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Banda 2008

SV *Infinity* celebrates with the people of Banda, Indonesia's most prolific cluster of spice islands, in a festival of peace and liberation, while rediscovering the perennial purity and beauty of the region.

By **Orla Doherty**,
Managing Director
PCRF.

We returned to the Molucca Islands on invitation of Banda's King, Des Alwi, to participate in the celebrations marking the passing of 400 years since the start of the first Dutch war. To commemorate this occasion, Des Alwi had called upon diplomats from the Netherlands, the USA, Singapore and Malaysia plus a host of Indonesia's media and politicians, to gather with the people of his islands.

During the course of the festival, there were many performances of the *cakalele*, a dance which retells the massacre of the Bandanese elders. Spirits of the ancestors are called to take part in the dance; five bamboo posts are adorned with red and white scarves to represent the ancient leaders and sand is strewn on the ground to represent the blood of the dead men. The costume and decorations surrounding the dance reveal the vast diversity of cultural influences on these islands—Medieval Portuguese-style headwear; birds of paradise from West Papua; Chinese dragons. Magic and symbols reappeared in the figureheads of the *kora koras*, traditional war canoes, which raced each other around the island.

Banda may appear to be an obscure group of islands in the 21st century, but 300 years ago, when nutmeg was the most sought after commodity on the planet, the fertile soils of these islands were the world's only source. Nutmeg was prized as a preservative in the days before refrigeration.

Columbus, Vasco de Gama, Magellan and Sir Francis Drake were all in pursuit of Banda and the surrounding Spice Islands. When Columbus' crew landed on the shores of America, they were under the illusion that they had arrived on the Spice Islands and shouted '*Mericha, mericha!*' (Portuguese for pepper). Another link between Banda and America lies in the fact that the English abandoned their claim to Run, one of the islands, exchanging it for the distant Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (which is the present-day Manhattan, USA).

Banda has since slipped behind a veil of obscurity which, in itself, has helped preserve it. But the nutmeg legacy lives on in continued exports of the spice, its mace sheath plus candied fruit, jams and syrups in a unique flavour. Banda's nutmeg is still highly sought after because no chemicals are used in Banda's soil. Indeed the islands' clean, pure air and beautiful landscapes are most apparent on the ascent of Gunung Api, a gentle jaunt for some of us, and an arduous climb for others! At each vantage point, the view downwards changed to reveal more and more of this magical land and its surrounding waters.

Underwater, dense schools of black snapper, full-sized groupers, turtles and mandarin fish dance above a substrate of glorious corals and sea fans. Some of the dives here are spectacular and will hopefully contribute to the Banda Islands becoming a World Heritage Site. PCRF has a long-term interest in Banda's future, with aims to play a part in its continued restoration as a demonstration project for the preservation of the planet's largest archipelago, Indonesia, and, by extension, for the islands and reefs of the world.

"Join the Voyage" of the SV Infinity, Raffles Marina's "club at sea" in Nautique and PCRF's homepage at www.pcrf.org. Together on our mission to conserve and protect the coral reefs and oceans, we can make a difference!