

The Waterhouse Club of the SA Museum

“Fire and Spice” Expedition to the Banda Sea aboard SeaTrek’s Ombak Putih

5 - 16 September 2025

Leader’s Report

Introduction

The SeaTrek Fire and Spice expedition follows in the tradition of several successful WHC shipboard expeditions aboard *True North* led by former Club President Ant Simpson.

SeaTrek offers numerous itineraries: in the Lesser Sunda Islands (Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, Komodo, Flores) in the winter dry season, moving to more tropical latitudes - Sulawesi and the Moluccas (Seram, Halmahera Islands, West Papua, etc.) in September for the rest of the year.

After consulting with Ant and lead scientist Professor Steve Donnellan it was decided that Seatrek’s 11-day East Indies Spice Islands voyage which follows part of the ring of fire to the legendary Banda spice islands, gave an interesting mix of nature, culture and history. Thus, “Fire and Spice” was born.

SeaTrek also offers booking services for Indonesian domestic flights and accommodation. As the expedition started in Maumere and ended in Ambon this proved to be very useful to most members to get to and from the international airport in Bali.

The expedition scientist was Steve Donnellan, and we were also joined by Nicholas Hughes, an Australian who has lived in Jakarta for many years, married to a local, and who has a passion for the volcanoes of Indonesia and a deep knowledge of the islands and their history.

The Expedition

In April 2025, five months before departure, expeditioners met for a pre-trip gathering at the Royal Society Rooms allowing them to meet Nick Hughes and each other, as well as hear the plans for the lecture programs by Nick and Steve.

From late August 2025 expeditioners began heading to Indonesia. Travel to Maumere requires an overnight stop either in Denpasar or in Labuan Bajo (LBJ) on Flores. As it is the main access point for Komodo, many chose to have a few days in LBJ to acclimatise and take a trip to meet the fabled Komodo Dragons.

On the morning of 3 September, 20 expeditioners linked up at LBJ airport for the flight to Maumere where we were met by our SeaTrek guides Anastasia and Tinae who had kindly arranged transfers to the Coconut Garden Beach Resort. We were joined there later in the day by our other two shipmates. While this was not part of the expedition proper, all had elected to have two nights there which was an excellent chance to bond over a Bintang beer or two in relaxed surroundings.

On Friday 5 September Anastasia and Tinae collected us for a visit to the busy and colourful Maumere market, and Watublapi traditional village in the hills behind the town before proceeding to the port, boarding Zodiacs, and heading for *Ombak Putih* (*White Wave*) anchored in the harbour. There we were welcomed loudly and enthusiastically by the very friendly and helpful crew. Watublapi proved to be an immersive introduction to the Indonesia we would see in coming days.

Over the next 12 days we sailed nearly 1,000 nautical miles along this part of the ring of fire, visited 16 of the so-called “inner ring” of islands, 11 towns and villages including 2 traditional villages, and enjoyed 9 snorkelling excursions on fringing reefs. The route is indicated the map below.



The two traditional villages were very special, allowing a glimpse into a timeless way of life based on farming and hunting, and cultural practices handed down over many generations.

In other villages and towns we were always warmly welcomed with big smiles and learned of local economies based on weaving, fishing and the spices nutmeg, mace and cloves. In a number of villages gifts of educational materials and swimming goggles donated by SeaTrek and expeditioners were distributed to the school, and in one village reading glasses were given to older adults.

The history of the islands is unique and varied. In the case of the Banda Islands, since the 16th century it is all about the competition between colonial powers Netherlands, Portugal and to a lesser extent Britain for control of the spice trade, and the consequent domination of the local population. The Dutch were particularly brutal. There are the remains of substantial forts on every one of the Banda Island group, mostly Dutch, which controlled the sea approaches to each.

One island, Rhun, which was held by the British, was so coveted by the Dutch that in 1667 they agreed to swap Manhattan (New Amsterdam) for it – the Manhattan Transfer. The recent history is more positive. On Banda Neira we visited the house used by political figure Mohammad Hatta when exiled there by the Dutch in the early part of WW2, who became vice-president to Soekarno when the country took the opportunity to snatch independence after liberation from the Japanese in 1945.

The snorkelling was superb. The reefs were in very good condition and the variety of life was astounding – hundreds of species were identified from photographs: from clown fish to reef sharks, nudibranchs to cephalopods, with the occasional seasnake or krait for added excitement. Two aspects were peculiar to this area. The reefs were quite shallow, perhaps no more than 3 metres mostly, but ended abruptly where the edges of the volcanic islands plunged thousands of metres into the abyss. In other places there was warm water from a submarine volcanic spring or curtains of sparkling bubbles of volcanic gas emanating from the coral. Manta rays, whales, dolphins were sighted from the deck also, but perhaps the most memorable wildlife experience was meeting dugongs in Mali Bay on Alor Is., where locals are rehabilitating seagrass and befriending the animals.

Aboard Ombak Putih the service and cuisine were excellent. Each meal was a buffet of simple but delicious food, both local and European, eaten on deck, and included on one occasion fresh Spanish mackerel which had been caught trolling over the stern.

The barman, Nioman, became everyone's friend dispensing wine and Bintang beer with continual cheerfulness and smiles. The crew were delightful and always cheerful, and despite the occasional language barrier could not do enough for us. The entire crew (*with the exception of the duty helmsman*) forms a band with a number of guitars, and entertained us on deck with song and dance on a number of occasions. SeaTrek is clearly a very good employer. Crew morale was excellent and many had been with the company for over 10 years, with one old salt, the irrepressible Julius, having over 30 years.

Spare time was fruitfully filled with interesting and varied talks from Steve and Nick. Steve's talks were typically topical and amusing, and always attracted interested crew members as well. They included such topics as island dwarfism, human migration through the archipelago, sharks, currents between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and the oceans' impact on climate. We now know about cookie-cutter sharks and that a negative Indian Ocean dipole is a good thing, at least for Australia.

Nick regaled us with tales of his climbing many of Indonesia's volcanoes, the eruption of Tambora on Sumbawa in the early 1800s which was bigger than Krakatoa, the complex and dark history of spice trading, the elephant tusks and strange bronze moko drums of Alor Is., and the villagers on Lambata Island who hunt whales.

Importantly, there was Fire and there was Spice. Highlights were:

- Watching the sun set behind the grumbling volcano Gunung Api Lewotolok on Lembata Is.
- Observing sulphurous emissions from the flank of volcano Gunung Wurlali, immediately above the village of Kehli on Damar Is.
- The first sight of nutmeg and cloves drying in the street in Kehli village.
- Visiting the cool, shady nutmeg / clove plantations on Rhun Is. and Banda Besar Is., and the unexpected and delightful traditional music welcome among the trees on Banda Besar.
- Dinner ashore in Banda Neira at the beautiful colonial Cilu Bintang (*Beautiful Star*) Estate
- The friendliness and welcome of the guides, the crew and the locals wherever we went, especially the children.

Summary

The expedition was Fire and Spice and so much more, with traditional villages, local colour and culture, history ancient and modern, superb coral reef environments and wildlife encounters. The voyage was thoroughly enjoyed by all expeditioners, and SeaTrek's guides and crew commented that it was a pleasure for them too, to have a group of like-minded, scientifically-oriented people on board who were there to learn but who knew how to have fun too.

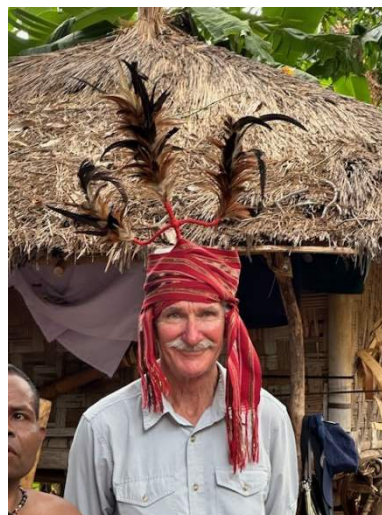
SeaTrek were superbly helpful along the whole journey – from initial contact and commercial negotiation, through the booking process and on the voyage itself. I have no hesitation in recommending SeaTrek for another ship-based WHC expedition in the future – perhaps to Sulawesi and beyond, seeking wildlife and the Alfred Russel Wallace story now that we have done fire, spice, history and culture!

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people, without whose support and assistance the expedition could not and would not have happened.

- **Ant Simpson**, who initiated ship-based WHC expeditions some years ago, who encouraged me to run another after Rowley Shoals, and whom we missed greatly on board.
- **Steve Donnellan**, whose enthusiasm, knowledge, ideas, flexibility, wit and humour are inspirational, and the very stuff of WHC expeditions.
- **Nick Hughes**, who brought a unique perspective to the trip with his insights into the history and culture of the islands and their volcanoes.
- **SeaTrek guides, Anastasia and Tinae**, whose organisation and care was flawless and who provided so many precious experiences. In particular their care for Gill Sneddon, who required precautionary medical attention in Kalabahi, was exemplary.
- **The Ombak Putih crew and SeaTrek office staff**, for their co-operation in getting the expedition underway, and their cheerful support and assistance for all our members once on board.
- **Natalie Rollinson**, whose work behind the scenes during the planning phase ensures the success of every WHC expedition and event.
- **All Expeditioners** for supporting and then relishing the expedition, and for continuing to support the WHC and its aims.
- **Caroline Mussared**, for putting up with my foibles along the way, and supporting the whole enterprise from within.

Mark Mussared, Expedition Leader
1 October 2025





Ombak Putih Crew and Waterhouse Club Expeditioners, Banda Neira Harbour



Ombak Putih at Umapura Village, Alor Ternate



Watublapi Traditional Village



Gunung Api Lewotolok volcano, Lembata Is.



Ombak Putih Crew Band - Singing Happy Birthday for Tony Morphet



Dugong, Mali Bay, Alor Is.



Takpala Traditional Village, Alor Is. Note Moko Drums



Kital Is., Romang Group





Nutmeg Drying in the Street, Kehli, Damar Is.



School Visit, Kehli



Kora Kora Escort, Banda Neira Harbour



Nutmeg and Clove Plantation, Banda Besar, with Reception by Traditional Musicians and Dancers



Dutch Fort "Belgica" (1613), Banda Neira, and Gunung Api Volcano



Dinner at Cilu Bintang Estate, Banda Neira