

Fragrance of past lingers in isles of spice

In eastern Indonesia, scents made cents

LYNN GALE explores centuries-old maritime routes where adventurers fought and died for spices more profitable than gold

ALM now reigns where tumultuous sea battles once took place during the 16th and 17th centuries, when nutmeg and cloves traded from the Banda Sea were worth more than half the English treasury.

When early explorers first came across spices in the Maluku islands in what is today called Indonesia, they were so seduced by their immense wealth they fought battles to control any property where such merchandise grew.

Now, on a 13-day cruise with SeaTrek Sailing Adventures, we will be following the sea route where blood was shed in one of the most far-flung and stunning parts of the Indonesian archipelago.

Before we depart, we are treated to a dance by the Watublapi weavers on Flores. While many weavers have turned to bulk manufacturing, this community continues to use traditional hand-spun yarn with natural dyes. Textiles are woven with age-old motifs to keep people's culture alive by passing down ancestral stories.

And with rice wine on offer, of course we join in the dance.

We bid farewell and the tone is set as we head out on Zodiac tenders to board our Buginese-built phinisi schooner, awaiting departure from Maumere port.

Hand-built and luxuriously furnished, the *Ompak Putih* – meaning white wave – accommodates up to 24 guests in 12 ensuite cabins. The vessel is perfect for small-group cruising.

As we head into Cape of Flowers, our onboard Spice Islands expert, historian Ian Burnett, shares his knowledge on the first of his nightly talks. We know little about these legendary lands so Ian's talks provide a wealth of fascinating information as we navigate the Banda Sea.

The following morning we drop anchor on the eastern end of Flores and head to Lantantuka, the central hub of early colonisation in the Banda Sea, where five Catholic churches and Stations of the Cross dominate the seafront.

Catholicism continues to thrive here,

with worship paramount among the villagers. We seem to be a novelty as we wander the seafront town. Locals stop us, wanting to practise their English.

Our next stop is the whaling village of Lamalera. It's one of the few places in the world where villagers still use traditional methods to hunt whales – and one I'm hesitant to visit.

Since 1836, the Lamalera people have sustained themselves by hunting whale. No more than 25 whales a year are allowed to be caught and every part of the animal is used, from the meat being traded for staple foods, down to small bone parts being made into scrimshaw jewellery for the few visitors who come ashore.

Friendly locals shake our hands wanting to show off their wares. Mostly cut off from the outside world, they survive however they can.

On board, we quickly settle into a daily life of visiting islands so far flung that the archipelago is often referred to as the Last Mile. With a mixture of intrepid travellers made up of South Africans, Australians, English and Americans, conversation flows easily as we chat about our life experiences and travel plans.

While we navigate waters tinged with sea-green blues we are served tasty lunches that keep us coming back for seconds. At dusk, sumptuous dinners, desserts and Ian's nightly talks prepare us for the following day, with the promise of each destination offering a window into a new culture.

We visit a remote tribe on Alor, where the indigenous Abui dance around a tribal altar as a way of keeping their community strong.

On Romang, we deliver much-needed water filters, small solar lights and school supplies to children who sing to us. They only see visitors a couple of times a year and their young faces beam wide smiles of joy.

After lunch, the routine is to jump in the Zodiacs, don snorkelling gear and explore the underwater world, where a dazzling array of exotic marine species abound. The ever-attentive



TIMELESS GESTURE – Watublapi village elders prepare a welcome offering.

Photo: Lynn Gale

crew keep track of us as time slips by.

As the days float by, it feels like we are in our own bubble. There are no other sea-faring vessels in sight as we head towards the "Ring of Fire" – Indonesia's volcanic ring of islands where our first stop is Damar, which lies outside the Bandas.

In 1648, the Dutch East Indies Trading

Company destroyed the island's nutmeg plantation to monopolise its growing spice trade in the Banda Islands.

It all seems so long ago as we step through the lush vegetation. The scent of freshly harvested cloves, drying on large plastic sheets, lightens the humidity as we trek up a steep incline.

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WHEN IN BANDA... Passenger Ann Bowker dances to the beat in the Spice Islands; left, the luxury schooner Okmar Putih, built by the seafaring Bugis people from South Sulawesi. Photos: Lynn Gale

IF YOU GO.....

SEATREK Sailing Adventures cruise to the Banda Islands departing from Ambon, Flores or Ternate Islands. Lion Air, Garuda and Tiger Air depart from Denpasar Airport, Bali, with several flights each day. The cruises start from US\$5990 to the Banda Sea and are led by expert historians – all food, entrances and private ensuite cabins are included on their two luxury phinisi schooners. ■ seatrekballi.com

Being October, the expected wet season is unseasonably late, and the oppressive heat affects our pace until we reach a plantation where a harvester shimmies effortlessly up an 18-metre tree with his machete to send several coconuts to the ground for us. We marvel at his agility,

The surprisingly cool coconut water rehydrates and refreshes us and we walk on through nutmeg and mango trees, stopping to feast on fresh mangoes. The staple diet around here is sweet potato, fruit and fish so the island's spices are used to add flavour while also being a commodity to sell on to traders.

As we head further towards the Spice Islands, striking volcanic islands begin to punctuate the landscape. Called strato-volcanoes, they rise from the dark seabed in alternating layers of lava and ash caused by many eruptions since they pushed through the Earth's crust millions of years ago.

Beneath plumes of volcanic vapour we go ashore to the island of Serua. At only two kilometres long by four kilometres wide, it is the most active volcano in the Banda Sea, experiencing major eruptions as recently as the 1960s and '70s.

Just 40 residents stay on its unpredictable peak, making it one of the most remote cultures in Indonesia. We receive a welcome fit for family friends and I'm quietly taken aback at how industrious they are.

A church, large enough for more than 100 people, has been built on the hillside above a small fishing village where dugout canoes line the shore. Cloves are drying outside well-maintained houses – everything and everyone has a purpose.

It's day nine, and we have sailed more than 400 nautical miles to reach Rhun, the first of the Banda Islands. The houses are painted the hue of the ocean and we get our first real look at a nutmeg plant.

When ripe, the nutmeg splits open on the branch to reveal a red-covered nut. The red inner coating is the mace, which is peeled off and traded separately. It was long laborious work collecting each ton of mace, as one "coat" hardly registered on the scales.

Spices were in such high demand because they were used to make medieval wines drinkable and to mask the foul odour emitted from corpses.

They were an essential ingredient in cooking and medicinal concoctions, and were also believed to have magical properties in the art of love making, turning men to violence to possess it. Explorers thought the plant more valuable than gold.

Walking around the peaceful shores it is hard to envision such a troubled past. The views are spectacular – sun-baked beaches are edged by pure white sand, where the ocean floor is visible for a sea depth of several metres.

We spend the following days exploring Dutch-colonial homes and forts, where cannon silently echo the control the Dutch had when they ruled the land and its people. It is a poignant history.

On our last evening the crew, who have become our friends, take us ashore to a secluded beach where a makeshift candlelit path guides us to a farewell feast.

Being disconnected from the wired world has brought us back to basics – back to the real meaning of community. We dance to the strums of an acoustic guitar and reflect on our journey through the Spice Islands' storied past as a bright orange sun sets in the distance.

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