

#INDONESIA #SAILING

Archipelago adventures

The breathtaking Banda Arc twists and turns around Indonesia's volcanic islands, where villagers still practice age-old traditions and the underwater world brims with spectacular sealife. *By Lynn Gail*





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VENOMOUS SEA-SNAKE SLITHERS alongside me in the ocean, and I pause to watch it go by, studying its striking black-and-white body as it wriggles up for air. It's as though the water between us acts as a safety barrier, and rather than panic, I am simply intrigued.

I'm taking my first snorkel around Bacan Island in Indonesia's breathtaking Banda Arc, navigating the high seas with SeaTrek Sailing Adventures, a voyage that begins in Ternate, North Maluku, crosses the equator and covers some 1,300 nautical miles to Labuan Bajo in the south.

As sunbeams cut through the teal-tinged water, Frank Hyde, SeaTrek's director and experienced freediver, rises beside me. "First, relax," he smiles, seeing my tight-lipped jawline. "Breathe from your diaphragm," he coaxes. "Position your body 90 degrees, then dive like a duck." I try my luck, eventually reaching the promised land. It's a star-studded aquarium boasting the highest density of fish in the world. I come eye-to-eye with angel, clown, black-spotted puffer and foxface fish the colour of lemons – darting, flitting, dancing through the current. There's a cacophony of chirping, fizzing and crackling: who knew fish could talk?

WE ARE SAILING

Just 15 minutes later, I'm sipping an iced fruity mocktail on the bow of the *Ombak Putih*, our home for two glorious weeks. Built in Kalimantan in 1995, she's 42 metres long with 12 well-appointed ensuite cabins – perfect for the 19 globetrotters on board. With a lawyer, international banker, author, Buddhist lecturer, agriculturist and counsellor, along with intrepid retirees as passengers, we could easily start our own community on an isolated outlying island.

Nan from Montana, a lively lady with a would-sail-solo attitude, becomes my snorkelling buddy. We're first in the dinghy when the bells clang, prepping snorkels, fins afoot – impatient children ready to slip into nature's playground. "It's another world down there, I love it all," Nan says. Our evenings are filled with

informative talks on subjects ranging from which dangerous sea creatures to be wary of, to nomadic cultures who still survive in the jungle, given by our venturesome guides, Nita and Anastasia.

Each night we dine on the deck, a first-class floating restaurant, savouring delights created by gifted chef Tri. Conversations flow easily, travelling yarns from far-flung destinations.

Early each morning, we stretch into downward facing dog and upward facing cat-cow poses as we cruise past volcanic outcrops before dropping anchor to explore new destinations. Pam from Brisbane always ends with a quote: "Gathering the energy of the universe. Giving thanks for all that we have. Opening our hearts and our minds. Staying in touch with the Earth. Namaste."

THE SPICE OF LIFE

The notion bodes well for visiting Obilatu Island, where the Earth's volcanic soil is perfect for growing spices, generating much-needed income. Today, the nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves we see drying throughout the quiet village are worth a mere fraction of days of yore, when, during the 16th century, they netted more than gold. Used by European aristocracy, the highly sought-after produce was favoured to season meats, mask rancid foods and make into medicinal concoctions to treat fevers. We buy spices and snacks along the lanes, joined by villagers – who rarely see outsiders – practising their pidgin English. Excited boys show off soccer skills, girls clutch donated classroom

supplies and proud men hold up freshly caught fish as we wave goodbye.

Later that afternoon, the scent of nutmeg hangs in the breeze as we sail on, passing virgin shores draped in popcorn clouds. We cover the three 'Rs': reading, relaxing and reclining on the upper deck as chiffon lace whispers across a setting sun.

BOATS AND BATS

Several days in, we meet the Buginese boatbuilders on Bonerate Island, where schooners like the *Ombak Putih* are made entirely by hand. I learn it takes 35 craftsmen four years to construct a 40-metre, 350-tonne vessel using basic tools and traditions passed down through the generations.

At dusk I witness their handsome handiwork as we cruise to Kalong Island. After days at sea seeing empty horizons, myriad majestic schooners have also dropped anchor. Like us, people are here to witness a natural phenomenon. G&Ts are mixed, champagne corks are popped. We gather, top deck, with front row seats. On cue, the sky smoulders orange as flocks of fruit bats emerge from a mangrove forest to find food. Wave after captivating wave, they fill the sky like a flypast, farewelling us before we head to our final port, homeward bound. 🦇

OPENING PAGE: A SeaTrek Sailing Adventures vessel © Lynn Gail THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Views from the deck © Lynn Gail; aquatic wonderland; Banda aerial view © Fabio Lamanna/Shutterstock; overwater living © Lynn Gail

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TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE
Most major airlines fly to Denpasar, Bali. Lion Air, Indonesia's largest airline, flies to domestic destinations where SeaTrek cruises depart from.
SAILING THERE
SeaTrek Sailing Adventures cruises include on-board accommodation, all meals, excursions and snorkelling equipment.
seatrekbali.com