

The evolution of paradise



Indonesia | Alfred Russel Wallace endured shipwreck and starvation on the eight-year voyage that led to the idea of natural selection. 150 years on – and in rather more comfort – *Mike Carter* retraces his steps

It was 3:30am and we were in a small boat trying to find the entrance to a tiny creek on a moonless night. Bioluminescence trailed behind us but ahead there was only a wall of black, the occasional spark of lightning revealing a row of jagged pinnacles. Creek found, we left the boat and waded through the mangrove swamp in single file. Somebody mentioned pythons.

Back on land, in cloying mud, a man at the head of the line hacked his way through the rainforest with a machete. Huge flying beetles aimed for the beam of my headtorch and smacked me in the face. That same beam found giant spider webs and, in their middle, giant spiders. It was 30 degrees, with 95 per cent humidity, and I was as wet as if I'd had a bath fully clothed.

Word came down the line to be quiet. Nobody had given the forest the memo. It sounded like an old dial-up modem, the cicadas pulsing like static; unseen, in the blackness, a hornbill flew past, its vast wings going whump, whump, like a giant's heartbeat.

It felt like a commando raid but it was nothing of the sort. We were here on the island of Misool, eastern Indonesia, to see a bird. Not just any bird, but a bird of paradise and its dawn courtship rituals. This was the rare, exotic creature that Alfred Russel Wallace called, in his 1869 book *The Malay Archipelago*, "one of the most beautiful and wonderful of living things". Starting in 1854, the young naturalist had spent eight years travelling these islands, enduring unimaginable hardships – malaria, shipwreck, starvation, headhunters. Our early start seemed a small price to pay.

"There," whispered the man next to me, pointing up. He was Dr George Beccaloni, an evolutionary biologist, world authority on Wallace and our expert guide for this trip arranged by SeaTrek to celebrate the upcoming 150th anniversary of the publication of Wallace's most famous book. I followed his finger up to the top of the tree; this was a lek site, George, 51, explained, where the male birds display their fantastical plumage to the females.

I could see one male bird, then another, then another. These were Lesser Birds of Paradise, one of the 39 known species, with flank plumes of brilliant white and yellow, twice as long as their bodies, so that when they leapt between branches they looked like comets and their tails. They danced, strutted and hopped, tails and wings held high, calls exquisite. The females bounced around excitedly. The whole tree was alive with the displays. "It's as close as an animal gets to creating art," whispered a fellow guest.

A few days earlier, we had set sail from Ambon, one of the more than 17,000 islands that make up the Indonesian archipelago, which runs along the equator for more than 3,000 miles. We were aboard the *Ombak Putih* (Indonesian for "white wave"), a stunning 42-



Clockwise from main: the Raja Ampat archipelago in Indonesia; the 42-metre sailing ship *Ombak Putih*; the village of Sawai, on Seram island; Alfred Russel Wallace; sea gypsies in Tomolo Bay; a Wilson's bird-of-paradise

Images: Getty Images; Mike Carter



cocoa-nut, [they] are quite a delicacy," he wrote.

We made our way along the north coast of Seram, stopping off at little stilt villages – the boat is often the only contact they will have with the outside world – to buy fish for dinner. At Sawai, we went ashore and, picking up local guides, trekked into the dense and pristine forest of rattan and banana palms, durian and nutmeg trees, festooned with epiphytes and bird's nest ferns. George went at the head of the line, turning over leaves and rummaging through rotting wood, finding beetles and scorpions, giant stick insects and preying mantis, huge spiders and centipedes, all deposited in plastic viewing beakers and passed back for the rest of us to see. "I've never seen one like this before," said George. "Wouldn't be surprised if this isn't a new species"; "Look at this jumping spider mimicking an ant!"; "Listen to the noise this beetle makes if I tap its head . . ." He was as happy as I've ever seen a human being.

The forest was full of huge butterflies, too, and George whipped out his net and waved it around, bagging first a butterfly with two large eyes on its wings so that it looked like an angry owl – "Deflection marks," said George, "so a bird would focus on them and bite the wing but the butterfly survives. A theory first proposed by Wallace." And then a glorious black and yellow birdwing, among the largest butterflies in the world, with a wingspan of up to 25cm. On capturing one, Wallace had written "my heart began to beat violently, the blood rushed to my head and I felt . . . like fainting".

That night, after a dinner of chicken soup with quails' eggs, followed by traditional Indonesian gado salad and snapper bought in Sawai – for us, none of the hardships that once saw Wallace make a small parakeet last for two meals in his leaking, ant-infested hut – the anchor was raised and we headed north. Across the Seram Sea from us was Ternate. It was there in 1858 that, laid up with a malarial fever, and having concluded that the relationships between species were "as intricate as the twigs of a gnarled oak", Wallace conceived the theory of natural selection independently of Charles Darwin and sent the great naturalist a letter to his home in Kent. "All my originality . . ." wrote

Darwin, who had been working on the theory for 20 years, to a colleague, "will be smashed."

Darwin was spurred into action and in 1859 published *On the Origin of Species*. To this day, Darwin is venerated; Wallace, who died in 1913, largely forgotten. George believes that here we see something of the English class system at work. Wallace was self-educated, from a humble background, an early socialist; Darwin was privileged, highly educated, establishment to the core. "History has a Darwinocentric view," said George, who tracked down Wallace's overgrown monument in a Dorset graveyard in 1998 (Darwin was buried in Westminster Abbey) and helped raise the funds for it to be restored. "Wallace deserves to be acknowledged too."

We navigated on through the Raja Ampat archipelago, comprising about 1,000 steep, jungle-covered limestone karst islands, many with little stilt fishing villages clinging on to them, the water as clear as cut glass, the channels dotted with small mushroom-shaped islets balanced on slender columns that looked as if they were going to topple over with the slightest touch of the *Ombak Putih*'s wake. We took to the tenders and bobbed about under a rock overhang, where ochre cave paintings – fish, turtles, dolphins, the age of which nobody knows – sat alongside the handprints one often finds at ancient art sites, like greetings from the dead.

At Tomolol, we swam for half a mile through a Stygian cave, dripping with stalactites. Then nearby (after paying a fee to Sama-Bajau sea gypsies who turned up, armed with bows and arrows, on a covered bamboo raft that was their floating home) we swam in a little lagoon crammed full of giant golden medusa jellyfish. Their tentacles were stingingless, their isolated home predator-free, their gelatinous bodies pulsing like beating hearts as they enveloped me. "This is the closest you can get to experiencing what a swim in Pre-Cambrian seas would have been like," said George.

And then, as we did every day of the cruise, the tenders dropped us off to snorkel on a fabulous remote reef off a classic desert island that we had, as we always did, to ourselves. Raja Ampat has been dubbed a "species factory" by conservationists, who claim the vast, pristine coral gardens and marine life have the greatest density and variety on Earth – 1,459 fish species and more than 550 hard corals (more than 75 per cent of the world's total). That day, I swam with a rare and critically endangered Hawksbill turtle, the look from its

ancient, hooded eyes somehow feeling like a rebuke. I watched reef sharks flit past, saw enormous bump-head parrot fish, lionfish and giant puffers, and lost myself in vast shoals, thousands strong, of yellowtail fusiliers and moorish idols, batfish and surgeon fish. I met a sea snake in a narrow gully and flew over enormous table, fan and brain corals, giant clams and barrel sponges. I couldn't imagine what Wallace would have made of the weird and wonderful adaptations of this undersea world had he been able to visit it.

Afterwards, we sat on the deck with margaritas as the sea swallowed the sun. A column of 100,000 giant fruit bats rose from their nearby island roost and turned the amber sky black as they went to feed, sea eagles picking off the stragglers – survival of the fittest in vivid action.

On one of our last days, we had another 3:30am start, this time to track down the Wilson's bird-of-paradise. Of this highly embellished species, each with unique adaptations, the Wilson's was among the most stunning. Even Wallace never got to see one.



After a couple of hours, we arrived at a spot in the jungle where a grey tarpaulin had been erected with a few slits cut in it. Just feet in front of us was a male Wilson's, the size of a thrush, leaping around on the ground, crazy iridescent curly tail feathers like a handlebar moustache, a bright turquoise skullcap on his head, feet of sapphire blue and slashes of primary colour – brilliant yellow and red – across its body, like a child had gone mad with the paintbox. The bird was busy tidying his "display court" of leaves and twigs.

Without any natural predators or competition for the abundant nuts and berries, female birds of paradise select a mate not on the usual efficiency criteria – strength, foraging ability, speed – but effectively on how sexy they are. Think the court of Louis XIV.

The female, drab in comparison, turned up for the show. The male went into his routine – only filmed for the first time in 1996 – dancing, spinning, calling to her, urgently, longingly, flexing his fluorescent green collar so that his whole body became a brilliant viridescent disc, the inside of his mouth now fluorescent as well, so that he would look to her like an explosion of light and colour. Just feet away, George and I could hardly breathe.

"This is one of the most astonishing natural history things I have ever seen," whispered George. "Perhaps it's a good job Wallace never saw it. He might have had a heart attack."



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Mike Carter was a guest of Audley Travel (audleytravel.com), which offers tailor-made trips to Indonesia. A 16-night trip departing on September 28 and including the 11-night SeaTrek "In Search of Wallace" cruise (seatrekball.com), led by Dr George Beccaloni, costs from £8,025 per person. The price includes two nights in Bali at Belmond Jimbaran Puri, a night in Ternate and internal flights



Short cuts: a new frontier for heli-skiing and the end of London's Mondrian hotel

Albania Skiers seeking not just untracked powder but mountains that have never been skied before should head to Albania this winter. The country has no conventional ski resorts but a new heli-ski operation is due to launch there next month, promising first descents in the Prokletije, or "Accursed" mountains.

Heliski Albania has been set up by Rok Zalokar, an internationally certified mountain guide who is originally from Slovenia but has spent several seasons

working for heli-ski operations in Alaska. The new company is based at Valbone, a village surrounded by national park, about three hours' drive from the airports at Skopje, Pristina or Tirana.

Its launch is part of a growing trend for heli-ski operators to push beyond the sport's traditional heartlands of British Columbia and Alaska, a move being driven by a rise in the number of back-country skiers and a demand for more off-the-beaten-track experiences. "If you want to feel like the skiing equivalent of

Columbus, come to Albania," says Zalokar.

Guests will stay in a traditional hotel set just outside the village at 1,050 metres above sea level, and the helicopter – brought in from Germany – will take off right outside. The operation claims to have 1,500 sq km of potential terrain, including 24 peaks over 2,400 metres (the highest is 2,694 metres); the proximity of the Adriatic should create a more stable "maritime" snowpack. A week's trip, full-board and including guides and four hours of



Heli-skiing in Albania's Accursed mountains

Chris Bezzant

flying, costs from €6,350 per person. heliskialbania.com

London The Mondrian hotel on the city's Southbank has been "debranded" and will now be known as Sea Containers London – a move that some will see as evidence of the waning appeal of global chains. When the 359-bedroom hotel launched in 2014 its publicity centred around its being the first Mondrian outside the US. Now, though, the building's owner, Archlane, has

appointed a new managing company, Lore Group, which runs hotels including the Pulitzer in Amsterdam but keeps each property's identity separate. There will be changes to the bar, some design updates and staff will wear new uniforms that "nod to the golden age of transatlantic travel". Less glamorously, the name comes from the original tenant of the 1978 building, a company specialising in steel shipping containers. seacontainerslondon.com

Tom Robbins