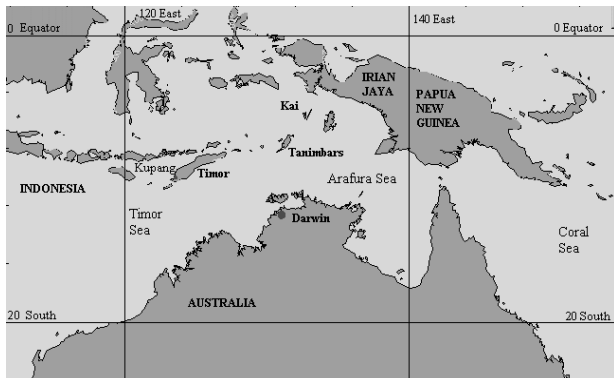


SAIL SAUMLAKI: A POTTED HISTORY

The Tanimbar Islands are located in the West-South East Moluccas in the Arafura Sea, approximately 300 km north of Darwin, Australia. By yacht it is approximately 280 nautical miles. The provincial capital is Saumlaki and it is situated in the southern low-lying area of the main island of Jamdena. This island has a topography and climate similar to the Top End. The Dutch were aware of this island group as early as 1629 but they never colonized the islands, which have had little contact with the west. The arrival of Jesuit priests resulted in a population that is overwhelmingly catholic and the end of practices such as headhunting.



The origins of Sail Saumlaki lie with the Multihull Association of the Northern Territory (MANTA). In 2002, Bruce Panting (Blood, Sweat and Beers) sailed to Saumlaki and engaged in negotiations for a rally. When civil unrest erupted in Ambon some residents fled to the Tanimbar Islands. Among these were people who had been involved in the Darwin to Ambon race. They were keen to see a similar event in the Tanimbars to replace the defunct Darwin to Ambon race. Bruce laid all the groundwork for a rally in 2003. On his return MANTA decided to organize the rally (cruising company) for July or August 2003. The rally coincides with a traditional display of goods and crafts from various villages around the islands. The display includes produce, arts and crafts, especially weaving, woodcarving and pottery. There is a competition between the villages for best display and the people take a lot of pride in their work.

Word began to spread of Sail Saumlaki early in 2003 and MANTA announced a meeting for interested boats. Quite a few people attended and while some were enthusiastic others were a little more cautious and concerned about security issues in Indonesia. We heard about the event and assumed it was for multihulls. We asked if they would mind if Sea Urchin II came along even though she is a monohull. Of course, they didn't mind. Organizing the event was somewhat informal and easy without a committee. Everyone just pitched in and took on the various jobs that needed to be done. Bruce was the link person with officials in Saumlaki. Eventually six boats committed to the rally: four multihulls (Blood, Sweat and Beers, Khumsin, Wishful Sinful and Shockwave) and two monohulls (Sea Urchin II and Firefox).

Saumlaki is not a port of entry so Customs and Immigration officials fly in from Ambon to process rally boats. Normally six or more officials board the boat and all want to go below to use the table for paperwork. They are friendly and helpful, the process takes about 30 minutes and is conducted in English luckily. After clearing Customs and Immigration people generally gather at a local watering hole, the Harapan Indah, for a quiet drink and post-rally rave. Each year the locals have greeted everybody as they make their way to the hotel. Those new to the rally are always struck by the warmth, hospitality and generosity of the people.

The Welcome Ceremony and other hosted activities have been different each year. In 2003 we were given a program of Sail Saumlaki Activities that were going to keep us fully occupied for four days, starting with the Welcome Ceremony. The crews gathered at the wharf and were surrounded by about 200 people, many of whom were very important dignitaries. Inside was the traditional produce, cuisine and art/craft display. After perusing the display we sat in the official marquee to be entertained by dancers and singers. The singing was Pacific Islander style, presumably Micronesian. The ceremony went for 2 hours, speeches were made and our representatives responded. They sang for us and we sang back! *Waltzing Matilda* of course. We didn't completely embarrass ourselves as we had a tea towel gift with the words on it. After the ceremony we were invited to join a traditional dance, which turned out to have no end and went on for what seemed to be hours.



A traditional dance during the Culture Show



Our 'ambassadors' engaged in official duties

The next day the Tourist Authority had organized an island tour by mini bus. Two minibuses travelled the one dirt road which seems to be Jamdena's only road running the length of the island. At the first village we were completely stunned by how well presented it was: very clean and tidy, flags adorning the road, little cottage-type housing with garden beds of rock and swept earth. At Lauran singers and dancers welcomed us and taking pride of place among the flags was the *Waltzing Matilda* tea towel! Once again we were invited to join a traditional dance. Then it was off to a *sopi* still. Most of us only had a wee dram, as it is very potent firewater made from coconut, not unlike poteen and grappa. We were then encouraged to buy local crafts before boarding the minibus and a lunch stop at a karaoke bar that did not seem to be located near anywhere. It was in a bay with a lovely beach and apparently the bar was built to cater for visiting sailors, except it is on the windward side of the island and there was no sheltered water for anchoring.

We then went to Tambur village for another traditional welcome. The headman met us at the village gates and placed a smudge of ash on our foreheads to signify we had permission to enter the village. We were "stamped" after we made a donation to either the church or the school. On the walk to the headman's home all the locals burst into song that was very rhythmic. Locals swept up our hands and led us through the village, encouraging us to join in their song. It was an amazing experience. A hungi-style lunch was prepared at the headman's house, with food cooked in banana leaves. The food was fabulous. We then wandered around and met lots of the local kids, who were quick to learn the Australian war cry: *Ozzie, Ozzie, Ozzie, oi, oi oi!* We were greeted by this the next year. It was then off to a local hall which was bursting with vendors displaying handcrafts for sale. On the way back we were humoured by a voice at the back regularly asking "Are we there yet?" After an all day tour we barely had time to spruce ourselves up for the Presentation Night that commenced at 6 pm. There was more dancing and singing, official speeches and rally presentations.



Welcome at Lauran – note the tea-towel



Presentation Night ceremony

Then there was more singing and dancing (traditional and modern) and the secretary of the region brought his steel guitar and jammed along. All the boats had to clear Customs and Immigration the next day so officials could return to Ambon. The plan was to go down the west coast to shelter from the strong easterly winds and anchor in a quiet spot with the other boats. Interesting that a bunch of people who navigate boats make a decision on where to meet and only two boats end up in the same place.

Seventeen boats (again mainly from Darwin) participated in the 2004 Sail Saumlaki and the program developed by the local organizing committee (which had swelled to 70 odd members) was different to that of 2003. The official welcoming ceremony was held at the very imposing Regent's residence. A large, raised and very precarious stage had been constructed. The program was long and primarily occupied with lengthy speeches. The Tourism Minister had travelled from Jakarta and it was the first time a Minister had visited Saumlaki. It was obvious that they had a vision for a large yacht rally, bigger than Ambon ever was. The program was stretched over 5 or 6 days and some boats were uncomfortable about this as they did not want to be pressured to stay in Saumlaki town for that long. Beautiful, uninhabited tropical islands beckoned. The island tour was conducted on the second day and the third was to be a lunch at the Regent's. A couple of buses collected us from the hotel. We drove into the Regent's, went round the driveway and then drove back out again. It seemed there had been a sudden change of plan. We were herded into a large warship brought over for security reasons associated with the Minister's visit. No one seemed to know what was going on and before we had the sense to jump ship it pulled out from its berth. Word spread that we were going to Matakos Island for a ceremony. Decorated fishing boats greeted us, with drummers and dancers on the roof of each. We had to climb down the side of the warship into a fishing boat to take us close to shore. Then it was onto a very makeshift bamboo raft to shore. The inevitable happened and some of the rafts sank. It was a crazy scene. Matakos has assorted buildings at various stages of construction and, apparently, they will form a luxury resort that will be the destination for the proposed International Saumlaki Yacht Race. The ceremony had many speeches. The reverse process took place to get us all back on the warship. The experience was surreal. There was a party that night then a presentation night the next night. Some found the program wearing and scampered to their boats for peace. Others left to explore Nambutang village on the island southwest of Jamdema. It was stunning and



Relaxing on the warship—note guard above



Darwin's Lord Mayor—first landing Matakoka

the village was spotless with its wide dirt streets swept clean. We were impressed by efforts to build a footpath to connect Nambutang to a village on the other side of the island. On a stroll we heard laughter and singing. Soon a group of women and young girls appeared, carrying plastic bottles and bags. They were hauling water, sand and cement for the path. There are no cars or motor bikes on the island.



The lure of an uninhabited island took some boats to Nastubun for R&R before heading home. It wasn't long before a large group of yachts were anchored off the island. It is the perfect place for sunset drinks, shared meals and campfire conversations. The island is also good for swimming, snorkelling and diving.



The 2005 Sail Saumlaki rally attracted 12 boats. The Saumlaki program had been reduced to three days after discussions between the committee here and the one in Saumlaki. We decided we needed to return their generosity and had two events in the program for us to host. These became the highlights of the trip. The first was a fireworks display in some open land between the wharf and the markets. The ground was rough and the event launched into chaos when fireworks shot off in all directions except up. People didn't know which way to flee and others could barely move due to fits of hysterical laughter. The finale was a display of out-of-date flares shot over the harbour. This didn't go quite to plan and a couple strayed into town. A large plume of smoke suggested a fire in a thatched roof. The locals loved it so we would like to repeat it this year. The second event was an Aussie BBQ at Tambur village. Osprey brought a very large BBQ and gas bottle. The villagers cleared an area for ceremony and dug large hangi pits. We set up a long table with fine Aussie fare: white bread, sausages, fried onion and potato, tomato sauce, beetroot, coleslaw, lamingtons, pikelets and cream, Anzac biscuits and Cadbury Roses chocolates. It began in an orderly fashion with the dignitaries but descended into chaos when we were mobbed on all sides. We cursed the person responsible for this "great idea." Tambur put on a wonderful display of traditional dance and the children were fantastic. At the ceremony Bruce Panting became Mersilea Bruce (translates roughly as Chieftain Bruce) and was made an honorary citizen of the Tanimbar Islands. He was crowned with a dead bird of paradise. Bruce remains the linchpin for this event.



The other highlights were the party at Pak Lucas's residence, delivering donations of two microscopes and equipment to the hospital and teaching English classes.



Sail Saumlaki has a lot going for it. It is not a race, is very accessible compared to places like Ambon (55-60 hours for our cruising monohull) and it is timed to include two long weekends in the NT. It is also very safe and affordable plus you get a 3-month Indonesian cruising permit (the CAIT). Different boats go each year and of the 19 boats in the rally in 2006 only two are original boats (Blood Sweat and Beers and Sea Urchin 11). Over time the fleet has expanded from just being Darwin boats. There's also nothing better than going somewhere where people really want you to come and welcome you so warmly. Some of us have established friendships there and become involved in community (for example, conducting English classes). What's more, you are treated like royalty the whole time you are there.

Bridie O'Reilly & Steve Templeton Sea Urchin II

SAND BAR BBQ

Sunday 13th August 2006

From 12 Noon

There will be some transport available to the
Sand Bar from Darwin Sailing Club

\$20 for Adults, \$5 for children - payable on the Sand Bar; Includes Beer, Wine,
Champagne, Soft Drinks and Sausage Sizzle

Games and Heaps of Fun, Guaranteed !!!

