



Indonesia's lush scenery paints an idyllic scene, but during writer Glen Petrie's long-ago voyage, that beauty came with a hefty helping of pitfalls and surprise. PHOTOS: GLEN PETRIE

# SLOW BOATS THROUGH THE SOLORS

Indonesian islands journey delivers epic adventure for intrepid traveller

GLEN PETRIE

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

As the wooden ferry approached Lewoleba on the island of Lembata, in the remote, undeveloped Solor Archipelago, it looked to be a nice place to hang out for a while. Silky palms nodded languorously over long beaches, thatch fishermen huts sat on stilts over coral seas, and the volcanic cone of Mt. Iliape smoked in the background. A good place, but not, as I soon discovered, idyllic.

A woman had just had her head chopped off.

I got the story from a one-eyed policeman as he lounged over an orange Fanta in the only guest house catering to roaming island traders and the occasional backpacker like me. An old man died of mysterious causes, he told me, leering suggestively with his one good eye.

"Old age?" I offered in rudimentary Bahasa Indonesia.

He shook his head. "Ilmu hitam!" I thumbed through my dictionary: Black magic.

The old man's family had accused an elderly woman of putting a spell on him. "So they cut her into pieces."

The eldest son had ceremoniously delivered the woman's head in a box to the police, apparently with a sense of pride for having rid the area of a witch.

I went to the harbour to look for a boat out.

The dock is the social centre of towns like this. This one had lights powered by a chugging generator that reflected on the water like a little carnival. Giant insects were drawn to the bulbs, as were villagers, picking up news from sailors passing through on their various wooden craft. I asked for a boat to the town of Kalabahi, on the island of Alor.

"This one is going to Kalabahi!" declared the cherubic captain of a worm-eaten 40-footer called Diana. "Tomorrow."

SEE INDONESIA ON F8



The Diana provided one of few connections around the islands of the Solor Archipelago.



Boats glide through the peaceful waters, while fishing nets are repaired on shore.



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# Adventure, idyll and unfailing hospitality

INDONESIA FROM F7

Perfect. "What time?"  
"Eight o'clock." His name was Budi. We shook hands.

As a precaution, I walked to the pier the next morning at seven. The Diana had left at six. "When is the next boat?" I asked of a tiny, neat young man who, by a stroke of luck, turned out to be the local teacher of English.

"Maybe one week." Then he offered a parcel of hope, as if my sunken face was too much for him to bear. "The Diana stops at Wairiang tomorrow. Take the bus to Wairiang now. But you must hurry."

The bus was a discarded troop transport. Twenty locals and I crowded onto hard benches under a canvas canopy. My feet rested on sacks of rice, my knees at my chin. A goat hobbled under the bench sniffed my bum through the slats.

The truck jumped over rocks, ruts and tree roots with a great clamour of colliding metal parts. At one point a fallen tree blocked the way. We go no further, I thought, but the young men attacked the thing with parangs (machetes) and reduced it to sticks in just minutes. I was reminded of the witch and shuddered.

Seat mates told me the journey to Wairiang was five hours, but I no longer put any stock in Indonesian time estimates. At one point, the truck almost toppled on a steep mountain curve. Two wheels left the ground and the truck started a slow motion roll over the edge of a cliff. I gaped into the maw of death until a lone gum tree stopped the truck from falling with a satisfying clunk.

We shifted to the top side of the vehicle, it returned to all fours, and we went on our way.

After five hours, a village. It was not Wairiang, but Balauring. A rest stop, they said. I climbed down and discovered the goat had chewed away the heel of my left shoe. The driver and his men proceeded to remove the vehicle's driveshaft and hammer at it with a wrench fashioned from a flattened length of pipe. I felt panic.

"How much further to Wairiang?"

"Five hours."

"When will we leave?"

"Two hours." Bang, bang, bang.

"Four hours."

I hobbled to the docks to kill time. The Diana was there!

Budi and I were both startled and asked in unison, "What are you doing here?"

"When are you leaving for Kalabahi?"

"Now." With great glee I rescued my bag from the truck and hopped aboard.

Those next few days at sea were about as close as I could get to my idea of paradise. I was Treasure Island's Jim Hawkins and Kidnapped's David Balfour. I was



A man bathes his horse at the village of Wairiang, where the site of a visiting foreigner was greeted with great excitement and curiosity.



The Diana sails through the cerulean waters of Indonesia's Solor Archipelago.

Huck Finn and every wandering youth of childhood novels.

The shabbily endearing Diana glided over shallow reefs where the sea glowed emerald, as if lit by lamps below the surface. I felt a desire to dive in, to bathe in the lurid colour.

The engine pattered and we had blue sails up, and skimmed the coast. Green volcanic mountains rose straight from the sea and disappeared in little clouds at the top. I sat atop the wheelhouse, my bare feet dangling as the Diana took gentle swells. The dozen or so other passengers, local families visiting relatives, avoided the sun under a canopy at the rear.

I did laundry in a bucket and hung my socks and underwear in the rigging like bunting. I sang. I

read. I watched flying fish. I practised Bahasa with the crew. Now and then we'd pass another craft, a fishing boat or the floating home of people who spent their whole lives at sea.

At dusk we dropped anchor at Wairiang for the night.

The Diana meant a lot to the people of Wairiang. The boat was, and maybe still is, their only contact with other places, except for the truck, which still hadn't arrived. People came to meet us in canoes and we passed them sacks of rice.

The sight of a foreigner was a cause of excitement, and I was invited ashore and given a cold shower. In public. The entire population watched, pointing and commenting on my whiteness and who knows what.

I spent the night on the boat, reading on the deck by flashlight. A young fellow called Ahmed sat close in companionable silence. From high in the black hills came a lonesome hooting sound, a forlorn moan like a Swiss horn.

"The truck?" I asked Ahmed. He shook his head. "Mountain people."

"What is the sound?" "A horn, made from the horn of a bull."

"What does it mean?"

"There is some problem. The mountain people need the help of the village people."

A different pitch answered from Wairiang. The two factions, separated by a long hike, carried on a strange dialogue in the darkness. I never learned what it was about

and we sailed at dawn.

Relieving oneself at sea was a bit of a peril. The loo was a tiny room hanging off the stern with no floor. One had to balance on two slats, with the propeller wash churning below. It was a tricky proposition to lift one foot at a time to remove one's pants, and put them on again, without disappearing into the sea.

Islands came and went, passing on either side. Alfred Russel Wallace's famous line demarking Asia and Australia was behind us, and I could see his theory before me. The lush jungles typical of Southeast Asia were falling away, and dry Antipodean grasslands became more frequent. Marsupials lie somewhere ahead.

I had no idea what to expect of Alor once I reached it. Captain Budi described it as an island of mountaintop villages, each fortified in a medieval sort of way. From one village to the next, a different language is spoken and there is much strife between groups. "Headhunters," he said, grimacing.

The scant half a page my Lonely Planet guide devoted to Alor backed him up. "The people of the interior were little affected by the outside world - in fact so little that just a quarter of a century ago they were still taking heads!"

Anyway, there was no turning back. I could only hope for the best and rely, as always, on the unfailing hospitality of the Indonesian people. Whatever their regard for witches, they had always been exceedingly kind to me.

Surely I could follow that sage advice about keeping one's head while others around me were losing theirs.

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