

Towards a Sustainable Future

Labuan Bajo's First Ecotourism College in promoting higher learning and ecotourism, Politeknik eLBajo Commodus is striving to ensure every graduate has the best opportunity for the future while preserving the natural beauty of Flores.

Written by Suzanne Srdarov and Clare Srdarov

More and more people are putting Flores on their 'must see' list - with its unspoiled beauty, incredible diving experiences, the Komodo National Park and enough unexplored and off the tourist path adventures to keep any intrepid traveller happy - it's fast becoming the hottest travel destination.

With the increase in visitor numbers, comes increased pressure on the resources of Flores and its fragile ecosystem. Thanks to the foresight of leaders who are determined to see Flores set an example for other developing regions on how to successfully and sustainably manage tourism growth, create jobs for locals, and preserve the spectacular environment for generations to come.

Noviana Halim – laying the foundation for sustainable tourism through education. Politeknik eLBajo Commodus is the first ever college to open in Labuan Bajo, officially opening its doors on the 1st of March, 2019 to students looking to further their education in hospitality and tourism. Demand was so high that the college started taking enrolments and offering classes before the official opening, with students squeezing into two of the finished rooms in September 2018. The college was the idea of Ibu Novi, who on a visit to Flores, realised that there was nowhere for students to complete any higher education in the region. This meant that local students were being lost from Flores as they were forced to travel to other parts of Indonesia to pursue education, often staying on to find employment. Ibu Novi saw the need for a local college to provide courses in hospitality and tourism to meet the demands of the growing tourism industry in Flores, and more importantly, to train students in ecotourism and sustainable practices to ensure a healthy future for Flores.

The Politeknik includes classrooms, IT facilities, a commercial kitchen large enough to be in any five-star hotel, a restaurant, edu-hotel, and library, with further extensions planned. Next semester will see 300 students enrolled, with the plan to be able to accommodate 500 students each semester. Currently, the college offers diplomas in hospitality and ecotourism, with coursework divided between practical components (around 60%) and theory (around 40%). In the new academic year of 2019, the students can also enroll in Information Technology,



Tax Accounting and International Marketing courses; and in 2020 Ibu Novi says the college will be offering 10 different study programs. Students must graduate in the four core areas of study, before specialising in their chosen field, choosing from a range of courses like food and beverage, housekeeping, hotel management or becoming a chef. Students who complete the course receive a Diploma of Ecotourism, as well as a certificate in their specialist area.

Classes are conducted in Indonesian and in English, meaning that students learn to speak English proficiently, plus they must learn French and Mandarin. Every Wednesday, the entire campus has a 'must speak English' day, as they recognise how vital it is to be able to speak fluent English in the hospitality industry. All of this, incredibly, is privately funded. The school receives no government funding, but instead is funded by Ibu Novi who looks for sponsors and donors, empties her own pockets or reaches out to family and friends. Her brother, Teddy Halim, offers significant support as he sits as Director of the campus.

Ibu Novi believes that education is a life-changing investment that empowers people and their communities to build better lives. This is a sentiment echoed by the students – to them the greatest power is in education. Aloysius Sudartin Karya, also known to his friends as Louis, is a current student who told us that the opportunity to study and learn skills without leaving Flores, was a huge privilege, and inspires him to continue to work hard. Louis already has a successful business in Flores, and a family to support, but he knows that getting a higher education will mean that he has even more opportunities to build his career and provide for this family.

Ibu Novi believes that the Ecotourism College will help to protect the future of Flores and the spectacular natural beauty that draws increasing numbers of visitors every year. This belief in the importance of education to build a sustainable tourism industry from the ground up shapes the ethos and every aspect of the college. Students are expected to provide their own water bottles, refilling them at stations around the campus, and plastic water bottles can't be found anywhere on campus in an attempt to reduce their use and educate about the destructive impact of single-use plastics. The college wants to set an example to the rest of the world, and in particular, developing regions, as to how to best manage tourism and hospitality responsibly, with minimal impact on fragile ecosystems. While the college currently offers only hospitality and ecotourism diplomas, they hope to extend and add accounting and IT courses, once construction of the campus is completed. When all 15 classrooms are eventually built and finished, they are hopeful that student numbers will swell to around 1000 students, and already, they have had great interest and many enquiries about evening and after-hours classes. It's an inspiring project, and a fabulous step towards managing the growing influx of tourists, so that the people of Flores, and their environment, can benefit for many years to come.

Martha Muslin –fighting for both the people of Flores and the future of their environment

A woman who needs little introduction in Flores, Marta has many years of experience in community development roles, having worked in NGOs, led in community building projects across the Asia-Pacific region and being consulted by many like organisations globally. With an unwavering focus on sustainable tourism and environmental policy, she has partnered with local communities, businesses and governments to deliver initiatives that benefit all parties, while instituting conservation measures. As a coordinator on the Indonesian Waste Platform working on sustainable waste management procedures; this Past President of DOCK Komodo, where she still works closely on safe and sustainable diving initiatives within the Komodo National Park, has written and implementing policies for marine pollution management, particularly in developing areas.

In 2011 and 2012, she was responsible for a project that created water refill stations around Labuan Bajo, in order to reduce the single use of plastics. Growing up in Flores, she knows first-hand that implementing environmental management projects can be tough in developing nations.

For people who can sometimes earn as little as \$2 per day or less, and families who struggle to access basic needs like food, clean water, and healthcare, it can be unrealistic to expect them to prioritise land conservation. Marta believes that education is key to community development by empowering communities through education, providing employment opportunities and consultation on community issues, is the key to a sustainable future for all.

One of fifteen children, she learnt from an early age how to use her voice. While Marta was caught up in the riots in Lombok, her beloved father passed away and rather than share his estate fairly between the fifteen children, Marta and several of her siblings were overlooked. This propelled her to study a Bachelor of Law as she wanted to learn her rights and about the rights of others. At the time, Marta was a restaurant worker with not enough money to cover her tuition fees. Informing her employer of the situation, she asked him for a loan. Initially met with scepticism, her employer's wife urged him to invest in Marta, pointing out that staff like her were rare and deserved to be supported. She embarked upon the degree, working three different jobs in order to pay her rent, for food, and to pay back the money she had borrowed. The determination and resilience she had learnt growing up in a huge family had served her well, and she graduated earning her law degree in high esteem.

Marta is currently the community project manager with Wicked Diving in Flores and its affiliated charity, the Wicked Good Foundation. She is integral to instituting programs that train locals, giving them skills that will provide future employment within Flores' growing tourism and hospitality industry. Wicked Good SEEDs provides training and sponsorship to locals to become qualified dive masters and instructors, providing employment opportunities within the diving and tourism sector.

Marta's biggest fear is that if growth in places like Flores is improperly managed, the unspoiled environment will be irreversibly damaged by rubbish and pollution. By creating greater wealth and jobs for the people of Flores, and tying these to the ongoing preservation, it will ensure the health of both the people and the natural world. Education plays a significant role in this, and Marta hopes that higher education will soon be more widely available in Flores. Currently, other than the new Tourism College, students must leave Flores to study at colleges and universities elsewhere, and often don't return. Creating education and employment opportunities within Flores will encourage students to stay, strengthening and adding value to their own communities.

As a single mother of a 12-year-old boy, who is similarly passionate about the environment and conservation, she feels that education is of the utmost importance to women, who are often the first teachers that children have. Martha's conviction is that by educating and empowering women, you will, in turn, empower the next generation of students to effect positive changes in their communities. It's an inspirational and holistic approach to sustainable community development that has earned Marta a reputation as a formidable and impressive leader in her field, and in communities all around the world.