

Hello! My name is Lena. I am a traveler. Originally I am from Russia, but since four years I've been living in New York City. Currently I am traveling solo, visiting the world's interesting places and their countryside. In the 4+ months I traveled in Nepal, India, New Zealand and now making my way around Indonesia.

Two weeks ago I landed in Ende and began exploring what turned out to be one of the most beautiful places on Earth – the amazing Flores. In particular I would like to share with you a story of my stay in Bajawa.

Once in Bajawa, I met some fellow travelers and we set off to explore local villages and do some trekking. We visited Ngadha villages of Luba, Bena, Tololela and Gurusina. Mostly, I travel for nature and people. Bajawa got both. The views are stunning; and also I was amazed how easy it was to bond with the local people. Even though we didn't share a common language, I could simply come up and sit on their porch, watch them do their crafts, try to have simple conversations and play with the kids.

That day we were guided by a talented guide William Doi from Bajawa Eco-Tourism and Tourist Information Center. William, together with his friend Alfredo Sua, just opened the Center a month ago. I would like to take a minute and tell more about the Center. I have traveled to many places in the world, but I must say that I've never come across a tourist center like that.

First, they really provide (for free!) the most up-to-date first-hand information about traveling in Flores, they are very knowledgeable and experienced. They do guided trekking tours to the local villages and hot springs, but on top of that William and Alfredo are also promoting the idea of eco-tourism in Bajawa area. Not simply do they bring tourists to the villages (which already helps villages financially!), they work closely with the villagers, educating them about keeping their environments clean, recycling plastic, etc. They also teach Ngadha villagers how to provide hospitality and authentic experience to the foreign guests, as well as developed a guest code of conduct in the villages for the tourists. This helps both sides to have a more positive and exciting experience, least about each other, and in the long run promotes villages' empowerment, gives financial benefits, as well as helps preserve the local culture.

Seeing how truly passionate William was about this, made me want to learn more about the Ngadha culture, its people and villages. Together we came up with a project of making a little documentary film about Ngadha and its culture preservation. So the next day I grabbed my camera, microphone, jotted down a rough script for the film and we set off to a far-away village of Belaraghi.

I'm truly amazed by Ngadha, its houses, people and simple living. In Beleraghi I interviewed the chief of the village Antonio. He spoke about the village, how it changed over time and about tourists that come for homestays to the village. I also had a great time talking to a local woman Maria about Ngadha house decorations, food and marriage traditions. It was great to hear what a powerful role women play in Ngadha culture! Together with some people from the village we shared a simple dinner of corn

and sambal in Maria's house, listening to a heavy tropical rain. I also tried the traditional beetle nut☺

I was lucky to also have a chance to interview Mr. Ivan Botha, Head of Tourism Department in Bajawa. Ivan is highly knowledgeable about the Ngadha culture and gave me an insight and a brief history of the culture, its roots and development. I learnt about the rituals and traditions of the Reba ceremony. It's amazing, how animism and Catholicism are combined so organically in Ngadha culture, both taking an important place in people's everyday lives.

And as a cherry on the cake, my stay in Bajawa coincided with the opening reception of the Eco-Tourism and Tourist Information Center. One more thing about the Center: not only they provide invaluable information, guide amazing treks and develop sustainable tourism in Bajawa area, their office is probably the best place in town to come and meet people, listen and play some music and simply have a good relaxing time. I met so many nice local people, learnt so much about Flores and its culture just by spending evenings at the Center.

For the opening a traditional pig sacrifice was made. The pig heart read all the best for the Center's future, which I am very happy about. The party brought together a lot of friends, supporters, travelers, and Department of Tourism officials. We had a delicious dinner, played lots of music, both in English and Bahasa, and shared our love and stories about Flores.

It is truly inspiring to see such a great grassroots initiative growing. Of course, there's always a question of funding and further development. But with such a passion, I'm more than sure that eco-tourism in Bajawa will blossom, more travelers will visit and learn about Ngadha and the culture will be preserved for future generations. It requires collaboration from the Government, grassroots organizations and villages themselves. From what I saw, this is already going on and more long-term positive results are to come. Education is the key and it takes a lot of time, but leaves a lasting effect.

All the best Bajawa, hope to be back sometime!

P.S. It will take some time to edit the film, but make sure to follow the Facebook page of Bajawa Eco-Tourism and Tourist Information Center for it.

Lena Zubareva

My travel blog: [www.travelena.us](http://www.travelena.us)



**Abbildung 1: Enjoying a conversation with a local woman in Luba village**



**Abbildung 2: Alfredo Sua and William Doi, the founders of the Tourist Information Center and Eco-Tourism in Bajawa, at the Center's opening reception**



Abbildung 3: Me interviewing and filming Mr. Ivan Botha, Head of the Tourism Department in Bajawa