

# Sailing Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

By Ann Verbeek and Genevieve Duggan

Nusa Tenggara (literally Southeast Islands) stretches east from Lombok to Timor and south to Roti. Consisting of some of Indonesia's most diverse, remote and isolated communities and cultures, they are seldom travelled collectively. Flights to each of the islands are irregular and small aircraft fly once a week at best, depending on the weather. Sailing between the islands offers the best option, but if the wind is against you, it may take 12 hours between one island and another, using the boat's motor. A group of 19 intrepid FOM members embarked on the trip of a lifetime. Led by Genevieve and Tony Duggan, they visited 11 ports on seven of Nusa Tenggara's islands in 11 days, aboard a 3-metre *pinisi* (wooden) schooner christened *Ombak Putih* (White Wave).

After 18 months of planning, the Lesser Sunda Islands Study Tour began on 19 April in Maumere, the capital of the island of Flores, where the group boarded buses and headed to Watublapi village in the Sikka Regency hills. Welcomed with blessings, songs, dances, rice wine, betel and Sikka-style warp *ikat*, the trip had a remarkable beginning. Of the local textiles, the heavy use of natural indigo in the hand-woven cloth was striking. From around the age of 10, the women learn the entire process of dyeing, spinning, tying and weaving. Most of the fine *ikat* is created for weddings and used within the community. Both men and women participated in the performances – accompanied by the music of hand-crafted instruments.

After boarding the *Ombak Putih* at 2:00 pm we cast off and began an 18-hour eastward journey to Alor. Like all the islands of the northern archipelago, Alor is volcanic. It is also on one of the major historical sea-faring trading routes linking the spice islands of the Moluccas to Sumba and Timor. Over the centuries various groups of people settled the island – both Austronesian and Melanesian. In Takpala and Monbang, the two villages we visited, we saw two distinct cultures. Although neither village has a weaving tradition, the people wear unique fabrics. Most distinct is Monbang's bark cloth, a craft being revived under government guidance. In contrast, the Abui people of North-central Alor wore finely patterned, dark indigo *ikat* acquired through centuries of trading *moko* (bronze kettledrums).

A night's sailing brought us to Lamalera, a traditional whaling village on the southern coast of Lembata. Fishermen simulated traditional harpooning aboard two 30-foot, hand-crafted *paledang* (whaling boats). The boats' hand-woven, 'patch-work' *gebang* (palm-frond sails) reveal incredible skill. Dried sperm whale, dolphin and shark meat, hanging under the eaves of local houses, looked far from appetising.

We arrived in Seba, Savu's main town and harbour, before sunrise the following morning. Gone were the lush, green, volcanic hills of the northern islands. Before us was a flat, low-lying island bordered by a wide, white sand



Harpooning from the 1.5 metre bamboo platform requires speed and bravery as the fisherman launches himself at the passing sperm whale; Photo courtesy of Peter Brazier

beach. Travelling in open trucks to the district of Mesara, we stopped for a demonstration of lontar palm sap-tapping in Raedewa. In the hamlet of Ledetadu, women demonstrated dyeing and weaving techniques unique to the island. Other villagers demonstrated various clothing styles men and women wear throughout the different stages of their lives.

At a beach little changed since Captain James Cook sent an *Endeavour* landing crew ashore in 1770, we witnessed a *kowa hole* ceremonial boat launch. A palm-frond boat is used to send all possible bad things brought by strangers and foreigners, back to the sea. Walking away from the beach to an open field, we watched the *pehere jara* circling dance. Riders astride bell-decorated Savunese-bred horses moved in a wide circle that appeared to suggest warriors preparing for battle. Travelling farther inland to Rae Iki, a sunset performance of three dances provided a cultural interlude prior to a walk to Namata, the ritual centre of the district of Seba since the 13th or 14th century.

After a night sail to sacred, deserted, Rai Dana we were treated to a glorious sunrise and our first truly wet landing – although only a few braved the twenty-metre swim to the white sand beach. A few hours later, under full sail we headed to Rajjua Island to visit Ujudima, a traditional fenced village.

More sailing brought us north again to Ende, Central Flores, a village first occupied by the Portuguese in 1560, and later by the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company) in 1646. Under the VOC it was the main entrepôt for slave trade in the Lesser Sundas. Driving through the mountains of the Lio region we ascended 1,675 metres to the three-coloured crater lakes of the Kelimutu Volcano and paid an afternoon visit to a ritual (*adat*) house in Jopu.



FOM 'tourist tribe' dockside in Maumere, East Flores; Photo courtesy of Ann Verbeek



Ombak Putih, 'White Wave', 100 foot pinisi schooner  
Photo courtesy of Peter Brazier

Hugging the southern coast of Flores we docked at Aimere to go to the Ngada region and the extraordinary traditional villages of Luba and Bena. Most fascinating were the male and female houses and shrines (*ngadhu and bhaga*), and megaliths marking ancestor tombs.

In Melolo, Sumba, we travelled to Rindi Prai Yawang, a village with large and striking *adat* houses. Here we viewed the *Uma bokulu*, a 300-square-metre rectangular house with a four-storey, peaked roof. Enormous ancestor tombs, decorated with sculptures of gongs, horses (symbols of prosperity and wealth), *mamuli* and *marangga* (fertility symbols), other animals and the moon (cosmology) filled the dry and dusty centre of the village. From Rindi it was north to Waingapu for lunch with Rambu Ata. This Sumbanese master weaver's house was filled with visually impressive *hinggi*, a traditional *ikat* cloth measuring up to nine feet in length. Colourful images of warriors on horseback, skull trees, *naga* (snakes) and dragons were woven into the cloth.

Late in the afternoon we set sail for Rinca, one of the many islands in the Komodo National Park archipelago, to view the feared Komodo dragon in its natural habitat. A long, hot walk across the grass-covered island produced good viewing of the dragons and their prey. To rest, we sailed to the deserted island of Sabolan for snorkelling, swimming and a starlit beach BBQ.

At sunrise we departed for our final port of Labuhanbajo (literally 'harbour of the Bajau people', the sea gypsies of Southeast Asia). We entered a harbour filled with *pinisi* schooners and were again transported back in time – a perfect end to our sea journey before an abrupt return to the 21st century when we boarded our flight to Bali and saw our first newspaper in 12 days. Deciphering a *Bisnis Indonesia* front-page story written in *Bahasa Indonesia*, we learned

that seven days earlier the rest of the world was learning about swine flu. It was good to be heading home, but for most of us, Nusa Tenggara was a taste of the many adventures to come.



Riders and Savunese-bred horses perform the local circling dance, pehere jara  
Photo courtesy of Ann Verbeek

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