

ON THE WALLABY 2020 PART 1

SINGAPORE TO JAKARTA (30 January to 7 February)

We flew in comfort from Brisbane to Singapore using a lot of our accumulated frequent flyer points and arrive there quite refreshed even though we left Brisbane at 0300. We had booked a hotel close to China Town and after a freshen-up we headed out to refresh our memories of this part of the city. The celebrations for the Chinese New Year of the Rat were still in full swing as evidence from the decorations along one of the main streets. The shops were also full of “rat” merchandise, much of it more reflective of Mickey Mouse than anything else.



We were not in the market for clothes, cameras or electronic gear so we avoided that area and wandered through “Food Street” with its old buildings and cafes. The old street-food outlets have gone a bit more upmarket now with shop fronts and so on.



Close to the food street we came across a shop promoting Elephant Parade, a charity that supports the rescue and rehabilitation of baby elephants. The elephant shop was selling statues of baby elephants that have been decorated by a whole range of artists and celebrities and are sold to fund the charity. It started when a couple of Dutchmen in 2006 came across a baby elephant in Thailand that had lost a leg through treading on a landmine. There is quite a range of designs and sizes, including some life-sized versions.



Just across the street from the elephant shop was the very large Relic of Buddha's Tooth Temple. This is a magnificent building; the interior is elaborately decorated with literally hundreds of statues of the Buddha and other deities as well as lots of flowers and other offerings.



The one major attraction in Singapore that we had not visited previously was the Jurong Bird Park so we made a point of visiting there this time. The park is some distance to the west of the city but taxis are so cheap in Singapore that we indulged in one for this visit. The park has two major walk through aviaries as well as several other themed aviary sections such as parrots or raptors. There are also several open enclosures for birds such as pelicans, swans and flamingos. They also stage two shows in which they talk about bird behaviour and have trained some birds to do a variety of 'tricks', including one parrot that "sang" three short songs, one each in Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin and English.

We walked through the two big aviaries, both of which have rainforest vegetation and various feeding stations scattered about. We were a bit blown away by the numbers of Victoria Crowned Pigeons that were there. Ken knew these birds from PNG where they are called "guria" pigeons and are protected. In the wild you are very lucky to see one but in both aviaries you almost had to push them out of the way! We even found one on a nest – quite a substantial nest by pigeon standards – and another carrying some nesting material across the road near the cafe.



There were plenty of other exotic species, especially South American parrots {including the rare Blue Macaw} as well as several species of flamingo. All in all it was a feast for the senses.



On our final full day we took the easy option and toured the city by open-top bus. The city is still growing and the number of high-rise towers under construction is incredible. Surprisingly, Singapore has a population of just under 6 million but it is squeezed into a very small area. In spite of its highly urbanised areas Singapore still remains one of the greenest, cleanest and safest cities in the world. Given the outbreak of Coronavirus in China there were a fair few people (mainly Asians) wearing face masks, even though there was a wrap-around page on the front of the *Straits Times*, the main English language paper, which carried the message from the Department of Health “do not wear a face mask unless you are unwell”.

It was not hard to see the commercial and maritime significance of Singapore next day as we sailed out of the port on the *Coral Adventurer*, our home for the next 18 days. The massive container terminal, oil refineries and hundreds of ships of all sizes and types crowd the port.



That evening and all of the following day we sailed down the Straits of Malacca. Our time was taken up with lectures on Indonesian cultures (by Linda, an American who has lived in Indonesia for 30 years), and the influence of monsoons on trade from China and the Far East to Europe throughout history by Kit (a retired Cunard Line Commodore). Both were very knowledgeable and the presentations well-illustrated.

As evening approached we came in sight of Banka Island, the site of the notorious massacre of 21 Australian nurses and numerous wounded soldiers by the Japanese in February 1942. None of the expedition crew were aware of this event nor the story of the sole survivor, Sister Vivian Bullwinkle. Ken volunteered to talk to the guests about this event after dinner.

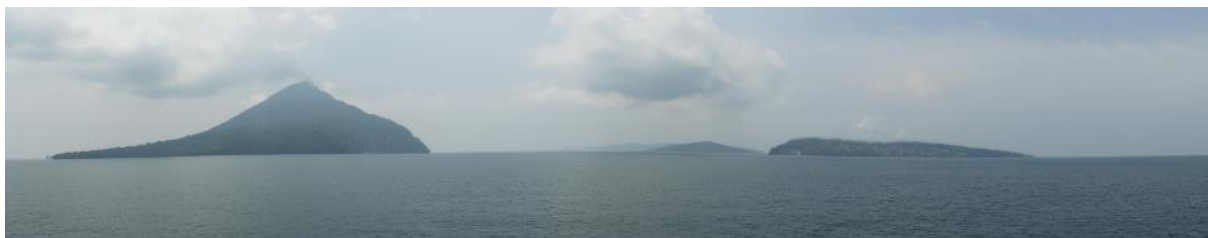
Our first landfall was Lenkuas Island with its 20m high lighthouse built by the Dutch in 1882. It was a significant way-point for ships coming from the South China Sea to enter the Straits of Malacca. Before going ashore we had to have our temperatures scanned by Indonesian health officials, the first of many such checks against the Coronavirus outbreak during the cruise.

We went ashore by *Xplorer*, the fantastic craft designed for Coral Expeditions that is raised and lowered from the rear of the ship so passengers simply walk on and off. The island itself is just a small granite outcrop and is uninhabited, though some people from a local village had brought some fruit, such as rambutan and small sweet “monkey” bananas, for sale along with some local sea shells.



More very interesting lectures by Linda and Kit in the afternoon focusing on the Indonesian version of Islam and the constitutional acceptance of numerous other religions (Christianity, Hindu, Buddhist and so on) by Linda; and the climatic drivers of the monsoons from Kit.

The next morning as we approach the northern entrance to the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra, we stopped about 600m off the site where the HMAS *Perth* was sunk in March 1942 by the Japanese in the Battle of the Sunda Strait. A short service was held by Kit to honour those that were lost on *Perth* and the USS *Houston*. From there we passed into the Strait and approached Anak Krakatoa (“Child of Krakatoa”), the still-active remains of the very much larger stratovolcano that exploded in August 1883. The explosion of Krakatoa was so great that it was heard as far away as Perth, while the tsunamis it generated circled the globe. Anak Krakatoa (the low island in the centre of the picture) emerged in 1926. There was only a small amount of steam coming from a vent on the island as we passed.



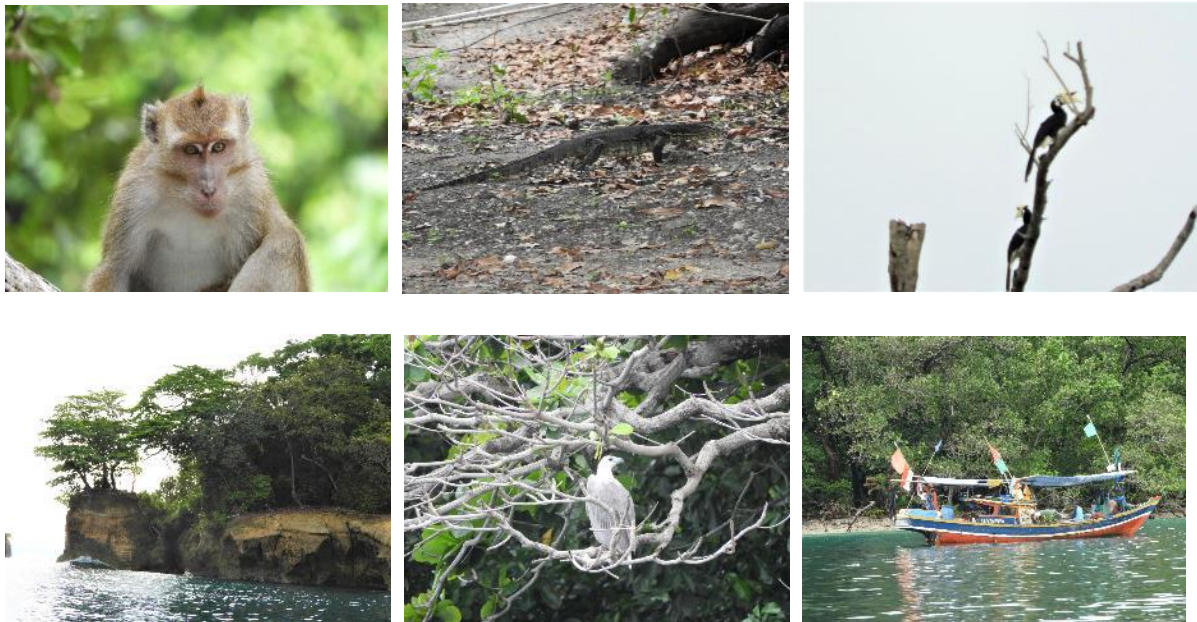
We had another excellent lecture that afternoon, this on the marine life of Indonesia by Dani, one of the expedition leaders. Dani is a marine biologist (James Cook University trained) and is a passionate and very good lecturer.

We had a very early start next morning to go ashore to the Ujung Kulan National Park at the western end of Java. This national park is home to the critically endangered Javan Rhinoceros, of which there are only 76 left in the wild. Fortunately it is doing well in the national park –there have been four births in both 2018 and 2019. The island is also home to Banteng cattle and Javan Leopard, both endangered species, as well as Rusa Deer.

After landing from *Xplorer* we were greeted by rangers and walked through *Nypa* swamp to a large clearing in which we did get a view through the rain of some Banteng and some endemic Green Peacocks. Within a few minutes our so-called rain jackets bought in England in 2018 became sodden and fortunately the rangers came well supplied with plastic ponchos to keep us reasonably dry. Unfortunately the grass in the clearing was in seed and they managed to stick themselves to anything that came in contact with them. It took ages once back on board to remove the seeds so that they were not spread.



In the afternoon, with the rain clearing, we went over to the Ranger Station on Peucang Island where there were quite a few Long-tail Macaques, Rusa Deer and a large monitor lizard roaming about. After a walk around the ranger station we boarded *Xplorer* to do a cruise around the island. The island was severely impacted by the tsunamis generated by the 1883 Krakatoa eruption and some very large slabs of the original coral reef thrown up by the impact were visible in one area. We got our first (and only) good view of one of the many species of hornbill in the region. Three were spotted by Judy, two of them landed at the top of a dead tree some 200m away from us and we managed to get a reasonable photo. After much debate and consulting reference books they turned out to be Oriental Pied Hornbills, rather than the Rhinoceros Hornbill as first thought. We also saw two White-bellied Sea Eagles, one of them quite a pale morph. There were a few local fishing boats sheltering around the island.



Our next stop was off the old port of Batavia which is now the modern Indonesian capital of Jakarta. After again going through the temperature checks we went ashore by *Xplorer*, landing in the marina surrounded by a few “super yachts”. We were then taken by bus to the Maritime Museum which is housed in a former Dutch spice warehouse of very solid construction – huge teak beams and massively thick walls. Not surprising really given that, back in the day, a good handful of peppercorns could set someone up for life if you could get it back to Europe.

The trade started with nutmeg and mace which are endemic to a small island in the east of Indonesia and spread to spices such as pepper, cinnamon, cloves, fennel, and so on. There were samples of the range of spices in a small side room – the mixture of fragrances was incredible.

There were themed “rooms” tracing the various influences from Arabs, Hindu, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch and English traders/invaders over the centuries. Interestingly the WW II room was identified as “The room of Japanese salvation” and included a display of Japanese wartime propaganda posters. In another area there were models of the various types of craft that had used the port, including simple outrigger canoes, Arab dhows, a Dutch man-of-war and the local “pinisi” sailing craft.



From there it was on through the chaotic Jakarta traffic, with its many self-appointed traffic controllers, to Fatahillah Square, which had been the centre of the Dutch administration. Here we were treated to a short presentation of *Wayang*, the Indonesian shadow-puppet theatre. The theatre and museum are housed in a former Dutch church dating from 1640. Rather than being seated on the shadow side of the performance we were seated on the performer's side so that we could watch the puppet-master perform. He manipulated the puppets to represent a battle between two ancient Hindu kings while he provided all of the voices and sound effects. The performance was accompanied by a classical Gamelan percussion orchestra.



The puppets are made from cow or buffalo hide and the “whips” that control them from buffalo horn. They are so intricate that each one must take many days to make and many more to decorate. This process was displayed in the museum along with a wide range of both traditional and non-traditional puppets. We could not get a clear answer as to why the puppets were so intricately decorated if only the puppet's shadow was traditionally seen.

It was just a short walk to the Batavia Café where we had lunch from an Indonesian buffet with dishes such as nasi goreng, sate sticks, rendang beef and so on – very tasty. The café must have been the place to be seen in colonial times as the walls are decorated with hundreds of photos of notables including politicians, crowned monarchs, movie stars and other celebrities of the day. There was even a poster advertising the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It is still a very up-market place to eat.



Rather than visit another museum we simply wandered around the square for an hour watching the goings on. It was Friday afternoon after the main Muslim prayers and the place was busy with groups of school children, family groups and the odd foreign tourist. There were brightly coloured bikes for hire and mums were doubling their kids around the square, some being pursued by other kids from the same school. The older school kids were all posing for selfies and they were keen to include us in their pictures as well – it seems to be the thing to do because we encountered this again many times, not just with school kids but even police! We had a great interaction with one group of teenage girls in uniform from a *madrasa* (religious school) in Bogor that were on a cultural excursion. Two of the girls had bags with English slogans on them – unfortunately neither spoke English so they did not realise what their bags said! One of our Indonesian guides translated for them and they were absolutely mortified.



From Batavia we had a day at sea while we crossed to our next stop in Kalimantan. Once again we were entertained and educated by several more excellent lectures including the first by Ian, an Australian naturalist from Darwin, who joined us in Jakarta. He lectured on the Wallace Line and the life of Alfred Russel Wallace, the 19th Century naturalist who spent eight years in the area and first proposed the theory of natural selection based on his observations. The Wallace Line demarcates the unique flora and fauna of South-East Asia from that of Australasia.

So on to Kalimantan and more adventures.

Ken and Judy
March 2020

