

A South-East Asia Sojourn By Hugh Macready

To say this was a mid-life crisis would be selling us short of about 20 years of life expectancy, but what follows does have hallmarks of one. Disillusionment with the humdrum of working life, purchasing a boat that went against prudential financial planning and a need to blow-off the shackles of normality. That was how Kate (my then partner and now wife) and I felt as we sailed out of the Sydney heads in 2013. Apart from turning left at the heads, we hadn't done a great deal of planning for our cruising adventure, nevertheless we ended up visiting nine countries, challenging ourselves and growing together in ways that neither of us imagined in the two years that followed.

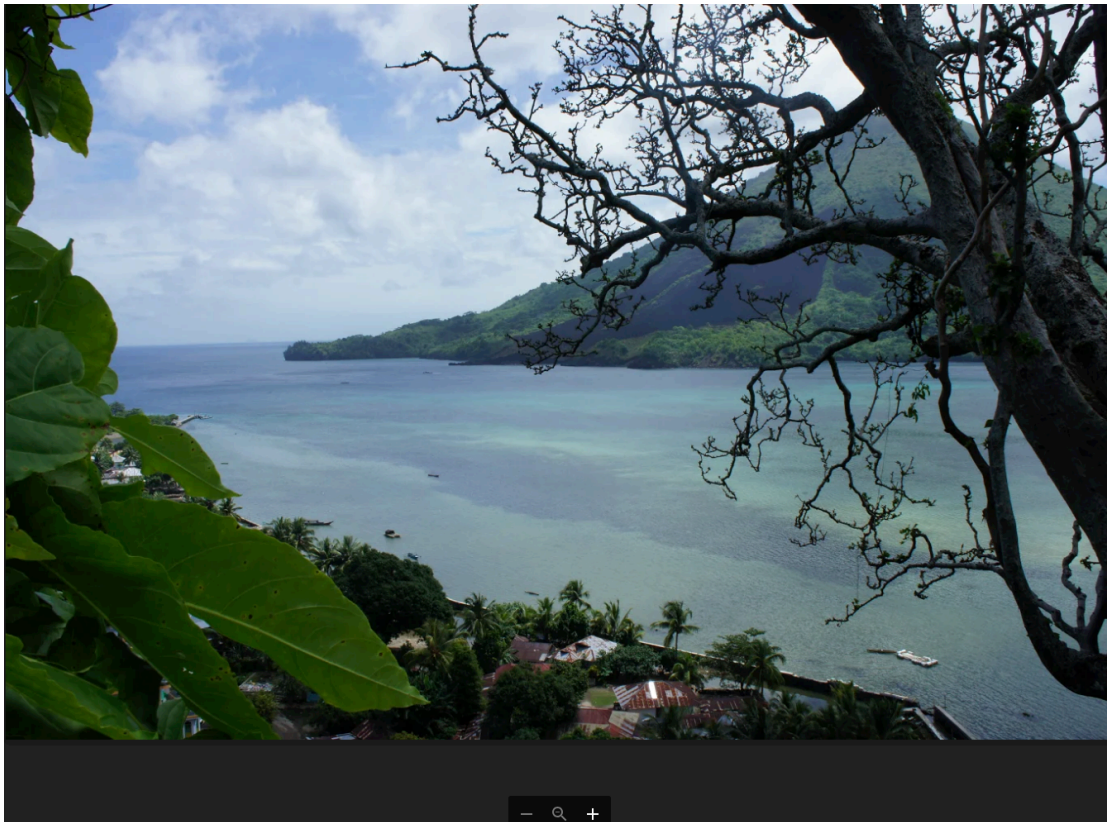
Our vessel was a Kelly Peterson 44 that we purchased in Pittwater six months prior to leaving. She was selected for her sea-kindliness and blue water sailing pedigree. I must admit that being more used to racing boats than cruising ones, the 16 tonne centre-cockpit felt like driving an aircraft carrier to begin with. We soon got used to her quirks and began to enjoy the cruising lifestyle as we made our way to the northern reaches of the Coral Sea.



Our 1981 Kelly Peterson 44 "Elizabeth Jane II" Underway in the Whitsundays

Though I could wax lyrical about the Coral Coast - it is truly a wonderful place to sail - the real adventure didn't start for me until we set sail from Darwin to Indonesia. Crossing the Arafura Sea was like entering a different world. It was a rough three day passage north made worse by the beam winds with strengthening contrary current as the ocean trench deepens close to Indonesia. It was with great relief that we finally dropped the hook in the port town of Saumlaki. Our 4am arrival lent an inky blackness to the deep harbour that made the process of anchoring feel quite foreign. We snuggled down the boat and made our way below for a rest before the formalities of checking in the following morning. Just as we were drifting off to sleep a call to prayer rang out clear across the harbour. At that moment we knew that we were in for a unique cruising experience.

After arriving in Saumlaki we pushed further north to Banda Neira, a spice island known for a bloody history owing to the natural occurrence of nutmeg. The vibrant green volcanic island towers over the deep blue ocean surrounding it, and partly because it is 200NM from any significant land mass, it has a majesty which is hard to describe. You navigate into a protected lagoon which is so deep that the only way to anchor is to stern tie against the fortified town lying directly opposite the active volcano. We later climbed the volcano which menacingly vented steam throughout our visit, had a tour of the town from a colourful tour-guide-cum-major, and dived on unique coral formed at the bottom of recent lava flows.

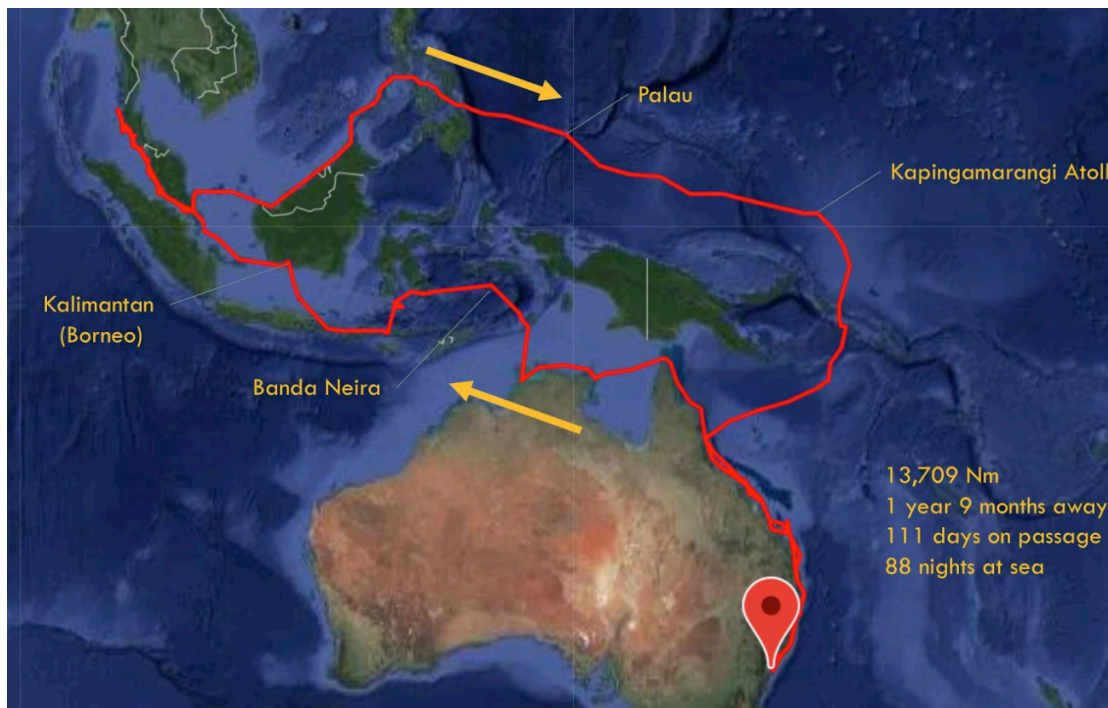


Banda Neira Island in Eastern Indonesia

The rest of our time through Indonesia was filled with extraordinary cultural experiences that are too numerous to mention here. Suffice to say that we were fascinated by our closest neighbour and the complex social, political and religious layers that make up the country.

By Christmas of 2013, eight months after setting out, we had made it to the northernmost extent of the cruising grounds in Thailand, the Surin Islands just shy of the border with Burma. We sat down by the pineapple that we had decorated as a Christmas tree in our snug saloon and thought about home. It had been a wonderful adventure up to that point, but there were dear family and

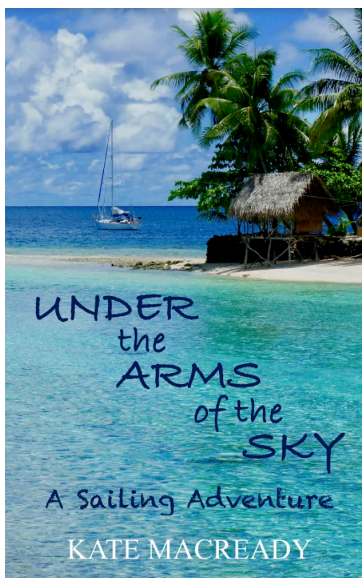
friends that we missed, as well as unfulfilled career aspirations drawing us back to Sydney. As we polished off the last of the 'celebration' standard Australian wine (read, the nice stuff) we began to plan our journey home.



Our cruising route 2013-2015

The route we eventually took was the result of a few unexpected twists and turns. Most notably the brutal kidnapping of a German couple on a boat that was cruising only a hundred miles from our location in the (now) renowned Sulu Sea. It was one of the factors that led us to press further north to the less travelled path via the Philippines and Palau before making the 21 day easterly passage to the Solomon Islands. From there we used the SE trades to reach back to the Queensland coast.

In all, the two years that we spent at sea taught us a great deal, not least how blessed we are to have the opportunity to travel and see the world by boat. We met so many kind-hearted people, and it was humbling to experience the genuine warmth that repeatedly greeted us. South-East Asia has many frustrations and occasional perils when explored by boat but for those willing to make the effort, a fascinatingly diverse cruising ground awaits.



If you would like to read more about our adventure, 'Under The Arms of the Sky - A Sailing Adventure' by Kate Macready is available in paperback or eBook from Amazon, Apple iBooks and most other online retailers.