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## TRAVEL

# Indonesia, More Majestic Than Ever by Boat

The volcanic Banda archipelago, once the heart of a global spice trade, is one of Indonesia's most adventurous and storied destinations—and a magical place to tour by chartered yacht.

*By Tony Perrottet* | Photography by Frédéric Lagrange for WSJ. Magazine

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Visiting the Banda archipelago in Indonesia's Spice Islands is no easy proposition, thanks to the islands' tiny airstrip and infrequent ferry service. Arriving by yacht means weighing anchor at the sleepy port of Banda Neira, where the Gunung Api volcano looms as symmetrical as a child's drawing. As improbable as it seems, these remote islands were on track to become a hot destination for jet-setters in the 1990s. As you wander into the lobby of the islands' largest hotel, the Maulana, you'll find a fading snapshot of a visitor from the fall of 1996: Mick Jagger, wearing what looks like a Panama hat and a white linen shirt.

"I was only 9 years old when he visited, so I didn't know who he was," says a third-generation owner of the hotel, Mita Alwi. Her family recalls that the British rocker stayed for a leisurely tea and bowl of *kua trang pala*, fish soup with nutmeg. Alwi has more vivid memories of another celebrity guest whose snapshot also hangs on the wall, Jacques Cousteau, who arrived on his research vessel *Calypso* to explore a recent lava flow via helicopter. The ocean explorer gave her a present of a soft stuffed animal—a mouse lemur. And she was fascinated by the famed underwater cinematographer Valerie Taylor, who in the '70s had been hired by Steven Spielberg to shoot the shark scenes for *Jaws*. (Taylor developed a friendship with a spotted eel in Banda she named Honey; the two can be seen swimming together in a clip on YouTube.)



The Raja Ampat (“Four Kings”) archipelago off West Papua is one gateway to the so-called Coral Triangle, containing some of the world’s richest marine habitats.

From 1999 to 2002, a spasm of religious violence between Muslims and Christians put a hold on tourism in the archipelago. Today, after nearly 20 years of relative peace, a yacht charter industry is tentatively putting the Bandas back on the map. Once pandemic restrictions ease (at press time, the CDC advised against any travel to Indonesia), visitors will again be able to discover a world of majestic reefs, Dutch colonial ruins and dreamy nutmeg plantations.

One of the more romantic ways to explore the Bandas is aboard the *Dunia Baru*, a yacht modeled after a traditional Indonesian *phinisi*, a two-masted schooner with seven curtain-like sails, earlier versions of which have plied the Spice Islands for hundreds of years, with elegant lines like a floating sculpture silhouetted against the dramatic landscape.

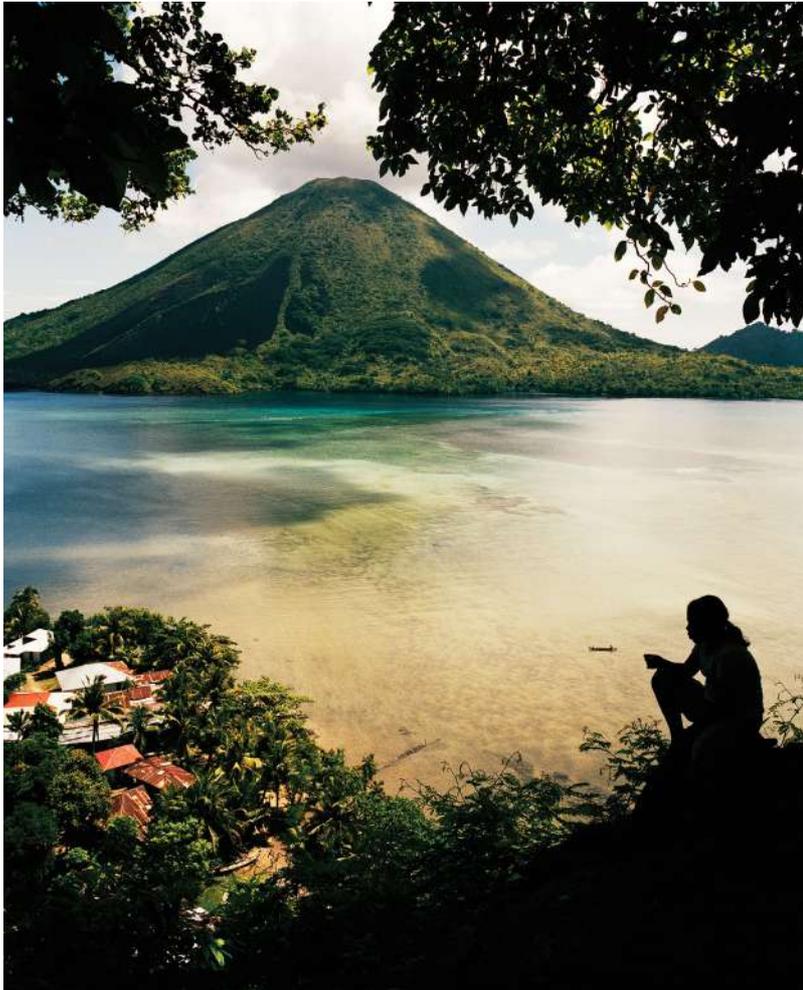


Crewmen folding a sail on the deck of the Dunia Baru; three of the 18 workers on board were shipwrights who had helped build the majestic schooner in the village of Sangkulirang and decided to stay on as part of the crew.

The Indonesian archipelago's roughly 17,000 islands arc across 3,000 miles of tropical waters and a tectonic fault line, part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, which sprouts 147 volcanoes, 76 of them active. The most notorious, Krakatoa, erupted devastatingly in 1883, while an underwater earthquake in 2004 caused a catastrophic tsunami in Sumatra. A seven-day journey between the ports of Ambon and Sorong crosses some of the world's most fertile marine habitats, including the relatively well-known Raja Ampat archipelago ("Four Kings"). The 11 small volcanic islands of the Bandas are at the heart of an expanse referred to as the Coral Triangle, and sometimes as "the Amazon of the ocean," home to some 600 types of reef-building corals, more than 2,000 species of reef fish and six of the seven species of marine turtle. The three main islands—Banda Neira, Gunung Api and Banda Besar—ring the harbor and main town, also called Banda Neira. A mix of nature and history gives the archipelago its allure, placing it on Unesco's Tentative List, in consideration for World Heritage status.

The rise and fall of the Bandas' celebrity in the 1990s is a faint echo of their cyclical fortunes over the past four centuries. In the 1600s, as the only place where nutmeg grew, the islands were in traders' crosshairs, inspiring acts of greed and savagery. "The Bandas are in the

middle of nowhere,” says Giles Milton, author of the definitive account of the islands’ colonial history, *Nathaniel’s Nutmeg*. “They were incredibly famous as the fast route to riches. If you could get to the islands and make it back alive, you were made.”



A villager on Banda Besar takes in the view of the Gunung Api volcano, whose eruption in 1988 lured Jacques Cousteau to study the rapid recovery of marine life on the lava flow.

The tiny specks have “a fabled, fairy-tale quality,” he says, that make visitors feel they’ve returned to another era. “Every island has a crumbling fort and dungeons and rusty cannons lying in the sand.” Locals joke that visitors are free to carry them off as souvenirs, if they can lift them. “There are Dutch planters’ houses in tropical decay, old churches and nutmeg trees everywhere, which are very beautiful and smell wonderful.”

For centuries, nutmeg from the islands was shipped to markets in Venice. In the 16th century, Portuguese naval powers decided to cut out the middlemen, thus giving the Banda Islands the dubious honor of being the site of one of the earliest Western imperial ventures in Asia. A club of voracious merchants in Amsterdam joined forces in 1602 to create a prototype multinational corporation, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which also created history’s first IPO and stock market. There was no shortage of takers: Nutmeg’s markup in the 16th and 17th centuries is estimated by historians to range as high as 60,000 percent.



From left: Nutmeg and mace drying on the island of Banda Besar; a woman seated on colorful tiles on Pulau Run.

A VOC force arriving in 1621 was supported by Japanese mercenaries who proceeded to behead much of the populace. Of about 15,000 islanders of Melanesian origins, all but 1,000 or so were executed or sold into slavery. After the genocide, the Dutch repopulated plantations with enslaved people and laborers from elsewhere in Indonesia; modern Bandanese are descended from a mix of the indigenous Moluccans, immigrants and slaves who arrived from various other countries.

One episode in the nutmeg wars had a lasting impact on the United States. In 1616 an English gentleman-adventurer, Captain Nathaniel Courthope, seized the remotest specks of the archipelago, Run and Ai, in an attempt to break the Dutch monopoly. He made a treaty with the islanders, who in exchange for protection became subjects of King James I; the monarch was then officially known as the king of England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Ai and Run. “An English courtier quipped that Run would be far more profitable a possession than Scotland ever would be,” Milton says.



A chart detailing a section of Indonesia's roughly 17,000 islands.

The colony was a quixotic failure. Courthope's 38 men and native supporters resisted a Dutch force of about 1,000 soldiers for 1,540 days, before he was killed, the English survivors fled, and the island's buildings were destroyed. But the treaty Courthope signed endured as a legal basis for an English claim to the Bandas.

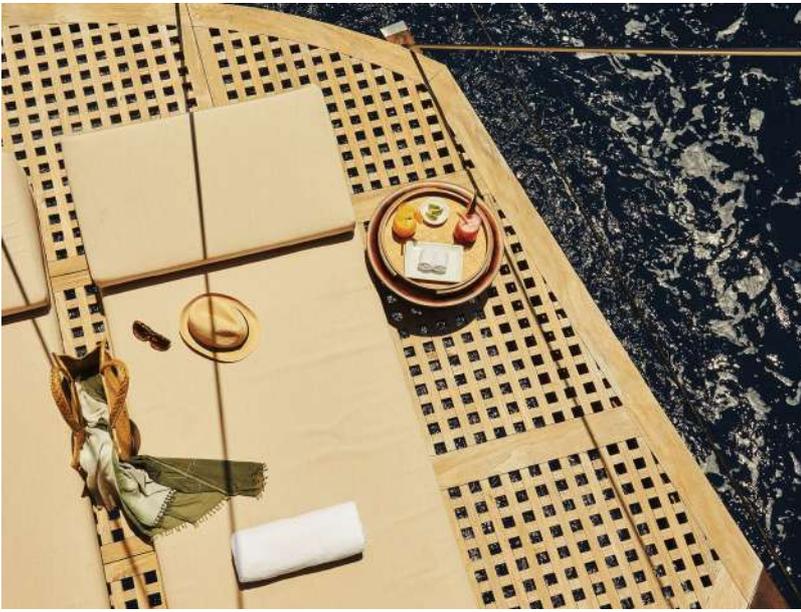
A few decades later, the Dutch agreed to make a swap with the English, gaining the Bandas in 1667 in return for the island of Manhattan. "The Dutch got their nutmeg monopoly; the Brits got New York," Milton says. The story is one modern Bandanese love telling New Yorkers today. "Would you like to trade Run back for Manhattan?" Mita Alwi asked me with a laugh. Her late grandfather Des Alwi once sent a telegram to New York's then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani proposing Run and Manhattan become sister islands.



Colorful clothes hang out to dry in Banda Neira.

The Dutch nutmeg monopoly lasted until the early 1800s, when British ships smuggled seedlings from the islands to Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the Caribbean. The former cradle of globalization had fallen into obscurity by the time Indonesia became independent from the Dutch in 1945. For most of the 20th century, only a handful of intrepid backpackers made a pilgrimage. Even today, ferry services are slow, and while a small airstrip allows Cessnas to land, flights are limited. According to the hotelier Alwi, arrivals had climbed to a few thousand visitors per year before the Covid crisis hit and the numbers spiraled to “about zero.” Elizabeth Pisani, the author of *Indonesia Etc.: Exploring the Improbable Nation*, says that’s just as well: “The islands are relatively untouched, and the tourist infrastructure is simply not there. There would be nowhere to put people if they arrived.”

Over the past decade or so, a charter-boat industry has expanded across Indonesia, with more than 20 luxury yachts based in the country, says Catherine Heald, CEO of the New York–based Remote Lands. Outfitters have added adventurous destinations to the most popular routes from Komodo and Raja Ampat, with rates from \$4,000 to \$20,000 a day. The Bandas take Indonesia’s allure to an extreme: A yacht can weigh anchor in a solitary cove every night, or cruise an entire week without spotting another ship.

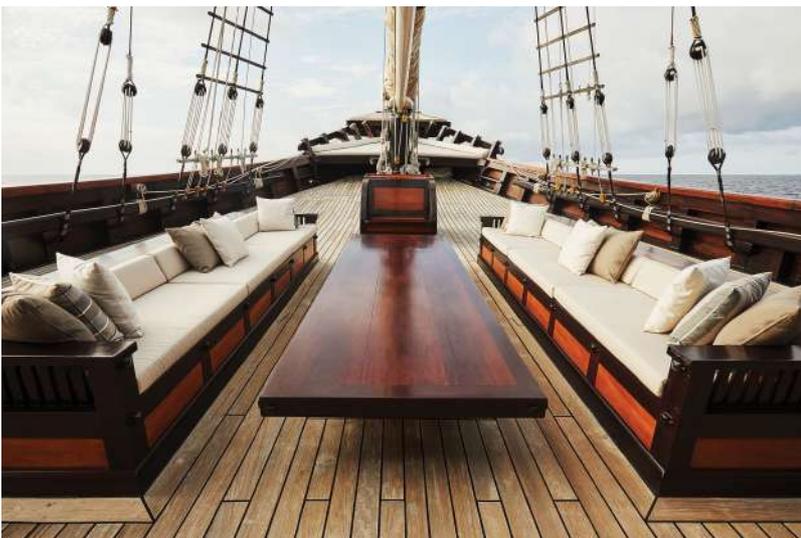


Guests on the *Dunia Baru* are served meals prepared by Chilean-born chef Jorge Valderrama. Treats served on the deck of the ship while underway.

The schooner *Dunia Baru* has a strong connection to Indonesian tradition, as well as an unusual history. When its current owner, Jing-Yi Wee—a Singapore-based real estate developer and an avid scuba diver—first chartered the boat from Komodo in 2014, she fell in love with its antique grace. The *Dunia Baru* (“New World” in Bahasa Indonesian) is as far removed from the common image of a “super yacht” as a Frank Lloyd Wright home is from a Hudson Yards skyscraper. For Wee, the love affair was confirmed when she made a second charter with her brother Teng Yuan Wee and friends in 2017. “We were just super surprised at how beautiful it was,” she says. “It was a work of art.”



The remote Banda Islands, once the heart of an international spice trade—and the only place on earth where nutmeg grew—is now an attractive destination among Indonesia’s charter yacht tours, and an itinerary served by the schooner *Dunia Baru*.



An update of the traditional Indonesian phinisi schooner, the *Dunia Baru* took eight years to build; its hull was crafted with hardwood from the jungles of Kalimantan. New owners refurbished the vessel and launched it in 2020.

The siblings flew to Bali to look into building a similar schooner, but were dismayed to find it was impossible. The *Dunia Baru*’s hull and much of its interior framework had been crafted from ironwood that grows in the jungles of Kalimantan, the Indonesian side of

Borneo, at a rate of half a millimeter a year. The boat's original owner, an American businessman based in Java named Mark Robba, had taken eight years to build the vessel, in large part because each piece of timber was sourced in the jungle. Robba hired members of the Konjo community, multigenerational shipwrights who work by hand in the village of Sangkulirang, to craft the hull, which took three and a half years to complete. It was then towed to Bali, where it took another four years to outfit the seven cabins, including a master cabin in the aft with a four-poster bed, before launching in 2013.

Robba agreed to sell the yacht in 2019, and the Wee siblings hired a Cape Town– and Singapore-based designer named Deirdre Renniers to refurbish the interior. “It wasn't so much a redesign as an upgrade,” Wee says. “We didn't want to rip out the amazing ironwood; those massive planks can never be replaced.” After adding new upholstery, artworks and Indonesian textiles, the *Dunia Baru 2.0* was ready for its first outing in late 2020.

Even today, a sailor can smell the Spice Islands before seeing them. The Bandas are covered with nutmeg plantations where the fruit of the glossy-leafed trees are harvested by farmers using a toothed basket attached to a bamboo pole, then dried in trays. The golden skin of the fruit peels when ripe to reveal the shiny brown nut, which after drying is cracked open to yield nutmeg. The seed is coated in a delicate crimson sheath that produces a second spice, mace, when dried.



From left: A villager relaxing by the island's waterfront; the day's catch at the market at Banda Neira.

Today, the archipelago's main town, Banda Neira, maintains a dreamlike serenity. A trail leads from the waterfront fish market to a colonial church whose aisle is paved with worn tombstones, each engraved with Dutch names. A few cafes and guesthouses serve nutmeg jam and nutmeg-flavored drinks. Crowning the hilltop is the imposing Fort Belgica, offering panoramic views across the shimmering waters to the still-active Gunung Api volcano. On the other islands, fishermen glide between villages in small boats. Run, the isle swapped by the Dutch for Gotham, sits about 15 miles west of Banda Neira, with a tiny village set among

rolling hills. On its even tinier neighbor, Ai, a white-sand beach is used by yachters as a setting for torchlit dinners.



A beachside repast on the island of Ai.

The ongoing pandemic remains a wild card for the local charter industry. Indonesia has been slow to roll out vaccines. In spring 2021, boats were returning as quarantine restrictions eased, but a surge in the Delta variant this summer put the recovery at risk, with the country experiencing an India-level crisis. Once it becomes possible to travel to Indonesia again, the 51-meter *Dunia Baru* can accommodate 14 passengers, with 18 crew including a Chilean-born chef, Jorge Valderrama. Scuba and snorkel gear allows guests to explore marine life, while above the waves there are Sea-Doos, kayaks and paddleboards. (Rates start at \$120,000 a week, booked through Y.CO, a full-service yachting company.) The crew includes three of the original carpenters who stayed with the boat after completion. “It was a source of immense pride for the families in the village,” Wee says. On its first cruise in 2013, the vessel toured other shipbuilding villages and at one was given a festive three-day christening.

Today, the trio of craftsmen contributes local expertise. “They are three friends who grew up together.... We consult with them [about renovations], asking about every woodwork adjustment, waterproofing, making sure the huge pieces of ironwood don’t crack,” Wee says. “They knew they were building one of the most beautiful boats in Indonesia.”



A fisherman steers his boat near the port of Banda Neira, a main entry point to the islands. The Bandas' infrequent ferry service, tiny airstrip and limited hotel options have made visiting by chartered yacht an appealing alternative.

One of them, Jamaluddin, a fifth-generation shipwright, says that building the boat was a satisfying way of showcasing his ancient maritime culture. Staying on as part of the crew, he adds, "gave me a new opportunity to take care of *Dunia Baru*, her team and her legacy." One day, the trio's efforts will be enjoyed by international travelers again. Mick Jagger might even consider another visit.

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