

## Cruise on trial



### THE DETAILS

Cox & Kings offers a range of Indonesia voyages aboard SeaTrek Sailing Adventures' pinisi, several of which visit jellyfish lakes. A 14-night, expert-led cruise costs from £9,995pp based on two sharing, including flights, three nights' hotel accommodation, all meals and excursions on the cruise, and a £50pp contribution towards a Covid test (020 3813 2966; coxandkings.co.uk).

◀ A golden jellyfish slowly makes its way through the water  
 ▼ Take in the local sights during the voyage

and a handful of legs (actually "oral arms") straggling behind. The *Mastigias papua*, or golden jelly. I squealed into my snorkel as the little creature throbbed by. It moved so softly, like a full tulle skirt caught in a light breeze. But it also moved with purpose. "This variety has developed a way to obtain food symbiotically," Muller had told me. "Incorporated within their tissues are microalgae called zooxanthellae. Since the algae provide the jellies with food, the jellies must maximise their intake of light, so they migrate daily – they move vertically to the surface, and horizontally following the sun, covering up to 2km [a mile and a quarter] a day."

Once I'd seen one, I saw more. Never a thick stew, but a steady stream – as soon as one pattered out of view, another appeared; gazing down into the deep, I could make out the faint forms of five, 10, 20 others. Sometimes they floated right towards my face; at other times I followed them, hypnotised by their gentle, pulsing ballet. They came in a range of sizes, some wide as dinner plates, others little bigger than insects, like little learner swimmers fighting to get to the sun. I saw one of a different species altogether: *Aurelia aurita*, the moon jelly, a translu-

# Are these jellyfish really 'experts at mindfulness'?

Sarah Baxter finds an unexpected calm while snorkelling in a landlocked lagoon on her trip around Indonesia's remote waters

The tiny village of Mbuang Mbuang, on Indonesia's middle-of-nowhere Banggai archipelago, had over-glamorous pretensions: its name was declared in large, white letters, Hollywood-style, on the hill just above. To be fair, its beach was A-list – a blinding dazzle of bright-white sand – and its stilted houses paddled in perfect-blue seas. However, the village itself was heat-drowsy; it seemed most of its residents were sitting beneath a rose apple tree, doing nothing much at all. Few outsiders had been here since my vessel, the *Ombak Putih*, last sailed by; the place felt within a fathom of falling completely off the map. No, Mbuang Mbuang's greatest drama was below the surface.

I was midway through a voyage with SeaTrek Adventures, navigating some of Indonesia's remotest waters on a journey from the fabled Spice Islands of the Moluccas to southern Sulawesi. I was travelling aboard a pinisi, an elegant and intimate standing-gaff ketch built for touring but handmade in the same way as the region's traditional Bugis trading vessels. We'd spent the morning snorkelling just offshore, where there was life lurking everywhere, a swaying fairy tale of slipper corals, anemones and golden sea squirts; of warty sea stars and Christmas tree corals that shrank to the near-touch; of long-finned batfish that rippled like ribbons and giant purple clams that pursed and puffed

### THE VERDICT

**HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?**  
 Quietly magical. To see even more might have been mind-blowing.

★★★★★

**WOULD YOU DO AGAIN?**  
 In a flash. Shame it's so far to go...

★★★★★

**CONCLUSION?**  
 Jellyfish swimming: the newest, niche-est mental wellness trend?

their grinning maws. But it was the afternoon trip that I was most anticipating. Just around the coast from Mbuang Mbuang is a lagoon known for its *ubur ubur* – jellyfish.

I'd long heard tell of sites such as this: lakes formerly connected to the ocean but now landlocked, and packed with harmless jellyfish that, having been so long isolated without predators, had lost their stings. These lakes are found largely in Indonesia, Vietnam and the Micronesian archipelago of Palau, mostly in karstic areas. "About 200 marine lakes are known in the world, and more keep being found," said Joe Mueller, professor of marine biology

at California's College of Marin and my go-to man for all things Cnidaria. "Some 42 previously unknown lakes were found in one 2018 study in Indonesia alone; but of the 13 that were visited, only four contained jellyfish. It's estimated that fewer than 20 marine lakes worldwide host jellyfish." So, it turned out, Mbuang Mbuang had every right to shout its name from the hilltops. This was a special spot indeed. And I was about to take the plunge.

Aboard the tender, my nine shipmates and I zipped along the green-tufted limestone shore. We slowed to approach a jetty, only erected a few years back but already limp and broken; instead, we clambered up the soil and scrub beside for a short walk down to the sunken lake.

Here a sign warned us: no drinking, no eating, no touching, no flippers. I'd forgone the bug repellent and sunscreen so I wouldn't pollute the water. I pulled on my mask and snorkel, eased down the wooden steps and dunked into the murk, a warm, salty, cyan soup of sediment and plankton that seemed deep and abyssal – unfortunately, recent rains had churned things up, so the clarity wasn't what it might have been.

At first, nothing. Me and the plankton. So I swam further out, searching, searching. And then... something – almost a non-thing – materialised from the blue: a globule of translucent pinkish-peach, with a white-spotted hemispherical "head"

cent plastic bag-alike, almost mistakable for a trick of the eye.

They all seemed so fragile – somehow almost childlike – that I began to feel fearful for them. I tried to swim with care, twisting, bending and adjusting to avoid making contact. Occasionally they bumped me anyway. A soft kiss, like being caressed by a living crème caramel. On one occasion, I accidentally hit one with my breaststroking arm, sending it into a somersaulting death throes... I squeaked an apology into my snorkel as it span and tumbled. But fortunately it was fine, eventually righting itself and billowing away, all its fine filaments intact.

Maybe I shouldn't have been too concerned – these jellies are hardier than they look. "These are the first macro-animal forms of life on earth," Joe had told me. "They figured the correct recipe for success early on and have been masters of what they do to survive for more than 700 million years." And, though they might be 95 per cent water, with no butt and no brain, they can perhaps teach us a thing or two. "They are wondrous in their simplicity, an excellent example of how life doesn't have to be complex to be successful," Joe added. "You could call them experts at mindfulness, all without a mind. To swim with them is to get an earthly perspective, free of charge."

*Overseas holidays are currently subject to restrictions. See Page 3*



▲ The *Ombak Putih* offers an elegant and intimate way to tour Indonesia's waters

