

Adventures in Flores and Sumbawa

In August 2017, I set off with a group of Indonesian friends to visit the islands of Flores and Sumbawa, which lie to the east of Bali. This time my objective was not just to climb mountains, though that was an important part, but to visit the Liang Bua cave in Flores where the extraordinary find was made in 2003 of “Homo Floresiensis” nicknamed the hobbit because of its small stature and to see some of the other spectacular scenery of these two islands.



We flew over the island of Sumbawa from Denpasar, Bali catching our first glimpse of Mount Tambora, the site in 1815 of the greatest volcanic eruption in human history.

We arrived at Labuan Bajo in Flores which is the jumping off point for visits to the popular islands to the west of Flores inhabited by the Komodo dragon but with a busy programme ahead, regrettably we skipped them this time. After visiting the unusual Mirror Stone cave, we headed to Ruteng and a key objective of the whole journey, the Liang Bua cave.



We were fortunate to be accompanied by Pak Jatmiko from the National Center for Archaeology in Jakarta who was present at the initial discovery of the remains of this unusual hominin and with collaborators from overseas institutes has been conducting annual excavations ever since.



Here we see him pointing out to me some of the features of the cave. Altogether one rather complete female skeleton and the remains of perhaps 8 others have been found and are now dated to around 60,000 years ago. Homo Floresiensis was about 1.1 meters tall. There have been conflicting theories on their origin. Originally one view was they were a version of homo erectus, most famously represented in Asia by Java man and Peking Man, who had somehow shrunk over hundreds of thousands of years isolated in an island environment while others thought them members of the modern Homo Sapiens family afflicted with dwarfism and microcephaly. Further study however is strengthening the most recent theory that Homo Floresiensis in fact represents a new kind of extinct human unknown elsewhere.



There is a tiny museum near the entrance of the cave, looked after by Benjamin, a local villager. It does not contain the remains or the many artefacts found in the cave which have all been moved to Jakarta for safe keeping but it has some interesting displays. Remains of the stegodon (small elephant), Komodo dragon and giant rat (all pictured here) have been found in the cave, encouraging the theory that “the hobbit” despite its small stature and small brain was able to hunt and kill these animals. There are also the rare remains of a pre-historic giant stork which at 1.7 meters would have towered over the hobbit.

Turning our minds from paleoanthropology, we drove to the small town of Bajawa which is close to a beautiful volcano with an almost perfect pyramid shape, named Inerie.



Steven, my friend and long term Indonesian climbing partner, had at short notice arranged the local guide Francisco and we set off just before dawn. As we expected, the mountain was steep and as we moved higher, the ground became loose and slippery.

Francisco would exhort us on with cries of “pelan pelan” (slowly, slowly) and “hati hati” (be careful) and then he would bound uphill for a stretch jumping from one relatively solid piece of ground to another, indicating that this did not apply to him!



As we neared the crater rim, we could see another lovely mountain Ambu Lobo rising to the east. A recent eruption means this is seldom climbed but we marked it down for future attention.



By the time we reached the crater the wind became stronger and stronger which continued as we climbed up further to the summit, almost blowing us off our feet.

The top of the mountain is marked by 3 crosses, since Flores, due to the long Portuguese influence, is a largely Christian island.





The descent was slow going particularly at the top but guided by Francisco we were able to divert to a scree field and move quite rapidly down for about 300 meters.

Saying farewell to Francisco and his family whom we met at the bottom, we headed off on the next leg of our journey, stopping first at the traditional village of Bena, at the same time catching our last view of Inerie.



That night we stayed near Kelimutu and in the early morning rose to climb up to the tri-colour lakes in the crater there. The colours change periodically and sometimes one of them turns a dark red. On this occasion, however, while the one separated from the others was distinctly black, the colours of the other two were a fairly similar blue green.



From there, we needed to retrace our steps to Denpasar as there was no direct connection between East Flores and Sumbawa. We flew to Bima, where we were met by Dewe who was to guide us up Tambora, and drove towards the mountain, heading for a small beach to the west where we were introduced to the resourceful Chris who ferried us to Satonda Island.

Satonda is a very small island which consists largely of a crater lake.



We walked up to look down on it and a little further on the eastern side of the island came across a small wooded valley with hundreds of bats swirling around in the evening air.



Next morning in Chris's capable hands we were off early. As well as acting as a skillful boatman, he organized our local transport, our porters and cheerfully accommodated our various changes in schedule.



Ashore we met our porters and with them and our luggage all piled into an ancient pickup truck we drove to the village of Pancasila to complete registration formalities and to begin the hike up Mount Tambora.



We paused for a moment to look at this memorial with some key facts relating to the great eruption.



Most of these claims I was familiar with. I thought maybe the fourth one relating to Waterloo was a bit fanciful but checking the Internet I found that the Napoleonic Society is very convinced that without the unseasonal heavy rain on the night before the battle, undoubtedly caused by the distant eruption of Tambora, the Emperor would have triumphed and history would have been changed!

The size of the Tambora eruption was many times greater than the better known eruptions of Krakatoa and Vesuvius.

We drove on a little way up a very rugged road till we reached a point where the jeep could manage no further and began our trek at 0922 at the height of 690 meters. From there we moved steadily with a break for lunch, arriving 5 hours and 25 minutes later, after 13.7 kilometers, at Pos 4 (1873 meters) where we planned to camp for the night.



We rose early and after a good breakfast headed off at 0239 for the summit at 2850 meters. We reached this rather too early and spent more than an hour waiting for the sunrise. It was cold, windy and dusty. Here you see me wearing full protection.



As the sky lightened, we were able to secure a reasonable summit shot.



And glimpsed the huge crater below us. This is around 6 kilometers wide with a caldera 1,250 meters deep.



Eventually, the sun rose over the crater rim.



And soon we were on our way down.

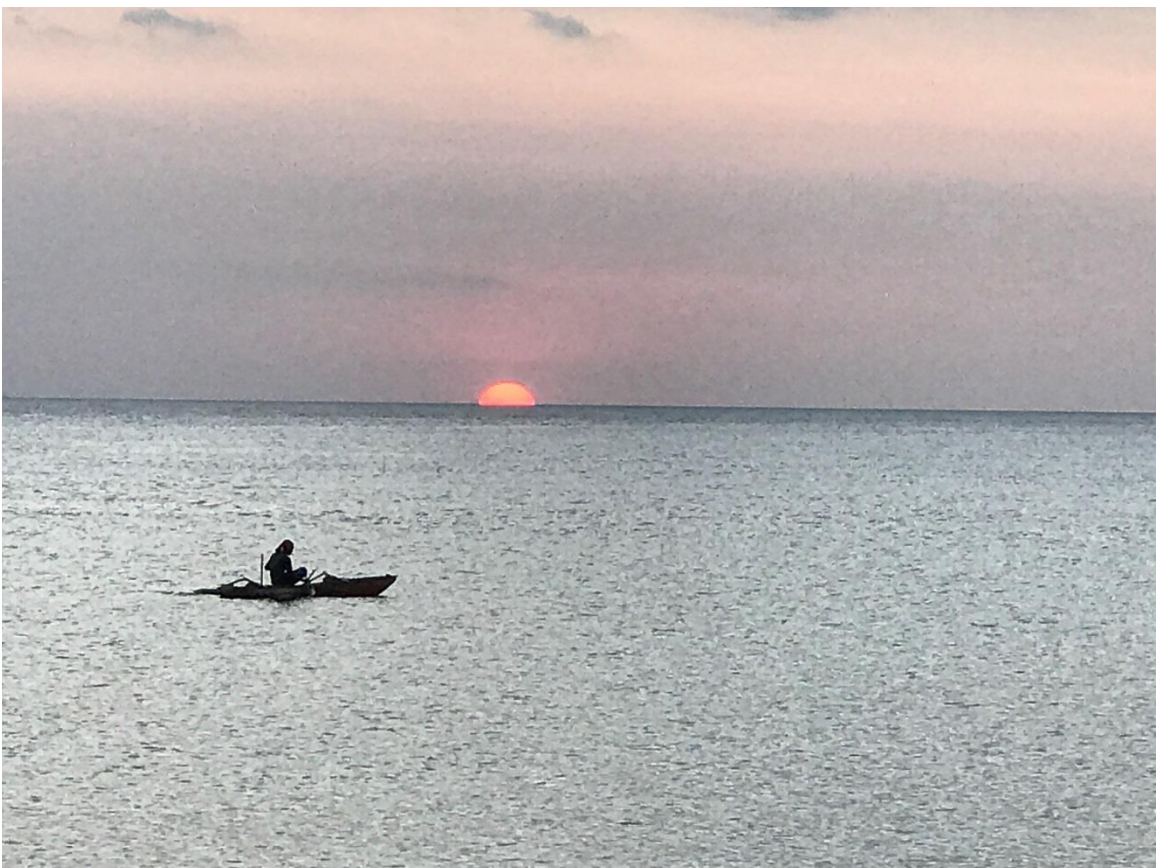
Our original plan had been to camp at Pos 3 at 1,624 meters but the camp sites on Tambora, unlike some Indonesian mountains, are not very appealing. We decided instead to head the whole way down the mountain and, if possible, sleep instead that night at nearby Moyo Island with its famous waterfalls.

With the aid of the sat phone, through the helpful Chris and Alex Dewi who was supporting our expedition from Bali, we managed to secure driver, boat and sleeping quarters on the island as we descended the mountain.

At the bottom we diverted briefly to visit a small but attractive Hindu temple.



Then we drove on to the small port of Calabai and were soon bouncing along the waves with Chris on the journey to Labuan Aji village on Moyo island taking one hour and 20 minutes. We arrived just as the sun was going down.



It was a special feeling to have enjoyed in the same day the sunrise over Mount Tambora and the sunset over the sea.

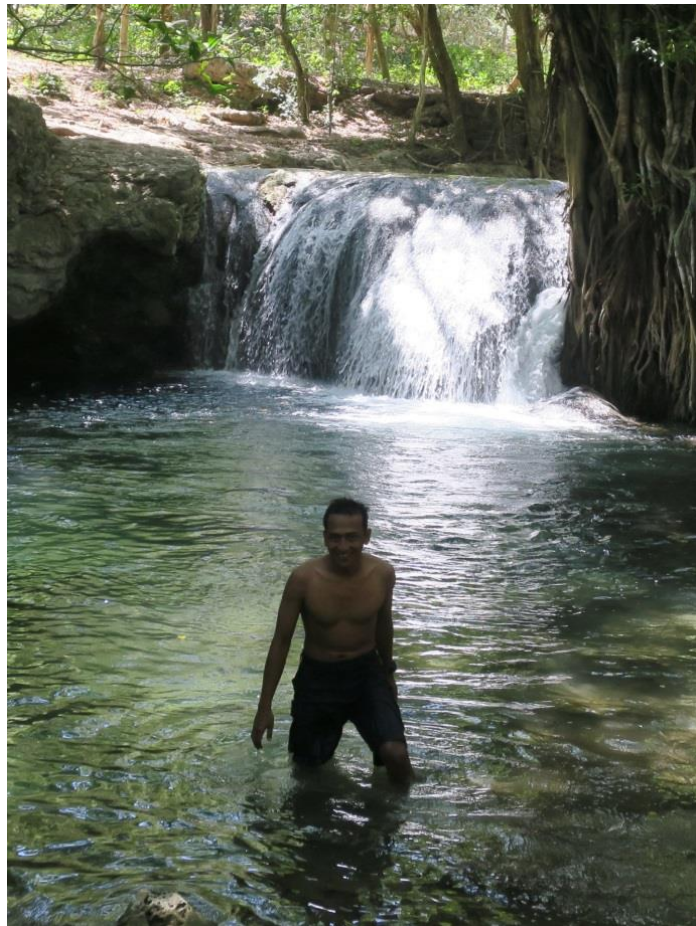
We passed a pleasant night at a little guesthouse owned by the friendly Mahendra though for a while the enthusiastic cries from the crowd in the next door café watching on TV a late night football match overwhelmed the sounds of the waves lapping outside. In the early morning, we were roused by the call to prayer at the nearby mosque. We were soon travelling by ojek (on the back of a motorcycle) to the great attraction of Moyo Island, the beautiful Mata Jitu waterfalls.



As we walked up the path to the higher falls, the occasional beautiful flower caught our attention, as well as a startled snake which scuttled across the path in front of me.



We visited a second waterfall closer to the village named Dwu Mbai where Dewe decided it was time for a swim.

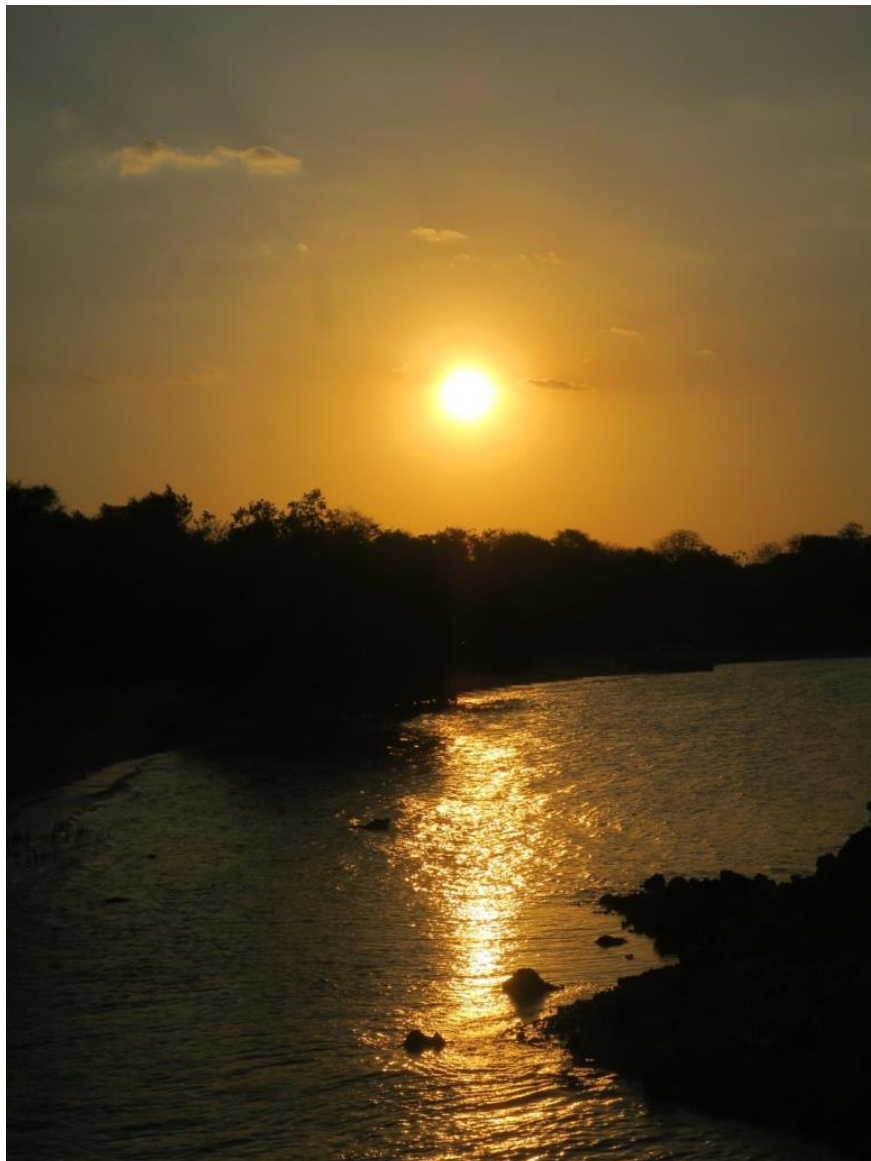


After a pleasant lunch prepared by Mahendra's wife, we were soon back with Chris speeding across the water, at first smooth but then more choppy, to our final stop, the Resort of Sumawa back on Sumbawa Island.

This lovely place, with good accommodation and friendly staff, was virtually empty except for us. We were joined by Alex who had flown in from Bali.



We enjoyed another fine sunset





In the early morning we saw a final sunrise over Mount Tambora and reflected how majestic and dominant this would have appeared before 1815 when it rose with a conical shape a further one and a half kilometers into the sky.