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page 12

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page 6



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page 9

# Travel on Sunday



## A passage to Indonesia

*Sail in the wake of Sir David Attenborough's favourite naturalist to a remote archipelago where wildlife still thrives, says Sarah Baxter*

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# COVER STORY



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## ESSENTIALS

Cox & Kings (020 3642 0861; coxandkings.co.uk) is offering a range of Indonesia voyages aboard SeaTrek Sailing Adventures' pinisi. A 14-night expert-led "Spice Traders, Island Tramps and Sea Gypsies" cruise costs from £8,395 per person departing on Feb 3 2020. This includes flights, three hotel nights and meals and excursions on the cruise. A 14-night anniversary cruise, "In Search of Wallace and His Living Treasures with Dr George Beccaloni from Ternate to Raja Ampat", costs from £8,195 per person (with the same inclusions), departing Sept 28 2019.

### NOW AND ZEN

The ship Ombak Putih, main; a Dutch fort, below; and a seaside inlet on Ternate, bottom



# 'Our pinisi was more like a sculpture than a boat'

**D**awn, and a new view emerged. Our boat was the biggest in the bay, bobbing elegant as a duchess before the sleepy low-rise town. This fringe of civilisation quickly gave way to jungly hills, which were swallowed by smoky cloud. The call to prayer drifted on the breeze; a cockerel responded. But largely Labuha – the capital of Bacan island, part of the Moluccas archipelago of eastern Indonesia – remained peaceful; an exotic backwater.

Impossible to believe, then, that this island and its near neighbours were once the epicentre of a trade network that spanned, and shaped, the globe, not to mention co-birthplace of the theory of evolution. Bacan today is not a world player. Its main fort – founded by the Portuguese in the 16th century, taken by the Spanish, rebuilt by the Dutch – is now a well-preserved ruin. And the local sultan no longer wields much power: visiting his modest house, we were permitted to see only one room ("The rest is untidy") and found the man himself absent ("He lives in Ohio and works in IT"). But Bacan is one of the four spice sultanates of North Maluku – original source of all the planet's cloves, the aromatic buds once worth more than gold.

Bacan is also where British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace made his best-known discoveries: his standard-wing bird of paradise and golden birdwing butterfly, which he was so excited to find that he "felt much more like fainting than I have done when in apprehension of immediate death". Both these



discoveries were made shortly after, in a fit of fever, he solved the "species problem", deducing that "the fittest would survive". While Charles Darwin was procrastinating over his theory in Kent, Wallace was on the other side of the world, coming to similar



**VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY**  
Alfred Russel Wallace loved life in Bacan

world; there is, says David Attenborough, "no more admirable character in the history of science".

My own voyage would be considerably shorter: a 12-day trip from the Spice Isles to south-east Sulawesi. But it would also be eye-opening, and

## SEVEN SAILS, SNORKELLING AND STARGAZING: LIFE ABOARD A PINISI

A pinisi is more than a boat. In 2017 Unesco included the "art of boat building in South Sulawesi" – with specific reference to pinisi – on its list of the world's Intangible Cultural Heritage. These hand-built, engineless trading ships, built by Bugis shipwrights in

the 20th century, embody the skill and spirit of the local seafarers. The Ombak Putih is a modern slant on the pinisi. She has a seven-sail rig but mostly motors, the sails only hoisted in the right conditions, or for photos. This means she can set a more reliable course for the remotest parts of the

completed in far greater style. Our cruise started from Ternate, main hub of North Maluku, the most powerful of the spice sultanates and from where, in 1858, Wallace sent a letter to Darwin outlining his evolutionary theory. We visited an old house that, some claim, was lived in by Wallace; a lady let us in, smiling inquisitively at the bule (foreigners) nosing around. Such courtesy and curiosity became standard on this trip on which we saw no other travellers. Often when we were doing our tourist thing – trying to spot Lake Toliere's legendary white crocodile; retching at the caramel-onion rankness of the durian fruit – we'd find locals taking pictures of us.

We were quite the attraction, thanks to our novelty, but also our vessel: the Ombak Putih ("White Wave"), an elegant 138ft pinisi. A standing-gaff ketch, handmade from ironwood by Bugis shipwrights, she was commissioned for pleasure



touring but made in the traditional way. "These trading boats were not built to plans but by experience," explained Jeffrey Mellefont, maritime history expert and guest lecturer on our voyage. "They are more like a sculpture than a boat."

Including Jeffrey, there were 10 passengers aboard (though Ombak Putih can hold 24), a mix of Aussies, Britons and Americans, ably looked after by a 17-strong Indonesian crew. She was a beauty of a boat, comfortable and graceful. She was also talkative. In my cabin that first night I lay awake listening to her sighing and exhaling, gossiping with the waves. Which is to say, I slept badly. But emerging on deck at sunrise, in a whole new hemisphere, slipping between uninhabited-looking froths of green, over glittery seas, it didn't matter.

At breakfast, a spread ranging from granola to *mi goreng* (fried noodles), I wondered aloud what it might have been like to sail here 100 years ago. "What it's like now," one of my shipmates countered. (Maybe minus the granola.) Since its spice heyday, the world seems to have forgotten North Maluku. Time drifts at a different pace.

Our pace was similarly relaxed, with an itinerary mixing shore visits to remote – really remote – outposts only accessible by sea with snorkelling exquisite waters. That morning we took our first dip, along the edge of a white-sand beach, flopping straight into underwater fireworks: explosions of soft corals; the sparkle of blue-green chromis in hundreds-strong shoals; swaying anemones with Nemos hiding inside; angelfish, triggerfish,

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 4]



Indonesian archipelago, accessing places larger cruise ships can't reach. The Ombak Putih has an excellent galley, plus air-con, salon, library, snorkel gear, loungers and a crew equally adept at steering, cocktails, identifying fish and playing guitar.

A typical day begins when you fancy – on deck for sunrise, perhaps – with a 7.30am breakfast bell signalling the buffet is ready. A shore excursion by tender leaves around 9am to explore a remote

village or historic town. Then it's back to the boat for lunch, some reading or a bit of snorkelling. Welcomed back with smoothies and snacks, there's plenty of time for showers and a G&T before sunset, followed by an expert lecture, a briefing on the next day's activities, and a beautiful dinner.

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# COVER STORY

**BLUE SWOON**  
Sulawesi waters, main; drying squid, left; Bajau children, bottom

→ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

pipefish and lionfish; and a black-tip reef shark slinking into the deep. Back on board, fellow passenger Ginger smiled broadly. "There was a big school of little fish and one moment I felt I was one of them; it was like meditation."

It was the same every time we snorkelled; some new, strange sub-aqua beauty was inevitably revealed. We saw a plantation of giant clams pulsing their bright-spotted maws; we saw frenzied catfish and elegant batfish; and we hovered over a huddle of small, rare Banggai cardinal fish – dainty showgirls with black fronds and



pearly dots, so beloved by aquarium keepers that few now exist here, in their endemic waters. All this magic and these aren't even Indonesia's best reefs. Raja Ampat, further east, is renowned as perhaps the world's finest snorkel spot. Sadly on this occasion we were voyaging west, but Ombak Putih also sails to that fetid archipelago, travelling in the wake of Wallace – though he was drawn there not so much for the spectacular seas but the birds-of-paradise shaking their tail feathers on land. As breathtaking as Raja Ampat looks, I didn't feel too upset about veering the other way. As Ombak Putih progressed between lush island bumps, I began to feel Ginger's Zen. The bow was my own happy place. There was a seat there, and a nook for fixing the rigging where I could rest my coffee mug as dawn broke, watching a blaze of pink flashes of distant thunder, Venus cusped by the crescent moon or, once, a pod of dolphins. Each morning we would all gradually emerge from our cabins, in roughly the same order. But there was an unspoken rule of non-communication. The quiet on board was a contrast to the joyous mayhem encountered every time we went ashore. For instance in Sanana, one of the Sula Islands, we were greeted like royals. The *bupati* (regent), the head of the military

garrison, the tourism chief and a herd of paparazzi received us on the jetty. Then we were invited to place our feet on a small mound of earth to be blessed with water before drums pounded and two men – *salawaku* shields in one hand, *parang* knives in the other – slashed palm-leaf screens, ceremoniously welcoming us to town. At the 17th-century fort, a spread of dark Sula coffee and sticky *wajik* cake had been laid, and we were driven in a cavalcade around the sights: the region's biggest mosque, built Arabian-style unlike Indonesia's usual pagoda mosques; the mangroves; a Bajau (Sea Gypsy) village teetering on stilts; and the colourful market, bursting with tomatoes, limes and chillies, fish and batik-wrapped ladies, their faces smudged with rice-powder sun screen. At Waikoka, on Mangole island, we were met by fisherman launching their boat; their village is now tucked inland, behind willow palms, since their beachfront settlement was hit by a tsunami. They hadn't seen a *bule* (foreigner) since Ombak Putih last anchored here. On Banggai island we pulled right up to the dock, where a fleet of three-wheeled *bentors* – somewhere between rickshaw, doggem and snowplough – waited to whisk us to the market and the king's



## THE SPICE WARS: A HISTORY

Between the 16th and 18th centuries the tiny Maluku played a huge part in shaping the modern world, simply because these equatorial specks were the only source of nutmeg, cloves and mace – at the time, worth more than gold. These spices had been widely traded for millennia – a Syrian excavation



found cloves dated to 1700BC. It was a vast, lucrative network, and Arab civilisation prospered by being intermediaries in the supply chain from Far East to Europe. Stories such as Sinbad were written to disguise and mystify the spices' origins, discouraging competitors. But when Vasco da Gama discovered a direct route to India and the east, navigating

and English muscled in, with local sultans shifting allegiances depending on both the highest bidders and who could give them the greatest advantages over rival sultans. The Dutch triumphed, though not without swapping the tiny English-owned nutmeg island of Run for a scrap of land called Manhattan. But by the late 18th century, the French and British had smuggled seeds out of the region and started growing spice supplies elsewhere. Monopoly over. And the end of the Maluku's 15 centuries or more of fame.

the Wana gave us a lift back in their dugouts, which could just about squeeze down the forest-arched crystal shallows. According to Jeffrey, "channelling our inner rice sack" was the key to staying balanced in these slender boats; lean at your peril. Though, as we frequently ran aground, us sacks had to keep hopping out to push. Most raucous was our arrival at the Bajau island of Samaringa. The entire child population had gathered and followed us as we chatted to ladies shucking sea snails. Bajau traditionally lived on the sea but most are now settled in villages such as these. Wallace himself was an observant ethnologist, studying "man and nature in all its aspects". No wonder this culturally rich region held such fascination. Eventually Ombak Putih pulled into busy Kendari, journey's end. It felt a cruel jolt out of my new normal, in which every day was different, but every day was the same, rolling with the sea. My phone finally caught up, and there was a flight to catch. But my mind was still laying on deck at midnight, phosphorescence flashing in the bow waves, Milky Way sprawling above, sailing through another time.

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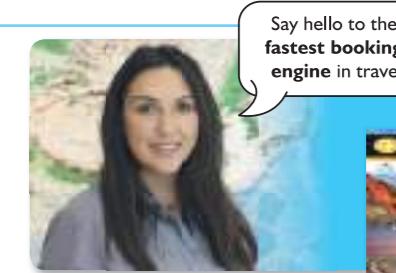
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