

'Who needs to go to the moon?'

Other worlds wait over and under the water on a nautical adventure through Indonesia's remotest islands



The Ombak Putih in Wakatobi National Park. Below: Taliabu islanders in traditional clothing sing and dance. Inset: Guests at Batongan Lake.



A narrow pontoon stretches before us like a gangplank into the warm, inky waters of Batongan Lake on Mbuang-Mbuang Island, Indonesia. At the edge, a signpost shows rigid rules: no fins, no jumping, no sunscreen – all are harmful to the thousands of fragile jellyfish who survive here, in one of only 20 lakes of its kind.

No free-diving either – 10m below, an anoxic layer (void of oxygen) can cause brain damage and even death in humans. On the upside, the jellyfish are reputed harmless. With no predators, their sting has evolved into one so weak it is barely detectable. I slowly immerse myself as one would enter steaming water and say a prayer the tentacle sting-test is on point. I'm immediately lost to their calm, hypnotic movements. Soft-pink lava lamp globules pulse around me, lighting up the brackish water. Two hours pass like a 10-minute ride on a bullet train.

"That was otherworldly, without having to get on someone else's spaceship," says Nan, from Montana, as we bounce across the ocean in the Zodiac, back to the *Ombak Putih* (white wave), a traditional Indonesian phinisi schooner – our home for 16 days with SeaTrek Sailing Adventures.

Four days earlier, we'd boarded the 42m-long vessel in Ternate, Maluku. We're the first group to set sail in her elegant, handcrafted hull since the pandemic. With 12 cabins and 19 guests, we're near capacity. Like me, the other passengers have one word in mind. Remote. Far away from any TV operating device.

It's a day for rare sights. Later, we're dropped for a drift snorkel where we float

over giant clams. Fully grown they can weigh more than 200kg, reach 1.2m and live well into their hundreds. They are handsome, too. On approach, their enormous claw-like shells snap shut as we block out sunlight they need to photosynthesise. I move away as they open – their soft tissue is resplendent, shimmering in shades usually seen at a Mardi Gras parade.

At sundown on a deserted beach we dine, singing and dancing, abandoning social restraint, as the talented crew-come-masterful-musicians serenade us under a star-piqued sky. Our knowledgeable guides, Anastasia Louhenapessy and Nita CJ, join in the jiving before giving the daily end-of-day briefing on what's in store.

Each day brings new adventures, nautical narratives on exploring islands only reachable by sea. We drift past volcanic masses where shrouds of clouds drape over clove, cinnamon and nutmeg trees jostling for space on the densely forested hillsides.

Gavin Gallagher, a keen yachtsman, and one of SeaTrek's three partners, points to flapping cords, "When the ship's tell-tales flow in the right direction, like wind socks, raising the sails will increase speed," Gallagher says.

I watch the crew climb far-reaching masts to release big canvases, tying them down in whipping wind. We forge ahead like sailors before us when Spice Trade merchant ships plied the archipelago during the 16th century. The era darkened history books when Dutch company VOC

(known as Dutch East Indian Company) vied for control over the islands. The spices were worth more than the British Treasury and became the most sought commodity in the world.

Five days into the voyage, we go ashore Taliabu Island where youngsters in blood-red clothing perform the Cakalele (pronounced cha'ka'leh'leh), a high-energy war dance. It was originally a dance of healing when the VOC took control of surrounding islands, enslaving villagers to work in the spice plantations. Peace now rules over its palm-hemmed shores.

We're a big item in a small village. Supplies of books, pencils, swimming goggles and water filters create excitement among children who share selflessly. Further on, a group of soft-singing swirling ladies dance to native songs. It's more than a welcome, it's a coming together, a rejoining of travellers

and remote communities after two long years. We wave goodbye, fast friends, farewelling a community that treated us like kin.

Away from alarm clocks, cut off from email-connectivity, we meet fisher people and craftsmen in villages built over water. On a jungle trek we find the wonderful Wallace's golden birdwing butterfly mating in the trees. We snorkel throughout the captivating Coral Triangle, seeing some of the archipelago's 6000 fish species – the highest density of fish worldwide, quadruple the number found in the Great Barrier Reef.

Christine, from Canada, sums it up perfectly, "Who needs to go to the moon, when there's a whole new fascinating world underwater".

We visit some 600 racks where more than 6000 corals have been transplanted through NGO marine conservation company Coral Guardian and see the



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Far left: The Banda Sea archipelago. Below: SeaTrek guests hunt for butterflies on Bacan Island. Inset: Batongan Lake jellyfish.



positive effects restoration programs are having on threatened marine life.

"Corals are colonies, they love doing things together while creating healthy habitats for tropical fish; one needs the other to survive," says Frank Hyde, SeaTrek's manager and passionate advocate for ocean wildlife.

Too soon it's our last day, and the mood is sombre. "I can't believe we're already day 15, can we start again?" says Margo, from Brisbane.

Dark storm clouds form, but unticked itinerary items – the lure of swimming with manta rays and turtles at Siaba Besar Island – create an anticipation. Hoping to coax them in, we hold hands and devise a manta ray rain-dance; an hour later our search proves fruitless; instead, we pray to the turtle gods.

We're caught in a deluge of balmy rain as we search for the ocean's reigning kings. There's not a flipper in sight. Hatta, the ship's second engineer and free diver, rises from 20m below, pointing to a resting green turtle. He's so camouflaged I barely decipher his shell. The strong current pulls us away. Determined, we snorkel against the underpull, willing him to rise. Mother Nature has heard our call. Sunrays pierce the surface as his hulking mass rises effortlessly from the ocean floor. We're spellbound. His beautifully mottled brown shell is aglow as he rises. Six – the number of times he returns to the surface. Five – the number of people beaming on the final snorkel on the trip of a lifetime.

The writer was a guest of SeaTrek Sailing Adventures.

Escape route

• Getting there

Virgin Australia, AirAsia, Garuda Indonesia and Jetstar airlines fly to Denpasar, Bali, from Australia's major cities. Lion Air, Indonesia's largest airline, flies to domestic destinations where various SeaTrek cruises depart.

• Sail there

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures offer all-inclusive multi-day cruises departing from Bali and other islands throughout Indonesia.

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