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# SPICE OF LIFE

An exotic voyage of discovery in the far east aboard *Ombak Putih* – the 42m Indonesian Buginese-built, gaff-rigged phinisi

WORD AND PHOTOS FIONA HARPER

**I**ndonesia's Spice Islands with its exotic crops of nutmeg and cinnamon have been fought over for centuries. But the eastern archipelagos straddling the Equator are also entrenched in history thanks to natural historian Alfred Wallace's revolutionary theories on evolution.

Dodinga village is about as far from London as one can get. Fewer than 100 foreigners visit the neat, single-street village that straddles a narrow isthmus shaded by coconut palms on Halmahera Island in Indonesia's North Maluku province. The only way to reach the island is by boat, then it's a half-hour walk on a road lined by dense jungle on one side, and a coconut plantation on the other. Yet its significance in the archives of history is well-established.

It was here in 1858 in this far-flung village that English naturalist Alfred Wallace had an epiphany during lucid moments of malarial delirium. His 'aha moment' completed the last piece of a decades-long puzzle that led to his theory of evolution by natural selection. Wallace later recovered enough to take a boat to the nearby island of Ternate and dispatched an essay he'd penned to friend and mentor Charles Darwin, which would later become known as the Letters from Ternate.

Wallace had spent the past eight years in the Malay Archipelago (Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia) collecting thousands of biological specimens unknown to science. Musing on the rich diversity of species he wrote: "I have lately worked out a theory which accounts for them naturally." Darwin wrote in a letter to Wallace in 1867: "It is curious how we hit on the same ideas," before publishing his volume *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*.

While Darwin's name is forever etched in history, Wallace's is largely forgotten, although his name lives on in the Wallace Line, a hypothetical divider separating the biogeographical regions of Australia and Asia. The line runs roughly north-west between Lombok and Bali and extends northwards along the deep waters of the Makassar Strait between Kalimantan and Sulawesi. Wallace deduced that species such as placental mammals of Asian





origin resided west of the line while marsupials such as kangaroos lived on the eastern side. He published his findings in *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869 which remains in print today.

As I step ashore at Dodding's village accompanied by naturalist, evolutionary biologist and science historian and card-carrying Wallace fan Dr George Beccaloni, who spent 20 years at London's Natural History Museum, I'm intrigued by the tantalising prospect of following in historical footsteps.

#### SAILING THE TROPICAL TRADE WINDS

In fact, we've been doing just that for the past 10 days. Following in the centuries-old wake of seafarers lured by exotic cultures and aromatic spices, we've voyaged through the Banda Islands and Molucca Islands powered by the same tropical trade winds which now fill the qiblah blue sails of *Ombak Putih*. Dr Beccaloni is the naturalist onboard our voyage east of the Wallace Line, offering unique insights to the regions in which Wallace's ground-breaking research was conducted.

*Ombak Putih*, (White Wave) is a 42m (138ft) Indonesian Buginese-built pinisi-styled gaff rigged ketch run by 14 crew with capacity for up to 24 guests. There's just 12 guests on our voyage which means there's always a free sun lounge where I spend lazy

*Previous page:*  
*Ombak Putih* at anchor

*Above left:*  
*Ombak Putih* translates into 'white wave'

*Above right:*  
Aftreece dining on the main deck

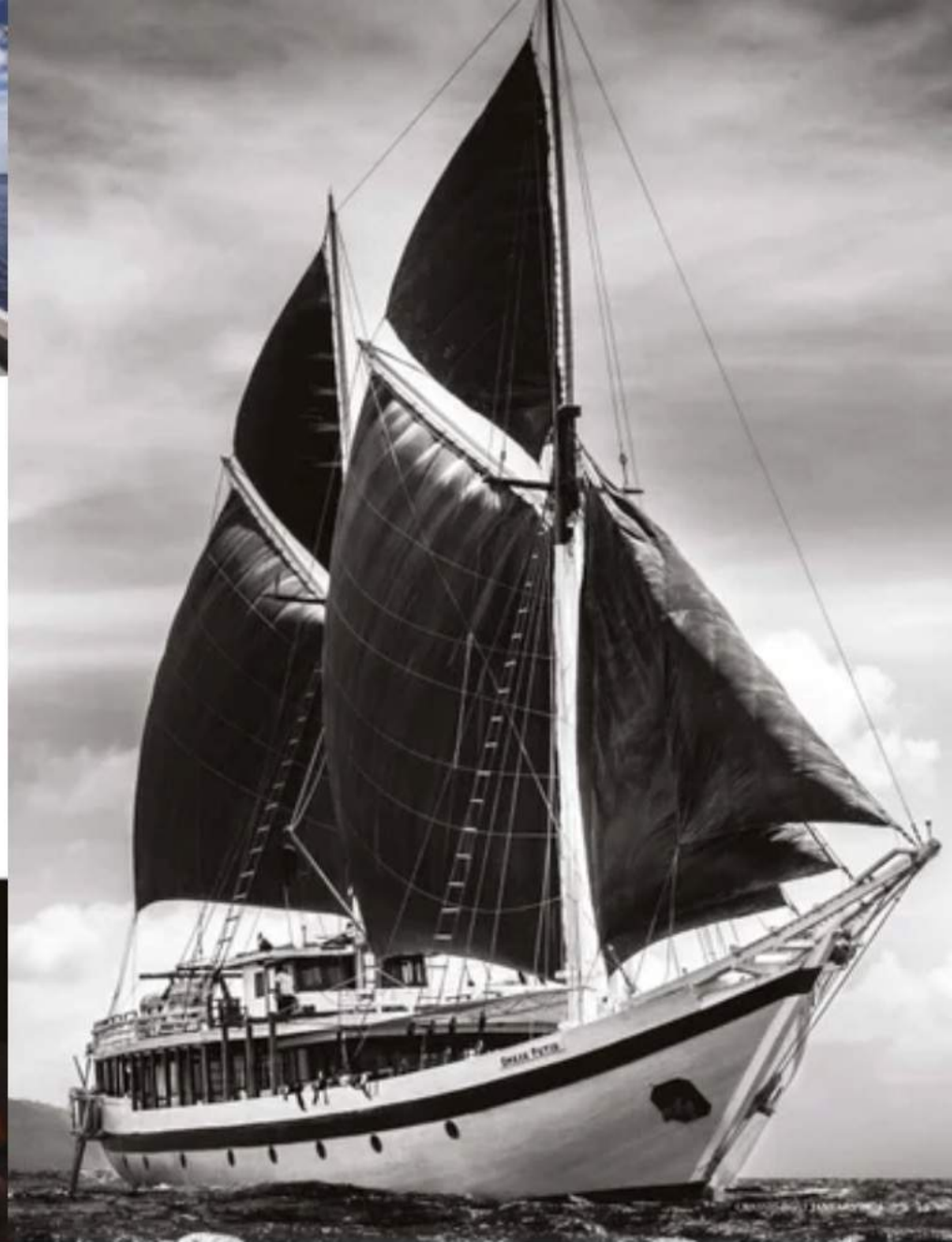
*Below left:* Crew built dry in the sun

*Below right:*  
Nutmeg fruit cut open to reveal the seed - mace

*Facing page:*  
*Ombak Putih* was built by traditional boatbuilders of Kalimantan

hours reading or simply watching the Banda Sea slip beneath our ironwood hull. Occasionally these moments of tranquillity are interrupted by the call of whale whose spine-filled exhalations give away their position or dolphins which joyfully ride our bow wave. In one unforgettable display two dolphins leap into the air, spinning like acrobatic high divers before plummeting gracefully into the sea. At dusk I gravitate towards the raised bow where a teak seat straddles the deck and provides a perfect viewing platform to watch a blood-red sun sink below the sea.

Dining in communal style beneath shade covers on the fore deck and the galley team ensure there's an abundance of delicious Indonesian-influenced cuisine. One afternoon while on passage from Manupia Island, Chef Bugis gives a cooking demonstration, making Indonesian ayam (chicken) satay and spring rolls which we later devour with relish. At Belang Belang we worked over astonishingly colourful coral gardens before wading ashore onto a white sand beach where the crew has set up picnic tables laden with food. Snorkelling opportunities abound in between village visits and are an absolute highlight with a myriad of kaleidoscopic fish life gliding across hard and soft corals. Late one afternoon, we don our snorkel gear and slide into the less than-pristine waters of Banda Neira Harbour in the







hope of sighting arguably the world's most colourful fish. Matchbox-sized Mandarin fish are known to inhabit the waters near the rock wall of the quiet waterfront Hotel Maslana. We get lucky and see five Mandarin fish in the dim light of dusk. A fellow guest who has never snorkelled before declares snorkelling to be her new obsession while De Beccaloni, a cardi-carrying marine life junkie, is always the first in the water and the last one out.

While the underwater world is mesmerising, it's what's above sea level which has long drawn attention to the Spice Islands, luring seafarers from afar. As early as the 13th century in Europe, spices from the Far East were in huge demand for both culinary and medicinal purposes. In the 17th century physicians claimed nutmeg to be a cure for the bloody flux and sweating sickness later called the black plague. Ironically, nutmeg purportedly had aphrodisiac properties and was also ingested in large amounts to induce abortions.

**Above: Ormbak**  
Aunt sitting across  
the Banda Sea

**Above right:**  
Beachcombing  
and snorkelling on  
deserted Molana  
islands

**Below: A kora-kora**  
cane escort us  
depart from Banda  
Neira harbour

**Below right:**  
Villagers escort us  
around Ewo village,  
Marapu Island

Spices made their way from the Far East to Europe via the Middle East, a problematic route which drove nations to seek faster maritime routes to the East Indies with its abundance of spicy riches. Violent wars were waged in the race to secure treasures which were, for a time, more valuable than gold.

The seed from which emerged two of the world's all-consuming empires was sown on Ruan (pronounced rooni) Island during the 1600s. The aromatic reason for interest was the Myristica fragrans tree which produces nutmeg kernels encased by a wicker-laced lisa-like aril called mace. Seeking to control trading routes between Europe and the East Indies, the English East India Company and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) fought for control of Ruan Island and its flourishing nutmeg forests for 60 years.

Essentially a truce was called and the Treaty of Breda was signed on 31 July 1667. As part of the agreement the English kept the island of Manhattan in New Amsterdam, while the Dutch were purportedly clothed with claiming ownership of coconut-fringed Ruan Island in the Banda Sea.

Jan Barner, author of *East Indies*, called it the real estate deal of the millennium. "Few would have believed a small trading village on the island of Manhattan was destined to become the modern metropolis of New York," writes Barner.

Author Giles Milton says in *Nathanial's Nutmeg of Ruan Island*: "The island can be snuffed before it can be seen. From more than 10 miles out to sea a fragrance hangs in the air long before the bowler-hat mountain loaves into view."

But it wasn't just the English and Dutch with an interest in the profitable spice trade. In the 1490s Italian explorer Christopher Columbus set out to find a maritime route, bucking the trend for southward routes, heading westwards instead. The fact that he discovered North America instead of the Far East did little to persuade others. Portuguese Vasco de Gama led the charge for the Portuguese foray into Asia, rounding the Cape of Good Hope to eventually reach India. Later, his brothers reached the Banda Islands, ensuing massacres

**Above: Chef Inay**  
fresh fish from  
Banda-Neira  
whenever possible

**Below: Memorial**  
to national hero  
and freedom  
fighter Kapitan  
Fatmahan in an  
Ambon park

and warspringing as nations sought control of the islands and their inhabitants. Evidence of brutalities of war remain in the form of formidable forts throughout the Banda and Molucca Islands. At the 17th century-built Belgica Fort above Banda Neira, prison cells echo with the dreadful misery of prisoners awaiting execution. The stone block where Bandanese farmers were laid out and beheaded, often for the crime of defending their nutmeg crops, remains in place.

As I wander the streets of Loutboir village the air is permeated with the spicy aromas of nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves. Sheets of nutmeg spread with cloves, nutmeg and mace drying in the tropical sun lay outside brightly painted houses. The drying process is crucial. Nutmeg kernels must be turned regularly for uniform drying, while temperature and humidity variations also affect the quality of the final product. On the steep-sided slopes behind the village, our guide Solomon walks us through a nutmeg plantation. He shows how the precious nut is harvested manually, with farmers climbing the tree







trunks and glacking the ripe pods, which look a lot like a small peach, with a long-handled bamboo cage. He unsheathes a knife and carves a shallow cleft of bark from a tree trunk, proffering it for me to sniff. The subtle aroma of cinnamon is unmistakable.

Sailing northwards from the Banda Islands we cross into the northern hemisphere near the white sand-fringed islets of the Gornai Archipelago. Anchored within a whisper of 'the line' we steeled our souls for some of the heaviest reef I've seen anywhere in the world before weighing anchor. Though I've crossed the Equator numerous times, the rite of passage it evokes still thrills me. On this occasion Captain Jafri brings Obah Putih in a half loop enough for us to celebrate by jumping off the bow into a tranquil Molucca Sea.

Seafaring line-crossing ceremonies are steeped in mysticism as a sort of circumlocutory baptism invoking religious order and social hierarchy. Ancient seafarers adopted traditions invoking the gods and goddess of the sea, wind and storms to ensure divine protection. More recently line-crossing traditions are connected to create solidarity onboard. The origins of the traditions are uncertain: some sources cite the Vikings, others point towards Mediterranean influences including the Egyptians or perhaps the Romans and Greeks. By participating in this ancient maritime tradition, sailors moved from the rank of inexperienced pollywog to the new rank of experienced shellback. Traditionally, shellbacks were then inducted into the solemn mysteries of the ancient order of the deep sea, meaning that King Neptune approves. King Neptune (and sometimes his maritime cousin Davy Jones) often makes an appearance in the guise of a crew member dressed as the Roman God of the Sea to conduct initiation rites. On Captain Cook's 1768 voyage to the Pacific on HMS Endeavour, first timers were given the choice of giving up their wine allowance for four days or undergoing a ritual dunking in the ocean. Other traditions include sailors being 'invited' to participate in physical challenges, associated with land-sailing concoctions or simply jumping into the sea, as we did.

Back at Dodonga village there are plans afoot to commemorate Wallau's legacy in 2024 with a memorial

**Above:** Obah Putih anchored near Bun Island

**Below:** Buildings in stills line the shoreline of Ambon's waterfront market

plaque where he had his world-changing epiphany. I try to imagine what the village was like more than 160 years ago when he lay in suicidal delirium. But I'm distracted by tiny fingers curling around my own. A young girl whose name I think is Lari, but I can't be sure as I speak no Bahasa and she speaks no English beyond 'hello hello', is curious about my foreign features. As I squat down to show her the screen on my camera she strokes my forearm inquisitively, lightly pinches my cheek and plays with my blonde-strucked ponytail.

There is no doubt that Wallau's place in history deserves recognition. Sir David Attenborough has said that: "There is no more admirable character in the history of science."

But I can't help wondering how an influx of foreign "Wallauism" may impact this village. Do villagers even wear sunglasses like myself wandering their one-road village? My inability to speak Bahasa prevents me from posing the question. Though curious travellers like myself come in peace and with ethical intentions unlike past warsoingers, I hope that the lines connecting responsible tourism with historical context help rather than hinder far-flung villages like this one.

*Sea Trek Sailing Adventures partners with the Wallace Conservation Project. The project's founder, Dr George Bevanon, leads four Wallace-inspired expeditions in the eastern Indonesian archipelago each year.*

*The Malay Archipelago by Alfred Russel Wallace is published by Penguin Books and tells the story of how one Englishman travelled some 14,000 miles (22,500km), collected around 250,000 specimens and changed the face of science.*

*Sea Trek Sailing Adventures - [seatrekball.com/juni](http://seatrekball.com/juni)  
The writer travelled as a guest of Sea Trek Sailing Adventures*



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