

This episode is dedicated to David L., Patrick C., Don C., and James I. All of them have made generous donations to the podcast since the previous episode was uploaded. And yes, as always, I am grateful for your contributions. Especially now that my wife is gone. May all of you be in good health for all of this year, and may your ventures be successful. Now if everyone is ready to travel to some places you have probably never heard of, let's go.

<intro>

Episode 138: Archipelagoes

Greetings dear listeners, for the 138th time, from the hills of Bluegrass country in Kentucky! What is an archipelago? I should have asked this question sooner, since I have already used that word more than once in previous episodes of the podcast. Archipelago is a fancy word for a group of islands, all of them in the same body of water. I use the word here because two of the nations in Southeast Asia are archipelagoes. In fact, one of them is the largest archipelago in the world. That's Indonesia, with more than 17,000 islands, spread across an area the size of the continental United States. The second largest archipelago is next door to Indonesia -- the Philippines, with at least 7,100 islands, 7,500 if you count the rocks that are only above water at low tide. You'll remember that I told you my wife came from the Philippines, and she once told me that she thought an archipelago is the best place to live in the world, because almost everyone in an archipelago lives near a beach. In her case, her family lived in a house on a beach until we got married. Other examples of archipelagoes include the state of Hawaii, and the Caribbean, which contains thirteen island nations, more if you count the islands that are still ruled by outsiders, like Puerto Rico.

And that's not all; you can have small archipelagoes inside larger archipelagoes. We have that in the Philippines. I have mentioned before that the smaller islands between the two big islands are together called the Visayas, and the Sulu Islands, the chain of islands running between Mindanao and North Borneo, are usually mentioned together as well. Now why am I talking about archipelagoes? Well, for today's episode we are going to look at three small groups of islands, located between Timor and New Guinea. Those are the Alor Islands, the Barat Daya Islands, and the Tanimbar Islands, three small archipelagoes within the larger Indonesian archipelago. All of them are well off the beaten path for most travelers.

Before we move on, I should give a disclaimer. I will not be telling much history in this episode, even though this is a history podcast. This episode will mainly be a travel guide, for any of you who plan to visit the Alor, Barat Daya, and Tanimbar Islands at a later date. Why? Because as I just mentioned, these islands are off the beaten path, and underpopulated as well. From a human perspective, nothing exciting has ever happened here. If there were ever wars in this area, those who led the armies and navies just passed through, without stopping for a battle. Moreover, I don't know of anyone important who ever lived here, and any natural disasters that may have happened, such as fierce storms, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions, were not reported, for future generations to remember. The good news is that because these islands are so remote, they are unspoiled wildernesses full of natural beauty. If you are an eco-tourist, one who likes going to places where nature has been untouched by modern man, you will like it here. Likewise, the indigenous peoples living here have not been affected much by the outside world;

they have been left alone, as much as can be, in the twenty-first century. Most of them live by subsistence farming and fishing. Okay, are you adventurous enough to visit them? I'm ready when you are. Did you say yes? All right, let's go!

<Interlude>

The Alor archipelago is a regency in the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara, near the eastern end of the Lesser Sunda island chain. These islands are located east of Flores, and north of Timor, with the Savu Sea to the south and the Banda Sea to the north. There are two large islands here, Alor and Pantar, and fourteen smaller islands; altogether only nine islands are large enough to have people living on them. As on the islands we have visited previously, the largest mountains are old volcanoes; one volcano, Mt. Sirung on Pantar, is active. About 3 miles from Mt. Sirung is a hill named Korelau; here in February 2011, a gas eruption occurred for the first time. You can think of this as the birth of a new volcano; it burned the grass on the hill, and created a crater about 30 feet across. The population of this archipelago was estimated at 225,000 as of 2024; one fourth of them live in the largest town, Kalabahi, on Alor.

Podcast footnote: Kalabahi has an airport, and local airlines travel between here and other Indonesian islands, like Flores and Timor. You will probably begin your visit to the Alor islands by flying in here. Nusantara, the new capital city of Indonesia, is much closer to here than Jakarta, so when Nusantara is completed, I expect that Garuda, Indonesia's national airline, will offer direct flights between Nusantara and Kalabahi. This will show that with the new capital, the Indonesian government has truly shifted its attention more to the eastern part of the country. A second airport, with a single runway, opened on the island of Pantar in 2021. End footnote.

Once you're in the Alor islands, the main form of transportation is by boat, and PELNI, a state-owned company, has ferries traveling between the islands. A ferry that carries cars runs between Kalabahi and Kupang on Timor, three times a week. If you use the boats, be prepared for long journeys and frequent delays. Likewise, you can use minibusses to get around on Alor, but the schedule is unpredictable; car and motorcycle rentals are also available. Unfortunately the local roads wear out as fast as they get built or repaired, so there is no guarantee that you can drive to every place you want to see on the islands. Away from the diving resorts, accommodations are very basic, and prices are high because Alor and the neighboring islands aren't used to seeing tourists. Food is also simple, with few restaurants of any kind available, so plan on bringing your own food with you. Local foods include cookies, called *kue rambut* and *jagung titi*, and a rice cake called *kaleso*. For drinks, a local favorite is *sopi*, a fermented palm sugar alcoholic drink.

In previous episodes I told you that as you travel farther east in Indonesia, you see less of the Austronesian culture that characterizes Java and the other important islands of Southeast Asia. In place of them you will see strong influences from the Papuan culture of New Guinea, as well as from Polynesian traditions. That is the case in the Alor islands, where fifty indigenous tribes have their own communities, and speak fifteen local languages. If you learned the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, before coming here, you will find that quite a few of the local residents speak it, but not everybody. A few understand English, while the oldest residents may speak Dutch. When it comes to the religion of the inhabitants, 68 percent are Protestant, 23

percent are Moslem, and the remaining 9 percent are Catholic or animist.

Now that you know how to get around the Alor islands, what is there for a visitor to do? Three things in particular: you can go diving or snorkeling among the coral reefs, you can visit the tribal villages, and you can hike the slopes of Mt. Sirung, the previously mentioned volcano. There is also a hot spring worth visiting, at Tutti on the north coast of Alor.

Years ago some fishermen used dynamite when fishing here, until they were driven away; the coral reefs have healed up since then. Because of this, and because there are only a few visitors here, the reefs are now in pristine condition; the website TripAdvisor.com rates the Alor islands as one of the best places in the world for diving. There are dozens of good diving sites, with more being discovered all the time. In addition, Pantar Strait is a marine park and a migration corridor for blue whales; you can see the whales if you come here in September and October. The dugong, a rare Southeast Asian manatee, has one of its habitats around Alor Island, so when you're here, keep an eye out for the dugong as well.

The tribal villages have preserved their traditional cultures, and visitors are welcome to buy souvenirs, or attend the local ceremonies and festivals. Probably the best village to visit is Takpala, which is a 45-minute drive from Kalabahi. The main musical instruments played are *mokos*, cast-bronze kettle drums, and visitors are encouraged to join in the traditional dances at these events. Before Indonesia became independent in 1949, the tribes often fought each other, and some tribes practiced headhunting, but the islands are quite safe now. Many villages still practice the traditional weaving, called *ikat*; you can meet the ikat weavers, watch them at work, and buy a finished weaving if you wish.

Podcast footnote: I have one historical fact to share for this region. In previous episodes I told you about the *Nagarakertagama*, an epic poem composed in the fourteenth century, to praise the Kingdom of Majapahit, and its fourth king, Hayam Wuruk. This is the oldest record which mentions the Alor Islands; they are listed along with the other islands Majapahit ruled at its peak. Here the Alor Islands are called by an older name, "Galiao." Like most Southeast Asian nations before modern times, Majapahit was loosely organized in what we call the Mandala system, with borders that were subject to change without warning, so scholars disagree on how much control Majapahit had over the Alor archipelago, especially when one considers that these islands were at the eastern limit of Majapahit's reach. End footnote. Okay, that's all I have to say about Alor; let's move on to the next archipelago.

<Interlude>

Now we are at the Barat Daya Islands, located east of Alor and northeast of Timor. However, the name means "south-west" in Indonesian, and that can be a bit confusing, because geographers define the Barat Daya Islands, like the Alor Islands, as being in the eastern part of the Lesser Sunda chain. What's more, these islands are not in the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara, like the other islands we visited in recent episodes; the Indonesian government considers them closer to the Maluku Islands, and thus puts them in the province of Maluku. Sometimes you will also hear these islands called the Southwest Maluku Regency. The best I can figure is that the islands are "south-west" in relation to New Guinea. Another name given to

them is the Forgotten Islands of Indonesia.

These islands are really remote. How remote are they? Well, to explain that, I'll start by reminding you of some facts I told in the very first episodes of this podcast. During the ice age, most of Indonesia and the Philippines were linked to the Asian mainland by land bridges that are not above water today, and New Guinea was linked to Australia. I also told you that the gap between the islands linked to Asia and those linked to Australia is called the Wallace Line, after Alfred Russel Wallace, the nineteenth-century naturalist who first noticed that the animals on the two sides of this line are different. Well, the Barat Daya Islands are in the gap, in the middle of the Banda Sea, and were never linked to either Asia or Australia. Consequently there are few indigenous animals living on these islands; most of the mammals you see here were brought by people. There are plenty of plants, though, from both continents, and the sea life is abundant; more on that in a few minutes. Sometimes you will also hear this part of Indonesia called Wallacea, for the same reason.

The Barat Daya Islands are not very fertile. There isn't much forest cover and the scenery varies from volcanoes to barren savannahs. The most recent population figures I could find are from 2010, and for that year, the total population of the islands was 28,235, one eighth the population of the Alor Islands. Here are the islands worth your attention, from west to east:

1. Liran. This small island is considered part of the next island, Wetar.
2. Wetar. This is the largest island in the archipelago. A volcano located here, called Gunungapi Wetar, erupted in 1512 and 1699. Wetar also has some gold mines.
3. Kisar. About 14,000 people live here.
4. Nyata. All I could find about this island is that the name means "Real" or "Definite."
5. Romang. Another volcanic island, with a population of 4,430 as of 2023.
6. The Leti Islands. These are three islands named Leti, Moa, and Lakor. Sometimes the first two letters of each name are put together to give them another name, "Lemola." Here the people make a living by fishing, raising various animals, and by growing rice, coconuts and tobacco. Moa has the largest population in all of the Barat Daya islands; its administrative center is a small town called Tiakur.
7. The Sermata Islands. This is a group of twelve islands. The only information I could find about these is that in the eighteenth century, the Dutch East India Company had an outpost on the largest island, also named Sermata, and most of the time, only three soldiers were stationed here.
8. Damar is a small volcanic island, also called Kenli Island. The south side of the island has one of the few forests in this region, and it has been designated an important bird area, because it is the only home of the Damar flycatcher. Crops grown on the north side of the island include coconuts, cashews, coffee, cacao, cloves and nutmeg. The island has seven villages with a combined population just over 6,000, as of 2022.
9. Pulau Teun. This island is only 14 square km, about the same size as LAX Airport in California. It has about 252 inhabitants, and no airport or seaport; you will have to ride a ferry to get here. Still, it is worth visiting for Layoni, an historic village, nine different types of forests, and a volcano that erupted most recently in 1969. Only two of the surrounding islands are inhabited, and they also have volcanoes.
10. Babar Island is large enough to have five rivers and two springs, supporting a light forest. Surrounding it are smaller islands named Dai, Dawera, Daweloor, Masela, and Wetan. As on the

other islands we have seen, the people are mostly farmers or fishermen. The crops grown here are corn, plantains, bananas, cassava, other root vegetables, and red rice, the kind of rice grown without irrigation. In addition, they raise some cattle, and will collect and sell sea shells, sea weed, sea cucumbers, shark fins, live lizards and birds, cashews, nutmeg, cloves and eucalyptus oil.

In the days before the Dutch arrived and took over, the Barat Daya islanders did not participate much in trade with their neighbors, even though the Spice Islands are not too far away. The only islands in the region that produced more than a little spice were Damar and Babar. In the case of Babar, the Dutch destroyed the nutmeg trees on that island, to prevent competition with the spice trade they controlled already. The people of Sulawesi, Bugis and Makarassarese, sailed here each year to purchase products from the coral reefs, such *trepang*, or sea cucumbers, and mother of pearl.

Okay, now that you know about the Barat Daya Islands, what is there to see and do here? I already mentioned the village on Teun Island, and there are plenty of opportunities for hiking. But the biggest asset of this area is not on the islands; it is the biodiversity in the surrounding ocean. Marine biologists give the name “Coral Triangle” to the waters around eastern Indonesia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. These waters have more species of marine life than any other place on earth, and the center of the Coral Triangle is right here, at the Barat Daya Islands. So while you are here, by all means do some snorkeling or diving. As in the Alor Islands, you may get to see something really special in the waters, like a blue whale or a dugong. And with that, we’re done here, and it’s time to move on to the third archipelago for today.

<Interlude>

Now we have come to one of the most remote parts of Indonesia, the Tanimbar Islands. How remote are they? Well, they are located between the Banda and Arafura Seas, just 343 miles north of Darwin, the nearest Australian city, but few Australians have visited here. In fact, few visitors come here from anywhere. These islands only seem to matter to the local residents, and to the ornithologists who come for the eight species of birds native to these shores. So when you’re here, add bird-watching to your activities. The beaches have pure white sand, and my sources compare them to beaches in the Maldives of the Indian Ocean, but the tourists aren’t here because so many other Indonesian islands have beaches that are more accessible. There are two airstrips on Yamdena, the main island, but it appears that the commercial flights only go to and from Ambon, in the Moluccas, and to and from Langgur, in the Kei Islands. The second largest island, Larat, also has an airport, and also accepts flights from the Kei Islands. So you will probably find it easier to get here by booking passage on a cruise liner or a ferry. Like the Barat Daya Islands, the Tanimbar Islands are part of the Wallacea region, and organized as another regency within Maluku Province.

The Indonesian name for the Tanimbar Islands is *Timur Laut*, which means either “Eastern Sea” or “Northeast.” There are 65 islands in this archipelago, with a total population of 130,000, according to a 2023 estimate. When it comes to religion, 94 percent of the locals are Christian. A few Islamic villages exist as well; their inhabitants came here from other parts of Indonesia.

By far the largest island in this group is Yamdena. It is seventy miles long and forty miles across at its widest point. The regency capital, a town named Saumlaki, is on Yamdena, too, on the southern coast. There are villages on the other coasts of Yamdena, but the interior is uninhabited. The next largest islands are Fordata and Larat to the north, Selaru to the south, and Sera to the west. I couldn't find any information about the other islands, except that not all of them are inhabited.

The islands are forested, although nowhere are the forests as dense or luxurious as on other Indonesian islands, because this region does not receive as much rain, and there are few rivers to provide fresh water. Yamdena has thickly wooded hills along the east coast, while the west coast is lower and swampy in some places. Larat has high cliffs, a rocky coast, and thick vegetation along the shore, while Selaru is rather flat and mostly grass-covered. Unlike the other islands we visited in today's episode, there isn't volcanic activity here.

Like some of the other islands in eastern Indonesia, the people of the Tanimbar Islands are mostly Melanesian, meaning they are dark-skinned, and related to the peoples of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji. Crops grown on the land include corn (called maize if you're not American), rice, coconut and sago palms, yams, plantains, mangoes, and papayas. They build houses of wood and palm leaf, generally on piles, which you enter from underneath, with fancy carved pillars for decoration. Finally, the men are skillful boatbuilders, and use the boats to search for *trepang* (sea cucumbers again) and tortoiseshell; they also keep pigs, and work with iron, copper, and gold. Recently, Inpex, a Japanese oil and gas corporation, announced plans to drill for natural gas in the waters off the Tanimbar Islands; they are probably building offshore facilities as I record this.

In the 16th century, the Tanimbar Islands were called the Aru Islands. Now who were the first Europeans to visit here? If you listened to other episodes of the podcast, you will probably say the Portuguese, and you'd be right. The first Portuguese expedition that we know of had a navigator named Martim Afonso de Melo Jusarte, and it arrived between 1522 and 1525. Another navigator, Gomes de Sequeira, may have come here in 1526. Then in the 1560s we start seeing Portuguese maps of the East Indies that show the Tanimbars. However, Portugal didn't do anything with these islands, which is understandable because that little country already had so many opportunities in places like Brazil, Africa and India, not to mention the nearby Spice Islands. Even the missionaries didn't come here yet; they were stretched thin by their activities elsewhere.

The next European visitors, the Dutch, could take advantage of their discoveries. They first visited the Tanimbar group in 1629, and claimed them in 1639 by right of discovery. Nevertheless, they did not try to rule the islands directly until 1900; by then they were establishing Dutch rule all over the area they called the "Dutch East Indies." The Catholic Church established its first permanent mission in the islands in 1910, and by the late 1930s most of the population was at least nominally converted.

It turns out there **was** some action here during World War II -- surprise! Well, in July 1942, after the Japanese had conquered virtually all of the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch sent a detachment of 13 soldiers led by KNIL sergeant Julius Tahija, to the town of Saumlaki in the Tanimbar Islands. Japanese ships entered the bay at Saumlaki on July 30, and small boats were used to bring their soldiers ashore. The Dutch garrison opened fire at close range with two light machine guns. The Japanese retreated to their boats, leaving several dead behind. Then Japanese ships opened fire on the defenders' position, while the soldiers landed on beaches that were out of machine gun range. Six Dutch soldiers were killed and the rest were driven into the bush. One day later, on July 31, a ship carrying an Australian Army unit arrived at Saumlaki, unaware that the town had fallen to the Japanese. It was fired on from the shore, and the Australian commander of the landing party was killed. The Australians retreated to Darwin. Afterwards, the remaining members of the Dutch garrison came under naval gunfire from the Japanese, and attacks from the Japanese infantry who had already landed. Seven surviving members of the garrison boarded a sailing ship and escaped to Australia. Thus, the Tanimbar Islands were held by the Japanese for the rest of the war.

After World War II, the Tanimbar Islands went the same way as the rest of eastern Indonesia. First a British occupation force came, to disarm and remove the Japanese and maintain order until the Dutch could come back. Soon after their return, when the Dutch came under pressure to grant independence to the Dutch East Indies, they included the Tanimbar Islands in their proposed eastern Indonesian state, *Negara Indonesia Timur*. Then in 1950, all of the Indies were absorbed into present-day Indonesia; that included the archipelagoes we are talking about in this episode. Since then, outside corporations have taken an interest in Tanimbar's resources, so the current issue is how the exploitation of those resources – mining, fishing, commercial forestry and drilling for oil and gas – will affect the islands' future.

I will finish by telling you what to expect if you visit the Tanimbar Islands. Unlike other islands we have covered in the past few episodes, I am not going to tell you to visit as many places as possible, because these islands are not set up for it. In fact, Saumlaki is the only place that has accommodations for tourists. Chances are you will go here first, either by plane or by boat, because Saumlaki is the most accessible location in the archipelago. I already mentioned there are airports at Saumlaki and on Larat. If you have time to travel by boat, Pelni ships come to Saumlaki a few times a month, and cargo ships are also available. As for the accommodations, you will find the prices high for a basic room with fans and a shared bathroom. Of course, if you're willing to pay more than the minimum, you can get a room with good service, food and a view of the ocean.

The locals have their own unique culture including music, dance and traditional crafts. Unfortunately the locals are not used to having visitors. One of the travel guides I checked said that are not particularly welcoming in Saumlaki, with excessive shouting and demands for money. The island of Yamdena has some interesting megalithic structures to see; alas, I couldn't find out who built them or how old they are. For those seeking something a bit more adventurous, charter a boat and explore the neighbouring islands; this kind of trip can take a whole day. Finally, reptile fanciers come here to catch the blue-tongued skink, a lizard native to these islands that grows up to 18 inches long and really has a blue tongue.

<Interlude>

That does it for our tour of the Lesser Sunda Islands, that has been going on for the last few episodes. The only islands remaining between Timor and Western New Guinea are considered part of the Moluccas, the fabled “Spice Islands.” So join me next time as we complete our long tour of eastern Indonesia, with a visit to the Moluccas. I look forward to seeing you there!

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<Outro>