

PHOTO ESSAY

SAILING WITH THE MAN WHO WASN'T DARWIN

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Alfred Russel Wallace's classic book *The Malay Archipelago*. Writer and photographer **MARK EVELEIGH** boards a traditional Indonesian sailing yacht to explore a chain of Indonesian islands that have changed little since Wallace's time.





When one can follow in the footsteps (some of them, anyway) of figures such as naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, and do so onboard a traditional Indonesian-style sailing ship, well, then there can be nothing more romantic than the history of things

The timber sailing ship swung slowly on her anchor as the morning tide began to run through a water course that Portuguese mariners had long ago named the Strait of Patience. The state-of-the-art navigation screens in the ship's bridge showed the Indonesian name as Selat Patientie, but were a 400-year-old Portuguese marinheiro (sailor) mysteriously to appear, there would be little else between the waterline and the jungle-clad peaks of the volcanoes that would have seemed unfamiliar to him.

In a country that boasts an estimated 17 500 islands (6 000 of which are said to be uninhabited), it's not unusual to find unspoiled patches of paradise. Indonesia has been described as the world's most invisible country and, with the exception of the tourist resorts of Bali, few people seem to be aware of the existence of the world's largest island nation. It was in the little tangle of islands around the Strait of Patience where Alfred Russel Wallace (a contemporary of Charles Darwin) began to formulate his own ideas on the theory of evolution, and 2019 marks 150 years since the naturalist published *The Malay Archipelago* - a book that, even today, remains the most engaging travel text ever written about the Indonesian islands.

CHAMPAGNE UNDER CRIMSON SKIES

I'd boarded the ship just a couple of days earlier on Ternate. When Wallace established his base on the island in 1858 it was a phenomenally wealthy spice-island boomtown but today it is little more than a sleepy Indonesian port wrapped around the foot of a towering volcano. Even so, it was the most romantic setting imaginable for the beginning of a voyage on *Dunia Baru*, Indonesia's most luxurious traditional-style superyacht. As soon as we were aboard, the ship's 18-strong crew weighed anchor and within a few minutes we were toasting our voyage with chilled champagne under a crimson sunset. With a name meaning 'New World', this 51-metre pinisi (traditional Indonesian sailing ship) was hand-built by Sulawesi Shipwrights and, while her elegant lines and gracefully swooping bow would be familiar to



Wallace, her navigation, communications systems and engine rooms would appear completely futuristic.

While Darwin was, by comparison, a gentleman-naturalist with a comfortable billet in the famous Beagle, Wallace contented himself with sleeping on the deck of fishing boats. During long stints in the jungle with just a machete and a couple of local guides, he occasionally had to resort to drinking the water out of carnivorous pitcher plants. Alfred Russel Wallace rose from the restrictions of a poor family to become one of the great heroes of the Victorian era.

THE ISLAND THAT HISTORY FORGOT

Wallace arrived in The Malay Archipelago (as Indonesia was known back then) penniless after a Brazilian ship sank with his entire specimen collection from eight tough years in the Amazon onboard. With the sort of indomitable spirit that comes through as characteristic in his book, he simply started again and in Asian jungles eventually discovered more than 5 000 species that were new to science. His most productive collecting grounds turned out to be Batchian, on the appropriately named Strait of Patience. Marked on charts today as Bacan, this little island (about one-third the size of Bali), has seen few foreign visitors since the great naturalist spent six months collecting there. If Alfred Russel Wallace has been sidelined by history as 'the man who wasn't Darwin', then Bacan is 'the island that history forgot'.

So when I woke, on the second morning of our voyage, to find *Dunia Baru* anchored within tantalising reach of the island's jungle-shrouded shore, I borrowed one of the ship's kayaks and paddled over for a closer look. I headed towards the only signs of humanity, the bark-tiled roofs of a few fishing shacks, but when I clambered up the muddy bank the little hamlet seemed to be abandoned.

I spent almost an hour wandering at the edge of the jungle hoping for



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FIND OUT MORE

Dunia Baru boasts six spacious en-suite double cabins below deck and a wonderfully sumptuous full-beam master-suite on the aft upper deck. Her fully-equipped dive centre is operated by a PADI-certified dive instructor, and she boasts a gourmet eat-in galley where an experienced chef creates Indonesian, Asian and Continental culinary works of art. To charter the entire yacht, including an impressive selection of water toys like sailing dingies, jet skis, kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and three powerful RIBs, visit duniabaru.com

copra oil from coconuts (an industry that has changed little since Wallace's time). 'My people have lived here longer than anyone can remember,' he told me in Indonesian. 'We still see a lot of those black monkeys deeper in the jungle. If you want I'll get my gun and we can shoot one!'

LURING US ONWARD

It seemed that old habits die hard on Bacan. Wallace was almost certainly the only foreigner who had stayed on the island and, in tune with the research methods of his times, his modus operandi had been to shoot at least one of every species he could find.

I refused Opi's offer as graciously as possible and paddled back to the ship where the crew were already preparing to move on. As *Dunia Baru* turned her stern towards the shore I looked back at the jungle-clad hills and wished I had time to explore them. But my gaze was almost instantly drawn forwards when the sea erupted in a shower of spray and a pod of dolphins began to leap in our bow-wave, as if luring us onward.

Before our final landfall in far-off West Papua we would sail past more than 100 virtually unknown islands. Anywhere else it would seem like a lot but in the scale of the world's greatest island nation it was just a drop in the ocean. ■

a sighting of the local bird of paradise - which later became known as Wallace's standardwing (*Semioptera wallacii*) - or perhaps one of the large black baboon-monkeys that were common here. Wallace noted that this was the most easterly point in the world where monkeys existed and the embryonic theory of natural selection led him to hypothesise that they could only have been introduced here by settlers.

Both species avoided me. On my way back towards the beach, however, I met a young man called Opi Ibunya who works to produce

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