

Our Schooner FOUR FRIENDS, with a seven strong eco-survey team aboard, arrived in a small archipelago of islands called Nanusa one evening. This archipelago, lying at the NE extremity of Indonesian territory, is one of the most isolated of the country's myriad island groups, so far from the centre, the Java Sea, that it is the broad Pacific that washes its shores. Its inhabitants are nominal Christians of the Roman persuasion, a faith imposed by the Portugals who colonised the isles in the 16th Century. However the Pope would not recognize some of their practices, for their beliefs are still anchored firmly in an earlier, animist past.

Their religious beliefs are somewhat relevant to this account, as will be revealed.

Our ship anchored near the one populated island, Kakarutan, in the sunset, with no possibility of making contact with the inhabitants, whose attap-roofed huts were visible in the last rays of the sun.

We ate our dinner, and our Scientists set about pickling their specimens, and their own bodies, and writing their reports, as on every other night of our thirty day expedition.. We went to bed in all innocence, for neither the weather, nor the locals, seemed likely to offer any interference in such a peaceful anchorage. In the early morning, while we were eating our breakfast, a large pirogue type wooden perahu, paddled by many men, made a cautious approach towards the Schooner, but lay about 30 metres away, with all aboard peering intently at us. Both I and our Indonesian scientist Alex, called out to them, with invitations for coffee. They approached closer, and after some more persuasion, three of them climbed aboard. They listened sombrelly to explanations of our mission, sipped coffee, and studied photos of my family on display. They quickly related a face in the photos to my daughter, sitting there in the deckhouse with them. This connection elicited the first hint of smiles on their faces.

After a brief huddled consultation in what must have been a local dialect, they suddenly became quite voluble, in Indonesian, exhorting us to come ashore immediately with them, in order to reassure all their people that we had not come to harm them!

Their anxiety was all too apparent...we therefore abandoned our breakfast and all eleven scientists and crew, plus our three visitors, piled into our motor-launch and we sped to the beach, followed by the other villagers in their large perahu. Our hosts jumped out of the boat and commenced hailing the jungle behind the beach in urgent, stentorian tones. Various disembodied voices, some of them obviously women, returned the calls from quite deep in the trees.

What unfolded then amazed our innocent, city-bred crew, those variously from Jakarta, Brisbane, Toulouse, Auckland, Houston and Amsterdam.

A rustle started in the undergrowth even while the calls were bouncing back and forth. The movement of twig and branch and leaf underfoot swelled into the rumble of an emerging crowd of scores of bedraggled, mosquito ravaged people with hunted looks on their faces, men, women and children, mothers with one or more babies cradled in their arms. More, many more, hundreds, followed behind from the gloom of the thick foliage. As the first wave came close enough to recognize their own, and to quickly size up our foreign faces, the fearful expressions turned quickly to euphoria, and a cacophany of excited expostulations. The palpable relief of the first wave infected those crowding in behind, and our crew, surrounded by excited, joyous people, soon felt like Manchester U after beating Arsenal 6-nil on their home ground.

An explanation of this mass reaction was obviously called for, but in the confusion, the details were a long time in emerging. For the sake of the reader, I relate it all now.

Our arrival, in a vessel utterly strange to the people, had aroused fears of inter communal strife, inter-religious violence, such as was being enacted at that time in the year 2001 in central Central Sulawesi to the South. There, Muslim and Christian communities were then locked in bitter and violent battles. These sheltered Christians, the people of Nanusa, feared we were "provocateurs", the French word taken directly into the Indonesian tongue by the Press in Java. They feared we had been sent to stir up religious strife in their isolated community!

Amazingly, all 600 or more inhabitants of the small island had fled into the jungle to hide all night, while the men stood guard along the beach armed with parangs, turtle spears and one firearm that looked like an

ancient flintlock. At dawn, a desparate group of armed volunteers had manned the boat that approached us...the men now showed us their arsenal stowed below the thwarts of their boat.

We were shocked that we had caused so much alarm, but the sense of relief was infectious and we, perforce, had to join in the celebrations. A flock of admiring girls guided my daughter, Sula, away to the village. Benjamin Kahn, our huge, two-metre expert in Cetaceans, carried two small boys on his shoulders, while a mob of others chattered and tripped along in his wake, several of them shouting something which, implausibly, sounded like “Baywatch!” many times.



Baywatch! Baywatch!

We all were taken to the Balai Rakyat, or Peoples’ Meeting Hall, much bigger, and a little grander than any of the houses, with the only corrugated iron roof in the town. This Hall, however, was dwarfed by the Church, a white-washed two storey edifice built of coral blocks...an architectural hierarchy which was repeated in all the villages we passed on our thirty day expedition, a suitable tribute to the power of the Religionists over the impoverished masses.

Everybody that could jammed inside the Hall. The rest, most of them, crowded around the many open windows, peering inside. It still felt like a sporting celebration.

Inside we listened to numerous speeches from the elders, which were impossible to follow even for Alex, being mostly in their own dialect, and drowned out anyway by the noise of the children and teenagers, still euphoric with relief, and intent on engaging their visitors in attempted conversation, from the crowd around us, and even through windows on the opposite side of the Hall. We found we could communicate much better with the teenagers in Indonesian than with their elders in their dialect.

Apart from gratitude for our friendly demeanour, one interesting point was made that we did understand. Apparently no one on the island had ever before seen an “Orang Puteh”, a Westerner!...apart from one old man who remembered a visit from some “Orang-orang Belanda”...Dutchmen, when he was very young.

Our awe at being in such an isolated community, enhanced by the strangeness of our impact on these people, was somewhat diluted when one of the teenagers told me that “Of course we have seen people like you on TV...many times!”

“Baywatch! Baywatch!” shouted the younger ones. They showed us a black and white TV set in a corner of the Hall, and took us outside to show us a satellite dish on the roof. So much for isolation in this modern world!

After the first flush of relief abated, the elders enquired about our purpose in their islands. It took Alex, a Batak from Sumatra, a man from the opposite, Western, extremity of the wide Republic, almost as much a foreigner here as the “Orang puteh”, quite a while to persuade these Eastern citizens that we had not come simply to catch fishes, and so plunder their riches, but more to observe, count, and indeed acquire “a few, small specimens to take to our Museum!” This seemed to arouse great amusement, with little disapproval expressed...and so we were free to cruise and dive in any of the six islands of the Archipelago...except that we were warned against landing on the nearest, Intata, because of a tabu, for fear of the malevolent “hantu-hantu!”...ghosts!...which infested the jungle....doubtless a consequence of the islanders’ burial there of their dead.

We set sail, still somewhat shaken by our unfortunate ability to frighten simple island folk...at least until they knew something about us...that we had families, perhaps?, or possibly that we looked a little like the characters in “Baywatch”? Ignorant myself of the precise character of these Hollywood heroes, I was informed that I, at least, should take the allusion as a compliment.

Photo: Benjamin Kahn



The islands of the group glowed with colour under the tropic sun. From above water a dozen shades of blue filled in the sandy shallows, plus a dozen shades of green. The corals of the reefs shone in pastel hues of browns, reds and greens.

Below the sea the isles lived up to their evolutionary heritage as the epicentre of the birthplace of the corals of the world...nearly eighty genera of corals were represented...compared to only forty four in the Caribbean, for example. Marine mammals were well recorded too, the songs of Humpback, Sperms and Pilot Whales were all picked up on Benjamin’s hydrophones, and the big Humpbacks were tracked, sighted and counted. When the scientists were out in our motor-launch they were enthusiastically intercepted by a

big pod of Spinner Dolphins, those performing clowns of the ocean, who frolicked and leapt and spun in the air all around the launch for three-quarters of an hour, while Sula stood on the bow, attempting to touch the closest spinners, swearing afterwards that she would have touched them, but for the abruptness of their twisting leaps from the surface which gave no chance to anticipate their trajectories.

The Isles of Nanusa offered more than adequate reward for the long distance sailed: their colourful Natural splendour, the drama of meeting isolated people...the essence of a good expedition.

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