



Kite Sails Indonesia
Spice Islands to Borneo

Fisherman with clams in Bajo village, Saumlaki.

By Jack and Zdenka Griswold, Boston Station, Gulf of Maine Post

One hundred and fifty or so of our fellow cruisers – representing 87 boats – filled an auditorium at the Doubletree-by-Hilton in Darwin. We were all there for a Sail Indonesia Rally briefing. As we watched the assembling crowd we wondered, not for the first time, whether we had done the right thing in signing up for this rally. Normally we prefer to be on our own, sometimes buddy boating with friends and not hemmed in by schedules. Not to mention being able to find a place to anchor.

There was much discussion about Indonesian bureaucracy, the copious amounts of paperwork, interminable delays and “gifts” that might be required. Sam, our Indonesian rally coordinator, was asked if there was an Indonesian word for “mañana.” “I’m afraid that we don’t have a word that conveys such a sense of urgency,” he replied.



Photo by Kennedy McLeod

“ Sam, our Indonesian rally coordinator, was asked if there was an Indonesian word for “mañana.” “I’m afraid that we don’t have a word that conveys such a sense of urgency,” he replied. ”

It was too late to get a refund of the rally fee, so we went back to *Kite* to finish provisioning. On the list (actually, at the top of the list) was to lay in a three-month supply of wine and spirits to sustain us during our sojourn in mostly Muslim Indonesia, where these items are either impossible to get or impossibly expensive. Happily, Australian customs reimbursed us more than 25 percent of the cost in tax and duty.

Fueled up, watered and provisioned to the gills, *Kite* locked out of Tipperary Waters Marina and waddled over to the Fannie Bay anchorage where we staged to leave. A two-day passage took us to the large and dusty town of Saumlaki in the Tanimbar Islands, our port of entry. This was our first taste of Indonesia and we were fascinated. Open-air markets, food stalls, new smells, lots of motorbikes, a little ramshackle, and people everywhere — all with smart-phones. Foreigners are a rarity here and we were deluged with shopkeepers,

policemen, fishermen, school kids, people young and old, all clamoring to have a “foto, foto” taken with us, with much giggling, jostling and hand shaking.

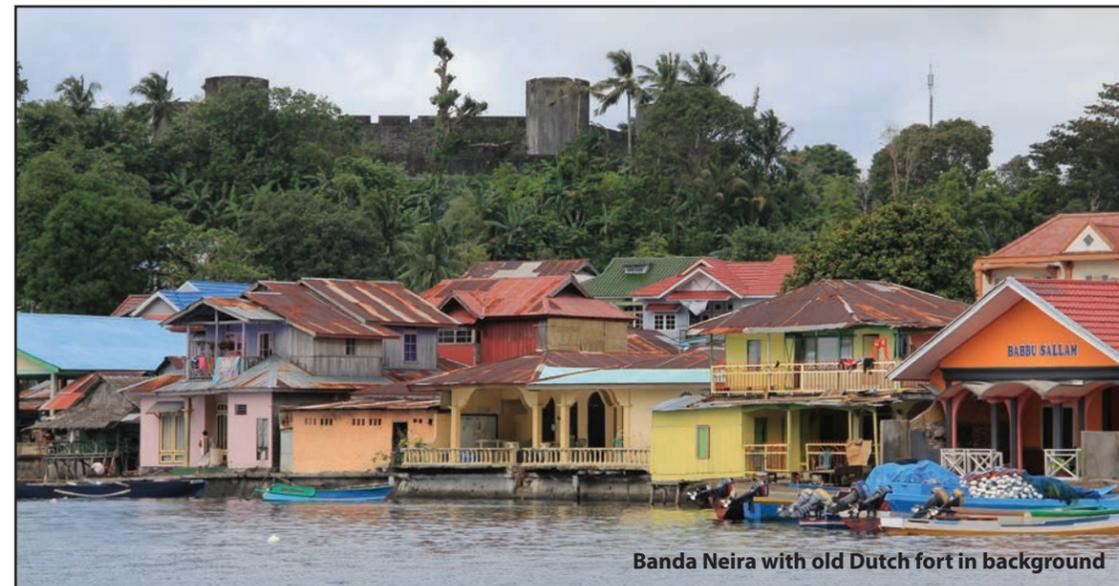
“Foto, foto” became the norm as we, along with only 13 other boats, followed the rally’s eastern route over the next six weeks. We had elected to take this route because it was off the beaten path and went to areas where few tourists go. With such a small group, all our fears about bumper boats in anchorages proved unfounded. Similarly, we never had any problems with government officials the entire time we were in Indonesia, though they did like their paperwork. At each port of call, we would variously be asked for copies of our passports, boat registration, clearances, crew list, manifest and/or cruising permit — never the same documents.

We had heard that having a boat stamp would be helpful, so when we first arrived in Saumlaki we found a stall where we ordered a round stamp featuring an anchor, “KITE” in the middle and our documentation number around the perimeter. To our astonishment, the man

“ Shopkeepers, policemen, fishermen, school kids, people young and old, all clamoring to have a “foto, foto” taken with us. ”



Officials in ceremonial garb taking pictures of us as we take pictures of them.



Banda Neira with old Dutch fort in background

“ From Saumlaki, we sailed overnight to the Banda Islands. These are the original Spice Islands, bitterly fought over by the Portuguese, Dutch and British in the 17th and 18th centuries. ”

hand-carved the whole thing. No digital machine could have done better, and it only cost \$3.50. Stamp in hand, we took our documents to the harbormaster, pulled out a red ink pad and stamped everything in sight. A big smile filled his face as he said, “Ah stamp, very good, very good!” Thereafter our stamp always worked its magic.

From Saumlaki, we sailed overnight to the Banda Islands. These are the original Spice Islands, bitterly fought over by the Portuguese, Dutch and British in the 17th and 18th centuries. In fact, Britain ceded Run, one of the Banda islands, to the Dutch in return for a small island in the New World called Manhattan.

The main harbor is magnificent (and very deep!) with a towering volcano on the west side and the colonial town of Banda Neira to the east. Some old forts and many Dutch buildings remain in varying stages of decay. Nutmeg, cinnamon and almonds are still grown here and are a major source of income.

There are several mosques in Banda Neira and more in a nearby village, which was typical of most places we visited. One of the iconic sounds for us throughout Indonesia were the daily calls to prayer, sung five times a day from each mosque. We particularly enjoyed this in the evening, sitting in the cockpit drinking our infidel wine. But sometimes this could be too much of a good thing. The days of an imam climbing a filigreed minaret to issue the call are long gone. Now, each mosque sports an industrial strength PA system which blasts out a recording. Since sound travels so well over water, we might as well have had the mosque in the cockpit — actually several mosques, because they all broadcast at the same time, but different songs. The resulting cacophony especially got our attention at 4:30 a.m. when the first call of the day began. We got used to very early mornings.

A three-day passage took us from the Bandas to the town of Wanci in Wakatobi, an isolated group of islands in Southeast Sulawesi known for beautiful reefs and diving. All our Indonesian passages were somewhat nerve-racking because large, unlit – or barely lit – bamboo fishing platforms are everywhere, floating in water thousands of feet deep. At night all you could do was keep a good lookout and hope you didn’t plow into one. Somehow we never did.



Banda Neira waterfront



Girl at circumcision ceremony, Wakatobi

We also saw many local fishing boats. Most, though not all, had some sort of light, usually white but sometimes red, yellow or blue — no running lights. Often we saw a blinking LED light flashing multiple colors. Unfortunately, this type of light is increasingly being used by cruisers as an anchor light, a sure-fire way to ruin a serene anchorage and we hope the practice isn't spreading to our home cruising grounds.

At each of our destinations, local and regional governments pulled out all the stops to welcome us with elaborate ceremonies, traditional dances, lavish meals and trips to see local sights and festivals. We were quite bowled over. When we first arrived in Saumlaki, we found a dais filled with government officials including the regent (somewhat akin to a governor), television cameras and a delegation of village elders who welcomed us with a ritual involving local palm wine. In Wakatobi, there were sumptuous feasts, and each boat was given \$250 and two hundred liters of fuel as an expression of appreciation for coming to the area. We had mixed feelings about such generosity but our hosts insisted, so we made sure to leave it all in the local economy. Many local meals and several dives later, we had a glorious spinnaker run to Pasar Wajo in Buton, where we witnessed a healing ritual involving a thousand babies, followed the next day by a ceremony featuring 12,500 dancers. This really happened! The baby ritual is a traditional way of inoculating kids – the sicker they are, the more welcome they are, we were told. The huge dance, a big media event, showcased Buton as the government tries to put it on the tourist map, and Sail Indonesia provided the catalyst.

Why local government officials went so out of their way and to such excess for us we are still not entirely sure. Certainly it didn't make economic sense, except that these were areas eager to develop tourism and we were seen as ambassadors who would spread the word. Many of the places we visited had rarely, if ever, hosted a foreigner before. We were also told that a wealthy Indonesian had subsidized the events.



Squid fishing boat returning at dawn, Wakatobi

Everywhere we went, people were thrilled to hear that we were from America and proudly reminded us that Barack Obama had lived in Indonesia as a child.

We were fortunate to take part in a number of local celebrations. One of the most interesting was a “circumcision” ceremony involving dozens of girls in a Wakatobi fishing village. This controversial practice apparently involves a cut but not the widely condemned genital mutilation practiced in some other parts of the world. The girls were quite young, wore elaborate make-up and were dressed in beautiful, ornate costumes. They were carried in open palanquins, each one belonging to a particular family. Men in the girl's extended family served as bearers and female relatives rode with her. Proud mothers and grandmothers danced and shouted alongside. There were about 30 of these and they made a raucous procession through the town, followed by a fancy feast to which we were invited. The food was delicious, though several of our group later succumbed to Bali belly, an affliction that visited almost every boat at some point along the way. Miraculously we escaped, though we consumed our share of fried beetles, raw sea urchins and sun-baked salads.

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Circumcision palanquin, Wakatobi



Two of our Benteng guides on *Kite*

beautiful coral reefs and lots of fish, though not many pelagics. It also only cost about \$20 a dive with the one and only national park ranger acting as our dive master. Much of Indonesia in general is a fantastic bargain. Delicious, filling meals cost \$2 to \$3, and \$7 will buy an excellent hour-long massage.

We rejoined the main Sail Indonesia track in Labuan Bajo, on the island of Flores, a jumping-off point for tourists visiting Komodo National Park and divers joining live-aboard boats. This big backpacker town has western-style restaurants (and toilets!), souvenir shops and travel agents. We were back on the well-trodden path. No more demands for “foto, foto,” but still the same wonderful Indonesian hospitality.

The Komodo area is quite arid with steep, brown, mountainous islands surrounded by beautiful turquoise water. We did some fantastic diving here, perhaps the best we experienced in Indonesia, and saw the Komodo dragons on Rinca Island. We

Benteng, on the island of Selayar, just south of Sulawesi, was our last organized rally stop. Most of the other boats had peeled off by now and only five of us came here. We were met with the usual plethora of officials and welcome ceremonies. We felt awkward that so much fuss was being made for so few people. Nonetheless we enjoyed Benteng very much, and it was perhaps our favorite place on the eastern route. The town is attractive, with a lovely mosque as its centerpiece and well-tended yards. But the main reasons were our “guides.” At each of the rally locations, local middle, high school and college students were recruited to act as our interpreters. Many were studying to go into the tourism industry although most had not seen a tourist before, while others earned the job because they were at the top of their class in school.

Because so few boats showed up in Benteng, we each had quite a posse of eager young helpers. We had five, and over the course of several days, we became quite close to our little family. They were as curious about us as we were about them. They loved American music and culture. Lady Gaga was a favorite and we mentioned we had seen her in Maine at an event supporting same-sex marriage. That seemed to confuse them. The girls all wore hijabs. Jack asked one of them, Indah, if she ever minded wearing it. Never, and in fact she saw it as a fashion statement. Apparently she has dozens and would match a different one every day to whatever else she was wearing. We had a tremendous time with them and there were many tears on all sides when we said goodbye. They still e-mail us and we expect to stay in touch for a long time to come.

We did not want to miss Take Bone Rate, the third largest atoll in the world, and so we beat and motor-sailed our way to windward to get there from Selayar. Though known for its diving, very few visitors come because it is so hard to get to. The diving was superb, with



Sunset dancers at the regent's house in Benteng



Rice paddy in Ubud, Bali

watched as two of these huge monitor lizards waited near a water hole where a water buffalo was slowly dying, infected by one of the dragon's bites. Death can apparently take as long as two weeks, and the dragons would wait patiently until then to feed.

Until now, we had wonderful winds and sailed everywhere. Now we began to experience periods of calm, a common complaint about sailing in Indonesia. We island hopped to Lombok where we left *Kite* on a mooring in Medana Bay and flew to Bali and Java for a bit of land-based adventure. Bali is mostly Hindu and the architecture, culture and even cooking are different. We stayed in Ubud, where each extended family seemed to have a walled compound with gardens and a family temple, decorated with ornate sculptures and reliefs. The place has a definite “spiritual” vibe. We loved it, taking walks through rice paddies that were so green they were almost fluorescent, and attending amazing Balinese dance performances.

We wanted to see Borobudur in Java, a huge 9th century Buddhist temple that supposedly rivals Angkor Wat. To get there, we flew to Yogyakarta, a bustling university town centered on an ancient walled city and Sultan's Palace with a population of crazy drivers. The lines on the roads were more like suggestions than traffic lanes. Our bus would barrel along, passing a car that in turn would be passing a motorbike. Heading towards us would be the same configuration, all on a two-lane road. Just when we thought the end was nigh, everyone would merge back into their proper place. It was good to get back to *Kite* where seven knots is a fast clip and one-tenth of a mile a close call.

Our cruising permit was good for three months and our time in Indonesia was drawing to a close. After a few days in Lovina Beach on the north coast of Bali, we headed for Kumai in Borneo, 400 miles away, where we met Jack's brother and sister-in-law, Brehon and Kate. Together with Australian cruiser friends, Hugh Macready and Katie Lyons on *Elizabeth Jane II*, a 1980 Peterson 44, we hired a “klotok” to see orangutans and other jungle inhabitants in Tanjung Puting National Park. The klotok, a narrow wooden boat, resembled a double-decker African Queen. We ate and slept under mosquito netting on the top deck while



Dancers in Ubud, Bali



Klotoks in Borneo

the crew lived on the bottom. The park has three feeding stations and research facilities, trying to save the orangutans from extinction. Although we did see “wild-born” orangutans, most had been born in captivity and were semi-wild, living and breeding in the jungle but coming to the stations to feed. It was quite incredible how human they seemed.

On our last night on the river we tied up along the bank near a colony of proboscis monkeys. Over sundowners, we watched a big male have his way with a female, high up in a tree. Once finished with her, he headed for three other females nearby. As he approached, they high-tailed it to the top of the tree and sat precariously on the thin outermost branch, just out of his reach. When we went to bed a couple of hours later, he was still waiting. We never found out if his patience was rewarded.

Brehon and Kate were still with us when we made a brutally hot and humid passage to Belitung. They were great sports, but spending two sweaty nights on the Java Sea was probably not their idea of an Indonesian vacation. We did cross 109 degrees 46 minutes East while they were with us, marking the spot halfway round the world from our mooring in Portland, at least longitude-wise. The distance we’ve sailed is much longer because of our dips down to New Zealand, back up to Fiji, then down to Australia and back up again. But now every mile we sail west brings us closer to home instead of farther away.

We cleared out of Indonesia at Nongsa Point Marina on the Singapore Strait, just a few miles from Singapore. For much of our passage there from Belitung, we had great sailing in 12 to 15 knots on the beam and less than one-meter seas. In company with friends Jake and Jackie Adams on *Hokule’a*, a 1984 Liberty 458,



Borean Orangutan

we crossed the Equator for the second time and celebrated with a bit of rum, giving Neptune his share.

We had done a surprising number of overnight sails in Indonesia, 18 in all. We almost always had ideal sailing conditions. On our last night passage we sat in the cockpit, sailing gently under a full moon in the South China Sea. Not for the first time we had a feeling of unreality, sailing on our own boat in fabled places that we had read and heard so much about – Bali, Borneo, the Spice Islands. Indonesia is a special place and we hope to return one day. But now it’s on to the bright lights of Singapore, and then Malaysia and Thailand beyond. ✧

BIOGRAPHY

Zdenka and Jack Griswold sail Kite, their Bob Perry-designed Valiant 42 cutter, out of their hometown of Portland, Maine. In 2011, they transited the Panama Canal and set off across the Pacific. They left Bundaberg, Australia in April 2013 and sailed inside the Great Barrier Reef to Cape York, then across to Darwin. In July 2013, they departed from Darwin to explore Indonesia.