



**This page:** The liveboard schooner sleeps 24. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Snorkelling with manta rays is mesmerising; The islands are beautiful; Vibrant reefs are teeming with life; Turtle spotting is a highlight; Villages proudly display their tribal dances.

I force my fins into a fast-paced dolphin kick, but the current keeps pushing me back. Below, an abyss of teal-tinted ocean extends before me as I search for the elusive and vulnerable-listed manta ray in the Lesser Sunda Islands in Indonesia. The mission seems futile. But never say never in nature. Like a floating cloud crossing the sky, one appears. He's so close I could reach out and run my fingertips over his fin, but I only watch as he wraps his great, cape-like fins around his body in slow-motion, like he's dancing the Paso Doble. It's just me, watching the performance, front row, ringside – until he opens his 'wings' and glides gracefully away, back into deeper waters. It's a bucket-list item ticked; a memory forever tucked away.

"If only we could begin each day that way," says Boy, a sculptor from the Netherlands, as he breathlessly recounts coming close to three mantas. Excitement hangs in the air. Our small group relive their encounters as we bounce across the ocean in Zodiacs, back to the *Ombak Putih* ('white wave'), our liveboard schooner we boarded three days ago for the eight-day voyage – Whale Sharks, Corals and Dragons Cruise with SeaTrek Sailing Adventures.

At 42m long with 12 private en suite cabins, she can accommodate up to 24 guests. We set sail, indulging in a breakfast far outweighing calories burned that morning. It's Michelin star-worthy, on-deck dining at its best – the banana honey-drizzled pancakes tango on the tongue as we recline, drifting past idyllic isles.

#### IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Our next port of call, Labuan Mapin Village, comes into view and we drop anchor to go ashore. Excited girls wearing hijab, women smeared with clay facemasks for sun protection, and young boys touting mobile phones escort us through a neatly kept village. With a population of around 8000, the island is shared by three tribes. Anastasia, our knowledgeable guide, describes each group as villagers point the way.

We learn the Bajau tribe are incredible free divers who can hold their breath for up to 13 minutes underwater. Scientists have studied their anatomy, finding their spleens have developed over time and are 50 percent larger than normal. The resulting extra oxygen allows them to stay underwater longer. While some Bajau settle permanently, others stay at sea, living a nomadic existence in small houseboats.

Surrounded by a growing group of giggling children we walk on, learning about the talented Bugis boatbuilders who build colossal 40-tonne schooners like the one that we are sailing on. "They build them without blueprints, without drawings, using only

# WELCOME TO FANTASY ISLAND

*Remote tribes, manta rays and turtles create the voyage of a lifetime far from the Bali crowds in Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia.*

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY LYNN GAIL





basic tools,” says Anastasia. “All the skills are passed down through the Bugis elders.” The third group, the Selayar people, are traders, dealing in timbers and tools. It’s unexpected witnessing three separate tribes, each with their own language, living in harmony as one community.

We’re a highlight. Tables laden with freshly cut coconuts and sweet tasting *barongko* (bananas mashed with sugar, eggs and milk wrapped in banana leaves) have been specially prepared for us. To top the treats, talented troupes show us their dance moves. Young girls wearing traditional costumes perform Bulu Ala’una Tempe, a mesmerising synchronised dance using gilded red fans; men dressed as warriors perform Pencak Silat, a high-energy martial arts dance. The final fling, a free-for-all, is when we join in, kicking up dust, enjoying connections made across language barriers.

### UNDERWATER WORLD

Back onboard, we retreat to the bow for cocktail o’clock, passing outlying islands rimmed by ribbons of sky-blue ocean. It’s paradise on tap.

The postcard scenery continues the following morning when we awake in a calm corridor between two volcanic islands, Satonda, our point of exploration, and Sumbawa. Satonda Island is a ring-shaped, uninhabited atoll with a 335-hectare lake formed by an underwater volcano that erupted some 10,000 years ago. It’s a short walk over a steep hill where the serene lake belies its history.

Shrouded in myth and mystery, some locals believe it is forbidden land. It’s so remote we have the island to ourselves, and we swim, kayak and paddleboard to our hearts’ content, enjoying total seclusion for the afternoon.

At the lake’s edge a hope tree is adorned with dead coral, mementos and various rocks. I tie a keepsake along with others’ wishes. If it’s granted, folklore says to return to give

## “IT’S THE SISTINE CHAPEL OF UNDERWATER REEFS, A TECHNICOLOUR ARCHIPELAGO.”

thanks – immersed in nature, cut-off from connectivity, my wish is to return.

After a banquet lunch of salmon Wellington, garlic king prawns, spicy mussels and sesame chicken, we don snorkels and head to an unexplored arena for our final snorkel. It’s the Sistine Chapel of underwater reefs, a technicolour archipelago dense with tropical species, and I tune out to life above as I drift with the current. I spot rainbow-coloured parrotfish, sunflower-yellow butterfly fish, crowned queen angelfish and the cheeky clown fish, which, born male, can change sex if a female is needed. The healthy coral, sea sponges and tunicates (sea squirts) work tirelessly, filtering nutrients, giving fish a fruitful feeding ground. The best part is

when a giant green turtle appears alongside me. Its powerful flippers barely flap as she rises for air, floats down, rising twice more before effortlessly drifting away. Like a morning alarm drags you from your dreams, I want to smack the snooze button, stay under longer and soak up every minute, but it’s time to return to the *Ombak Putih* where cold flannels and freshly squeezed juices await.

### DREAM VOYAGE

“That was the best snorkelling I’ve ever experienced!” says Greg, a retired teacher from America, back on deck. “Even better than the Great Barrier Reef,” adds Jim, a maintenance engineer from Western Australia. With an eclectic group of guests onboard – doctors, teachers, a dressmaker, an Indigenous educational expert, bathroom outfitter, and an accountant-turned-cleaner – the excited chatter continues until the wind picks up. Like nimble acrobats, the crew scale 20m-high masts to raise the ship’s seven sails. Huge blue canvases billow and flap, wallowing in the breeze as we sail to our final port. It’s a window into the olden days when traders transported precious spices worth more than gold, using only wind to steer their ships.

The afternoon slips into twilight as we swap stories with passengers who’ve become fond friends. A pathway of golden light falls across the ocean – a red-carpet moment for the talented crew who play guitars and drums as we sing and dance into the night, clinking glasses to a voyage that made us live life more boldly than before.  [seatrekballi.com](http://seatrekballi.com)