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Feature  

Banda islands: Holding down the forts in remote Indonesia  

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A letter sent from the Banda islands to any location, even in Indonesia, is likely to take not days but weeks to arrive at its destination. This is a reflection of how remote this area is.  

If you look on a map, the isolation of this tiny archipelago of 10 islands in the middle of the Banda Sea is immediately obvious.  

In a country of unsurpassable beauty, the Bandas must surely be one of the "Jewels in the Crown". Rich in volcanic soil, coral reefs, a fascinating (but tragic) history and a unique micro-climate, the Bandas have much to offer the adventurous traveler, including snorkeling and diving in clear blue waters.  

There are also heritage sites, particularly the forts dotting the islands.  

To reach the Bandas is a mission in itself. Presently, air services to the small airport on Banda Neira are not in operation, and the Pelni boat service is dependent on the seaworthiness of the vessels. Recently, the ferry Sugintang was in dry dock due to a little "fracas" with a reef.  

Added to this is the security situation in Maluku province, which has led most foreign embassies to recommend against traveling through the provincial capital of Ambon (although the local people of Banda will quickly tell you, "Oh, but that is Ambon ... Banda is different.").  

However, the Pelni ferry Rinjani sails from Surabaya, briefly berthing at Makassar, Bau Bau, Ambon, and finally reaching the beautiful harbor of Banda Neira island. The boat trip is a wonderful experience, something akin to being part of a floating city. There are corridors and stairwells filled with passengers grabbing that vital shut-eye, the periodic call to prayer echoing through the vessel, a little market in the economy section and, during a rather stormy 18-hour open-sea leg from Bau Bau to Ambon, the inevitable seasickness that afflicts numerous poor souls.  

By boat, the first indications that one is approaching Banda Neira is a blinking red light of the navigational tower at the entrance to Banda Neira Harbor (the Rinjani arrives at 7 p.m. on Tuesday evenings). Then, as the eye adjusts in the darkness, a huge cone-like shadow can be discerned.  

This, the dominant geographical feature of the Bandas, is Gunung Api (literally "fire mountain"), a volcanic island that rises some 600 meters out of the sea. The volcano, still active, last erupted on a major scale in 1988,
destroying one of the two villages on the island.

The ferry berths right next to the Hotel Maulana, one of three hotels on the island, and a welcome coffee at the hotel itself is had with the lights of the ferry so close that one feels that the hotel is an extension of the boat.

But it is the early morning light which truly displays Gunung Api and the harbor at their very best. The harbor is half a kilometer wide, with the volcano on the other side affording a safe anchorage from the powerful currents of the Banda Sea. The sounds of small fishing boats venturing out for their day’s catch periodically can be heard.

And the call to prayer from Hatta-Sjahrir Mosque echoes against the volcano, creating a truly romantic atmosphere. This is a scene that would have inspired Joseph Conrad.

But the Bandas are not simply renowned for having a beautiful harbor and an awe-inspiring volcano. Some three to four hundred years ago, this was the place, as various European powers sought to find the source of the "holy trinity" of spices -- cloves, nutmeg and mace. First, the Portuguese then in turn the Spanish, English, Dutch and French dispatched expeditions out to the other side of the world, all in the hope of securing a foothold in the extremely lucrative spice trade.

And, most significantly, the Bandas were virtually the only region where both nutmeg and mace grew.

To a certain extent, it could be argued that the quest for the source of the hallowed spices fueled the achievements of the Age of Exploration. The need to avoid the "middlemen" (Arab and Chinese traders) of the spice trade drove explorers such as Vasco da Gama to (eventually) round the southward cape of Africa, sail on to India, to the trading port of Malacca (on the west coast of present day Malaysia) and finally to reach Banda itself.

One of the major aims of the expedition of Christopher Columbus in 1492 was to reach the Indies, "for God and Spices". And we all know where he ended up, don't we.

The rivalry for control and dominance of the spice trade in the Bandas became rather "testy" (to say the least) in the early 17th century, and there were numerous armed confrontations, and massacres, involving European crews and the resistant locals. The first ever British colony was established on the islands of Ai and Run, but after a Dutch invasion (of Ai, in 1616), and a prolonged siege (of Run) for the next four years, the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC), perhaps the world's first multinational, gained control and a virtual monopoly of the nutmeg trade.

The VOC became renowned for its ruthless, cruel and systematic methods of forcing the local people to comply with company needs. And the most tragic episode in the history of the Bandas occurred in 1621, when VOC forces massacred and
enslaved thousands of Bandanese people.

Today, there are only a few vestiges of this (often tragic) past. The town of Banda Neira boasts of having a number of old Dutch mansions, churches and forts, many in a state of disrepair, but still a reminder of all that was before. Local efforts to restore many of these buildings have been stymied by the current economic and security situation. But the large fortification Benteng Belgica (Fort Belgica) has been restored and dominates the town.

Most islands of the Banda group have at least one Dutch or English fort, and are the site of an old Dutch nutmeg plantation, with associated crumbling building. Some of the fort sites are now simply foundations in clearings (such as Fort Defense on Nailaka Island, or Fort Swan on Run), some are gradually being reclaimed by the forest (Fort Hollandia on Gunung Api) and some are serving as shelter for cassava plantations (Fort Revenge on Ai).

But one of the least visited is Fort Concordia, on the largest island, Banda Besar. A recommended means of reaching this location is to walk from Kampong Salamon, over the island (a good two hours through nutmeg plantations and forest) to the fort itself, which is in Kampong Waer, on Banda Besar's south coast.

The view across to the ubiquitous Gung Api from the Mesjid Jami in Salamon is worth the trip in itself, and, along the way, one also finds two other tiny forts (Salamon and Kota), very much overgrown and largely hidden in the trees.

Fort Concordia stands on a low cliff, overlooking the sea, and, standing on its thick walls, one needs little imagination to see a Dutch Carrack or a Javanese Prahu approaching.

For those with a historic bent, the Bandas are a worthwhile destination, despite the current headaches in getting there. The latest word is that the security situation in Maluku may be easing, and that air services to Banda may resume in the next few months.

This is a part of the world that deserves to be visited, not only for its forts, but its snorkeling, diving, wildlife, culture and generally relaxed way of life.