

# The People That Time Forgot

1 While excavating a cave on the Indonesian island of Flores, archeologists made an  
astonishing and unexpected find:  
5 a very unusual human skeleton. “At first we thought it was a child,” says Mike Morwood, one of the archeologists involved in the project. The remains were  
10 definitely human, but the body was only about one meter (three feet) long—about the size of a modern three-year-old.

The team transported the skeleton back to Jakarta (the capital of Indonesia) for closer  
15 inspection. There, Peter Brown, an anthropologist from the University of New England in Australia, analyzed the skeleton. He determined that the human was a female, and contrary to what archeologists  
20 first thought, that she was an adult, not a child. Additional studies also showed that she had lived about 18,000 years ago, the same time that modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) were walking the Earth. Her  
25 forehead and jaw were similar to those of an earlier type of human, *Homo erectus*, but her size was unique—unlike any other human archeologists had ever seen. But it wasn’t just her height and weight that made her unusual.  
30 She also had a very small brain—about a

▲ A reconstruction brings to life an 18,000-year-old skull from Indonesia. Could this be the face of a lost human species?

third of a modern human’s, even smaller than a chimpanzee’s.

Perhaps, scientists suggested, this was a modern human who had suffered from a rare disease which caused her body to develop  
35 abnormally. But when archeologists returned to the cave where they had made their original discovery, they unearthed<sup>1</sup> several other adult skeletons. All shared the same characteristics  
40 as the first female. Scientists began to realize that an entire population of tiny beings had once lived on Flores. Had they discovered a new species of modern human?

Immediately scientists had a number of questions about these people—which they now called *Homo floresiensis*. One of the first was, where did this species come from? According to Peter Brown, these little people (who lived on Flores from about 95,000 until  
45 at least 13,000 years ago) may have evolved from a population of *Homo erectus*, which crossed from Asia to Indonesia at least  
50 1.5 million years ago.

55 But how could those early humans  
have reached the remote island of  
Flores? Located between mainland  
Asia and Australia, Flores was never  
connected by land bridges to either  
60 continent. Even when the sea  
level was low, traveling to Flores  
involved sea crossings of up to 24  
kilometers (15 miles). People could  
only have reached Flores if they had  
65 the brain power to design and sail  
boats. Scientists had believed that  
*Homo erectus* had a fairly limited  
intelligence. But with these new  
findings, they are now asking whether  
70 *Homo erectus* was smarter than  
first thought.

Which raises another question: *Homo erectus*  
was probably several centimeters taller than  
*Homo floresiensis*. What caused the change  
75 in size? Scientists believe thousands of years  
of isolation on Flores could have caused the  
people to **shrink**—especially if they had no  
natural predators,<sup>2</sup> which would make physical  
size and strength less important. In addition,  
80 having a larger body requires more food, and  
on Flores, resources were scarce. **Minimizing**  
food consumption and **adapting** in size were  
necessary for *Homo floresiensis* to survive—a  
**phenomenon** often seen in nature.



▲ A *Homo floresiensis* hunter protects his catch—a giant rat—from a Komodo dragon.

85 Despite their smaller brains, the little people  
were apparently skilled toolmakers and clever  
hunters. Near the spot where archeologists  
found the bones of *Homo floresiensis*, they also  
unearthed pointed stone tools and the remains  
90 of a stegodont—an extinct relative of the  
elephant, which could weigh 400 kilos (800  
pounds). The stone tools were probably used  
to hunt animals that were many times larger  
than the little people.

95 There is no sign of modern humans on Flores  
before 11,000 years ago. Nevertheless, it is  
possible that people like us (who were already  
living in Australia and parts of Asia 40,000  
years ago) met their tiny human **cousins**.

100 Some scientists have suggested that a conflict  
between the two human species may have  
caused *Homo floresiensis* to die out. More  
likely, though, is that the tiny humans became  
extinct as a result of a major volcanic eruption.

105 Today, though, local stories are still told about  
little people who once walked the island. It's  
amazing to think that modern humans may  
still have a memory of sharing the planet with  
another species of human—one who was like  
110 us but also very different.

<sup>1</sup> If you **unearth** something, you take it out of the ground.

<sup>2</sup> A **predator** is an animal that kills and eats other animals.

◀ Archeologists Wahyu Saptomo and Mike Morwood  
look for signs of early humans in a cave known as  
Liang Bua, on the island of Flores.

