



# ISLAND NATION

EXPLORING DEEP INTO INDONESIA OFFERS TRULY INCREDIBLE  
CRUISING FOR KATE ASHE LEONARD





## CRUISING

Fleeing bait fish ping against our hulls while troops of shrimp crackle like frying bacon as they drift past. A red painted fishing boat is anchored among the shallow reefs up ahead, its skipper dozing in the gentle dawn. Diving in off our back step, I swim against the current, grabbing hold of our anchor chain. *Polaris's* twin hulls frame a white sandy spit topped with three leaning palm trees, shelving into light then dark blue sea. We're cocooned off both port and starboard by two bigger islands cloaked in lowland forest and surrounded by twinkling ancient granite boulders.

These are the Anambas islands, Indonesia's northernmost sea border archipelago. The islands are dotted with traditional villages suspended over water on wooden stilts, gushing waterfalls, silica sand beaches and empty, well-protected anchorages, making them a dream destination. Between Peninsular Malaysia and the island of Borneo, only 25 of these 255 islands are inhabited. We arrived in Indonesia on our Catana 47 *Polaris* 10 months ago and, although it's not the easiest place to cruise, the 1,900-miles we've explored in the country has been an unforgettable chapter in our circumnavigation so far.

Indonesia is spread across more than 17,500 islands that stretch between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and surfers can ride long, consistent swells formed from both oceans. Located within the Ring of Fire it has the highest number of active volcanoes in the world, and the multitude of habitats – from savannahs and tropical rainforests to mangrove swamps and coral reefs – are home to fascinating wildlife; from Komodo dragons to critically endangered tigers,



elephants and orangutans endemic to Sumatra and Borneo that roam in the wild.

Indonesia is out of the cyclone belt and its proximity to the equator means light wind is normal year-round; all but the most patient sailors tend to burn lots of diesel.

However, there are two monsoon seasons to factor in. From June until September, dry season conditions with south-east winds cover much of southern Indonesia. At the same time, north of the equator parts of Aceh, Kalimantan and Sulawesi are in their south-west wet season. Then between December and the end of February the southern wet season brings stormy weather with north-westerly winds, while the northern regions experience north-easterlies and drier conditions. Transitional weather with light wind in the months between seasons can provide windows to make way in directions otherwise untenable due to the monsoons.

## LAND AND SEA

Departing Darwin we're on a broad reach. Out of the lee of Bathurst Island the wind accelerates and has us speeding along at eight knots, but it's short-lived and by day two we drop our sails and motor through glassy water. When we arrive at Kupang, our port of entry in Timor, our plan is to make our way west using the last of the south-easterlies as far as Lombok, where we'll stop for the southern rainy season. By contrast to our year spent sailing Australia with clear and strictly enforced regulations, we're expecting unmarked fishing vessels, lots of plastic pollution and lengthy officialdom clearing in. But on this sweltering three-night passage, the



Far left: Komodo Island – and others within Komodo National Park – turns spectacularly green during the wet season.  
Left: *Polaris* on a slow passage to Kupang

Right: Padar Island in the Komodo National Park. The fearsome Komodo dragon (below right), is not present on Padar but is found on other islands within the park.  
Bottom left: Jim Hooper at *Polaris's* wheel



number of obstacles in the water are few and far between until the last 50 miles. The plastic, however, is heartbreaking and checking in does take two and a half days.

Spinner dolphins guide us south-west towards the powder white sand of Rote Island. Wooden villages fringe the coast en route to the town of Nemberala where uncrowded breaks attract surfers from all over the world. Like many Indonesian coastal communities, though, Rote is still reliant on agriculture and fishing. We squeeze in among about 30 enormous fishing trimarans and for three weeks we rise at dawn and paddle out to the nearest break.

After our fill of surfing, we set a course north-west while the winds are still pumping. Keeping at least 50 miles off the north coast of Sumba to avoid fishing







vessels, we spend the 300-mile passage reaching under mainsail and genoa. The heat of Indonesia is tough but the wind fills our sails and helps keep us cool. Using PredictWind forecasts and gathering local knowledge before our departure, we manage to pick up favourable current as we continue north towards Rinca island, our first stop in the Komodo National Park islands.

In this area there are dozens of breathtaking anchorages at the foothills of sloping savannah-covered islands, hemmed by colourful, thriving coral reefs. Ashore we spot monkeys in the trees, deer in the shallows and water buffalo grazing on the hills. These islands are both a terrestrial and marine park – the same day we visit the ferocious Komodo dragons, a resting sperm whale exhales just outside our anchorage. Our time here is blissful; mornings are punctuated by hikes up scorched brown hills that will slowly turn green when the rains come, and afternoons drift snorkelling in the current with sharks, turtles and dozens of manta rays beneath us.

TROPICAL HEAT

The humidity rises as the seasons transition and we need to keep moving. Next, Sumbawa beckons, its moody volcanic craters smouldering to the west. With our sails full we race past Mount Tambora, whose eruption caused a global cooling event nicknamed the ‘Year Without a Summer’ in 1815. Today, it appears reassuringly sedate. Continuing west, Satonda island, with its volcanic crater lake interior, has a unique anchorage with access to a hike around the crater’s edge, while Moyo island offers excellent diving. But perhaps the biggest highlight is Saleh Bay, where enormous Whale sharks congregate around fishing platforms for an easy meal.

After several day-hops, we reach the brilliant blues of Lombok’s famous Gili islands. It’s late October and the heat forms a giant thundercloud above Rinjani, the second tallest volcano in Indonesia. When the storm hits it’s sudden and violent: the wind shifts and climbs to 30 knots. At anchor, *Polaris*’s bows gallop over a growing swell while lightning flashes ever closer. Waves pound the beach and two fishing boats break free.

Wet season comes early this year and the north-west winds will soon prevent sailors from safely continuing west. But our desire to explore Indonesia slowly, plus a family holiday on board, means we pause our journey in Lombok. With an international airport, a boatyard and a good marina, it’s convenient.

Above: cruising past fishing platforms as *Polaris* heads to south-west Lombok. Right: anchorage at the island of Belitung on the east coast of Sumatra, Java Sea



At this time of year, the best shelter is in south-west Lombok. The wind hasn’t quite switched north-west yet and so the passage south along the west coast is very sheltered by the main island. Still, a large swell generated in the Lombok Strait repeatedly smashes against our starboard beam as we raise our mainsail and motor-sail for 40 miles, passing dozens of wooden fishing platforms decorated with lights and draped with fishing nets that are hung out at night. A little archipelago known as the Secret Gili islands is sprinkled along this coastline, still untouched by mass tourism despite being a mere 90-minute speedboat ride away from neighbouring Bali. This area becomes our base for the coming months.

Traditional daily markets are the beating heart of village life across Lombok. Women sit arranging buckets of silver fish while other vendors sell chicken, tempeh, vegetables, stacks of fruit and heaps of grains and nuts. Flexing our basic Bahasa, and with a little help from local people, we gather what we need each week.

Monsoonal deluges of rain and thunder and lightning storms are almost daily occurrences by November, when our boat sustains an indirect but damaging strike. I was standing in the saloon area when the front window filled with purple and green light. The flash and almost simultaneous bang were terrifying and Jim and I lunged to disconnect our lithium batteries in time. In the weeks that follow, we notice our instruments are malfunctioning and *Polaris*’s depth sounder is completely dead.

Locals tell us this is the worst rainy season in years. Low pressure systems spin up from northern Australia and on a few occasions our instruments read over 40 knots. Rivers flood, breaking their banks, spilling debris that

poses a serious risk to yachts. Moving between anchorages after a storm, we dodge huge floating logs and are confronted with the worst plastic marine pollution we’ve ever seen – many islands have little to no waste collection or processing facilities.

THE JAVA SEA

The seasons are slow to transition and it’s early May by the time the north-west winds finally peter out enough to head west. Timing the crossing of the strait that separates Lombok from Bali is crucial, as it’s known for strong currents and high waves. We motor-sail across the widest, northern part on a light wind day without incident.

Bali’s volcanic north coast is striking and has good holding in black sand, although inlets and coves are lacking. Nets marked by flags set sometimes hundreds of metres apart, interspersed with dozens of FADs (Fish Aggregating Devices), mean this area requires close attention. We are on a tight schedule, but before crossing the Java Sea, visits to Banyuwedang’s hot springs and diving off Menjangan island are exceptional experiences.

Next, we head north-west towards Kalimantan, Borneo. The Java Sea is Indonesia’s maritime highway and an intimidating body of water to navigate; a major fishing ground and shipping artery, it connects Indonesian ports and also intersects international shipping routes. As the sun dips below the horizon, fishing fleets (with no AIS) glow like a city in the distance; their white, purple and green lights initially appear blindingly close, but in fact we motor towards them for hours. Smaller vessels, barely visible by comparison, flash torches to signal their presence. In the dead heat of a windless passage, we ►



From top: colourful Anambas fishing boats; stilt house on Bawean Island; still waters for *Polaris* in the Anambas archipelago; night watch under sail



meander between vessels like this for two days straight until, exhausted, we reach Bawean island, a welcome halfway stop in the middle of the Java Sea.

Dawn breaks as our bows cut through shallow aqua water, dodging reefs off Bawean's east coast. Reminiscent of some Pacific islands we've experienced, Bawean is mountainous and covered in rainforest. From the northern anchorage, minarets and the domed roofs of mosques are visible. Ashore we hike past glistening rice paddy fields, and a school where the children run out from class and follow us playfully up the street.

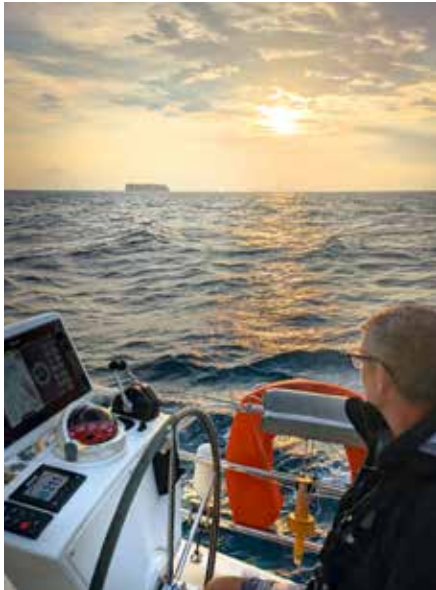
Back on board, we plan our onward route and prepare to depart. The CAPE index is extremely high from here to Kalimantan and as far as Singapore with lightning forecast for the next ten days. But as we approach the equator unstable weather is an unavoidable characteristic year-round and we leave feeling somewhat apprehensive.

ORANGUTANS UP RIVER

The south-east winds are not yet fully established and our angle is tight on the wind for 180 miles, until the muddy mouth of Kalimantan's Kumai river comes into view. We are tense as we enter the river: we replaced our depth sounder after the lightning strike but haven't calibrated it correctly and depths of 5m read as 2m. As well as being a shipping terminal, the town of Kumai is well known for its 'bird's nest hotels'. Dwarfing the once quaint village, tower blocks fitted with speakers play bird song all day long to entice the birds to nest in, the nests are then sold into the lucrative Chinese bird's nest market.

Across the river lies Tajung Puting National Park, an area of rainforest home to the largest population of wild orangutans in the world. This is the reason we came here, and we've booked a two-day river boat tour.

From a traditional *klotok* riverboat I look up as the sun casts splinters of light through the trees while our captain navigates up the narrowing river. A semi-submerged crocodile disappears into tea-coloured water, hornbills glide above the trees and proboscis monkeys scuffle along the banks. We whizz by crooked, stilted fishing huts until



Left: Siantan, one of the larger islands in the Anambas Archipelago. Above: the Java Sea is busy with shipping

we reach a pontoon. We follow our guide along a rickety bridge, then he stops abruptly and points. Burnt orange shaggy hair emerges from emerald foliage: the wild female great ape swings towards us, then positions herself upside down and gazes approvingly at the juvenile she is nursing, tightly gripped to her side. Not far behind a larger male is climbing up into the swaying canopy.

As the end of May nears the wind blows more consistently from the south-east. Back on *Polaris* we unfurl sails as we exit the Kumai river, passing barges piled high with timber. Our next stop is Belitung island, off the east coast of Sumatra, 300 miles west. The current accelerates fiercely and the wind too is strong at the southern tip of Borneo. We need to avoid shallower water

off this coast otherwise the wind over tide effect will make for very rough conditions. We put a reef in both the mainsail and the genoa, and for the next 24 hours average 10 knots of boat speed until the wind gradually reduces.

Granite boulders worn smooth by the elements sit clustered around Belitung's headlands and little islets. With a clearance port, a busy town and exceptionally beautiful sandy beaches this is a favourite stop for cruisers. A week is hardly enough to explore but, with just a month left on our visas, we're keen to get to the Anambas islands – we're told one of the most beautiful cruising grounds in the world. As we leave Belitung thunderclouds follow us and the squall clouds have joined together until they're over seven miles long. Finally a downpour washes through, the wind increasing to 30 knots, but it clears the air and we're back under blue skies.

AMAZING ANAMBAS

Arriving in Anambas after this 340-mile passage, what we find is even better than we imagined; the water is inviting; the beaches clean and villages dot the shore of just a handful of islands. We head to the outer eastern islands first and work our way back west. This is a place with nothing much to do but snorkel and marvel at the pristine, protected anchorages we find ourselves in. One evening at an bay known as Moonrock we watch the full moon rise while someone plays saxophone on the beach. It's a difficult place to want to leave.

Ten months in and we've only just begun to get the hang of cruising this vast archipelagic nation. It's true there's bureaucracy, and destinations are so spread out that – with two monsoon seasons – it's easy to get stuck waiting for a weather window. Safe places to leave the boat with access to airports for visa runs are few and far between, and importing spare parts are expensive. But these hurdles pale in comparison to the incredible experiences we've had. For the self-sufficient and adventurous, Indonesia offers thousands of undeveloped, stunning islands inhabited by exceptionally kind-hearted people. ■



From top: orangutans at Tajung Puting National Park; approaching Rinca Island in the Komodo National Park; Indonesian fisherman raising their anchor at Rote Island, part of the Sunda group where fishing is still a primary source of income



Anchored off the pier giving access to the volcanic crater of Satonda Island and its lake within (see also main image on page 34). Experienced hikers can traverse the whole crater rim on a dirt path



Kate Ashe Leonard has now sailed more than 30,000 miles almost seven years after moving on board the Catana 47 *Polaris* with her partner, Jim Hooper. They are currently cruising Indonesia and in the coming year they'll continue their circumnavigation west through the Indian Ocean. Follow on Instagram @sv\_polaris and at svpolaris.com