

DESTINATION

Going deep

Bajau sea gypsies have spent centuries perfecting the art of free diving among the pristine corals of Indonesia's Togean Islands.

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Mando peers skywards, to a soft blanket of cotton ball clouds. Treading water, he sounds like he is suffering from emphysema as he gulps in air, filling his lungs. He doesn't breathe out.

As one of the Bajau people, sea hunters, in the Togean Islands (off the coast of Sulawesi, Indonesia), Mando's lungs are anything but weak. Also known as sea gypsies, many Bajau are able to swim before they can walk, and can stay under water for up to eight minutes.

I'm looking at Mando through a clear protective mask; his fish-shaped eyes are barely visible through tiny wooden goggles handcrafted from mangrove wood and held together by a thin rubber strap.

The 48-year-old gracefully dolphin dives 20 fathoms (36.5 metres) to the ocean floor, making my one-metre mark an unworthy milestone by comparison. The sea is bathtub warm and five minutes pass before he floats to the surface with a grouper attached to his wooden spear gun. Again he fills his lungs before disappearing once more into the deep, for another kill.

Kabalutan village, in the Gulf of Tomini, is not a destination you happen on by chance. It has taken us four days – with stops at a number of islands – to sail the 130km from Gorontalo Harbour,

North Sulawesi, on the luxury *phinisi* schooner the Ombak Putih (“white wave”).

At dawn on the day we arrive, our guide, Arie Pagaka, leaves to meet with the village chief, to confirm our group of eight is welcome that morning.

Accepted, we take an inflatable over to a wooden jetty and enter a village that is home to more than 1,000 Bajau. Measuring 500 metres by 100 metres, a small land mass runs through its centre, but about 80 per cent of the village is built on stilts over the sea.

Records suggest the Bajau have been nomadic divers at least since the early 17th century. They still dive, not only to feed and hunt saleable produce for their families, but also to pass the traditions of sea survival onto their children. One of their customs is to puncture the eardrums of children at a young age so they are able to free dive deep without feeling pain, says the village chief, Salim Sam Gobel. Like seals they learn to dart through coral reefs as they hunt for seafood.

Gobel joins me on a visit to Mando's

modest hut, which is part of a row on the western side of the island. We cross the uneven, gaping timber boardwalks that connect rows of stilted houses. Beneath, glimpses of an emerald ocean look translucent in the shade.

As I sit on boards that creak and feel as though, at any moment, they could send me tumbling back into the ocean, Mando relays the story, with Pagaka interpreting, of the Russian diver who came to test her record-breaking breath-holding skills against his. Mando claims he stayed under water for 13 minutes without resurfacing. He laughs through the account, “while I sat on the bottom of the ocean, she went up for air three times!” and flaps his arms, demonstrating the Russian's need to get to the surface.

Studies have shown that because the Bajau start diving at around the age of seven, they develop spleens up to 50 per cent larger than average. As the spleen stores oxygenated red blood cells, this enables them to hold their breath for longer periods.

The village is also visited by divers who come to challenge the Bajau to spearfishing contests, but their shiny modern spear guns are no match for the agility of the sea gypsies, says Mando.



Mando returns to the surface with his catch, having been under water for five minutes.



From far left: Mando free dives to fish with a wooden speargun off Kabalutan village, Indonesia; Bajau huts in Kabalutan, in the Togeian Islands; boiled sea cucumbers.

“We are still 90 per cent fishermen,” Gobel says. “Boys go to school, but still learn how to dive with their fathers. They must learn how to survive and look after the ocean.”

The Muslim Bajau spend about six hours of each working day beneath the surface, hunting and gathering.

Outside Mando’s wooden hut, there is row upon row of items that look inedible, flushable even, lying on a timber deck.

The 10cm mottled grey lumps are sea cucumbers, which have been boiled then spread to dry along the decking under a hot tropical sun. They will be sold to buyers in China as a delicacy and as an ingredient for traditional Chinese medicine.

The income from sea cucumbers and fresh fish is minimal, however, and the Indonesian government now subsidises

seaweed farming, providing plants and outboard motors for dugout canoes so that villagers can reach ocean crops, says Pagaka.

Gobel gives me a tour of the rest of the village, which has recently been extended to a small part of solid ground where a volleyball court has been built. Women wearing hijabs play in the oppressive midday heat; they’re so skilled, the ball rarely touches the hard ground.

Goats and chickens wander through basic classrooms without doors or windows in the school grounds as children call out, “*Selamat pagi*” (“good morning”) and, “Hello missus”. Other women, their faces caked in mud paste as protection against the sun, are washing clothes under hand pumps outside their huts. Most of the village men are out fishing.

It’s a simple, unhurried existence. But could there be trouble in paradise?

Time is found for snorkelling on each of the 12 days we are at sea. These waters are part of the 5.7 million sq km Coral Triangle, which contains the highest diversity of coral reef fish in the world, and witnessing the density and variety of sea life here is like watching David Attenborough’s most prized footage through a mask. Some reefs, though, are clearly dying and devoid of clams, reef fish and bright swaying ocean plants.

“If we destroy the coral, the coral will destroy us,” says Pagaka, who was born and raised on nearby Flores Island and views these waters as his backyard. He describes how some fishermen bomb

reefs with dynamite to stun their quarry, keeping it alive to be sold at a premium. It’s a common but criminal offence and Indonesia’s Wildlife Conservation Society is taking measures to eradicate the practice.

Passionate about conserving his archipelago against harmful fishing, mass tourism and global warming, Pagaka meets with village chiefs to discuss how their environment can be cared for. He believes education is the answer to conserving what the Bajau have.

This pristine gulf sits far from mapped tourist trails. If its reef systems remain healthy and young villagers resist the lure of the big city, the Bajau’s extraordinary way of life may continue as it has done for hundreds of years; the villagers of Kabalutan working and playing in the ocean they call home. ■



Left: cardinal fish swim through pristine reefs in the Gulf of Tomini, off the coast of Sulawesi.
Above: a Kabalutan fisherman.