



The SPICE of LIFE

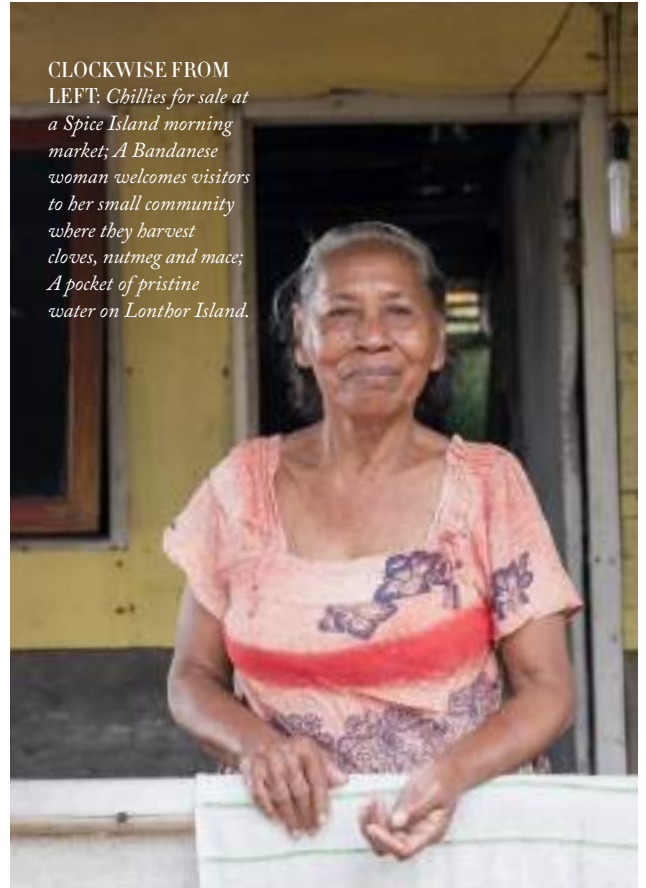
Lynn Gail follows the Spice Trail to the Banda Islands, where the scent of cinnamon is on the breeze, and where traders became the richest people on the planet during the 16th century.



Respected philosophers have long debated time travel, and the notion of being transported back to a bygone era. As I catch the sweet, spicy aroma of nutmeg and cloves as our sails billow into warm south westerlies, it seems as though they were onto something. I am cruising through Indonesia's Banda Sea, home to the fabled Spice Islands, and it feels like I've taken a passage into the history books as we navigate pristine waters where explorers before us landed on these exotic islands. Also known as the Banda Islands and set within the Maluku Islands, they pushed through the Earth's crust millions of years ago to become a pulsating trading centre for spices more valuable than gold during the 16th century. Being the only real estate in the world to produce such sought-after commodities, the islands' worth was colossal.

Because the archipelago held such immense value, ownership wars were inevitable. The Portuguese, English and Dutch fought tumultuous battles to rule and colonise the islands; the Dutch, outnumbering the enemy, emerged

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Chillies for sale at a Spice Island morning market; A Bandanese woman welcomes visitors to her small community where they harvest cloves, nutmeg and mace; A pocket of pristine water on Lonthor Island.*



as victors. The Portuguese, having little power, retreated while the English had to settle for a small slice of the action. The Dutch, foreseeing great wealth, established the VOC in 1602 (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, aka the Dutch East India Company): eventually the richest company in history, worth over 10 times more than Apple (approximately \$10 trillion in today's terms). On hearing of the promised land, Dutch families made the perilous voyage, enduring months at sea to become perkeniers, 'farmers' who were given a land parcel or 'perk' (Dutch, for garden) that they would manage for the VOC. Such was the worth of the rare spices farmed that even a tiny percentage of the crops made farmers so wealthy they kept them under lock and key.

It's not until we land ashore on Lonthor Island to meet the last perkenier, Paulus van den Broeke, that I get a sense of life as it was during the 16th century when the VOC empire was taking control. Grandiose stone arches, once the entrances to each perkenier's land, stand strong against the overgrowth, hinting at the iron power that once ruled this remote yet stunning archipelago. Ruins from the workers' accommodation still stand as a reminder of how slaves lived when they were brought in to work the plantations under strict rule. Paulus, nicknamed Pongky, is the last known living Dutch descendant who still manages his own perk of 150 nutmeg trees, supplying spice and seedlings to companies worldwide. In keeping with the fabled islands' chequered past, Paulus sends a message through that he is >>

COLONIAL WONDERS

FORT REVENGE, AI ISLAND

An expansive fort built by the English in 1616, before being captured by the Dutch.

FORT BELGICA, BANDANEIRA ISLAND

Built by the Dutch East India Company in 1672, the fort is a pentagonal structure mirroring an early blueprint of the Pentagon.

FORTRESS HOLLANDIA, LONTHOR ISLAND

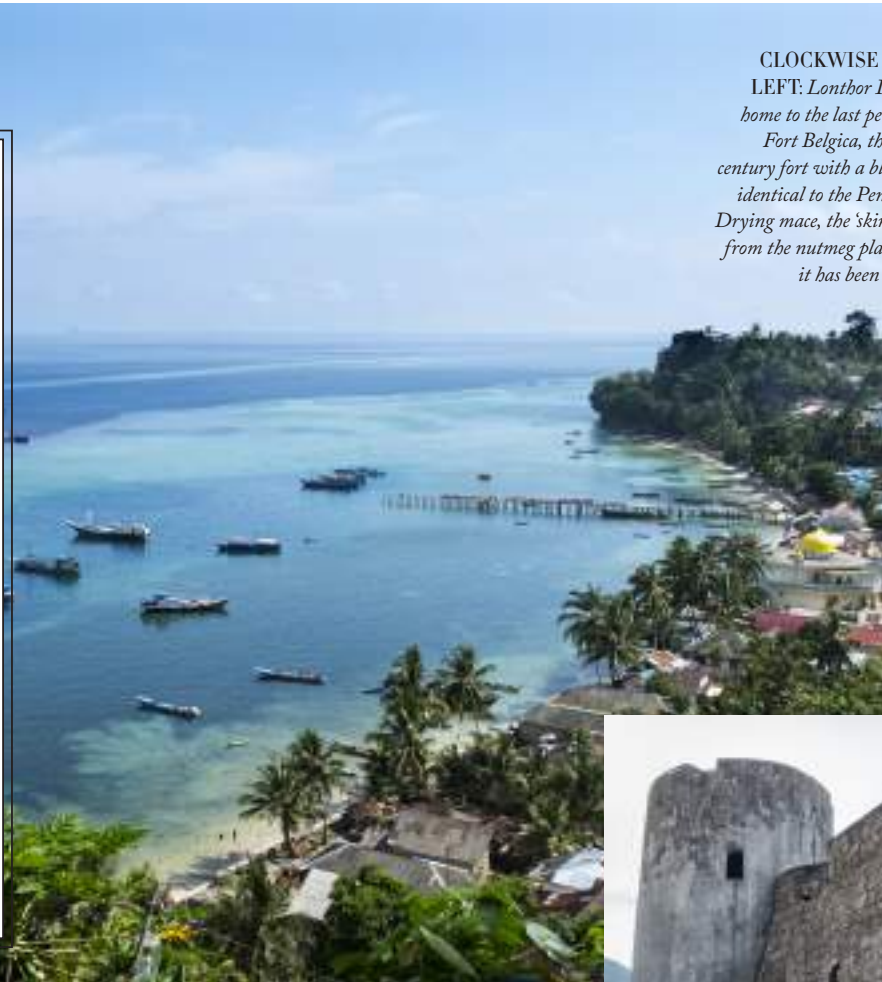
Built by the Dutch in 1624 with four small bastions.

FORT NASSAU, BANDANEIRA ISLAND

The Portuguese laid its foundations in 1529, before the Dutch completion in 1609 – it was the Dutch East India Company’s headquarters until Fort Belgica was completed.

KOMPLEX ISTANA MINI A

A mini palace complex containing the Dutch Colonial Governor’s house and office.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Lonthor Island is home to the last perkenier; Fort Belgica, the 17th-century fort with a blueprint identical to the Pentagon’s; Drying mace, the ‘skin’ peeled from the nutmeg plant after it has been opened.*



mysteriously ‘unavailable’, only contactable by phone. I learn his life has been punctuated by great tragedy, with the massacre of his family as recently as 1999; now a recluse, he doesn’t want to be seen as an object of the media.

My informed guide, Arie Pagaka relays Paulus’s agonising ordeal as we stroll through the humid undergrowth overtaking the land that once teemed with hot, tired workers. After Indonesia’s independence was granted in 1945, resentment brewed between Paulus’s family and the local Bandanese Muslims; they wanted ownership of their land back after their families had either been killed or forced off the islands. Arie’s eyes are sad. “Even though Paulus looked Indonesian as his grandfather had taken a local Christian wife, they still saw him as Dutch. People had suffered so much, they wanted what was theirs.” We walk on, making our own pathway. “A riot broke out between the Christians and Muslims over land rights. Paulus, sensing trouble, took his ownership papers up the hill and buried them, staying overnight. When he returned, his wife and two children had been slaughtered.” Being from this area, Arie

is clearly affected by the events. “The funny thing is,” he continues, “Paulus is now in his late 50s, he remarried, but he remarried a Muslim woman. A very forgiving man, he now lives a quiet life with his new family.”

I contemplate this atrocity as we head towards Ai Island to explore a nutmeg plantation laden with ripening yellow fruit. Still a working estate with hundreds of lush, healthy trees – it seems money really does grow on trees. Watching the fruit pickers, it’s difficult imagining the 1999 massacres, yet in one of the world’s most remote archipelagos, referred to as the last mile, where mace, nutmeg and clove – alongside almonds and cassava – are a main source of income, the Bandanese cling to their heritage for survival. We are merely passing through, revisiting yesteryear, on a luxury schooner where a daily smorgasbord of five-star dishes are served as we navigate pristine waters. Our days are filled with dropping anchor to snorkel richly inhabited reefs, stepping ashore peaceful islands with welcoming villagers and exploring ruins of colonial forts, before we return to our busy lives, and the last perkenier continues the tradition of generations past. *IT*

DETAILS

GETTING THERE

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures’ Spice Islands cruises depart from Ambon or Ternate islands. Garuda Indonesia, Batik Air and Lion Air offer direct flights to both islands from Jakarta.

CRUISING THERE

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures’ small group cruises start from \$9275 to the Spice Islands (The Scents of the Spice Islands I and II) and are led by expert historians; all food, entrances and private en suite cabins are included on luxury phinisi schooners. seatrekballi.com