

ON THE WALLABY 2020 PART 3

MADURA TO DILI 13 to 18 February)

Our next landfall was at the eastern end of the island of Madura which lies just off the north-eastern end of Java. We went ashore to a traditional fishing village where there were many Madurese fishing boats with their distinctive high stem and stern posts and colourful paint-work both along the shore and at sea. Most of them are powered by long-shaft diesel outboard motors and can be heard coming for miles! Much of their fishing is done from floating bamboo platforms called *bagan* from which they set nets at night and attract the fish with powerful lights. The bay also has a large number of seaweed farms, part of a rapidly growing industry though each “farm” is manually harvested.



We were bussed to the main town of Sumenep, about 20 minutes away. On the way we passed mainly well-built cement block homes surrounded by plots of corn and other small crops. Further on we passed the salt evaporation pans from which Madura Sea Salt has been produced for hundreds of years. They would not be filled with sea water until the end of the monsoon wet in about another month. There were also large paddy fields in which the next crop of rice was being planted. The impression was of a very prosperous area that has a long history of progress and stability.



Our first stop in Sumenep was the imposing Great Mosque. Its architecture reflects the various cultural influences of the Chinese, Arab and European settlers and traders that have passed through this area over many centuries.

The bright yellow colour of its imposing entry gate fits the setting and the character of the town. Within the mosque itself, the prayer room at the centre of the complex is stark white. It is surrounded by gardens and decorative pavilions and covered walk ways. The Islamic dress standard was strictly in place and attendants offered sarongs and scarves for those with bare knees and shoulders. Ladies were asked to cover their heads. The attendants themselves were dressed in formal Madurese attire of batik sarong, black jacket and batik turban.



Immediately across from the mosque is the Adipure Park. We walked down through the park towards the Royal Palace or Keraton where we joined the most bizarre procession imaginable. A large float in bright blues and golds was manned by a band of drummers, trumpeters and so on with full amplification. The group had the rather incongruous name of "Tinkerbelle"! Tinkerbelle was lead down the street by a trio of "butterfly" dancers. The locals, including a nearby primary school were attracted to the sight and sound - smiles everywhere.



To enter the palace grounds you pass through the "Smiling Gate" and a guard of honour of dancers in traditional costumes. Just inside the gate was an open fronted pavilion in which are displayed various royal treasures including a carriage donated to the Sultan by Queen Victoria in appreciation of the sea salt from Madura of which she was said to be very fond.



The palace is an imposing building with large open spaces and shaded terraces. It was built in 1762 for the Queen and her son. The main body of the palace is a large open-sided meeting hall which is linked to the palace proper by a wide galleried hallway. It suits the climate very well.

The local crafts of batik making and a large collection of the traditional Kris daggers were on display. The batik work was being done by school children starting with the incredibly intricate design being drawn onto paper freehand by a young lad of about 14. The design is transferred to fabric and the outline traced in wax before having dye applied by hand in selected areas. The skill of these young people was most impressive, especially the young chap drawing the design.



We were entertained by a Gamelan band (again well amplified) and, after a delicious lunch, by traditional dances performed by senior high school kids. The costumes were quite elaborate and certainly the male costumes were similar to the shadow puppets we saw in Batavia. This was a real feast of Madura culture.



From Madura we continued east crossing the Wallace Line that demarcates the change between the Asian and Australasian flora and fauna. Our next stop was at Satonda Island with its central crater lake. The lake on Satonda is said to have been originally fresh water until a tsunami created by the massive 1815 eruption of Tambora, 30 km away on neighbouring Sumbawa Island, filled the basin with sea water. Since then evaporation has exceeded rainfall which has caused the salinity level to be even higher than the sea. It is, however, quite an attraction to have a swim in an ancient crater lake.



As we sailed away that evening the clouds lifted briefly from the summit of Tambora. Its eruption is considered the world's greatest in more than a thousand years and was an order of magnitude greater than Krakatoa. It caused a major change in global weather for several years especially in the northern hemisphere where the "years without a summer" caused many deaths from famine and starvation.

Our next stop was one that we had been anticipating greatly - Komodo Island, the last sanctuary of the world's largest lizards, the Komodo Dragon. Komodo Island lies just off the western end of Flores and is of volcanic origin. It is much dryer than the areas that we had visited to date with extensive areas of grassland and monsoon forest. We were taken on a guided walk, accompanied by rangers "armed" with forked sticks to ward off any dragons that we may have encountered. No dragons on that walk but we did see a huge nest mound built by an Orange-footed Scrub Fowl that the dragons also use to incubate their eggs.

The young dragons are vulnerable to being eaten by the adults and as a result have developed a strategy to nest in the tops of old palm trees. The palms die once they flower and the rotting top is a safe haven for the young dragons because the adults are too big to climb.



On our return to the ranger station we found four dragons, each more than 3 m long, all stretched out dozing and/or digesting a Timor Deer that they had killed on the beach two days previously. It was quite eerie being within a few metres of such powerful and potentially dangerous wild animals. They are now recognised as having venom glands that secrete into their saliva. It is sufficiently strong that they only need to achieve a simple bite on their prey, even a water buffalo, to eventually bring it down. Our guest lecturer Ian reported that DNA analysis confirms that they evolved in Australia – their closest relative is the Australian Sand Monitor.



The other attraction on Komodo Island is a pink beach. The beach sands include remnants of a microorganism that colours some corals pink and when they break down the pink material is mixed with the normal beach sand. The bay on which the pink beach is located has absolutely fantastic corals and fish life so it is a magnet for snorkelers and scuba divers. Surprisingly, those, like Judy, that snorkelled there found that the water was quite cool – about 24°C rather than 26°C +. We were not the only group there on a Sunday – there were boats of local tourists from other islands with divers and snorkelers including a number of teenage Indonesian (Muslim) girls learning to scuba dive.



Our final Indonesian destination was Maumere, a town at the eastern end of Flores. Flores first came under the influence of the Portuguese and consequently the population is largely Christian. Our shore tour took us 45 minutes up into the hills to a village that specialised in the weaving of *ikat* fabric. The village is 600m above sea level and the country was very reminiscent of the Rabaul hinterland with steep-sided volcanic ridges, coconuts, cacao, bananas and other crops. We received a traditional welcoming ceremony with drums and gongs while the village chief made a speech. As we moved through the village the local Girl Guide troupe sang us welcoming songs.



Once we had got to the performance space we were offered betel nut (with the pepper and lime), *arak* (a fermented palm toddy), green coconut milk and cakes. We politely declined the betel nut. We were then entertained with various dances that reflect village life and traditions. One dance involved a young man shimmying up a tall bamboo pole held by five or six other men and then doing various manoeuvres at the top of the pole. The whole show was also watched on by the villagers.



The visit ended with demonstrations by the women on how they design and weave their quite incredible *ikat* fabric. They grow the cotton locally which is processed and hand spun into thread which is then strung on a frame and the pattern is established by wrapping fine pieces of leaf around the areas that the weaver does not want to be coloured by dye. The dyes themselves are made from plant material with an indigo colour the most common. Once dyed, the tread is then set up on the back-strap loom and the weaving is done. It seems a very laborious process but the finished product is quite wonderful.



The cloth sells for around \$60 to \$100 for a sarong-type length in the village but probably is three or four times that in craft shops in Bali and elsewhere. This craft is only done by the women of the village in their “spare” time between garden, children and cooking. It is a craft that should have some form of heritage protection. The village chief was a very happy man with a visit from this group of Australian tourists.



On our way back to the ship we stopped in at the local markets. They were not the most scrupulously clean but not very different to those in Port Moresby or Rabaul. The range of produce was quite extensive with plenty of tropical spices, fruits and vegetables as well as “European” vegetables such as tomato, cabbage and so on. The heat and humidity did not encourage us to stay long.



Our final port-of-call on this cruise was Dili, the capital of Timor Leste. The people of Timor Leste suffered greatly under Indonesian military rule following the departure of the Portuguese and the Indonesian invasion of 1975. Their struggle for independence was a constant theme of the visit. Our first stop was at the Tais Market which features traditional Timorese fabrics (*tais*) and handcrafts. In traditional times the *tais* cloth was woven on back-strap looms much like those we saw on Flores but these days many of the items on sale are made overseas and sold alongside the genuine article. In traditional times *tais* was used as a form of exchange or for a gift of respect or to welcome guests. We were told that all of the stalls in the market were owned by members of the one extended family.



Our next stop was a place of very much more sombre significance, the Santa Cruz Cemetery, where Indonesian troops massacred some 250 of the thousand or so young Timorese that had gathered to

pay respects to a young Timorese man that had been killed by the Indonesians two weeks previously. The massacre was witnessed and filmed by a British cameraman Max Stahl who managed to smuggle the footage out to Australia. Its airing on British TV in early 1992 created such a storm of protest that eventually saw the UN conduct a vote of the Timorese people to determine if they wished to stay with Indonesia or become independent. Some 78% voted for independence which again sparked violence from Indonesian militias. The Santa Cruz massacre of 12 November is now commemorated in Timor Leste with a public holiday.



During our visit one of the young expedition leaders from the ship asked Linda if those responsible for the massacre were ever charged or gaoled. Her response totally shocked him – “no, the Indonesian general in charge (Prabowo Subianto) recently stood for election as Indonesian president”! He was also the son-in-law of then President Suharto.

Our next stop was similarly very solemn - the Museum of Timor Resistance. Its display is a timeline from the early struggles for independence from Portugal and on until independence was gained from Indonesia in 2002. It has some very grim memories for the people.

Our final visit was to the foot of the hill on which the 27 m tall statue of Christ (*Cristo Rei*) stands. While there is a superficial similarity to the massive statue of *Christ the Redeemer* in Rio de Janeiro it was the idea of President Suharto to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the integration of East Timor into the Indonesian republic and ironically has become a symbol of Timor Leste’s independence. There was an opportunity to climb the 597 steps to the statue but we decided to be entertained by some traditional Timorese dancing instead.



From Dili it was back to Darwin after day and a half at sea to end this most wonderful expedition. Our abiding memories, apart from the Orangutans, Proboscis Monkeys and Komodo Dragons, were the smiling and very welcoming people that we encountered. There was none of the artificial “smile for the tourists” type of encounter, only a genuine welcome and thank you for visiting. We have formed a much more positive view of Indonesia, in spite of the lessons in Dili. Indonesia is a whole lot more than Java or Bali, and we are very glad that we had the opportunity to see those other parts.

SOME GREAT INDONESIAN SMILES



Ken and Judy
March 2020

