

IN THE SWIM

We've heard of swimming with dolphins ... but jellyfish? Lynn Gail finds the courage to bathe in an Indonesian lake that's brimming with them.

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The sun's tentacles are pushing their way past a distant horizon, bringing light after dark, as dawn falls across the Molucca Sea. Our phinisi schooner is forging through a five-metre swell, rocking back and forth like a rubber duckie in a bathtub as we head towards the Togeian Islands in the Gulf of Tomini, Indonesia. Built by the Bugis people without drawings or blueprints, and weighing up to 400 tons, the schooners are designed to withstand much rougher conditions.

Thousands of brightly coloured jellyfish inhabit the isolated lake.

The spotted golden jellyfish grows up to 15cm.

We sailed from Gorontalo Harbour, Sulawesi, three days ago on the luxury vessel *Ombak Putih* ('White Wave'). It's so remote it feels as though we've left the rest of the world behind. If conditions allow we'll have the rare chance to swim in an isolated lake with thousands of stingless jellyfish.

Around 10,000 years ago, subduction – a geological process whereby one tectonic plate moves under another – pushed the lake's seabed upwards above the ocean water in the Togeian Islands. Trapped by separation, sea creatures could not get in or out of the marine lake, and



lurking predators eventually died off. No longer needing to protect itself, the spotted golden jellyfish (*Mastigias papua*) – which grows up to 15cm – stopped producing its sting.

The lake sees relatively few visitors throughout the year due to its off-the-grid location. Scientists, NGO workers and students visit around three times a year, keeping an eye on the health and population of the jellyfish.

The weather gods are on our side – it’s warmed up to 30°C, the swell has subsided and our guide, Arie, gives our small group of eight a rundown of the dos and don’ts we must follow to protect the jellyfish and plant life around the inlet.

We need to make sure our skin is free of deodorant, sunscreen and insect repellent, as any products containing chemicals are harmful. We’re told to wear soft reef shoes rather than fins – a sharp knock with a hard plastic fin can cause irreversible damage, as parts of the jellyfish body can disintegrate on impact. “And lastly, don’t pee in the lake,” Arie adds. “Humans are the main threat to jellyfish survival.”

I’d heard, in some areas of the lake, the jellyfish are so abundant it’s like swimming in thick soup. Not entirely sure about being surrounded by a swarm of pulsating sea creatures – and having been stung before – apprehension sets in as we jump in inflatable boats and head out across the ocean. A sign warns us with hand-painted drawings circled by thick red borders to exercise care in the water. Translated from Indonesian it reads, “Welcome to the jellyfish lake, please follow the rules to protect the unique lake environment.” From the surface,

Clockwise from above:

The jellyfish stopped producing a sting when their predators died off; Getting ready to take the plunge; The jellyfish are protected for their survival; Swimmers take care not to bump into the delicate jellyfish; Taking a closer look.



TAKE A TOUR

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures have a range of cruises on both their phinisi schooners, the *Ombak Putih* (12 cabins) or the *Katharina* (six cabins). Tours enable you to visit remote islands throughout the Molucca Sea, Lesser Sunda Islands, Banda Arc and Spice Islands and beyond. seatrekballi.com

GETTING THERE

Garuda Indonesia, Virgin Australia and Jetstar Airways all fly to Denpasar, Bali. Connections to surrounding islands can be made through Garuda Indonesia, Batik Air or Tiger Air.

VISAS

Australian and NZ passport holders will receive a 30-day tourist visa on arrival in Indonesia.

the lake – measuring 200m wide and 30m deep – looks like a still green body of brackish water, barren of any sea life. As everyone carefully slides in and comes into close proximity with the jellyfish, nervous laughter and playful screams echo around the lake.

Wearing snorkelling gear in water warm enough to bathe in, I look down to find several orange spotted blobs bobbing around me. Scared to move for fear of hurting them, I watch as they yo-yo blindly past me, seemingly accepting my presence in their environment.

Gaining confidence, I slowly swim towards the lake’s centre. Unthreatened by my presence, white dotted jellyfish pulsate around my

arms and legs as if they’re trying to float through me. Their aim is to follow the sun from one side of the lake to the other, soaking up as many rays as possible. The sunlight feeds the tiny plants living in their tentacles, which in turn feed the jellyfish.

It’s a moving meditation watching these bell-shaped jellyfish float to the surface, and then gracefully glide back down into deeper waters. Occasionally they brush up against me and bounce away like a bubble against the skin.

As each moment passes, the underworld changes as clouds drift away, allowing sunbeams to enter the water – lighting up white spots on the jellyfish. I could watch them for hours, but soon enough it’s time to head back to the *Ombak Putih*, where freshly squeezed juices await us. At dusk we set sail through calmer waters and head towards the next day’s sunrise – ready to further explore the rich underwater world of the far-reaching Molucca Sea. **MF**

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