

The Conscious Traveller

In search of Indonesian ikat

Unlike batik, the fabric is rarely found outside Indonesia – and the best cloth comes from East Nusa Tenggara

Leyla Rose

FLORES, Indonesia – There are many cultural items that represent Indonesia on the world stage, but none quite as beautiful as ikat.

These intricately patterned woven textiles are an ancient art form, thought to have been brought to Indonesia more than 2,000 years ago by the Dong Son, a seafaring people from northern Vietnam who travelled and traded throughout South-east Asia.

In the past, ikat was one of the more prestigious items originating for trade from this region, making its way to Singapore and beyond as part of a vast South-east Asian maritime trading network.

My home island of Lombok has a longstanding ikat heritage. Villages such as Sukarara and Sade are major cultural centres where visitors can purchase pieces and see how the fabric is made.

Ikat can be found throughout the world's largest archipelago, including Sumatra, Java and Maluku, but I have been told many times it is in East Nusa Tenggara that the very best fabrics are produced.

Not only has the region maintained its weaving traditions over generations, but the fabrics here are also known for their intricate and distinctive motifs. And so I am travelling east to find the source of these fabrics and speak with locals who craft them.

My journey begins on the island of Flores, home to Komodo National Park. I am here aboard Katharina, one of two traditional wooden pinisi ships from tour operator SeaTrek, on routes that explore lesser-visited destinations in eastern Indonesia. My 12-day voyage (US\$10,050 or S\$13,000 a person) includes stops in the Banda Islands and the city of Ambon, as well as snorkelling and wildlife-watching.

The first stop is a small town called Maumere on the north-eastern coast of the Flores. From here, we take a narrow country road winding up into the hills to the village of Watublapi.

I hear it before I see it – the sound of rhythmic drumming and chanting getting louder as I near.

The village's cultural heart is a green and shaded community area called Bliran Sina Watublapi. "It was formed to teach the younger generations the local culture, which is deeply entwined in everyday life," says tribe chief Yosef Gervasius, 52.

"It's not just traditional dances. We also have exhibitions showcasing our ikat weaving," he says, as he guides me towards an area where a group of women is setting up tools.

OLD WAYS THAT REMAIN

The traditional method of making ikat starts with separating the seeds from cotton plants. Once de-seeded, the cotton is fluffed up and shaped into pellets, which are spun into threads. It takes around 1,000 pellets to make one sarong.

The name ikat ("tie" in Bahasa Indonesia) comes from the process of tie-dyeing the threads. The sections that are not due to be coloured are tied using tough strands of lontar grass, which remain white when the threads are dipped into dye.

This meticulous tie-dyeing process requires great skill, which is what makes ikat fabrics so revered. Before the threads are woven into fabric, the dyer must determine which parts of the thread will receive which colour, to create the final pattern. Once the threads have been dyed, the cloth is woven using a wooden hand loom.

These days, many ikat-makers use factory-made threads and synthetic dyes, as they are cheaper and faster. However, traditional villages such as this one continue the art of hand-spun threads and natural dyes.

Here, the women make use of locally grown plants to create their vibrant dyes.

Ms Bernadeta Nei, 25, shows me the plants she uses to dye her threads. Indigo leaves produce a royal blue, mango leaves create a vibrant green, candlenut produces a golden yellow hue, the roots of the mengkudu (noni) plant produce an earthy brown colour and mahogany bark turns the threads reddish.

Men in the community may help with the planting and harvesting of the cotton plants and natural dyes, but when it comes to weaving, women control the process from start to finish.



Ikat weaving has provided paid work for women in Umapura village, allowing them to contribute to the family income. PHOTOS: JOSH EDWARDS



Weaver Bernadeta Nei (left) started learning the craft at age seven.



Women make use of locally grown plants to create their vibrant dyes.



Threads are then dyed by hand, using colour from the plants.



A colourful house in Umapura village.

"Each of us has a role in the weaving process, whether that's a thread spinner or a weaver," Ms Bernadeta says.

"My job is to prepare the colours and dye the threads. I started learning when I was seven years old, which is the standard age that girls are taught to weave," she adds.

There is an overwhelming selection of fabrics for purchase here, with designs such as stripes, geometric patterns, flowers and birds. These fabrics can be tailored into clothing or cushion covers, used as table runners or hung up as decoration.

Compared with batik, another well-known Indonesian export made with a wax-resist dyeing technique, ikat is more expensive due to the labour involved. I buy a small piece of ikat fabric measuring 52cm by 170cm for 600,000 rupiah (S\$46.60), and a slightly wider one measuring 67cm by 167cm for 900,000 rupiah.

PART OF MODERN LIFE

Ikat fabrics are still part of everyday life in many traditional villages throughout East Nusa Tenggara. These fabrics are used in birth ceremonies and funerals, and as currency for wedding dowries and barter trade.

Each area has its own motif, such as animals, humans, trees or flowers. For example, in East Sumba, patterns of horses are commonly used as they represent strength and bravery. In Lombok, you will find geckos adorning the cloths – a lucky animal for the island's Sasak tribe.

Historically, the type of ikat people wore reflected their social rank and status. Certain motifs were allowed to be worn only by nobility or by specific tribes and clans.

This is the case in the village of Takpala in Alor, where I find myself after a few days of sailing. Set on the hillside overlooking a sparkling coastline, it is home to the Abui tribe, whose particular ikat features the double-antler motif perched atop its thatched roofs, representing arms presenting offerings towards the sky.

In Alor's main town of Kalabahi, I visit the Kalabahi 1000 Moko Museum (admission: 15,000 rupiah a person) where museum director Yulianti Peni, 49, introduces the collection of ikat fabrics from around the village.

"It used to be that villages made fabrics for use only within their own tribe, but nowadays, the rules are a little more relaxed and outsiders are allowed to purchase the fabrics," she says.

Even as more women are getting higher education and finding work, the tradition remains.



The traditional method of making ikat starts with separating the seeds from cotton plants.

Where to buy ikat

Apart from East Nusa Tenggara, Sumbanese ikat is also famous in Indonesia, and displayed in museums around the world including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands.

Unlike batik, it is difficult to find ikat for sale outside Indonesia. One of the most famous Indonesian fashion brands that showcases ikat textiles is Ikat Indonesia by designer Didiet Maulana.

Ikat from East Sumba depicts everyday life in villages, mythological creatures and scenes from the Pasola tournaments, a ritualised war game that involves horse riding. Meanwhile, the ikat in West Sumba is simpler, featuring mainly geometric patterns.

Kampung Raja Prailiu near Waingapu is a village where you can watch the women weaving and purchase directly from them, which ensures that they receive 100 per cent of the profit.

A five-minute drive away is Tenun Ikat Ama Tukang, a shop selling a large selection of quality ikat fabrics at a reasonable cost. Prices vary depending on the size and pattern, starting at 300,000 rupiah to a couple of million for larger, more intricate pieces.

There are a few things to look out for when shopping for authentic ikat. Compared with factory-made threads, hand-spun cotton has a less perfect twist and feels rougher. Natural dyes have earthier, more toned-down colours, whereas synthetic dyes are brighter and more vibrant. If the fabric has the same quality on both sides, this likely means it is handwoven – machine-woven cloths tend to be dyed only on one side.

To keep your ikat fabrics in good condition, hand-wash them in cold water with a mild detergent. Dry in the shade and avoid direct sunlight.

stlife@sph.com.sg

• Leyla Rose is a freelance writer based in Lombok, Indonesia. Her trip was hosted by SeaTrek.

• The Conscious Traveller is a series on responsible travel that does good for the community and environment. For more travel stories, go to str.sg/travel