



Indonesia

Odyssey on the Wallace's traces

Forgotten inventor
of the theory of evolution

The principle of natural selection does not owe everything to Darwin. The British naturalist co-authored this revolutionary invention, with a compatriot, Alfred Russel Wallace, whose explorations in the Moluccas and Papua inspired a fabulous cruise in the company of his great-grandson and a biologist passionate, in search of the bird of paradise.

By Sarah Chevalley (text) and Antonin Borgeaud for Le Figaro Magazine (photos)



In the Bacan forest, Bill Wallace searches for birds of paradise with a telescope of his great-grandfather.



The red bird of paradise with its spectacular crimson train.

S under a sky laden with rain, *Ombak Putih* slowly leaves the port of Ternate. Not a breath of wind ripples the sea of the Moluccas, a motionless mirror. A graceful collar of clouds envelops the volcano Kiematabuon the neighboring island of Tidore. Seeking the sea breeze at the bow of the schooner, eyes tired from jet lag, we let ourselves be lulled by this hypnotic panorama, admired in his time by Alfred Russel Wallace. Between 1854 and 1862, the British naturalist lived in the Indonesian archipelago to collect animal specimens and refine his ideas on evolution. In the last years of his voyage, he settled in Ternate, a thriving spice trading post operated by the powerful Dutch East India Company. Today, only a tropical jumble remains of the place where the explorer found some comfort upon returning from his expeditions to Papua. The reconstruction of his house, transformed into a museum, is one of the projects of George Beccaloni, a leading Wallace expert and director of the Wallace Correspondence Project and a fund dedicated to his memory. This former curator of the Natural History Museum in London has worked for thirty years to rehabilitate the scientist. *"In the 1990s, while writing my doctoral thesis on butterflies in South America, I came across some of Wallace's papers, which were completely neglected at the time. This seemed very unfair to me, given that he conceived the theory*

"Without Wallace, 'The Origin of Species' might not have not been published"

of evolution independently of Darwin after more than ten years of research. Without Wallace, The Origin of Species might not have been published. Professor Calculus, with a jovial air, George is a tireless defender of the self-taught naturalist whose prolific writings he collects, transcribes and posts online on a site funded by the adventure cruises he organizes in the Indonesian archipelago with the SeaTrek agency. As the sailboat skirts the island of Halmahera, a "dust" of 17,000 square kilometers, a few dolphins cross our path with no boats in sight. After several hours of navigation, the schooner drops anchor in the isolated bay of Dodinga, whose only land access is a small wooden pontoon that seems to lead to the heart of an impenetrable jungle.

The village of brilliant intuition

A few kilometers of bumpy road separate Dodinga from the sea. As we approach this hamlet in the heart of the forest, the cheers grow louder. An awning has been erected over the dirt square to protect against the blazing sun. Expected like King Charles, Bill Wallace, the naturalist's great-grandson, and Dominic Jermy, the British ambassador to Indonesia, unveil, to thunderous applause, a plaque commemorating Wallace's discovery of the theory of evolution on this spot almost 170 years ago.

Wallace's fascination with the wonders of nature has always taken precedence over his need for recognition

years. The fervor of the villagers, unaccustomed to seeing Western visitors, is probably not very different from that encountered by the scientist in the 19th century. Suffering from malaria, he stayed several weeks in Dodinga, taking advantage of this forced rest to develop his theory. "Wallace relates that the idea of natural selection came to him in a sudden illumination during a bout of fever." explains George Beccaloni, who organized the event, with the arrival of Bill Wallace. The latter, a discreet engineer, happily slipped into the shoes of his illustrious ancestor for the duration of the ceremony. "As a child, I remember seeing a few scientists come by to admire his butterfly collection, but my father didn't talk about it. The Wallace family cultivates a very British modesty that has left the field open to Darwin's defenders," he jokes. Because Darwinians continue to underestimate Wallace's role in this discovery that revolutionized science. After having his intuition, Alfred returns to Ternate and writes an article detailing his ideas. He sends it to Darwin, whom he admires, but whose research he is unaware of. The famous naturalist finds in it the essence of his own theory, which he has not yet published. In 1858, a few months later, the work of the two men was presented jointly in London, and their two names were attached to the discovery of the mechanism of natural selection. Pressed by the discoveries of his rival, Darwin published, a year later, *The Origin of Species*, which will go down in history while Wallace's contribution will be forgotten. This will not prevent the two men from devoting mutual respect to each other throughout their lives. For Wallace's fascination with the wonders of nature always took precedence over his need for recognition. Back on board the *Ombak Putih*, the passengers' gaze on Indonesian flora and fauna has subtly evolved. As the schooner sails toward Bacan Island, north of the Moluccas, a talented watercolorist fills his notebook with the vibrant shapes and colors he has observed.

The quest for the most beautiful inhabitant feather of the planet

The night is pitch black when the passengers leave the ship for dry land. A fine, warm rain falls continuously. Equipped with headlamps, the walkers plunge into the jungle in single file in reverent silence. The path narrows and climbs steeply, where each crooked step on the slippery ground triggers a mudslide. As the first light of dawn illuminates the canopy, the Papuan guides suddenly stop. Graceful white wings flap with surprising rapidity more than 30 meters high. Wallace's birds of paradise, named by the naturalist who first observed them in these hills in the late 19th century, 1850s, playing hide-and-seek. Long hunted for their extraordinary feathers, adorning the



Confetti
karsts of the archipelago
from Misool.



Snorkeling offshore from Piaynemo, one of the most beautiful reefs in Raja Ampat.



Ornithoptera croesus, one of the largest butterflies in the world.



The graceful dragonfly Indonesian red.



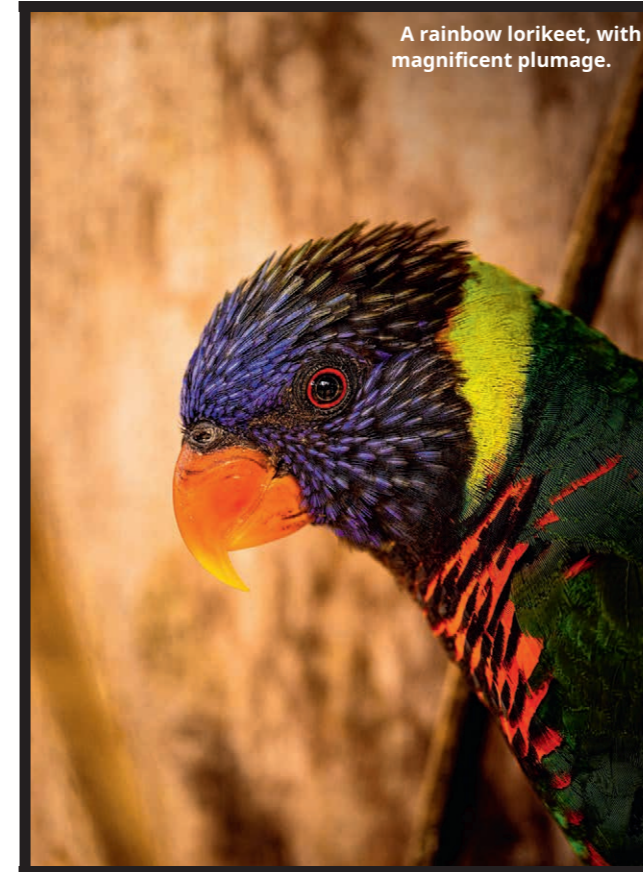
The hamlet of fishermen of Yenbuba on Mansuar Island.



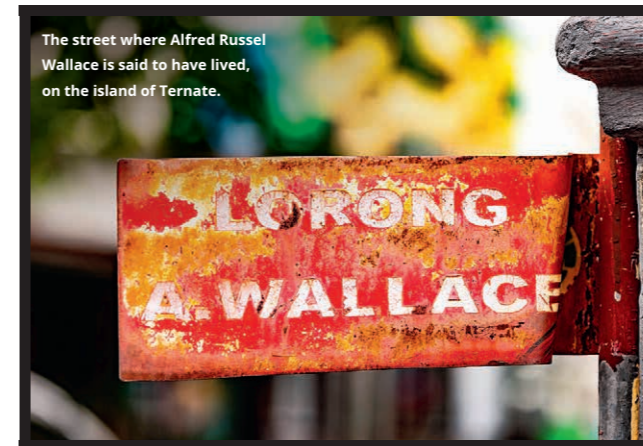
A young Papuan from the village of Marandan Weser.



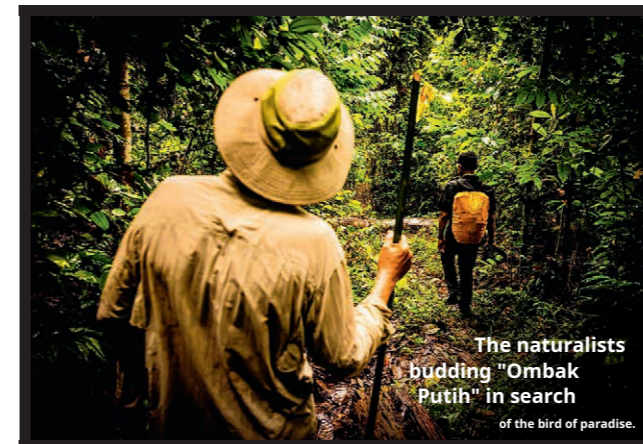
Moonlit evening on the pristine island of Hiriuli, in Raja Ampat.



A rainbow lorikeet, with magnificent plumage.



The street where Alfred Russel Wallace is said to have lived, on the island of Ternate.



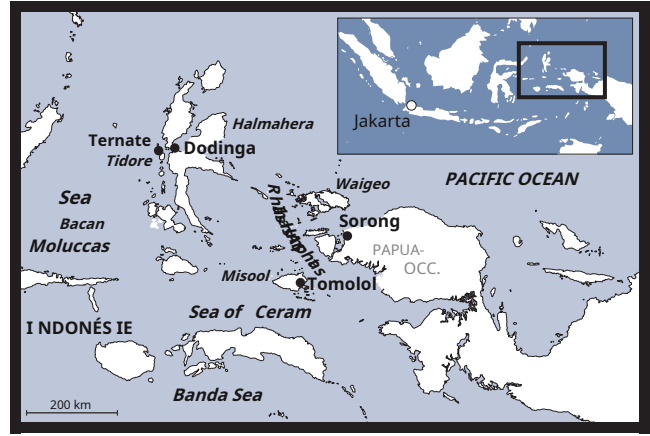
The naturalists budding "Ombak Putih" in search of the bird of paradise.

Leaving the Moluccas and their volcanic islands, the "Ombak Putih" set sail on a remote archipelago

hats of the elegant ladies of the Belle Époque, birds of paradise are not easily approached. Only Bill Wallace's telescope, inherited from his great-grandfather, allows one to glimpse their emerald green breastplate. But Bacan fortunately has more accessible surprises in store. It was on this island that the naturalist discovered the *Ornithoptera croesus*, a giant butterfly, the size of a dinner plate, with splendid golden reflections. We discover it frolicking in the heart of a coconut plantation. Watching this rare butterfly land on George Beccaloni's face, it's hard not to think of his mentor, who wrote in *The Malay Archipelago*: "The beauty and brilliance of this insect are indescribable, and only a naturalist can understand the intense excitement I felt when I finally captured it."

At Raja Ampat, paradise in technicolor

Leaving the Moluccas and their volcanic islands, the *Ombak Putih* set sail for Raja Ampat, the remote archipelago of West Papua nestled between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Myriads of strangely shaped karst peaks, scarred with petroglyphs dating back thousands of years, emerge from the emerald water, forming a labyrinth known only to the Bajau, this sea-nomadic people. Off the coast of Misool, one of the archipelago's four main islands, Tomolol Cave, an impressive natural cathedral, shelters unfathomable mysteries. One dives into the darkness without much thought. Outside, a few skulls indicate graves buried in the vegetation. Spirits are watching. The life of Raja Ampat vibrates underwater a few centimeters from the surface. Corals are tinged with fluorescent orange and canary yellow, damselfish form clouds of shimmering blue, even nudibranchs, those small sea slugs, have shimmering colors. Alfred Russel Wallace would no doubt have shared the enthusiasm of George Beccaloni, who doesn't hesitate to brave the tiny invisible jellyfish to catalog these underwater wonders. But aboard the schooner, the passengers haven't forgotten their last chance to see the mating parade of the birds of paradise. As the cruise draws to a close, the ship stops at Waigeo, the largest island in the archipelago, a short distance from New Guinea. The long, silent wait, in the tropical humidity of a bamboo platform, is finally rewarded. On a branch, a first red bird of paradise appears, then a second, then a third. In the setting sun, their wings resemble fans unfurling in an explosion of color. Their cries are reminiscent of the artificial sounds of children's toys. The females, whose plumage is utterly banal, remain invisible. The males act like divas, sparing their appearances. The bird of paradise truly deserves its name. Behind his ancestor's telescope, Bill Wallace doesn't suppress his pride. It was in this very forest that his great-grandfather was the first Westerner to observe these extraordinary birds.



Looking for
the sea breeze
at the bow
of the schooner,
we let ourselves be rocked
by the panorama
hypnotic

go there

Air France (3654; Airfrance.fr) operates two daily flights to Jakarta via Singapore in partnership with Singapore Airlines or via Amsterdam in partnership with KLM. From €560 return Economy cabin.

Local companies **Batik Air** (Batikair.com.my) and **Garuda Indonesia** (Garuda-indonesia.com) serve Ternate and Sorong several times a day from Jakarta International Airport. Around €200 round trip.

Stopover in Jakarta

After more than 15 hours of flight, the **Sheraton Jakarta Soekarno Hatta Airport** (00.62.21.3950.9888; Marriott.com) is the ideal place to rest for a few hours or spend the night before continuing your journey to the Moluccas. Completely redesigned in 2023, this hotel with 227 rooms and suites is located in the heart of a golf course, less than 10 minutes by car from the airport. Facing a lake, the most beautiful rooms exude a

Colonial atmosphere with vintage photos and chic black and white checkered prints. The bar by the beautiful pool offers a taste of vacation. From €135 per night, breakfast included.

Organize your trip

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures (00.62.361.474.3902; Seatrekballi.com) is a Bali-based tour operator. Committed to respecting the oceans, SeaTrek runs year-round nature cruises in eastern Indonesia (including one with

French marine biologist Vincent Chalias), aboard two traditional pinis, *Ombak Putih* (photo) and *Katharina*. Next cruise at the

Discovery of Wallace and his living treasures, in the company of Dr. George Beccaloni, from October 4 to 15, departing from Ternate, passing through the Guraici archipelago, Bacan Island, Raja Ampat (including the islands of Misool and Waigeo)... From €9,600 per person all inclusive. Prices exclude international and domestic flights.

On board of the "Ombak Putih"

This large two-masted pinisi, built in Borneo by Bugis craftsmen, was renovated 10 years ago. *Ombak Putih*, which means "white wave" in Indonesian, has 12 air-conditioned cabins with bathrooms. The most comfortable are located at the stern of the ship, featuring a large double bed. Entirely made of weathered wood, they are enhanced with batik cushions and pretty traditional baskets. The simplicity of the ship is part of its charm. A small library is available to

passengers can study Indonesia's birds and corals, comfortably seated on the upper deck, admiring the misty islands and the unreal sunsets. We gradually lose track of time, allowing ourselves to be infected by the joy of the crew members. Life on board is punctuated by impromptu concerts, dinners by starlight and lectures organized by George Beccaloni on Wallace's life and his discoveries.

To Do

Going in search of birds of paradise in the primary forest in Bacan and Waigeo. You don't have to be afraid to get up in the middle of the night and walk on steep, slippery paths to observe the "most extraordinary feathered inhabitant of our planet."

Snorkeling around karst islands immersed in translucent water. This is the flagship activity of the cruise, particularly in Raja Ampat, which is home to the most beautiful reefs on the planet, with nearly 75% of the known species of coral and more than 1,500 species of fish.

Meet the natives in remote villages, such as Marandan Weser on Batanta Island, where residents live in

houses made of mangrove wood and sago leaves, respecting their ancestral traditions.

To read

The Malay Archipelago. Home of the orangutan and the bird of paradise. Alfred Russel Wallace's famous work, published in 1869, had never been fully translated into French. This omission has now been rectified.

with the publication, in 2022, of an illustrated version (Éditions Plume de Carotte; €49) which reveals the scientific accuracy and literary elegance of the naturalist, who was also a great humanist.

To better understand Wallace, nothing beats the site created by George Beccaloni: Wallacefund.myspecies.info contains countless information and anecdotes, as well as a digital catalog containing nearly 6,000 of the scientist's letters.