LIFE IN THE LAST MILE

In the Banda Sea, **Lynn Gail** heads toward the Ring of Fire and ends up in the house of the chief of a remote tribe.

Photography by **Lynn Gail**

The revered village chief, Abner Yetimau, is the leader and decision maker of the Abui tribe on Alor Island.

The Ombak Putih, a handmade phinisi schooner, sails to far-flung islands located throughout the Alor Archipelago.

There's a cross in the mast on the phinisi schooner, a traditional Indonesian boat I'm sailing on to the Alor Archipelago. The Ombak Putih, which is the name of the boat and translates to white wave, promises protection as we navigate the rising swell of the Alor Strait. We are the only seafaring vessel heading into waters edged by volcanic masses. In an area dubbed the Last Mile, it feels as if we're heading towards the edge of the earth. We're at the mercy of nature as it sends lightning crackles across the night sky, illuminating mounds of steep stratovolcanoes.

The Banda Sea lies to the north of the Alor Archipelago, an area that sees a limited number of visitors each year. It's easy to understand why – its remote and undeveloped volcanic islands punctuate the ocean like gigantic stepping stones. When joined together they make up a section of the Ring of Fire. Maps show it as a thick red horseshoe of intense volcanic activity following the edge of the Pacific Ocean, as if warning us not to enter.

Our 40-metre, handcrafted vessel seems at home in this rough environment as she pushes the currents aside to reach the islands. As I watch constant flowing plumes of vapour escape from the jagged peaks, I mutter a mantra to the volcanic gods. Most travellers to the Banda Sea stay on liveaboard vessels to dive some of the world's most vibrant and richly populated coral reefs; few go ashore to meet and spend time with the indigenous tribes and communities that are cut off from mainstream tourism.

Throughout tribal rituals, all generations of the Abui tribe join to stomp around a mesbah – the all-important altar and meeting place in Alor village.

Each morning, the crew finds a safe landing spot to go ashore in inflatable boats and visit the remote villages before the heat of the day sets in. They take with them supplies of water filters and solar lights, which help build lasting relationships with the villagers. People from surrounding islands are also employed onboard the boats, presenting them with opportunities rarely available to islanders who only receive basic elementary education. It's day four of a 12-day cruise and, as our inflatable raft bobs over the white caps, we head towards Alor Island, which, at 2865 square kilometres, is the largest landmass in the Alor Archipelago. The water is fish-tank clear and the soft white sand sparkles at the water's edge. I have a pinch-myself moment – it's as if I'm watching a documentary on the best remote getaways on a big screen.

"Try the welcome of the betel nut. But don't swallow – spit it out," our guide Arie Pagaka warns us with a knowing grin as we land on the beach. "The Abui tribe will perform the lego-lego dance around the *mesbah*. It is unique to Alor." He explains the mesbah is like an altar that represents the community; it's the heartbeat of the village.

After an hour's car journey, navigating snaking bends close to the cliff's edge, we arrive at the tiny village of Takpala. In bare feet, the chief and his wife walk over jagged rocks to greet us dressed in traditional ikat cloth and wearing elaborate feathered headdresses. His wife, revered for her position, immediately stages a tribal dance to ask the ancestors for a blessing for her village.

Performing tribal dances has become a way of maximising the tourist dollar here. The harsh environment of the region offers little opportunity for income, and the people rely upon a trade of almonds, mung beans, cloves and corn.

The ritual is trance-like – they stomp one foot in, one foot out, kicking up dust as each generation joins the circle.

As if under a spell, we quietly follow the elders into their village. The older women begin to sing in low harmonic voices as they stamp the earth with bangled feet while they head towards the mesbah, their arms interlocked behind one another in unity. The ritual is trance-like – they stomp one foot in, one foot out, kicking up dust as each generation joins the circle.

When the singing halts, there is no noise except the rhythmic rattle of bangles clanging together. The raw, deep, guttural singing of the chief suddenly interrupts, turning my skin to goose bumps as his powerful voice stirs deep emotions. They move together as if they are preserving their culture from the influences of the outside world.

The heads of the village then perform a short, intense war dance, where they charge at each other bearing teeth and spears followed by hollering and jumping skywards to show off their agility and power – they remind me of two dominant lions fighting over females on the savanna. The chief, Abner Yetimau, approaches me with an intense gaze, causing my body to stiffen. When his mouth breaks into an irresistible smile, I visibly relax. He wants to tell me about his village. Not one to turn down a chief, I sit alongside him and listen. Abner, 53, has been head of the village since 1984 and takes his role very seriously. He tells me their 'government' is made up of eight members who discuss tribal affairs, like marriage, trading goods and their spiritual duties around the mesbah, which is where they make all the important village decisions.

"Every July, when it's dry," he points to the rugged uninviting mountain, "I climb up to the top, I stay at night to pray, and make wish for two days." He rolls a cigarette and I wait for him to continue. "Our old village used to be there, my ancestors are there in the sacred land – I talk with them." He takes a puff on his cigarette, slowly blowing out smoke. "The spirits

get in the know There are over 40 official dive sites around Alor Island.

get in the know Abui means mountains or enclosed place.

Pristine waters all over the Alor Archipelago offer some of the clearest snorkelling arenas in the world.

control our earth, they watch over us. I ask them for guidance on how to be the best chief." He turns to me, flashing his infectious grin.

I ask Abner if he performs healing on his people, and he describes a ritual I have not previously witnessed. As chief, he will swirl water around his mouth, proceeding to blow a stream over his patients while saying secret, magical words. He will also touch the person to feel their symptoms and their bodily vibrations, and perform a sort of hands-on healing. Abner goes back into deep thought as we discuss his role as chief. He pushes his chest out. "I like the honour and the respect." He emanates unquestionable power and I can't imagine anyone disagreeing with him.

One of Abner's duties is to communicate with the spirits as to where each house is built within the village. They have to be certain there are no bones where the foundations are laid, as this could disturb the spirits. As chief, his family has the most important house with four floors. He invites me in, wanting to give me the grand tour.

The ground floor is an open-air communal space, the hub of the home, where guests are greeted and strong thick coffee is served on a packed mud floor. The second has the bedroom and kitchen area. It's a tight dark squeeze to clamber up a narrow ladder, but each level offers a different view. The third stores rice, cassava and corn, while the top floor protects the weapons and valuable moko drums. Thought to originate from Indochina, the drums are a part of a wife's dowry. The distinct artwork, which features on every drum, represents Ramayana, the famous Hindu love story. They are considered a prized possession as they are no longer produced and are worth a substantial amount of money.

On my descent, a gecko shoots across the wall to a far corner. The chief's wife gives the thumbs-up sign in front of a broad grin filled with red, betel-nut-stained teeth. Apparently a lizard spotted in the right corner is a sign of good luck, but if it pops up in the wrong corner, it's a bad omen.

On our descent through dotted mountainside villages, I silently wish the western world could bottle some of the community spirit I've experienced here.

We are welcomed back on the deck of the schooner with cooling face cloths and a buffet lunch of king prawns, chicken kebabs, tasty Indonesian salads and spruced-up rice dishes. I can't help but compare the obvious imbalance of the scales, but the Abui people have taught me that richness encompasses so much more than material wealth.

That afternoon we mask up with snorkel gear, jump back in the inflatables and head into the crystal waters. The vibrant colours of the tropical fish mirror a colour-by-numbers drawing – each brush stroke neatly kept within the lines. I'm so absorbed in the addictive underwater world, I have to remind myself to look up to check I'm still with the group – it's easy to lose a sense of time and direction when nature is putting on a top-class show.

That night, I stretch out on a day bed on the deck of the schooner's stern watching the sun slip below the horizon as we sail on to our next destination. There's no storm or swell, just the swish of the ocean lapping gently against the side of the hull, lulling us into a new day and another place, where we'll again be immersed in an untouched culture far off the beaten grid.

GET PLANNING

GET THERE

AirAsia flies to Denpasar, via Kuala Lumpur from Melbourne's Avalon Airport for around AU$420 return. Connections to Maumere, Flores Island, can be made through Denpasar on Garuda Indonesia or Batik Air, with a one-way fare starting at around AU$185.

airasia.com
garuda-indonesia.com
batikair.com

STAY THERE

Sea World Club Beach Resort & Dive Centre in Maumere offers bungalow accommodation on a 400-metre stretch of sandy beach. With the choice of beachfront, ocean view or tropical garden view, each offers a basic room, while a TV, internet access and reading corner is located in the reception area. It also provides snorkel and dive excursions, offering plenty of opportunity to get acquainted with the ocean before your trip with SeaTrek. From AU$69 per night.

flores-seaworldclub.com

TOUR THERE

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures has a range of cruises on both its luxury phinisi schooners, the Ombak Putih (12 cabins) or the Katharina (six cabins). The tours visit remote islands in a stunning archipelago through the Lesser Sunda Islands, Spice Islands and to other islands throughout the Banda Sea. Tours start at AU$4146 for a seven-night Dances, Dragons and Magical Lakes cruise starting in Bali and finishing in Flores Island or vice versa. An 11-night, expert-run cruise, East Indies Exploration: Culture, Sea & Spice, starts at around AU$9922 from Maumere, Flores Island.

seatrekbali.com

get in the know Alor Island is also known as the 'island of a thousand mokos'. A moko is a small bronze kettledrum.