

DREAM DESTINATIONS 2026

Good Weekend

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WONDER LANDS

Fairytale villages, untouched
wilderness, journeys into history:
great global getaways



The Indonesian expedition cruise of the Paspaley Pearl, a 54-metre, luxury motoryacht (pictured here at 17 Islands National Park), sails from Bali to Timor Leste over 11 days.

Chain reaction

A cruise through Indonesia's Lesser Sunda Islands reveals an aquatic nirvana – and fauna found nowhere else on Earth.

BY SHARON BRADLEY

WHEN I spot the sea snake, it's kinking its way around the toes of my right foot on the wet floor of the Zodiac. I place a warning hand on the arm of my fellow passenger, Kristen, sitting to my left, who utters a small gasp. In a quick series of escalating reactions, her partner, Stew, springs, catlike, onto the bow of our inflatable boat (he clearly knows something we don't), while Janelle, sitting opposite, who's also now seen it, does a convincing imitation of a mid-century matron spying a mouse in her kitchen and screams.

The snake has now secreted itself behind a rucksack under the bow. Rod, our guide, gently moves this

aside, bringing it back out into the open. As his colleague, Sarah, reaches for her iPhone to take a picture, he manages to expertly manoeuvre it onto an oar. It's a couple of feet long with striking silver and black bands, a yellow snout and a paddle-shaped tail. "Ah, yes," says Rod, peering intently at the creature. "A yellow-lipped sea krait."

As he lowers it gently into the water outside the Zodiac, I ask him if it's venomous. "Oh, yes," he says, "it could kill you. But its mouth is small. To do damage, it would have to bite you where the skin is thin – like the webbing between your fingers." Or toes, perhaps.

Rod's walkie-talkie crackles into life. It's our expedition leader, Cara, who's watching us some way off in a second Zodiac, oblivious to the unfolding drama but alerting Rod that we're drifting towards a reef and need to get moving. He quickly resumes his position at the tiller and soon we're off again, bouncing across the waves, all of us invigorated by the adrenaline surge.

Welcome to the world of small-group expedition cruising. We are spending 11 days and 10 nights sailing through Indonesia's Lesser Sunda Islands – from Benoa in Bali to Dili in Timor-Leste – aboard the Paspaley Pearl, a 54-metre, purpose-built motoryacht. The wok-shaped archipelago, which stretches

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east from Java, includes Lombok, Sumbawa, the islands of Komodo, Rinca and Padar (the main parts of Komodo National Park), Flores, Lembata and Alor.

It occurs to me, in the harried days before departure, that this is a long time to spend, inescapably afloat, in the company of strangers. But then something seems to happen with the simple act of hanging up my clothes and pushing my suitcase under the bed. Surrender. To the daily rhythm of on-board life; to the organisation and knowledge of our expedition leader, Cara, and her three naturalist guides, Rod, Sarah and Danny; and to the expertise of 22 crew members who'll soon know all of us by our first names and proceed to take care of us like surrogate parents. They'll determine when we eat and what, where we go and when, even what we wear, and, in the case of mishap, the remedy.

The Pearl accommodates a maximum of 30 passengers, a fact that fosters a special feeling of fellowship as well as semaphoring the company's commitment to engineering an experience that feels intimate, customised and, yes, expensive. "The small-ship environment typically caters to 100 to 200 passengers," says Pearl Expeditions' Sarina Bratton, who conceived the model. "We've created something different, something that feels more like home."

And what a home it is. My "stateroom" comprises a double bed, two wardrobes and a desk, plus a private balcony and a spacious, Aesop-populated bathroom with a large, starboard-facing window in the shower. The Pearl has three decks, two restaurants (one al fresco, one indoor) and three bars. There's something seductively Golden Age about the decor – luxe, tactile fabrics in tobacco, cream and chocolate.

"On-shore, we've spent a lot of time scouting locations and building relationships," says Bratton. "We go to places where other travellers don't go because they just don't have our access."

By day, we snorkel, swim, hike and visit remote communities and, by night, we return to the serenity of the ship for a hot shower and a recap of the day's events on her al fresco Horizon Deck. At 6.30pm, we file downstairs, into her retro dream of a dining room on the Ocean Deck, for an exquisite, three-course meal prepared by chefs Amy and Teo in their nearby galley,

Below, left: Padar Island in Komodo National Park; right: a beach on Lembata Island. Just 100 metres from the shoreline, snorkellers can explore a spectacular coral reef.

a universe of polished stainless steel and borderline-pathological order.

On this trip, we're only nine guests and, by the end of our first dinner on board – Black Angus tenderloin with mustard greens and tallow salsa followed by a chocolate tart – the mood is convivial. A collective surrender has begun.

Sarah tells us that we're travelling through a region called Wallacea. "There's an extraordinarily high rate of endemism here – fauna that can't be found anywhere else on the planet," she says. "That's because this island chain was never connected to either the paleocontinent of Sunda [mainland south-east Asia] or of Sahul [greater Australia], which started drifting towards each other 25 million years ago. Zoologically speaking, these islands were a blank slate."

With deepwater straits enforcing the islands' isolation, the animals who started to colonise them mostly arrived by accident. "Like the Komodo dragon, which actually originated in Australia," she says. "Before it went extinct there about 50,000 years ago, it's likely that a group of them got swept out to sea somehow. Not only can they go for long periods without eating, they can also swim and, hanging on to each other to form a living raft, they can cross great distances. They washed up here about 1 million years ago."

Another animal that exists only here is the South Sulawesi spectral tarsier, she adds, showing us a slide of a tiny primate with dinner-plate eyes and knobby, prehensile fingers.

We'll be hearing the name of Alfred Russel Wallace, for whom Wallacea is named, a *lot* on this trip. That's because for naturalists, this gentle, bespectacled, 19th-century English explorer and anthropologist, who was a mate of Charles Darwin (despite lacking Darwin's money, connections and general megawattage), is one of the most interesting men that history forgot.

Indonesia was to Wallace what the Galapagos Islands were to Darwin. He spent eight years here in the 1850s, meticulously documenting the region's fauna, and alighted upon his own theory of evolution while Darwin, a notorious perfectionist, was still umming and ahing about going public with his. In 1858, the friends agreed to publish their joint discovery in a paper known as the Darwin-Wallace Theory. (How Wallace's star subsequently fell as Darwin's rose is a riveting topic for another time; it suffices to say that he has a passionate band of supporters in the UK who are intent on reinstating him in the public consciousness.)

ON APRIL 5, 1815, Mount Tambora, on the island of Sumbawa, began a five-day eruption that would become the most powerful ever recorded. Eleven thousand people died in the immediate pyroclastic flows, but the repercussions, which quickly became global due to the massive volume of volcanic ash circulating in the earth's stratosphere, would be felt for years. In the northern hemisphere, temperatures plummeted as a dark, volcanic winter took hold.

Early the following year, three young English writers, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and his lover and soon-to-be wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, found themselves confined to their rented villa beside Lake Geneva by relentless thunderstorms caused by Tambora's fallout. They decided to stave off boredom

