INTO THE EAST

SET SAIL ALONG THE EASTERN FRINGES OF INDONESIA'S VAST ARCHIPELAGO TO DISCOVER REMOTE ATOLLS HOME TO COMMUNITIES OF SEA NOMADS, THE WORLD'S LARGEST CONCENTRATION OF REEF SPECIES, AND THE BIRDS AND BUTTERFLIES THAT HELPED SHAPE THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION

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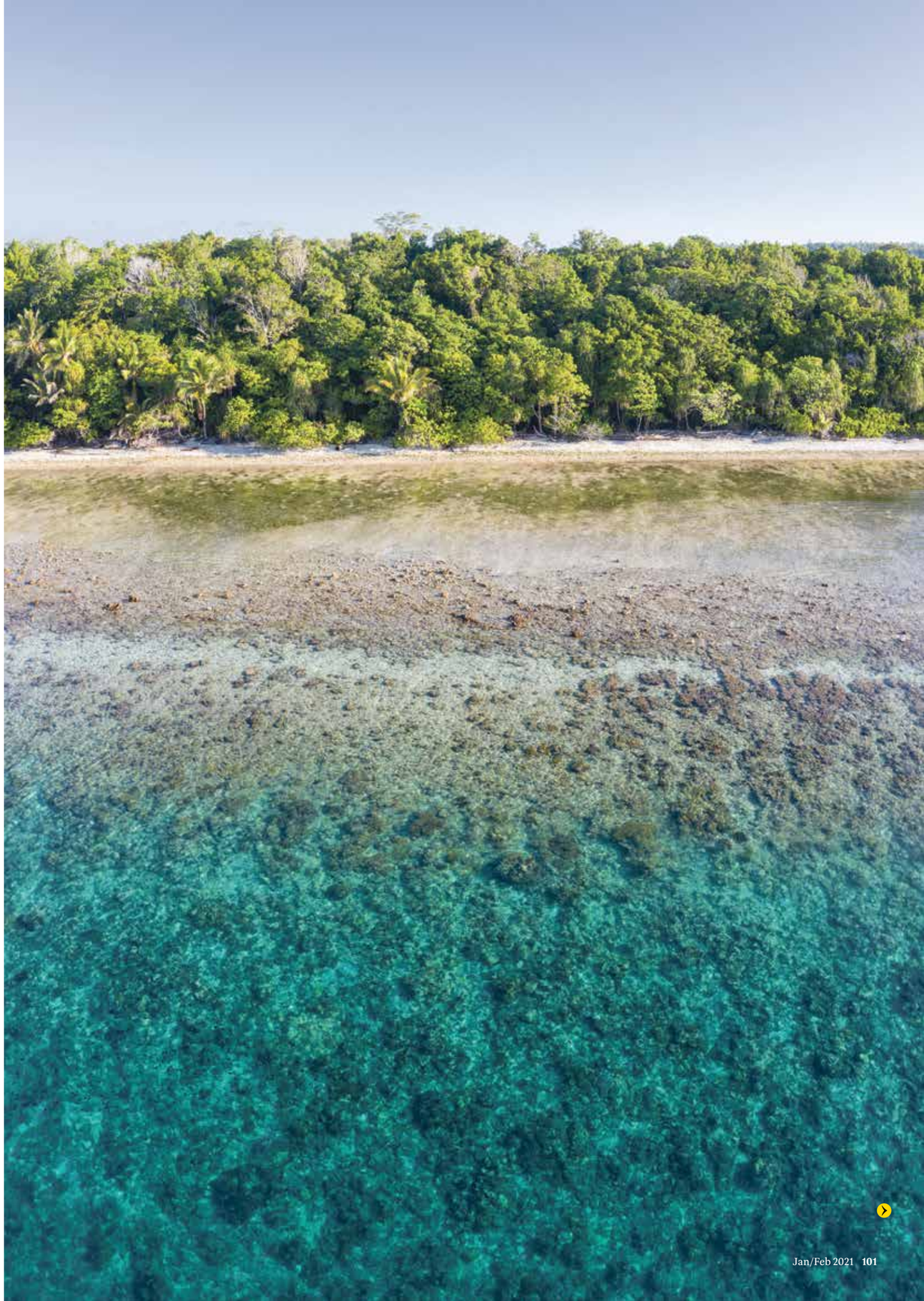
IMAGES: GETTY; NITA CJ



JAGO ISN'T PICKY ABOUT WHAT HE SMOKES. AGED 84, HE'S TRIED THEM ALL — CLOVE-TIPPED INDONESIANS, SOME EXPENSIVE AMERICAN BRANDS; THEY'RE ALL JUST SOMETHING TO PASS THE TIME BETWEEN DIVES.

But Jago isn't diving today. He sits dockside, poised as if ready to do so, dressed in nothing but a pair of loose shorts, bare feet placed lightly on the decking. You get the feeling Jago is always ready. His sea salt-thickened hair, silver at its roots, is rudely abundant. He's slight and leathery-tanned, with a teenage boy's build; liver spot-mottled cheeks frame eyes that are rheumy but resolute. At his hip, a bag bulging with cigarette packets — some gifted, some barter-traded as is the local way. I wonder aloud about his lungs. "They're fine," answers his nephew. "He's not so happy with his knees, though."

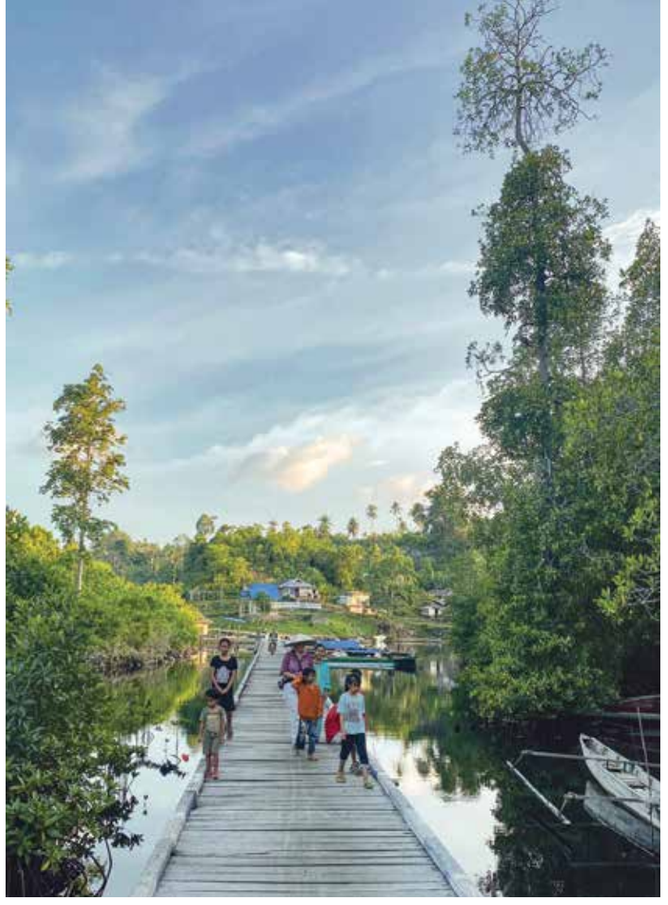
It's understandable for joints to be giving you gyp after eight decades making forays deep under the ocean. Rohani, Jago's real name, began free-diving aged five, learning from his father how to train lungs, heart, mind — and knees — to drive him 120ft below the surf to spear hunt for fish, earning him his moniker 'Jago' — master among the skilled Bajau free-divers. These 'sea nomads' of eastern Indonesia's Togean Islands are supremely fierce fishermen. Over centuries, the Bajau have evolved unusually large spleens: warehouses for oxygen-carrying red blood cells that help sustain dives for up to 13 minutes at a time. In recent years, Jago's diving and the Bajau way of life have inspired several TV documentaries and glossy photo features. Between here and Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, some 1,250 miles west, Jago is surely the country's biggest celebrity.

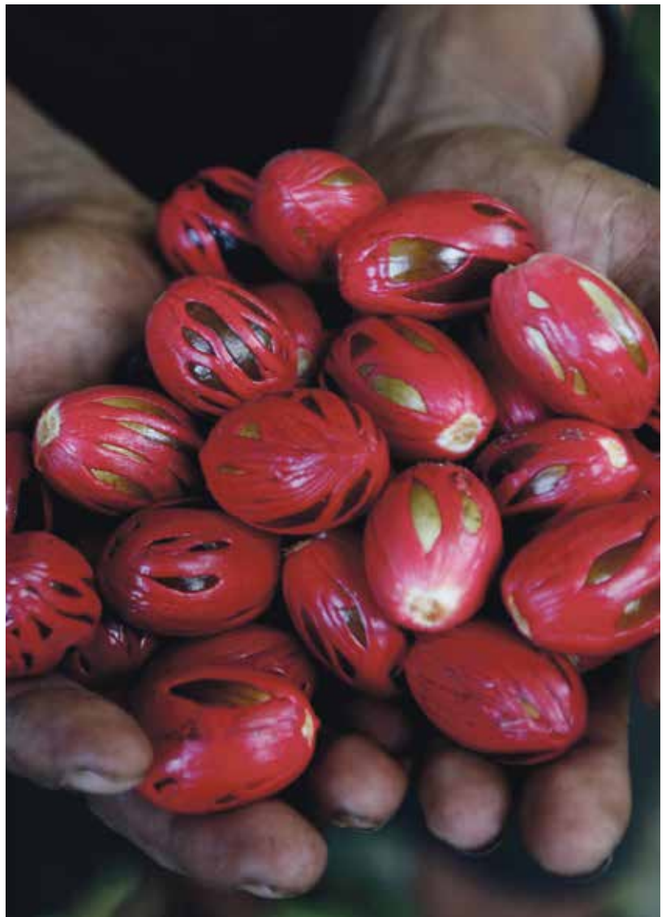
I find him in Kabalutan, a village in the Togean Islands that's far larger than it appears from the approach by boat. Rickety wooden bridges span sea inlets forming gangways to huts stilted above blinding turquoise water; concrete tracks make half-hearted inroads into the island's boulder-strewn interior, a craggy playground for a healthy population of goats. What looked like a desert island is in fact home to around 2,300 people — most of whom appear to be under the age of 10. As I disembark onto a wooden jetty, I watch a boy sail an impressive model boat he's built out of wood, complete with outriggers and battery-powered propellers.

Nomadic until a couple of decades ago but now largely settled, the Bajau once dived for pearls and patrolled spice trade shipping channels at the behest of the region's powerful medieval sultans. Today, they subsist via aquaculture, fishing, reef foraging and boat building — model and actual. "One of the best day's sailing I've ever had was on a Bajau sloop," says Jeffrey Mellefont, a maritime historian working with SeaTrek Sailing Adventures, the Balinese-based company with whom I'm travelling. "They're master sailors; they read the sea like a book. They also maintain they command the wind and can conjure drinking water from the shallows. I didn't see this done," he shrugs. "But there's no doubt these guys really know the sea. It's who they are. After a baby's birth, for example, having thrown the placenta in the sea, they say it accompanies the child on every voyage throughout its life — a sort of aquatic spirit."

The Bajau are just one of the countless communities that carve out a life on the easternmost fringes of the world's largest archipelago. It's pioneering terrain for SeaTrek's new, 14-day sailing expedition, however, which casts off from the island of Ternate in Indonesia's northern Maluku 'spice islands', to follow a perfumed trail southeast to Sulawesi. If you can't spend your career aboard Bajau sloops sailing to remote Australasian outposts like our resident maritime historian, then this trip aboard *Ombak Putih* ('white wave'), one of the SeaTrek's two traditional wooden pinisi ships, has to be the next best thing.

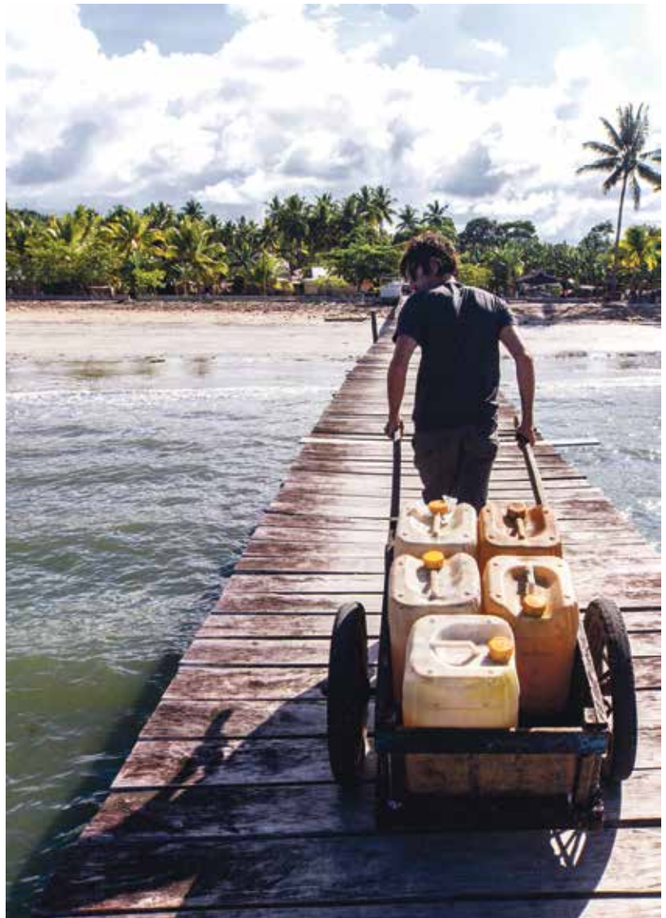
When I meet her — ironwood hull gleaming, seven midnight-blue sails flying — *Ombak Putih* almost





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Boardwalk through the mangroves to Tumbulawa, a village in central Sulawesi; snorkel masks drying aboard *Ombak Putih*; Jago, Kabalutan, Togean Islands; nutmeg and mace, North Maluku
PREVIOUS PAGE: *Ombak Putih*; an aerial view of the Halmahera coastline, North Maluku

IMAGES: NIGEL RAWSON; SEATREK; ALAMY



IMAGES: SEATREK; GETTY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Top deck of the *Ombak Putih*; transporting gasoline along the pier, Halmahera, North Maluku; Wallace's standardwing perched on a branch, North Maluku

upstages the drama of Ternate and neighbouring Tidore, islands whose stone horns cut jade slices out of the Molucca Sea. Unlike the clunky, souped-up pinisi boats widely used in Indonesia's eastern Raja Ampat atolls as liveaboard dive boats, *Putih*'s handsomely preserved contours wouldn't have looked out of place in Ternate's harbour even a thousand years ago. Her elegant lines are the embodiment of a centuries' old boat-building tradition from the island of Sulawesi; the hand-crafting skill of the island's Bugis people that gained Indonesia a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage nomination in 2017. Formerly seen sailing across the old 100 rupiah note, pinisi remain integral to the nation's far-flung shipping network.

Still weighing heavy as cargo are the nutmeg, mace and cloves that made the Maluku Indonesia's most powerful islands, long before the Dutch East India Company and spice-seeking European colonisers sniffed them out. Behind a modest shopfront near Ternate's harbour, I find frilly red mountains of mace heaped on the floor, hessian sacks of the seeds they previously encased; nutmeg, lined up to be categorised by weight and lustre; sacks of cloves bulging from shelves, bleeding their Christmas cake aroma into the 40C air. "Indonesia was, at one time, the world's only producer of cloves," explains SeaTrek guide, Arie Pagaka, interpreting for the factory's Chinese owner. "Clove and nutmeg are still Ternate's main source of income." Much of which goes east to China, following a route sailed for millennia.

WELL ABOVE STANDARD

There are even more exotic things, however, lurking in the trees of Indonesia's spice sultanates. On the neighbouring, starfish-shaped island of Halmahera, I find the world's most modestly named bird.

An appearance from the standardwing bird-of-paradise is beyond standard compensation for an hour spent crouching in the pre-dawn damp of Halmahera's lowland rainforest. As dawn edges the constellations out of the canopy, silhouettes of these 'fairy birds', as they're known locally, hover like butterflies. As the light rises, it's clear they're not so much hovering as throwing ninja-like stances — if ninjas were equipped with elaborate feather boas. The male birds' quivering, limb-hopping, canopy-shaking mating displays, seen through the gloaming, appear to have them tangled in the trees. But daylight reveals utter precision between their mad scrambles: iridescent green and cobalt-blue feathers flash as they strike still-as-a-statue poses, impossibly long white ribbon-plumes thrust aloft like a carnival headdress.

Alfred Russel Wallace, the itinerant British naturalist after whom the bird is named (*Semioptera wallacii*), knew he had 'a great prize' when he discovered the species on the neighbouring island of Bacan in 1858. Wallace's standardwing was integral among the vast arsenal of findings that led him to discover, independent of Charles Darwin, the theory of evolution by natural selection. But it was the golden birdwing butterfly that really blew his mind. "So great was his excitement that he had to sit down under the tree where he netted it. He almost fainted. He had a headache for the rest of the day," says Wallace specialist, SeaTrek naturalist George Beccaloni. We're at the very spot where the discovery was made in Bacan, having docked the ship and hot-footed it across the island's runway ("planes land a couple of times a day; we should be alright," grins Arie). We only see one dun-coloured female, but it looks large enough to need landing permission.

Aboard the ship, nightly lectures augment such wild wonders. A two-hour talk on cockroaches isn't an obvious crowd-pleaser, but the ever-engaging George only loses one of the 24 passengers to the seductions of the upper deck, where the sky rolls above us, a mirror sea of constellations. Daylight views are just as infinite: forever blues intercut with distant, dragon-backed chains of apparently virgin green islands. Villages, if any, are tucked inland out of sight.

Arrivals of international ships on small islands often occur decades apart, and entire villages — crowds of screaming children and selfie-requesting adults — greet dockings "like the Beatles arriving in New York in 1964," says a Texan passenger, John Forbeck. This relative stardom-bask is tempered by seeing some younger kids cower behind parents' legs, fearing we're the 'boogeyman'. The term here is literal: the Bugis people, the Sulawesi master shipbuilders who craft pinisi were, in centuries past, iron-fisted traders, pirates and sea warriors. Children still fear arrivals from the 'bugis-man' — strangers on sailing ships like ours.

Despite this, our multinational group of travellers is a curiosity that gets invited into island schools for cultural exchange. Our offering includes the creative picture books SeaTrek has published on marine conservation. In return, we're given hearty renditions of the national anthem sung in Bahasa, Indonesia's official language, along with other songs in the languages of myriad islands. "They're performed at school every day. We all know the verses, but we don't know what they mean," laughs Arie, watching pint-sized children trying to form words from islands they'll almost certainly

never visit. Such is the complexity of living in a country where more than 700 languages are spread across an archipelago scattered 3,200 miles along the equator.

On the island of Obilatu, the international language of money speaks loud enough for us to buy a hawksbill turtle tethered in the shallows, broiling in the sun. It's rewarding to save this endangered delicacy from the cooking pot and release into open water. SeaTrek's conservation remit, however, is more than this drop in the ocean. Sailings visit numerous sponsored projects including, in a modest shack on the coral-fringed island of Banggai, one dedicated to protecting the area's endemic cardinalfish. "They're being poached for the aquarium trade quicker than they can reproduce in the wild," says Khalis Dwi, local coordinator for Balinese-based fisheries conservation non-profit, The Indonesian Nature Foundation (LINI). He shows me some tiny, inch-long specimens nesting in tanks, bred here to sustainably supply hungry hobbyists, the profits from which pay local volunteers like Khalis, and fund eco-education on plastics and mangrove ecology in primary schools.

Snorkel-clad, offshore, we spot a group of seven cardinals. Then countless more, their black-and-white spines impressively camouflaged among foot-long sea urchin spikes. As ever, just a 10-minute dip reveals a boggling array of sea creatures: mace-red starry night octopus lurking in the shallows, stonefish, starfish, sweetlips and rays. Our clambering exit into the Zodiacs scatters flashing shoals of turquoise parrotfish and metallic sparkles of humphead wrasse. Defended against the eviscerating equatorial sun with UV swim shirts and reef-safe factor 50, each day we're submerged into a sub-aqua realm that brings us, crew and Seatrek passengers alike, gasping to the surface, pointing downwards in disbelief.

MARINE MARVELS

Indonesia's Coral Triangle, home to the world's largest concentration of reef species, is reason alone to spend 14 days afloat. I come face-to-beak with several species of marine turtle, and a venomous sea snake that looks as startled as I do. Dogface pufferfish beetle about like badly designed Victorian flying machines; toothy sharks grin from beyond reef walls, and giant eels dart out of the seabed. Swimming in marine lakes, thousands of rare stingless jellyfish morph lava lamp-like around us. In brackish shallows, I float above rainbow-jewelled clams whose twisted gummy lips span a metre. And while drifting among whip fans, anemones and towering chimneys of coral, I'm educated into the seemingly infinite world of *nudibranchs* — tiny Technicolor wonders I'd previously reduced to 'psychedelic sea slugs' — by conservation officer, Jeni Kardinal.

We tack and jibe across the invisible lines that shape our world, twice crossing the Equator, although there's more excitement about the Wallace Line — another of Alfred Russel Wallace's history-shifting discoveries. This is the biogeographical boundary dividing Oriental and Australian species, slicing Indonesia in half. "East of the line, in Halmahera, we saw cockatoos and parrots," explains George. "Monkeys exist only west of the line, marsupials east. There are some anomalies; Guinea has both, although the latter live in trees. And Sulawesi has lots of unexpected animals. It once had three-tusked pigs and elephants. When the ancient continents began dividing, separating species, swimmers migrated. Elephants are great swimmers: they've got their very own inbuilt snorkels, of course."

We're standing under a tree that's home to a colony of roosting fruit bats, an anomaly species with distribution across Wallace's line. We've docked on a crescent of talc-white sand to watch the creatures take flight at sunset. I squint into the branches strewn with what look like battered black umbrellas. It's only the squawking and a decidedly ferrety smell that signals their animate nature. "They taste like an old umbrella too, according to Bill Bailey," says George. "He had to eat one for *Jungle Hero*." This pre-coronavirus TV entertainment followed the British comedian's Indonesian travels — an attempt to revive Wallace's reputation. The legacy of the Victorian era naturalist was, over time, to become eclipsed by Darwin's rising star. The latter only ever reluctantly conceded natural selection to be a simultaneous co-discovery with Wallace, who was derided in some circles as a self-taught, lower-class upstart.

Bailey is patron of the Alfred Russel Wallace Memorial Fund, founded by George to commemorate his hero. Its Wallace Correspondence Project aims to locate, digitise and interpret all of Wallace's surviving letters and manuscripts — an impressive life's work aided in part by SeaTrek funding. I leave George in the trees, camera poised, and wade into the skin-warm sea to watch the colourful sky darken with hundred-strong clouds of umbrellas in flight. It's a surreal sight — a memory I'll return to — but soon enough, the captain is calling us in. Time to set sail. As ever, I'm the last one aboard, this time having discovered the joys of riding full speed behind the ship's rigid inflatable boat, while trying to stay upright on a paddleboard.

IMAGES: ALAMY; SEATREK

FROM TOP: A classic coral-fringed island in Central Sulawesi; a school of striped large-eye bream, just one of the many marine creatures found within Indonesia's Coral Triangle, home to the world's highest diversity of coral species

Paddleboard water-skiing is just one of Nita CJ's simple yet brilliant ideas. The SeaTrek guide is always out front for top deck dives or snorkelling and seems a natural water baby. But, like many Indonesians who live at the ocean's edge, Nita had barely seen below its surface until five years ago. "The first time I snorkelled, I freaked out; there was so much life!" exclaims Nita. "The more I did it, the more I fell in love with what's down there, and the more I wanted to protect it." So much so, she quit her job in finance. Her Peek Under the Surface initiative now distributes used masks and goggles among children from Indonesia's remotest islands, in an effort to aid ecological awareness. Apart from the Bajau spear fishermen who fashion goggles from glass bottle bottoms, snorkel kit is an exotic commodity. "And you don't care about what you can't see," says Nita.

In the tidy, picket-fence village of Tumbulawa, gifted goggles and books are reciprocated with handfuls of lychee-sweet longan fruit. Neat plots of farmed nila leaf lend their patchouli perfume to the goat-grazed football field where children, as ever, vastly outnumber adults. There's not a ball between them but gleeful shrieks fill the dusk, competing with the helicopter whoop-whoop of hornbills taking flight. "They say the birds are more punctual than the imam," says Arie, as the evening call to prayer sounds.

We motorboat out through pristine thickets of mangroves back to the ship where the deckhands land a squid. Almost a metre long, it spouts sky-high jets of water as it leaves the sea. The boys think it's gasped its last, but a final high-pressure spurt soaks the kitchen cabin, crew and most of us outside. Dinner and a show.

Squid-landings pale against the spectacle of *Putih*'s sails being hauled. It's a task completed with the lightning efficiency of a Formula One pit crew (if they had to wrestle with tons of canvas at rig heights of 100ft). This is among the ship's many star qualities, but I even come to love her anchor's Jacob Marley rattle, which wakes me at dawn for swims in what appears to be the middle of deep blue nowhere. Until, that is, you spot a wooden fishing platform, known as a 'FAD' (fish aggregation devices'). "People here live on a truly epic scale," says Jeffrey, our historian, whose "just a passing FAD" pun never gets old.

Swimming out from *Putih*'s mountainous hull, even the bottom deck far above my head, her mast poles vanish skywards. Into the ocean's mercury expanse, mirror-calm but for whisper ripples, I dive. After the rainbow-busy reefs, it's like swimming through the sky; a mid-ocean cerulean void, strobed with underwater sunbeams. I think of Jago, and dive deeper.

IMAGES: NIGEL RAWSON; SARAH BARRELL

FROM TOP: Kabalutan, a village that's partly over water, Togean Islands; village shop, Kabalutan

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

SeaTrek's Rare Species, Remote Cultures & Remarkable Corals expedition cruise departs from Ternate in Indonesia's Maluku Islands, ending in Sulawesi. The likes of Etihad, Garuda Indonesia, Malaysia Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Singapore Airlines fly from London to Bali or Jakarta with one stop. *etihad.com garuda-indonesia.com malaysiaairlines.com qatarairways.com singaporeair.com*

Average flight time: 20h

Connecting flights to the eastern islands depart daily, with Batik Air, Citilink and Lion Air. Book well in advance for decent fares and times. *batikair.com citilink.co.id lionair.co.id*

When to go

Equatorial Indonesia is a year-round destination — even for sailing. Varying slightly from east to west, dry season is April to October, monsoon season November to March. High humidity makes coastal temperatures feel far hotter than the average 28C, although offshore, aboard a moving ship, the heat is less intense.

Places mentioned

The Wallace Fund. *wallacefund.info*

Peek Under the Surface. *facebook.com/peekunderthesurface*

More information

indonesia.travel

The Malay Archipelago, by Alfred Russel Wallace, was first published in 1869 and details the Indonesian travels that saw him discover the evolution of species.

How to do it

SEA TREK's *Ombak Putih* sleeps 24 guests in 12 en suite cabins (double or twin bunks). *seatrekbali.com*

SELECTIVE ASIA offers SeaTrek Sailing Adventure's Rare Species, Remote Cultures & Remarkable Corals trip from £8,999 per person. Departing 23 February 2021, this includes a 13-night all-inclusive cruise on *Ombak Putih* and two nights B&B at Belmond Jimbaran Puri in Bali, airport transfers, domestic flights and return flights between London and Bali with Malaysia Airlines. *selectiveasia.com*