure seclusion. I only see the resort's handful of staff and other guests during meals, and with no Wi-Fi, TV, or even room service to distract, I pass the time reading on my bungalow's sea-facing deck, listening to the waves crashing ashore on Beloam Beach and soaking up the complete but momentary disconnection from the outside world.

Before snorkeling the next morning at the tiny Gili Petelu islets, just off the wild southeastern coast, and its string of sleepy, largely untouched beaches, I hike the cliffs rising above Jeeva Beloam. I'm concerned more with snakes than anything else in this dry, untamed backcountry, but as I maneuver through thorny bramble and flowering *kapal-kapal* bushes, two large, lumbering boars rumble across the trail no more than eight meters ahead. Thick, ridge-backed and sharp snouted, they're formidable. I'm terrified.

It's my closest wildlife encounter—and one that I'm sure is more jarring than if I'd crossed paths with the *Sunda sambar*,

which proves too elusive for my limited expedition. However, even an accomplished naturalist like Wallace catalogued in three months here just a fraction of Lombok's now-known fauna. So as I hold my breath and anxiously listen for signs that the boars are trundling off into the bush, instead of back towards me, I silently thank the island, and its inhabitants, for revealing some of its close-kept secrets in a few short days. 📍



THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Direct international service to Lombok is via **AirAsia** from Kuala Lumpur, and **SilkAir** and **Singapore Airlines** from Singapore. Garuda Indonesia and Lion Air offer connections from Denpasar International Airport in Bali.

HOTELS

Jeeva Beloam Beach Camp Go off the grid at this rustic luxury resort near pretty Tangsi Beach in the far-off southeastern tip. There's no room service, Wi-Fi or TV, but that's the point. The room rate covers all meals and daily activities, including guided snorkeling and cycling. *Jalan Pantai Beloam*; 62-370/693-035; jeevaresorts.com/beloam; bungalows from US\$285. **Jeeva Klui Resort** Take a dip in a beachside infinity pool and unwind with a massage at Jeeva's serene

flagship resort. Some of Klui's 35 spacious villas and suites include an outdoor shower; all of them have big patios and ocean views. *Jalan Raya Klui Beach No. 1*; 62-821/5000-0800; jeevaresorts.com/klui; doubles from US\$156.

GUIDED TOURS

Backyard Travel Bespoke tours with local pros in 10 Asian countries. In April, it launched two new Lombok itineraries, the weeklong "Reefs, Rainforest and Relaxation" package (US\$993 per person) and the four-day, three-night "Lombok Bliss Island Getaway" (US\$425 per person). Both include accommodations, guide services and premium vehicle transfers. backyardtravel.com. **Gunung Rinjani National Park** rinjaninationalpark.com; trekking packages from US\$300 per person.

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MAP BY AUTCHARA PANPHAI

