

TRAVEL

“I was given a proper tour of the village: 35 people living a life of agrarian subsistence among impressive dwellings that hadn’t changed in generations. **Glen Petrie.**”



Glen Petrie was greeted by affectionate villagers seen posing with hunting tools, an ancient moko drum and traditional “ikat” woven textiles when he visited Alor. PHOTOS: GLEN PETRIE

Fresh prince of ALOR

Remote Indonesian island with ancient, fortified hilltop villages impresses **Glen Petrie** with people’s kindness and its rich setting.

I spent eight months travelling by local boat from one end of Indonesia to other, a country of 17,508 islands spanning over 5,000 kilometres of sea. Every island held surprise, delight and sometimes peril.

A local boat landed me on the little-known Indonesian island of Alor, where I’d hoped to visit its ancient, fortified hilltop villages.

Alor’s villages have long been so insular that a different dialect is spoken from one hilltop to the next. At least, that was the case 30 years ago, when I was a wandering young backpacker. Conflicts were common, and seldom did they see a western visitor.

“Go to Takpala,” said the Sultan of Alor, when I asked permission to venture inland. “You will be treated well there.” I

thought it impolitic to ask if they still collected heads, which my guidebook claimed they did just a generation ago.

A hot climb up a mountain path — and some trepidation — left me wet with sweat when I arrived at a gate in a low stone wall. I could see six or so dwellings with towering conical roofs of thatch inside the compound. A teenage boy with Afro hair stood barefoot, eyeing me suspiciously. I tried my best smile. “Takpala?”

He nodded and gestured me in. My hesitant entrance brought the village to a halt. A pair of women husking rice let their pestles fall silent. A man who was rolling tobacco leaves froze. Children stopped playing and stared. A tall, big-boned woman dropped a hoe and ran toward me. Blood drooled from her mouth. No, it was the red juice of betel nut, a local hallucinogenic. She grabbed my hand in both of hers and kissed it, staining it red. “Tuan!” Sir!

Her hand came tenderly to my face. She stroked me and squeezed my arms, massaged my hands and shoulders, as if not sure I was real. A thin, leathery man joined her inspection, muttering words that sounded like approval. Young boys and girls busily plucked away burrs that had caught onto my clothing.

The startlingly affectionate hosts introduced themselves as Peter and Mary.

I made note of their Christian names and they pointed to a church steeple poking from the jungle a long way down. So, missionaries had made it here, planting a tiny sprout of Catholicism in an Islamic nation.

“One father!” Peter proudly proclaimed, using Bahasa Indonesia (of which I’d acquired a very rudimentary grasp).

I was given a proper tour of the village: 35 people living a life of agrarian subsistence among impressive dwellings that hadn’t changed in generations.



A Catholic missionary church is found on Alor, where villagers have an agrarian way of life.

Each house featured a large bamboo deck a metre above the ground, open to the air. Above it, a thatch tent-like structure, which contained rooms on two levels, rose steeply to a height of four metres.

I climbed up inside and found that the first level held the kitchen, where women cooked in darkness over open fires. It was choked with smoke.

I tried to explain that this was dangerous to their health, but got nowhere. I was then installed on the open deck to begin what would become a princely existence. Teenage girls placed a pillow under my head. One under my feet. They put a pillow under each elbow. They removed my running shoes. They brought me hot coffee and fried bananas. Girls sat near and waved flies away.

Peter invited me to stay as long as I liked, and I was inclined to accept. We chatted about where I had come from, what it was like there, whether I like Alor and — most difficult to answer — why I had come.

I'd brought food gifts from the market in town: bananas (they hung in bunches all around the house), papaya (the trees were laden with them), corn (they had an attic full), coffee (the hillside provided bushels). I had returned to them their own produce.

Mary took me aside and explained, with a maternal cluck of the tongue, that when you come here, you don't bring food, you don't bring anything. You just come. Understand? I understood.

The salubrity of the visit led me to forget the headhunting history of these people, until Peter led me to a cave where old parangs (machetes) were kept. One had a handle embellished with leather and horsehair.

"Very nice," I allowed, then noticed a series of notches on the blade. I counted 14.

"What are these ...?" I asked, but the moment the words left my lips, I knew the answer.

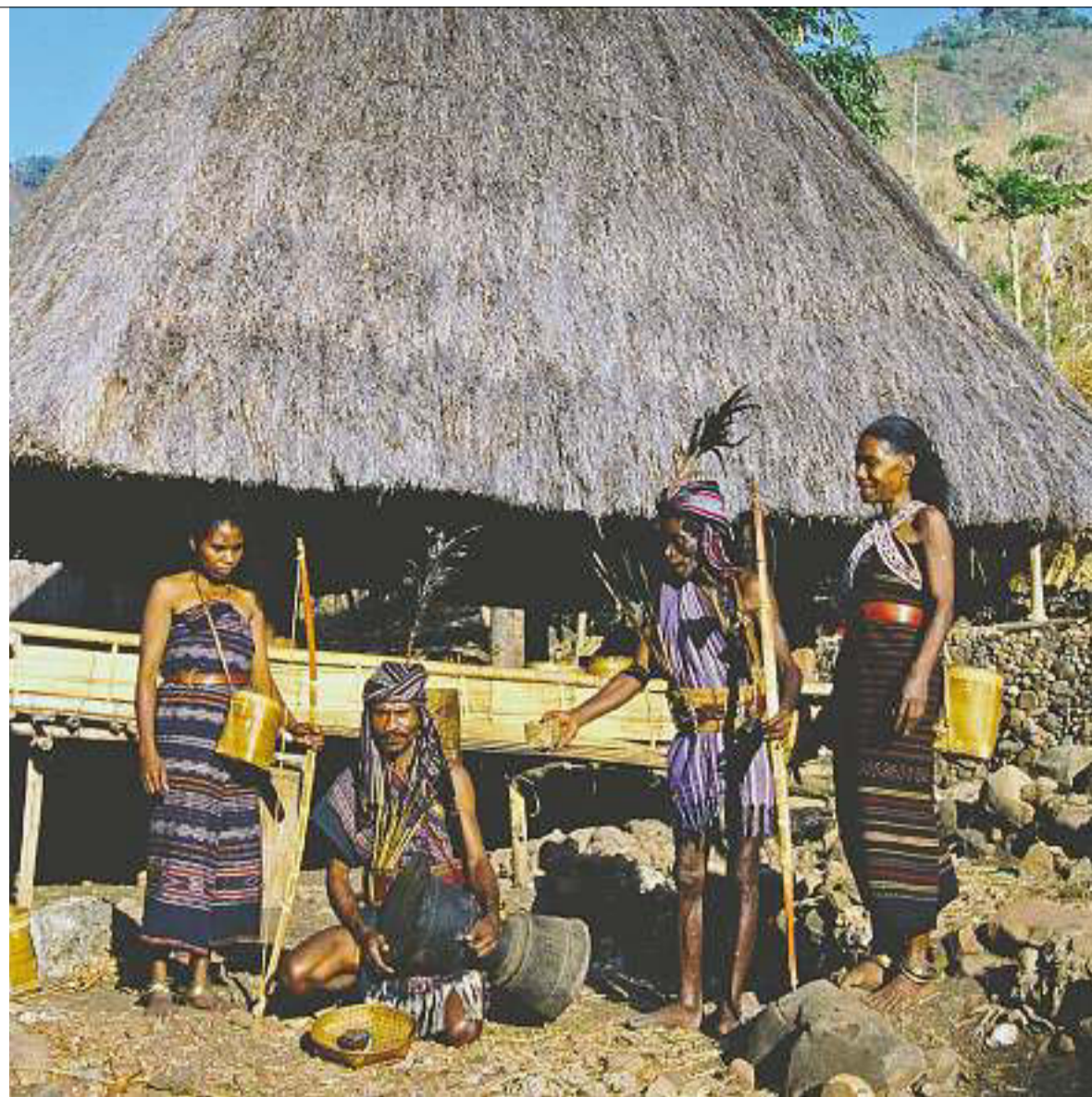
Peter drew a finger across his neck and laughed. My blood ran cold.

The instrument in my hands had dispatched 14 heads from their host bodies.

Peter noticed my pallor. "Not anymore," he assured. "A long time ago." How long ago was hard to get a fix on.

I couldn't reconcile violence with such kind, gentle people. Peter still hunts, he said, but deer and boar, not the neighbours. The notches were earned by his father. Heads were trophies taken to settle disputes with other villages in days past, and I would later learn that government authorities have long since met with chiefs, and still do, to lay down the modern law of the land.

Today the men prefer farming. That's because the women do it. Across the developing world, women do the heavy lifting, but at least in Takpala they gain some agency from their labour, realizing the men depended on it. I often saw them boss their husbands around. It is unthinkable for a man to cook for himself, so if he has a dispute with his wife, his only choices are to acquiesce or starve.



Alor villagers in ceremonial dress. The villagers' gentle nature contrasts with their ancestors' dark past.



Demonstrating a moko drum, a rare item believed to have been brought by Chinese traders centuries ago.

For that reason, some men, like the suave mustachioed Dominicus, had two wives. Clearly conversion to Catholicism still had some gaps.

I have to admit I benefited from my maleness. My days were passed prone on pillows. Every household vied for my attentions by feeding me fresh, granular coffee and fried bananas. I ate this snack seven times a day. Orpa, Mary's eldest girl, attentively waved flies away. She noticed me scratching my feet and promptly fell upon my toes to pick away the dry skin. I began to wonder if I was being primed as a wedding candidate for this dutiful young girl.

No matter how much I insisted on doing for myself, my clothes were washed for me and hung on trees to dry. I could not sit like

the others, but had to remain prone like a corpse at an Irish wake, discussed by the attendees. I could not even don my own shoes, but had them applied by obsequious young ladies.

I was not permitted to bathe myself. Martinus, the teenage boy (who had the annoying habit of standing at attention whenever I addressed him), would seat me on a stool by the well, douse me with the cold water, lather my limbs, rinse me off, dry me and help me dress. When it came time to relieve myself, I insisted my footman at least turn his back.

Once, while lying and reading, I broke wind and Peter rushed over to see if I was all right. This had all gone, I decided, far enough. Not only was I feeling suffocated, but ashamed. My

mere presence was altering the traditional daily life of a village.

I told them I would depart in the morning. This did not go well. "Don't go back to Canada, Tuan," Martinus said as I packed to go. "We are content here. Stay."

"Yes, Tuan," Peter concurred. "You are one of us. Stay in Takpala." Orpa looked on, teary and distressed. There is no describing the affection I felt for these people at that moment.

"I can't, Peter. I'm from another world. I must return to it." I was aware of sounding like a corny scene from Star Trek.

Peter nodded acceptance. I slipped some cash under a pillow and they escorted me down the mountainside. Martinus carried my backpack. I made a vow to one day come back and visit.

Garbage turned into artwork

Gallery to highlight blight of trash left on Mount Everest

GOPAL SHARMA

KATHMANDU Trash collected from Mount Everest is set to be transformed into art and displayed in a nearby gallery, to highlight the need to save the world's tallest mountain from turning into a dumping site.

Used oxygen bottles, torn tents, ropes, broken ladders, cans and plastic wrappers discarded by climbers and trekkers litter the 8,848.86-metre-tall peak and the surrounding areas.

Tommy Gustafsson, project director and a co-founder of the Sagarmatha Next Centre — a visitors' information centre and waste upcycling facility — said foreign and local artists will be engaged in creating artwork from waste materials and train locals to turn trash into treasures.

"We want to showcase how you can transform solid waste to precious pieces of art ... and generate employment and income," Gustafsson said.

"We hope to change the people's perceptions about the garbage and manage it," he said.

The centre is located at an altitude of 3,780 metres at Syangboche on the main trail to Everest base camp, two days walk from Lukla, the gateway to the mountain.

It is due for "soft opening" to locals in the spring as the number of visitors could be limited this year due to coronavirus pandemic restrictions, Gustafsson said.

Products and artwork will be displayed to raise environmental awareness, or sold as souvenirs with the proceeds going to conservation of the region, he said.

Trash brought down from the mountain or collected from households and tea houses along the trail is handled and segregated by a local environmental group, the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee, but the task in a remote region that has no roads is a huge challenge.

Garbage is dumped or burned in open pits, causing air and water pollution.

Phinjo Sherpa, of the Eco Himal group involved in the scheme, said under a "carry me back" initiative, each returning tourist and guide will be requested to take a bag containing one kilogram of garbage back to Lukla airport, where the trash will be airlifted to Kathmandu.

In 2019, more than 60,000 trekkers, climbers and guides visited the area.

"We can manage a huge amount of garbage if we involve the visitors," Sherpa said.

Everest was first climbed by New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay in 1953.

Reuters

Classic Baltic & Caribbean Reposition Cruises



CruisePlus
TRAVEL & TOURS

Please don't hesitate to ask us about:

Pricing for any other stateroom or categories (outside, suites, etc.), different fares (if you prefer less perks or non-refundable deposit options), Manulife insurance (which we highly recommend!), extending your stay pre or post cruise, singles and additional passenger fares, adding air, or any other cruise - we'll provide exceptional value and service and are happy to assist!

16 Night Classic Baltic | Regal Princess | Sep 2, 2021

With Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Russia, Finland, Sweden & Poland!

- » 14-night roundtrip Southampton cruise
- » \$150 US per person onboard credit
- » 2 nights in a 4★ Southampton hotel
- » **Princess Plus:** prepaid gratuities, WiFi & beverages onboard

\$5999 BALCONY
taxes included | pp CAD

16 Night Caribbean | Caribbean Princess | Nov 4, 2021

With Puerto Rico, St Maarten, St Lucia, Grenada, Curacao, Aruba & more!

- » 14-night New York to Fort Lauderdale cruise
- » \$100 US per person onboard credit
- » 2 nights in a 4★ New York hotel
- » **Princess Plus:** prepaid gratuities, WiFi & beverages onboard

\$3499 BALCONY
taxes included | pp CAD



Get in touch with us by email at info@cruiseplus.ca



1-800-854-9664

*New bookings only. Fares are per person in the currency noted, based on double occupancy, are capacity controlled, subject to availability at the time of booking and may be withdrawn without notice. Optional & locally payable supplier charges may apply and are not included. Amenities, if offered, are available for the first two in a stateroom & based on double occupancy. CruisePlus reserves the right to correct any human or electronic errors in the offers above. Before you book, be aware of Covid-19 restrictions clearly understand insurance terms and conditions. Future Cruise Credits may not or may only partially apply. Ship's Registry: Bahamas. CruisePlus Management Ltd. Consumer Protection BC License # 3325