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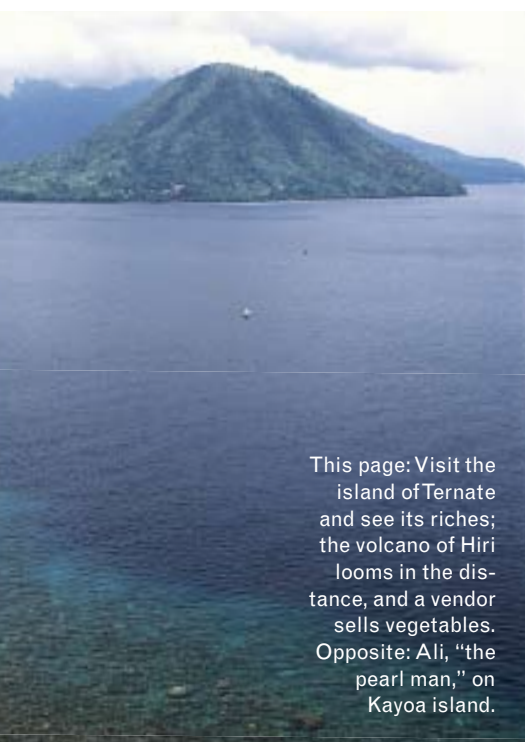
THE SULTAN'S CROWN

In the northern Moluccas province, deep in the heart of Indonesia, there is a mystical crown.

The Moluccas are a secret paradise where legends and traditions remain intact. Opposite: the sultan of Ternate's crown. This page: Boats ply off Mare Island, near Ternate.



NEAR MIDDAY ON THE REMOTE ISLAND OF KAYOA,



This page: Visit the island of Ternate and see its riches; the volcano of Hiri looms in the distance, and a vendor sells vegetables. Opposite: Ali, “the pearl man,” on Kayoa island.



I duck into a dusty shop filled with essentials like ramen noodles and batteries. All I want is a bottle of water, but the bearded man behind the counter startles me by asking in near perfect English if I'd like to see some pearls from this region of Indonesia, the northern Moluccas province. I glance outside at the sand-swept lane where the group of friends I'm traveling with is entertaining a swarm of local children with balloons and card tricks. Turning back to the man, who introduces himself as Pak Ali, the owner of the shop, I tell him, “Sure. I have time to look at the pearls.” He reaches beneath a worn-smooth counter and produces a battered box. Nesting in matted cotton are two opalescent pearls, each a half-inch in diameter and the most beautiful I've seen anywhere in Indonesia. I bargain hard, finally closing the deal.

“You know,” Ali says, “until recently all the islands in this province sent a flask filled with pearls to the sultan of Ternate (Ter-NAH-tay) as part of a yearly tribute. The most perfect pearls, ones much larger than the ones you just bought, were hoarded and sewn into the sultan's crown.”

When I tell Ali that some friends and I are sailing to Ternate on the *Adventure Komodo*, a yacht owned by Adventure H2o based in Bali, he insists that we stop to see the crown.

I put the box with the pearls in my pocket and settle on a stool while Ali lights a *kretek*, the clove-and-tobacco blended cigarette so pervasive in Indonesia, and begins to recount his version of the legend of the crown.

“Hundreds of years before Europeans arrived in Ternate [they arrived

in the 16th century] the great mystic, Awal, ruled the land from his palace at the foot of the volcano, the mile-high Gamalama. One day God told Awal to climb the volcano, and when he reached the top God gave him the crown. While he wore the crown, Awal was able to perform many supernatural acts. When the great mystic died, his son cut a swatch of his father's hair and attached it to the crown before taking the throne for himself. Many people believe Awal's hair is still growing, and that's what supposedly gives the crown its divine powers.”

I laugh and shake my head, but Ali continues: “It could be true. Just over 20 years ago I was in Ternate when the volcano started spitting fire. The sultan in power put on the crown and circled the island in his war canoe. When he got back to the harbor, the volcano was sleeping again.”

I leave Ali's shop, my head filled with a story that might very well be a fairy tale but, nonetheless, I'm intrigued and decide to add another stop to our itinerary when we reach Ternate.

The owner of *Adventure Komodo*, Steve Jacobs, invited my husband, Burt, and me on a journey from Sorong, on Papua's Bird's Head Peninsula, around the southern tip of Halmahera to Ternate. Our plan is to retrace part of the old European spice-trade route that snakes through the northern Moluccas province's 1,000-odd islands that sprawl between Sulawesi and the island of New Guinea.

Since *Adventure Komodo* weighed anchor, Steve has been talking about the European explorers' heroic voyages and the spices that put these islands on the map: cloves, nutmeg and mace. Until the late 18th century, clove orchards, he told us, flourished in only a few places in this region: on the slopes of Gamalama on Ternate; on its twin volcano on Tidore; on Halmahera, a mountainous, four-armed island, the largest of the Moluccas; on a couple of other nearby islands — and nowhere else on the planet.





Discover your own beach in the Moluccas. Opposite, from top: Play and swim near waterfalls on the west coast of Halmahera; You never know what kind of treasure you'll find in the shops, perhaps even pearls fit for a sultan.

The valuable spice trade was guarded by sultanates and — perhaps more mystically — by a supernatural crown.

I glance up and down the street of Kayoa's main village, looking for my friends. I don't see them, so I approach two women seated nearby with almond-shaped eyes and straight black hair. "*Di mana?*" I ask, which means "where" in Indonesian, hoping

they understand my cryptic question as I continue searching for my friends. The women stand, smooth their red-plaid sarongs and motion for me to follow them behind a cluster of huts. One of the women stops and loosens the distinctive funnel-shaped basket she wears like a backpack. She reaches in, hands me a red banana, and then places two dried cloves behind my

MARK LEWIS/ALAMY

ears. “*Terima kasih,*” I say. “Thank you.” I don’t know why she has given me the cloves, but they smell divine.

We wander beneath a grove of towering palms until we reach a clearing bordered by frangipani trees. Orderly rows of vegetables — I recognize tomato plants and bean vines — are laid out in what must be the community garden. The breeze carries a sharp aroma that overpowers the sweet fragrance of coconut flowers and frangipani. Before me lie yards and yards of woven ground cloth covered in drying cloves. Tens of thousands of the tiny, dart-shaped spices form a fragrant welcome mat that beckons me forward.

These “fragrant nails,” as the Chinese called them, were long ago coveted for their flavor and as preservatives and analgesics. Cloves were so coveted that, in order to control their flow, early Arab traders — the first foreigners to exploit the northern Moluccas’ natural wealth — established sultanates, commercial and political networks stretching across Indonesia’s vast archipelago to mainland Asia. Later, Europeans explored these routes to try and discover the spices’ source (see sidebar on page 60).

Just beyond the mats of drying cloves, I spot Burt surrounded by a group of children and a taller man. I say goodbye to the two women and run to tell my husband about the crown. Then I notice he has a clove stuck behind each ear, as I do. “It’s a custom,” Burt says. “Ask Yusman. He’s the local schoolteacher.”

I shake hands with Yusman and pull my hair back to reveal my own dried-clove decorations. Yusman explains that on Kayoa many Moluccan traditions persist, such as placing cloves around the ear to prevent demons from entering the body.

I ask the schoolteacher what the children know about the complex history of their province. Do they realize they live at what was once the crossroads of a global empire? “I teach

them a little history,” Yusman says. “But the people of Kayoa do not think of time in the same way as Westerners. We try not to think in terms of calendars. Few of us celebrate birthdays, but we do plant a clove tree whenever a child is born. I told your husband where to look for an orchard that might be in bloom. There’s one on Halmahera, on your way to Ternate, near a place where the sultans used to go seeking cloves.”

Burt and I hurry back to the beach. The Jacobs family has just finished snorkeling and the kids have been looking at blue starfish a few yards from shore. It’s easy to convince them to stop at the place Yusman recommended. If we travel through the night, Steve thinks we’ll arrive there at dawn. As *Adventure Komodo* motors through Kayoa’s fringing reef, half the village gathers on the beach shouting “*selamat jalan,*” or “safe journey,” until we’re almost out of sight, heading north through the night.

For 12 hours *Adventure Komodo* navigates the inside passage between a series of offshore volcanic peaks and the island of Halmahera. Burt and I wake up before the sun and crawl out on deck in the hazy, early-morning glow. Seven volcanoes are on the port side of the ship. Starboard, Halmahera’s thickly forested shoreline undulates back and forth, the wild vegetation giving way to cultivated fields that form green labyrinths across the island’s slopes. Following Yusman’s directions, the captain steers into a bay on the west side of Halmahera where terraced orchards — presumably the ones Yusman told us about — flank



**BURT STEERS THE ZODIAC CLOSE TO
THE WATERFALLS AND TIES OFF ON
A LOW BRANCH OF A CLOVE TREE.
WE PLUNGE IN AND SWIM BENEATH
THE CHILLY TORRENT OF WATER.**



CLOVE TRADERS

KICKIN Portuguese sailor Francisco Serrão was the first European to visit the island of Ternate. He commanded one ship in a fleet charged with locating the Spice Islands, including Ternate, Halmahera and Kayoa. In 1512 a storm wrecked Serrão's ship near an uninhabited island about 300 miles south of Ternate. Through pluck, Serrão managed to get to Ternate and was brought to its sultan, who showed Serrão what seemed to be an endless supply of cloves. Serrão quickly gained the ruler's confidence and negotiated exclusive rights to Ternate's orchards for Portugal. Portugal's dominant role in the spice trade faded when England, Spain and Holland discovered their own routes to the source. For the next 150 years, cloves were a profitable business. But by the late 18th century, cloves were successfully transplanted on other islands, particularly those in the Indian Ocean and, while demand continued to be high, trade cartels could no longer control the supply. Four-digit profits disappeared, and monopolies crumbled. Ternate, Tidore and their sister Spice Islands reverted to the somnolent outposts they had been before cloves became the rage of Europe.

ORIGIN? Where cloves came from was kept secret by the sultanates. Cloves are actually dried flowers, not seeds or fruits and, as such, they will not reproduce if planted. Clove trees can only be grown from seeds dropped by mature trees, and transplantation was not achieved until the late 18th century.

WHY SO VALUABLE? Cloves delayed food decay, were believed to stimulate the digestive system and had medicinal qualities. Although salicylic acid and eugenol were not known at the time, they are the compounds in cloves that give them their healing and anesthetic properties. Europeans were also convinced cloves made an excellent aphrodisiac; drinking clove-flavored milk before sex was all the rage.

foamy rivers. The sun gleams through the trees, and we catch flashes of red and yellow in the canopy. Cloves are indeed blooming on Halmahera.

Burt asks the captain to anchor so he can motor ashore on the dinghy and see the cloves. When everyone awakens, we pile into the red Zodiac and zip toward shore; hornbills and sulphur-crested cockatoos take flight as we pass. We follow the birds around a rocky point where an amazing waterfall gushes at least 80 feet down to the bay. According to Yusman, this was the spot where sultans came to play.

Burt steers the Zodiac close to the waterfall and ties off on a low branch of a clove tree. He snaps off a cluster of flowers, and then we plunge in and swim beneath the chilly torrent of water. I upturn the soles of my feet beneath the strongest flow and relax into the best reflexology treatment I've ever had. It's easy to imagine the sultans and their families traveling in gaily decorated canoes to enjoy this remarkable place.

Reluctant to leave, we decide to over-night. From the ship's satellite phone we call our friend on Bali, Reno Kirtya, who owns Grand Komodo Tours, and ask her to arrange a car and driver for when we arrive in Ternate the next day.

AT 5 A.M. WE PULL ALONGSIDE Ternate's main dock not far from where, in 1521, survivors of the crew who served on Magellan's fateful circumnavigation dropped anchor. (The explorer attempted to find a westward route from Europe to the Spice Islands but was killed in the Philippines.) A fleet-ing breath of cool air rushes down from the volcano's peak. Roosters crow, dogs bark and at least half of Ternate's 200,000 residents rev up their motorcycles for an early market run before the afternoon's swampy, equatorial heat wilts the just-picked produce. Red tin roofs cascade down to the edge of the calm sea.

Soon after, the harbor master arrives, accompanied by dancers and two

husky men in khaki uniforms. This isn't a typical reception, but news of our trip apparently has reached the Department of Tourism via Grand Komodo Tours. We are introduced to Dr. Syamsuddin, Director of Tourism for the northern Moluccas, and Dr. Widiyanto, Director of Moluccan Intelligence and Security, who have come to greet us and invite the group to a special lunch. Pak Sam and Pak Widi (Indonesians are frequently called by shortened forms of their last names) introduce us to our guide for the day, Arby, who speaks colloquial English and dresses straight out of an L.L.Bean catalogue.

After the dancers have stomped, twirled and handed out the last orchid necklace, Arby piles us into an air-conditioned Kijang, a Toyota SUV found all over Indonesia, for a quick spin around the 40-square-mile island. As Arby negotiates a maze of one-way streets, the first thing I ask about is the sultan's crown. I'm stunned when he replies that we can tour the sultan's palace but cannot see the crown. According to Arby, viewing the crown requires 48 hours advance notice and special arrangements.

When we arrive at the 16th-century Fort Toloko, I'm feeling sullen about not being able to see the crown, so I wait in the shade while Burt and the Jacobses investigate niches where Portuguese cannons defended the spice ships. Burt persuades me to walk out to the circular limestone plaza. There, on one of the highest vantage points in the city, I'm cheered up by the view of Tidore Island's cloud-shrouded volcano, rising about a mile away to the south.

Back in Ternate, our Kijang honks its way past horse-drawn taxi-carts, evoking a time when they were used to haul bushels of cloves from the orchards to the foreign ships waiting in the harbor. The Jacobs family wants to shop on the "gold street," a lively alleyway packed with jewelry stores. While Steve buys pendants for his daughters and a *(continued on page 100)*

Volcano peaks commonly decorate the skyline as you cruise through the Moluccas.



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The Spice Route

BY LAND To plan a dedicated trip to Ternate, we suggest contacting Grand KomodoTours to arrange the details. These islands do not have a developed tourism infrastructure, and accommodations are basic. If you stay on Ternate, make a point to visit British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace's former home, now a museum. He used Ternate as the base for his far-flung collecting trips throughout the Indonesian archipelago. A guide from Grand KomodoTours will drive you there and to other island landmarks (including the sultan's palace and crown). Rates from \$50 for five hours. komodoalordive.com

BY SEA In order to tour the northern Moluccas mentioned in the story, you'll need to charter a boat and tailor the itinerary. Choose from the 10-passenger, 75-foot yacht *Adventure Komodo* or the 18-passenger, 115-foot *Archipelago Adventurer II*, a wooden vessel built to resemble a traditional *phinisi*. Both these boats also offer set itineraries, but they don't sail the islands mentioned in "The Sultan's Crown." *Adventure Komodo* sets out on 14-day cruises departing from Sorong on the west coast of New Guinea. These cruises include a stop near Halmaheira and are dive-focused adventures with no shore excursions. *Archipelago Adventurer II* has a culturally-focused seven-day cruise that stops in the southern Moluccas: Ai Island, Lonthor Island, and Nusa Laut. Rates on *Adventure Komodo* are from \$335 per person per night; adventureh2o.com. Rates on *Archipelago Adventurer II* are from \$275 per person per night; archipelago-fleet.com. These prices are the same for both the charter and set itinerary; for charters you are obligated to fill the cabins.

DETAILS FLY to Bali on American Airlines and then transfer to a domestic carrier: Garuda or Lion Air. **READ** *The Malay Archipelago* by Alfred Russel Wallace. **EAT** *kepitng kelapa* (coconut crabs). **SPOT** Afo on Ternate; planted more than 400 years ago, Afo is the oldest clove tree on the island and possibly in the world. **DRINK** *air guraka*, hot water mixed with ginger and brown sugar. **SPEND** Indonesian *rupiahs*. \$1US = 9,072IDR **LEARN MORE** at my-indonesia.info.



Moluccas (from page 60)

pearl-encrusted bracelet for his wife, I wander from shop to shop. The exotic smell of kretek cigarettes permeates the air, and I'm reminded of Ali's tale about the sultan's crown.

Later, we meet Pak Sam and Pak Widi at Pondok Katu Restaurant. After an hour of cracking coconut crabs, Pak Widi asks if there's anything he can do for us, anything at all. Everyone but me seems satisfied. "Pak Widi," I ask, "can you *please* get us in to see the sultan's crown?"

Widi grins and his fingers dance across his cell phone key pad. "It's all arranged," he says. "Let's go."

Within minutes we're parked in front of the sultan's palace. This faded pink building isn't Awal's palace — it's only about 200



» **BRING BACK** This string of cultured gray pearls may not give you the power to halt a volcanic eruption, but it will give you an exotic take on a blue-blood staple. Wander through Ternate's market to find pearl vendors and bargain for whatever style appeals to you: asymmetrical, oblong or perfectly round. Don't feel shy about a little bartering; it's an expected and welcomed part of the culture. Expect to pay about \$25 for a strand such as this. *Note: The pearls pictured here are not the pearls from Pak Ali's shop on Kayoa mentioned in the story. The author gifted those to her sister.*

years old — but it has been constructed on the exact spot where Ternate's first sultan took the throne 750 years ago. Arby points to the peak of the island's volcano, Gamalama, and pats the building's meter-thick walls, which have been built to withstand eruptions and earthquakes. We follow Pak Sam and Pak Widi to the entrance hall and remove our shoes. Thick oriental carpets pad the marble floors. From out of the shadows appears a man with skin like ripples of mahogany sand. He bows before a desktop shrine and offers holy water, rose petals and incense to the crown's spirits. Soon the scent of burning cloves wafts among the exqui-

site Chinese pottery, embroidered silk sarongs and suits of armor displayed around the spacious room.

Thinking about what Ali said about the crown and the volcano, I do not take this ceremony lightly. After a final bow, the aging attendant unlocks a vault-like door and draws back the curtain shielding the crown. Even though it's weighed down by enormous rubies, emeralds, diamonds and pearls, the sultan's crown seems to float in its silk-lined case. Suddenly a gust of wind slams the heavy door, and an earsplitting blast shakes the room. The lights flicker and, for a second, I think the volcano is erupting. Then I feel Arby's reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry," he says. "You've honored the crown. The volcano will wait." ✦