Wae Rebo
A lost village in Flores
A last minute decision to buy a pig before setting off into the isolated mountains of Manggarai, Western Flores proved to be a wise decision. I was about to embark on a three-hour trek to the old Manggarai village of Wae Rebo and I felt it impolite to arrive empty-handed.
My local guide advised me that a female pig would be a sustainable gift as it would be used for breeding, and would last longer than a sack of rice. The pig (which I named Lucy) was delivered the morning of the trek, squealing, and not at all happy. The gentleman who delivered the pig immediately set to work weaving a little basket from a large green palm frond, complete with a plaited carry handle. Lucy was handed over akin to groceries in a shopping bag.

Once Lucy had calmed down, I set off for Wae Rebo Village, high in the mountains shrouded in early morning cloud. The trail started at Denge, a small village just out of Dintor, on the south coast of Flores. The track winds its way through dense rain forest ever upward and as you climb to 1200 metres, the foliage thins and affords magnificent views out towards the Savu Sea. Lucky for me, I had clear weather, which afforded stunning views of Mules Island rising majestically from the azure blue waters in the distance.

As I trekked on ever higher, mountain orchids appeared among the ferns. The birdsong from the high canopy of the forest added calmness to the journey and I couldn’t help but wonder at the ease with which the porters carried my supplies (in bare feet) including Lucy who by this time had fallen asleep!

As I rounded the last switchback, there was Wae Rebo - hovering in the mist that cascaded down the mountains with several huge cone-shaped dwellings forming a perfect circle. The tall, traditional mbaru niang or ‘drum houses’ rose up to greet the sky creating a mystic image. I felt an alluring pull which seemed to entice me to slip back in time to another world one thought only existed in myths and legends.

On arrival at the village, one of the elders greeted me and my guide versed me on the protocol of gift giving. I handed Lucy (who by this time was awake and curious) to the elder first, who in turn, passed her to the person in the village most in need of this welcome gift. The recipient had proclaimed the previous week that, "a pig will come" and in preparation for this vision he had built a sty for the impending arrival. Now, here I was handing Lucy over to her new owner!

With this ritual complete, I was invited to cross the threshold and, stooping low, I entered the drum house, where I was instructed to take my place, facing towards the central point of the structure. The light inside this conical structure was very dim but once my eyes had grown accustomed to the semi-darkness I could see that the elder, Rohfius, had taken his seat at the foot of a huge wooden pole that soared to the apex of the house. The official welcoming party fanned out to his left and right.

Sacred drums along with elaborate hand-made musical instruments and gongs cast in bronze hundreds of years old, hung suspended from the ceiling beams. Clever use of space within a conical-shaped ceiling means that household supplies join the instruments on various storage levels. I wondered how they reached their supplies tucked thirty to forty feet off the ground.

With a beaming, soft smile Rohfius greeted me. “Welcome to our home. Join with us!” he entreated. “Share our simple food, and while you are here, live our simple ways. We thank you for coming.” Comfortable on a pandanus leaf mat, I shared coffee and conversation as blackened pots bubbled away on the central hearth. Rohfus invited me to sleep either in the main house, together with the eight families, who are all descendants of their common ancestor, or I could choose to bed down for the night in the official mbaru niang guesthouse.

The history of Wae Rebo dates back thousands of years to the time of Maro, the first ancestor from Minangkabau, West Sumatra.
These beginnings are represented in the intricate songket cloth and weaving patterns produced in the village. For centuries the clans were nomadic, moving from place to place in search of food and shelter as the seasons changed. The oral history tells us that one of the elders experienced a dream where the Great Spirit came to him. He was instructed to “find the place in the forest and build your village on the flat land. Do not move from here anymore.” The people of Wae Rebo have remained in this remote paradise ever since.

The life of the Manggarai人的 life is steeped in tradition, ancient music, and a lilting unique language that can be appreciated during the Sunday ritualistic prayers. Coffee is the primary crop that supports the village. Introduced by the Dutch, the Wae Rebo people have continued the tradition of coffee planting and harvesting. The work is communal and the community participates in the process of bringing the coffee-crop to fruition. The same applies to the gardens where communal toil provides the staples for the entire village.

As I was pounding coffee beans with one of the women from the village, my curiosity about this remote lifestyle led me to ask about health and education. “I have nine children,” the woman told me. “They were all born here in the village. Some of the women walk to the town of Dintor. There is a medical clinic there, but no hospital. Some give birth there, but many do not reach the clinic in time and have their babies on the trail on the way. There is no nurse or midwife here. That is the way here.”

There is also no school in Wae Rebo and the eighteen kilometre return walk to Denge is impractical. “It is a very big pain in my heart,” the mother explained. “We have to send our children away to live in the town when they are seven years old. They live with another family and attend school. It is very sad for us and we miss our children greatly.”

Change however, is on its way. A school building project is under construction and will be completed soon. A schoolteacher has been recruited from the village and all going well, the new schoolhouse will be operational at the end of 2013.

The spirit of Wae Rebo is reflected in the unique style of housing, which is central to the culture. A few years ago the main house was in such a state of disrepair that it was in danger of collapsing. In 1999, using traditional methods dating back centuries, a new house was constructed. The complicated building technique has been passed from generation to generation via the spoken word. No plans or architectural drawings exist. It takes about a month to cut the trees from high in the forest and transport the cut wood to the village. It then takes approximately three months to bring a traditional drum house to completion.

A few years ago, a group of architects from Jakarta took an interest in the design of the drum houses and together with some Government funding, and financial assistance from corporate sponsors in Jakarta, funds were raised to continue the building of five new drum houses. Thanks to the outside help the current guesthouse was completed in June 2011. This community-led rebuilding project led to the winning of the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation in 2012.

Wae Rebo’s timeless cultural practices blend seamlessly into the harmony of the village perhaps helped by the fact that a conscious decision was made by the elders to allow no TV or radio to disrupt village life. And so, life here continues, as it has done for centuries, nestled in the remote mountains of Western Flores preserving a sense of pride and tribal spirit fuelled by a recipe of simplicity and tradition.
Drum and Gong Traditional Songs
The Manggaraian language is preserved in their beautiful songs. I listened to four songs. The first song was about the mbaru niang houses, which reflect the essence of the Wae Rebo culture. “We all live in big houses. In our village we must learn to live in harmony. In our village we always stop and say hello to someone. If someone is sad, say you are sorry and talk to them.”

The next song was a song for the children. Its soothing chants, rhymes, and rhythms have a mesmerising and soothing effect. This song serves to pacify the children if they are upset.

The third song conveyed the message of holding strong to tradition. “Do not forget the drum and the gong. They are from your ancestors. Do not lose this song.”

The fourth song was a plantation song. A ceremonial song that is sung to commemorate the opening of a new garden. The words “Do not forget the harvest ceremony” are repeated over and over.