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IN THE WAKE OF ALFRED WALLACE

BRETT ATKINSON SETS SAIL FROM THE SPICE ISLANDS ON AN EVOLUTIONARY ADVENTURE THROUGH A REMOTE ARCHIPELAGO TO A FAR-FLUNG CITY ON THE EASTERN EDGE OF INDONESIA.

Journeying from the former spice island of Ternate – once the world's only source of cloves – to the dusty West Papuan port of Sorong will take 12 days and we'll be cruising through spectacle and history on a classic sailing boat steeped in heritage, but packed with 21st-century comfort and convenience. We'll also be following the path of Alfred Russel Wallace, an influential but now overlooked Victorian-era hero of natural history.

Hand-crafted in Kalimantan in 1995 as part of a centuries-old boat-building tradition recognised by UNESCO for its 'intangible cultural heritage', SeaTrek Sailing Adventures' *Ombak Putih* ('White Wave') is a traditional Sulawesi-style *pinisi*, a type of gaff-rigged ketch still widely used for inter-island trade throughout Indonesia.

It's also the kind of vessel Alfred Russel Wallace would have sailed in, first venturing to Malaya, Borneo and the East Indies in 1854 and funding his ongoing travels as a collector of bird and animal



The *Ombak Putih* anchored at sunset. PHOTO: Carol Atkinson



Boning up on Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* before forest adventures. PHOTO: Carol Atkinson



Morning return to the Ombak Putih. PHOTO: Carol Atkinson



Remote beach on Pulau Hiruili. PHOTO: Carol Atkinson



Elevated views of the Raja Ampat Geopark. PHOTO: SeaTrek Sailing Adventures

specimens for rich natural history fans back in London. During our own travels onboard the *Ombak Putih*, we're joined by George Beccaloni, a London-based evolutionary biologist and a pre-eminent expert on the man who was regarded as Charles Darwin's equal in the late 19th century.

“WALLACE’S TRAVELS INSPIRED HIS OWN 19TH-CENTURY BESTSELLER, *THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO*, A BOOK THAT’S NEVER BEEN OUT OF PRINT SINCE ITS FIRST PUBLICATION IN 1869.”

Before continuing south through the jewel-like scattering of more than 1,500 islands known as Raja Ampat, we visit Dodinga, a sleepy village on Halmahera, a low-slung island east of the twin volcanic islands of Ternate and Tidore. In previous centuries both islands were rival and

very rich sultanates supported in turn by British, Dutch and Portuguese adventurers keen to dominate the global market in cloves.

It was during a feverish malarial dream in Dodinga in 1858 that Wallace first envisioned his theory of natural selection to drive evolutionary change. Back in Ternate, he quickly penned a detailed essay and letter to his friend and mentor Charles Darwin outlining the groundbreaking idea, prompting Darwin to move forward the publication of his *Origin of Species* book to 1859. At the time, Wallace's role as co-discoverer of the theory of evolution by natural selection was widely recognised, but his role in developing one of science's most important ideas has been largely overlooked since *Origin of Species* achieved bestseller status.

Wallace's travels inspired his own 19th-century bestseller, *The Malay Archipelago*, a book that's never been out of print since its first publication in 1869. More than 150 years later, it's also a superb literary companion for a Wallace-focused adventure on the *Ombak Putih*. We consult an insightful selection of paragraphs before an early morning hike to see Wallace's standardwing bird of paradise on Bacan Island. Later in the cruise amid Raja Ampat's even more remote archipelago, the even more colourful Wilson's bird of



Sea turtle, Raja Ampat. PHOTO: SeaTrek Sailing Adventures



paradise steals the show on Waiego Island, assiduously clearing his display arena of twigs and leaves in an effort to attract a mate. Fuelled by robust Indonesian coffee, our pre-dawn departure from the boat is making perfect sense as colour and shade slowly trump a tropical dawn deep in the forest.

Despite our isolation at the southeastern edge of the famed Coral Triangle, life aboard the *Ombak Putih* is both relaxed and very comfortable. A fun and hardworking crew of 15 from all around Indonesia go above and beyond for just 24 passengers relaxing in 12 air-conditioned cabins, while meals on the boat's spacious deck cover authentic flavours from all around the world. Indonesian sunsets inevitably progress to end-of-day cocktails, while an evening beach barbecue on the tiny island of Hiruili includes frosty Bintang beers, endless sticks of satay and a giant parrotfish infused with lemongrass and chilli.

During the day, relaxed breakfasts quickly give way to yet another opportunity to go snorkelling, easing off the *Ombak Putih*'s tenders to effortlessly discover the world's best underwater action. Thousands of tropical fish move as one across colourful reefs; manta rays cruise in gin-clear waters beneath us and turtles regularly emerge from underwater forests containing 80 per cent of the world's coral species. As we swim from a remote beach, a pair of black-tipped reef sharks loom past on the edge of our vision. Harmless, apparently, but definitely looking very shark-like in warm waters just one metre deep.

Two final experiences reinforce the specialness of the *Ombak Putih*. After negotiating a maze of coral islands in the boat's tenders, we climb to viewing platforms perched high above Raja Ampat's marinescape for endless horizon views. Later on the same day, brisk trade winds develop and the decision is made to raise the boat's sails. Metres of cobalt-covered canvas are carefully unfurled, soon harnessing increasingly strong afternoon breezes and we thrill to the power and grace of an Indonesian sailing classic. ■

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures' next **'In Search of Wallace – the Malukus, Misool & Raja Ampat'** itinerary departs on October 4, 2025. Visit www.worldjourneys.co.nz to book this and other SeaTrek experiences.

Tidore Island, Maluku archipelago. In previous centuries Tidore and its volcanic twin Ternate were wealthy sultanates supported in turn by British, Dutch and Portuguese adventurers keen to dominate the global market in cloves. PHOTO: SeaTrek Sailing Adventures