



Spice of life

Fiona Harper retraces ancient trade routes through the East Indonesian archipelago into remote Raja Ampat and the Spice Islands. Voyaging on *Coral Geographer* she discovers that eons-old cultural traditions and intriguing history are preserved alongside the pristine marine environment.



“Discovery of the nutmeg kernel led to brutal battles to control the spice trade”

OPENER: Hikers who scramble up the craggy flanks of Wayag Island to Pindato Peak lookout are rewarded with 360-degree views across some of the 1500 islands of the Raja Ampat archipelago. Others take a more leisurely exploration of this pristine marine sanctuary, snorkelling or scuba diving in the aqua-hued Banda Sea.

TOP LEFT: Kwatisore Village sits on the southern shore of Cenderwasih Bay, a thriving marine ecosystem known for its year-round whale shark population. For centuries locals have developed a sacred relationship with these gentle giants, which are considered spiritual guardians and are honoured in dances celebrating this cultural heritage.

TOP MIDDLE: The jetty at Misool, one of the four main islands of Raja Ampat, is the starting point for the Celestial Hill hike. The trail, with more than 300 steps, wraps around the near-vertical karst, spiralling

ever-upwards. As most of the archipelago's other islands come with craggy shorelines lined with razor sharp rocks, this makes Misool a popular place to stretch the legs.

TOP RIGHT: Propelled by the rhythmic strokes of Bandanese paddlers, kora kora canoes once protected Banda Neira harbour when it was the world's only source of nutmeg. In the 16th century, wealthy Portuguese and Dutch spice merchants sought to control the Banda Islands whose aromatic coin-sized treasure saw Run Island traded for Manhattan. The ceremonial tradition continues today, welcoming visitors arriving by sea.

BOTTOM LEFT: Raja Ampat's limestone karsts rise from the sea like silent sentinels which once guided Dutch and Portuguese merchants seeking their fortunes in the lucrative spice trade. The karsts began as coral reefs during a time when Raja Ampat was submerged beneath

the ocean. Sculpted by eons of erosion into mushroom-like islets, the region's fertile marine and land topography is influenced by the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

BOTTOM MIDDLE: Coastal villages in Central and West Papua see few foreign visitors, with the handful of expedition ships calling in each year receiving warm welcomes from villagers. In these remote islands, cultural traditions, ceremonial dance and songs passed down through generations remain integral to everyday life.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Straddling the Equator west of Papua's Birds Head peninsula, Raja Ampat sits within the Coral Triangle. Evidence of human occupation dates back 50,000 years, though the archipelago remains largely unspoiled by human interference. This marine haven contains the world's richest marine biodiversity, luring eco-aware visitors onboard Coral Expeditions' small ships.

TOP LEFT: Seventeenth century Fort Duurstede was a stronghold in the Dutch East India Company's control of the spice trade. Occupied variously by the Portuguese, Dutch and British who waged fierce wars, the fort's strategic position on a Saparua Island headland provided protection for treasured cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon being readied for shipment to Europe.

TOP MIDDLE: Discovery of the nutmeg kernel, with its encasing of lace-like scarlet mace, led to brutal battles to control the highly profitable spice trade, which also included cloves and cinnamon. As early as the 13th century, nutmeg was revered for medicinal and culinary purposes. At the time it was only found in the Banda Islands, though it is now grown across the globe.

TOP RIGHT: Warriors at Saparua Island replicate the 1817 battle between Kapitan Pattimura's insurgent uprising and Dutch forces at Fort Duurstede. The rebel army captured the fort, though Pattimura was later hanged by the ruling Dutch for leading the rebellion. He was acknowledged as a hero after Indonesia gained independence in 1945.

BOTTOM LEFT: The region's religious reverence is enacted by dancers with enthusiastic fervour. Christianity came to Manokwari Regency in West Papua during the mid-1800s by way of German Catholic missionaries. On Mansinam Island a Jesus statue, standing just three metres shorter than Rio de Janeiro's famous towering monument, peeks above lush vegetation. To this day, Christianity is still the dominant religion of Eastern Indonesia.

BOTTOM MIDDLE: The fertile currents and extraordinary marine biodiversity of the Coral Triangle contribute to Raja Ampat's recognition as a UNESCO Global Geopark. The region is home to 75 per cent of the world's coral species and around 2500 fish species, making it a haven for divers and snorkellers.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Banda Neira lines the eastern shore of a natural harbour in the heart of the Spice Islands. The town's colourful heritage is reflected in Portuguese, Dutch and Indonesian architecture. It's where restored hotels sit alongside crumbling ruins and a 16th century fort houses cells where 'rebel' farmers were beheaded for protecting their nutmeg crops. The popular spice is still grown on the island, which now boasts a population of around 7000.