



Navigating the Equatorial Latitudes of S. E. Asia

By Geoff Walker

My time served on general cargo ships sailing through the equatorial latitudes of South East Asia and the South West Pacific hold deep nostalgic memories for me. Not only was the trade interesting, but the environment and its unique ambience was most agreeable. Endless, blissful days working cargo in remote ports, many not even marked on an Admiralty Chart, or up meandering rivers at jungle clearings, loading logs or other dressed lumber, along with a variety of different cargoes such as spices, coffee, sago, copra and the like. Memories of visits to nonchalant and exotic ports, each indifferent to time, sitting in small friendly bars or “Warungs”, even on the beach under the gently swaying palms eating freshly BBQ’d sea food, or just drinking beer watching the world go by, until it was time to return aboard.

The job on board the ship to a large extent, looked after itself in many respects. Being on the same vessel on a regular run, loading the same routine cargoes, most knew what was required and just went ahead and did it. Hence, free time was in abundance. I can well recall many an excursion (some rather boozy and boisterous in a friendly manner, I must confess), in such places as Sabang, Madan, Palembang, Semarang, Surabaya, Makassar, Manado, Balikpapan and Samarinda to name but a few. Perhaps prudent not to go into too much detail in this narrative.

The beauty of the equatorial region is stunning, always clear blue sky, lush mountainous terrain with the odd smoking volcano, the calm deep blue or turquoise waters, the shimmering silver sandy beaches and reefs visible to the eye as their corals reflected the sunlight from their shallows, (being a mariner I obviously tried my best to steer clear of them).

Most of these exotic ports were flanked by the Java, Molucca, Banda and Celebes Seas and extended the entire length of the Indonesian Archipelago and insular islands. Proceeding further East through the Arafura Sea one arrived at Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, as well as the Islands of the South West Pacific, all of which made up the string of the “Paradise Islands”, also renowned for their splendour, beauty and pristine waters. We visited the “Paradise Islands” every 2nd voyage.

Most ships used in these trades were not overly large which enabled them to navigate up the winding rivers or navigate through narrow passages between reefs. Usually, they were tweendeckers with four wide hatches (to help accommodate logs and a variety of lumbers). All were fitted with good cargo gear and multiple derricks to ensure full sustainability. The average size would be about 5000 grt. Most ships engaged on these trades were very well maintained, beautifully presented and purpose built for the tropics with large windows and highly varnished timber doors that opened out onto the officers deck. The ships were not airconditioned so they were all fitted with reinforced mosquito doors which could be locked from inside, these sat just inside the main timber cabin door frame, so at night the main wooden door could be latched open, leaving only the mosquito door to allow good through ventilation and cooling breezes to enter the cabin, whilst keeping the mosquitoes out.

So it was that officers and crew seldom left these little beauties, not only because of the vessel's themselves but also because the trade in which they were engaged. Many officers had Asian wives and resided in Asia and occasions carried their families with them aboard ship. Food and living conditions on board was excellent in most cases. I recall with vivid clarity, nights spent sitting outside on the deck having a few libations, under a canopy of brilliant stars and dancing heavens. In fact, we did this almost every evening since the weather was nearly always so benign and predictable.



A map of the Indonesian Archipelago and the adjoining Seas

The Java Sea is a relatively shallow sea by comparison to some other waters in the Indonesian archipelago and is scattered with numerous coral reefs and atolls in some sections, many concealing their own stories going by the number of wrecks sitting askew, high and dry on some of them.

A typical voyage for us would commence at the port of **Sabang** on the Island of Pulau Wei, off the northernmost tip of Sumatra Island, the port is situated on the northeastern coast of Wei Island. **Sabang** lies at the northern entrance to the Strait of Malacca and is the first port of call in the Malay Archipelago for vessels coming from the west. The harbour, built in 1887, is sheltered from the strong winds and heavy swells of the Indian Ocean. During my time trading in the area, - Sabang only had a single wharf that was capable of accommodating a couple of ships, hence much of the cargo was worked at the anchorage. Nowadays the port has developed into a major hub and now boasts a modern container port and terminal.



The beautiful haven of Sabang, at the head of the Malacca Straits on Pulau Wei, ca 1960-70s.

A highly cultured township which cherishes its semiautonomous privileges.

Medan was usually our next port of call, located on the east coast of Sumatra, butting on to the Malacca Straits. I have memories of this being a bit of a boisterous town, with its share of nightlife, to suit most sailors. Medan, capital city of North Sumatra Province, situated on the Deli River, some 25 km upstream from its mouth, is where the city's port (**Belawan**) is situated. The largest city in Sumatra and the fourth largest in Indonesia, **Medan** is the marketing, commercial, and transportation center of a rich agricultural area sustaining major exports tobacco, rubber, and palm oil estates. Coffee and tea are also grown in the vicinity and exported. Medan, has now developed into a tourist center, and features the Great Mosque (the largest in Sumatra) and the Palace of the Sultan of Deli. **Belawan Port** is a major exporting center for oilseed expellers. Shipped in bulk and sometimes in bags for use as animal feed. During my years we always loaded bagged expellers from Belawan. Major upgrades were undertaken to the extensively deteriorated cargo berths and improvements made to dry bulk and palm oil loading systems. It is now a modern port with container, general cargo and palm oil export terminals. The township close to the port area still retains its charm and is still a playground for visiting seafarers (as well as others).



Stevedores waiting to board at Belawan



The old port of Belawan ca 1970s

Palembang is the one of the oldest and most cultured cities in Southeast Asia. It was once the capital city of Srivijaya, a powerful Buddhist kingdom that ruled much of the western Indonesian Archipelago and controlled many maritime trade routes, including the Strait of Malacca. Palembang was incorporated into the Dutch East Indies in 1825 after the abolition of the Palembang Sultanate. It was

designated a city on 1 April 1906. Api-Api Port is in fact, now one of the biggest ports in Indonesia. The location is some 42 miles from Palembang City. The new port has been operating since 2013 but when I traded there we only had a few rundown wharves from which we worked cargo with our ships gear. The port was a sort of terminal for the intra-province steamers, a few still under Dutch flag at that time. However, the center of entertainment was not far away and popular with our Hong Kong Chinese crew.



Some perilous waterside dwellings on the Musi River close to Palembang Port. The muddy colored water is indicative of the high level of silting the port experiences.

Floating Veg and Fruit Market at Palembang.
Note the muddy colored water.



Semarang's Port is located about 5 km from the city center. It was constructed in the nineteenth century by the Dutch colonial government, for use in exporting sugar and various agricultural products coming from the hinterlands in central Java, replacing a heavily silted, pre-colonial port. The Port of Semarang was developed to make the city a port city and to export commodities from Java to international destinations. Despite the addition of new port facilities, Semarang Harbor remained narrow. At that time, the maximum size of vessel that could be docked at Nusantara Pier was ships with draft of no more than 5 meters or \pm 3,500 Tons deadweight. Ships with draft greater than 5 meters still had to anchor outside the harbor, or offshore which is \pm 3 miles from the main dock. Like most other ports it maintained its cultural charms, layback atmosphere and many sailor's haunts. It is understood Governmental approval has been granted for considerable expansion and upgrade of the port.

Surabaya was one of our main hub ports. Surabaya Port known as **Tanjung Perak** is the second busiest sea port in Indonesia, located at Surabaya, East Java. It is the main port for the eastern part of the island of Java. For us this was the busiest of all the ports we visited. It had a good swag of general cargo berths, even during my time in the 1960-70s, and a close anchorage which was always crowded with smaller

cargo ships and palm oil tankers. It was a favourite with our crew members because of the wide variety of nighttime entertainment, most within easy reach of the docks. For the crew it was paradise with such places right outside the dock gate.

It was particularly interesting to me because of the many large oceangoing Dhows that were hipped up at the jetties loading their cargoes, in the old port area. Most being readied for their trips to Makassar.

Modern ocean-going Dhow



Ocean-going Dhows loading at Surabaya Port



For our ship, distances between the various ports were relatively short, some consisting of just one overnight passage. The balmy weather conditions were wonderful and the weather mostly placid and calm. We were seldom very far from the coast so the spicy sweet smells of the tropical shores drifted out to sea over great distances, especially at night. Sitting in a deck-chair with an iced Gin and Tonic and gazing at the dancing heavens above, added to the pleasurable experience.

Navigating in the Java Sea at night called for extra vigilance. As mentioned, many Dhows used the route to Makassar – being of wooden construction they did not provide the most definitive radar echoes. In the main, they were also poorly lit, so often the Dhow crews would throw buckets of sea water or hose down the main sail so as to reflect a stronger radar signal and warn an approaching ship. Another trick was to use powerful flashlights to illuminate their wet sails. It was all quite effective. They made for a wonderful sight wallowing in the calm seas, reflected or silhouetted against a background of silver moonlight, as they sought whatever breeze there was.

Makassar (the Port's name is Ujung Padang), lies at the south western tip of the Island of Sulawesi and is situated on the Makassar Straits. To the west lies Kalimantan and to the east Sulawesi. The strait is a major traffic route within south east Asia and connects the Celebes Sea in the north and the Java Sea in the south. It is a conduit for large ships transiting to and from the Lombok Straits. Ujung Padang has

developed into a major regional port, especially a bunkering port. However, it still retains its quaint old-worldly charm, and is a hub for many of the cargo Dhows still used today.

With three jibs flying from a novel, triangular bowsprit, and separate topsails for lighter winds, the ketch-rigged Pinisi offered easier handling of its smaller individual sails and more flexible sail combinations for different wind strengths. This became a vital advantage as engineless Pinisi grew from 20 to 300 tonnes to meet a pressing need for shipping in the early decades of independence after WW2. The versatile rig came to dominate long-distance trade routes across the archipelago, until motorization of this fleet was completed in the 1980-90s. Makassar has a long tradition and heritage of this unique style of boatbuilding, and which remains active until this day.



Nowadays, Ketch rigged Pinisi are still used for trading extensively throughout the Indonesian Islands. Island cruises have now become popular amongst tourists seeking a different experience. Left are depicted two Pinisi used for tourist excursions around the islands.



So typical of the wonderful sunsets experienced almost daily, in equatorial regions, as seen from Makassar (Ujung Padang).



A busy scene of down-town Makassar, typical of any Indonesian city of the 1970-80s. Not much change over the years except for the large shopping malls that have become a sign of urban modernization and development. However most Indonesian cities retain their culture and charm for which they are renowned. Makassar is one such city.

The excellent, spicy Indonesian cuisine, is plentiful with a choice of so many eating venues, ranging from open roadside eateries to 5 Star luxury restaurants. Most regions have their own signature dishes, it so happens in Makassar, like so many other Indonesian provinces it has its own favorites such as, Coto Makassar, Barongko, Pisang Epe, Mie Titi or grilled Sukang Fish, to name but a few.



One of Makassar's signature dishes – Grilled Sukang Fish. Once tasted one will always come back again for a second helping.

Pisang Epe – a Banana delight



On my ship, it was customary once or twice per week, for the ship's cooks to prepare Asian food for the Officers, it rotated between Chinese and Indonesian. The cooks were absolute "top notch", knowing exactly how to prepare the various dishes to suite our mainly European palates. These Asian menus were considered a treat and whenever oriental food was on the card, the Saloon was always full and no one went ashore until after dinner, if we were in port on the day. Indian Curries featured on the daily menu as one of the choices.

As can be seen from this image of a traditional cargo Dhow loading at Makassar, a wide variety of



merchandise and goods are commonly carried. The Dhows engage quite large crews as not only are they required to undertake the handling of the heavy sails, but also to load and discharge cargo.

One of the main sea routes for these Dhows is between Surabaya and Makassar

At the northern end of Sulawesi, just at the tip of the "hooked" Sulawesi Peninsula, or more correctly the Minahasa Peninsula, lies the city of **Manado**. It is the second largest city in Sulawesi after Makassar. The

Sulu Sea, which adjoins the Sulawesi Peninsula is very serene and idyllic but is prone to Piracy, so caution is required, so being prudent mariners, we always kept our distance from fishing boat fleets or unidentified craft. The coastal regions of Sulawesi that form the peninsula are extremely beautiful, with their silver sandy beaches, swaying palms, and off-lying coral reefs, along with a scattering of small coastal villages. No doubt many of their inhabitants being fishermen and perhaps part time Pirates! Or perhaps the reverse!

One is immediately charmed by the old township of Manado with its captivating buildings, temples, churches, and shrines but above all by its thriving China Town and markets. These markets never failed to fascinate me and I could spend hours literally wandering about looking at the wide range of goods for sale, more often than not, arriving back on board with several wonderful Batiks, a few small carvings with exquisite workmanship, or some other interesting items. My cabin was like a mini museum with all the cultural memorabilia and knick-knacks.



Through the afternoon heat haze, an image of the rambling city of Manado.

Another panoramic view of the sprawling city of Manado. Sulawesi Island's second largest, and most populated city.



Manado was formally a stronghold of the Dutch, during their colonial period and a focal point for the once thriving international spice trade. It is not a very spectacular city but appealing nevertheless, and interestingly, whilst Indonesia is primarily a Muslim country, the city of Manado has a high Christian community amongst its population.

Our Indonesian sojourn usually terminated at Manado, by which time our ship was generally near full. Once loaded we would speed our way towards Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore before repeating the round voyage, usually commencing again at Sabang. I often thought how much people paid to cruise through this region and how fortunate I was getting it all for nothing, and even getting well remunerated for the privilege. However, it was a very sought-after job amongst seafarers, during the 1960-70s when we spent days in these wonderful places, prior to the globalization of containers and the changes it brought to shipping. With us being paid in USD our earnings stretched a long way in Indonesia and other Asian destinations, much to our delight.

The change of Government in Indonesia in 1966 was in sharp contrasts with the immediately preceding period, between 1958 and 1965. Fresh economic policies were encouraged once again. These policies

had enormous and swift success. Much of the hitherto highly visible corruption was reduced (certainly not eradicated completely). Hyperinflation was eliminated, investment picked up strongly, and genuine growth was accelerated, which in turn provided a relatively lucrative period for the shipping industry, operating within the region.

Whilst not wishing to be seen, as standing in the way of progress, it was a sad day when most things became containerized and the sailor's life changed forever. During periods of deep nostalgia, I feel so lucky and privileged, to have experienced the last of a shipping era. Now I can only revisit these wonderful days, through the mists of nostalgia, which like everything else in life, fades with the passage of time.

End

Note: This is a not for profit document. Unless otherwise specified, images are from various unknown sources on the Public Domain and used under the Fair Use category for review, commentary, and educational purposes only. Photographs of unknown origin – owners of these images should make themselves known by contacting me via this website and I will be pleased to give due accreditation.