

Lombok quake sends shudders through tourist industry

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Tourists are hugely important to the economy of Lombok and the Gili Islands

The powerful earthquakes that struck the Indonesian island of Lombok in recent weeks killing some 400 people have sent holidaymakers fleeing, raising questions about how its lucrative tourism sector will

bounce back.

Two deadly tremors a week apart—accompanied by dozens of aftershocks—wrought widespread damage on homes and livelihoods, striking during the crucial tourism season, when hotels, local businesses and seasonal workers earn the bulk of their annual revenue.

In the Gili Islands, a popular backpacker and diving destination just off Lombok's northern coast, thousands of terrified tourists jostled on powder-white beaches for departing boats.

Lombok's airport was briefly crammed with holidaymakers rushing to get flights out, while the main [tourist](#) drag of Senggigi has been left deserted.

Alfan Hasandi depended on peak season tourists to see his family through the rest of the year. He and his brothers ran a now shuttered business on one of the [islands](#), Gili Air, offering boat tickets, snorkeling, trekking and vehicle rentals, usually earning five million rupiah (\$350) a day during peak season.

"We hope we can rebuild... but it's impossible because people are still traumatised," the 25-year-old told AFP. "Our homes have been completely destroyed... We don't have money to rebuild, we need help."

Located in the one of the most tectonically active areas in the world, Indonesians are used to natural disasters and its tourism industry has bounced back from catastrophes in the past.

But for Lombok, the quakes struck at an especially cruel time, when the island's [tourism industry](#) was on the way up.



Tourists have fled en masse from Lombok and the Gili islands since the quakes

'A new Bali'

Dubbed "The Island of a Thousand Mosques", Muslim-majority Lombok was always a path less travelled destination than its bigger neighbor Bali, the Hindu-majority island that forms the backbone of Indonesia's \$19.4 billion tourist sector.

But it had been earmarked as one of Indonesian President Joko Widodo's "10 new Balis" with the regional government hoping to develop it into a major destination, especially in the booming halal tourism sector.

Its residents now have to repair and rebuild, hoping that spooked tourists return.

Senggigi would normally be bustling with visitors this time of year. Now boats lie idle along its main beach, restaurants and hotels have been shuttered on its main drag and the usual stream of touts offering services has dried up.

"We don't know whether we can operate again in September," Susi Hayati, manager of the Asmara restaurant, told AFP.

Ketut Jaya, manager of the nearby Holiday Resort Lombok, said it might be a month before they could start taking guest bookings again. Just 19 of the resort's 189 rooms were occupied by hardy tourists who decided not to leave after the quake.

Authorities estimate the damage unleashed by the two quakes on buildings and infrastructure on Lombok will exceed two trillion rupiah (\$138 million).



A man riding a motorcycle passes by a damaged house at Sira village in northern Lombok

'Temporary shock'

But while the post-quake images of destruction and departing tourists were dramatic, analysts predict tourism in the region will recover after short-term pain.

Indonesia's tourism sector has been robust in the face of major crises before, including natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami and terror attacks such as the 2002 Bali bombings.

"The impact is not as big as a tsunami and the (Lombok) airport is still open," Tedjo Iskandar, a Jakarta-based travel analyst with TTC Travel Mart, told AFP.

Asnawi Bahar, chairman of Indonesia's tour and travel agency association, described the earthquake as a "temporary shock" for the sector.

The number of visitors to Bali plummeted following the 2002 bombings, which targeted a nightclub and bar frequented by Western tourists. The attacks killed more than 200 people and shocked the world.

But the island soon regained its status as one of the world's most popular holiday destinations.

That is little comfort for people like Vina Kartika, who used to work on Gili Trawangan, where one of her friends was killed in the quake, and has currently lost her seasonal [tourism](#) job.

"I will now have to stay at home, doing nothing," she said.

On Gili Air island, some hotels were flattened but others survived. A diving school was barricaded with wood panels and furniture to keep intruders out. A supermarket in the middle of the island was completely empty, its windows broken.

Hasandi said he is trying to remain upbeat, and he said lessons can be learned from the Bali's recovery.

"People were scared back then but then came back," he said. "This is a natural disaster, so it should be OK—God willing."

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