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Bovine beauties strut their stuff in a colourful display of pageantry

RICKY FRENCH

Tethered in pairs and dolled up like debutantes, the contestants step daintily towards a wooden board beneath golden arches, cloven hooves clapping through the Sumenep Palace courtyard. Their sleek, chestnut coats (oiled for the occasion) ripple under elaborately embroidered fabrics, tassels, jangling bells and gilded headpieces. The cow that stuffs up its steps will be swiftly eliminated. This is Sapi Sonok, Madura Island's bovine beauty pageant, and elegance is everything.

It's a humid morning in East Java, where hundreds of villagers have gathered to watch cattle compete in what must be the most graceful livestock contest on Earth. But the cows themselves have some competition for attention. Beside them stands a 20m dragon-headed chariot, swaying side to side and carrying a dozen musicians dressed in Where's Wally-like red and white striped T-shirts banging drums and blowing horns. Our local guide Indina tells us we're the first cruise passengers to visit Sumenep since the pandemic. The Sapi Sonok contest and the traditional performance of Musik Tong Tong has been ar-

anged to welcome visitors back to the island. "Everyone is so excited you are here!" she shouts above the celebratory cacophony. "We've waited a long time!"

Visiting lesser-known Indonesian islands like Madura is one of the great attractions of Pearl Expeditions' 11-day island-hopping itinerary. If Bali is the island of gods, then Madura is most definitely the island of cows. A measure of wealth and social status, there are more than a million cattle for a human population of just over four million. Madura cows are considered a distinct heritage breed, and Pearl Expeditions general manager Mick Fogg says Sapi Sonok functions as both a community celebration and a mechanism for preserving the genetic purity of the island's cows. "It doesn't matter how grand your house is, or how important your job or position is, you're not considered wealthy unless you own a cow."

Sapi Sonok traces its origins to the late 19th century Dutch colonial era. Contests are held each year at harvest season. The pageants are reserved for female cows, while bulls compete separately in Karapan Sapi, a test of speed and power in which pairs are yoked to wooden skids and sent racing through rice paddies.

Sapi Sonok translates roughly as "beautiful cow" in Madurese, and the ones we see are undeniably alluring. The cows are judged on criteria such as the sheen of their coats, the curve of their horns, the shape of their belly, the slant of their eyes and the size of their hump (the less humpy the better). Elegance of movement is paramount; cows must march 20m in rhythm to music, then step their front hooves in unison on to the platform. Self-infatuation is rewarded: cows that shy away from their own reflection in a mirror are eliminated from the contest.

A sudden downpour sends us fleeing for shelter inside the palace museum before we can witness the judging. The Keraton Sumenep was built in the mid-1700s by Chinese-Indonesian architect Lauw Pia Ngo, who merged Javanese, Islamic, Chinese and Dutch styles into a surprisingly cohesive design. When the Dutch East India Company took control of the town of Sumen-



Clockwise from main: cattle in the Sapi Sonok; a dragon-headed chariot performs Musik Tong Tong; and dancers join the festivities

ep in 1705, they left the structure largely intact, though their influence remains evident in many government buildings and noble houses. That same blend can be seen in the Great Mosque across the road from the palace, also designed by Ngo, where a traditional Javanese three-tiered roof sits above tall Dutch colonial windows painted a bold, distinctly Chinese yellow.

Artwork from Sumenep's three historical eras – kingdom, colonial and independence – lines the walls, and spread across a table is a display of hand-forged daggers, known as keris, a craft dating back to sultanate times. There are edible treasures, too: green balls of klepon, a sweet snack made from rice flour coloured with pandan leaf extract, filled with liquid palm sugar and coated in coconut, along with sticky rice crackers called rengginang and crispy cassava chips.

We drive back to the port in Kalianget, centre of the biggest salt production site in Indonesia, passing sodden fields, and shopfronts selling Arabic furniture. Donning life jackets, we climb back into our tenders and hold on as the vessel slaps through the chop, weaving between fishing bagans in the bay. Expedition ship Paspaley Pearl materialises through the mist and Madura slips from sight, the colours, cows and choreography of the underappreciated island dissolving into the damp air.

Ricky French was a guest of Pearl Expeditions.



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