




# TREASURE

Afloat in Indonesia's Maluku Islands, once known as the Spice Islands, MAX ANDERSON consumes the archipelago's dark and storied past. And a few cocktails too.

# *HUNTING*



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**P**eter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers..  
Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper  
picked? Twisting my tongue around  
a cocktail straw, I enjoy a hit of Negroni  
designed by Singapore mixologists, Proof &  
Company. There's a book butterflyed on my  
king-sized daybed, and I can hear anchor chains  
rumbling out into turquoise waters.

Luxury cruise vessel *Aqua Blu* has moored off  
an active volcano looming out of the Banda Sea.

Like a thing from *The Lost World*, the 600-metre  
volcano is robed with thick jungle and wears  
a necklace of yellow sulphur at its throat. In an  
hour, we will tender out to its green flanks and  
climb to the village of Waru, a cluster of crude huts  
and a tin-roofed church.

This is the island of Serua, a far-flung outpost  
that is but a single grain in seas salted with more  
than a thousand Spice Islands. The region of  
north-eastern Indonesia is more correctly (if less  
evocatively) known as Maluku, but it still feels  
distinctly edge-of-the-world. Looking at the volcano  
over the rim of my cocktail glass, I'm shocked to  
think that the village of Waru has never been  
visited by foreigners.

At least, not recently.

For 700 years, the Spice Islands were the source  
of nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon, prized by

Europeans as flavours, preservatives and medicine.  
Nutmeg, which was also mildly hallucinogenic,  
grew on only a handful of islands in the Banda Sea.

The Arabs and the Venetians ran the stuff  
overland to the Mediterranean before the  
Portuguese mariners plied a sea route to the East  
Indies. Then, in the 1600s, the Dutch seized  
control under the flag of the Dutch East India  
Company, the mighty VOC. A pound of nutmeg  
acquired for a fraction of a penny was sold in  
London for 90 shillings, or about eight months'  
wages. So lucrative was the trade that it bankrolled  
Dutch expansionism and built an empire.

Since boarding *Aqua Blu* in Maumere east  
of Komodo, I've been in no doubt this luxury  
expedition cruise is also the preserve of  
the privileged.

Eleven couples have paid close to \$22,000 each  
for seven days. Among them is a retired executive  
of Dreamworks, a consultant to orthodontists and  
a swashbuckling young tech millionaire. ("Y'know  
those pages of terms and conditions when you  
download an app?" grins the latter. "Well,  
when you click 'I agree', I'm the f\*\*\*er who takes  
all your data.")

Appearance-wise, *Aqua Blu* is a curious beast.  
Her upper decks have the smooth, rakish lines of  
a cruiser, but her doughty hull and four stalwart



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engines are strictly British Royal Navy – a legacy from 1968 when she was *HMS Beagle* doing research in the Persian Gulf. But she’s brilliantly fit for purpose, shallow enough to get us close to remote islands, strong enough to ply Indonesia’s fearsome currents and big enough to afford space for 30 guests catered to by 25 crew.

The largest of her 15 suites is 34 square metres, and all have ensuite showers with the drenching power you’d enjoy in a Hyatt. Books and antiques from the region hint at expedition, while the glossy shagpile carpet, the blonde maple-veneer closets and the Aqua Blu scent branding (opium, sandalwood, black tea) speak to luxe.

In the lounge areas, it’s distinctly “millionaire casual” – think bare feet and chill-out music on Bose speakers – which is very much the style of founder and CEO of Aqua Expeditions, Francesco Galli Zugaro. In his late 40s, Zugaro is along for the inaugural cruise, he has panache to spare, not to mention an Italian baronetcy.

Keen to avoid “cruise food”, he commissioned Australian chef Ben Cross (an alumnus of Rockpool and creator of Balinese restaurant, Mason) to design a menu of restaurant-quality food that reflected the Spice Islands. Cross turned to the ancient spice routes for inspiration, tying together cuisines from countries as disparate as Morocco, India and Indonesia.

Acting executive chef Adrian Broadhead ducks between freezer, kitchen and prep room, spread over three decks and connected by narrow stairs designed for British sailors to exercise. “I worked with Ben on the planning,” he says, showing me the micromanaged freezer deep in the hull. “Just the provisioning alone was insane.” He withdraws two marked packages: “Beef rendang – slow-cooked in sous vide for 48 hours. Braised oxtail – three days of cooking.”

Lunch offers casual, often fun, self-serve spreads in the bar, light on the carbs but lavish on the choice (a lively poke bowl features lightly cured raw tuna, white poached chicken and Cross’s own ▶



Clockwise from top: *Aqua Blu* consulting chef Ben Cross adds a finishing touch to a dish; the salon area on *Aqua Blu*; peanut butter parfait. Opposite: luxury cruising on *Aqua Blu*.



PHOTOGRAPHY KEN KOCHEV.

kimchi). But under starlight on the rear deck, the dinner dishes are suitably stellar: grouper fillet in a shaoxing broth delicately flavoured with ginger and shallot; charred chermoula tuna; Moroccan spiced chicken. Each night, we travel anew.

"In a way, what we're doing is more sophisticated than a restaurant," says Broadhead. "We've got around 100 recipes for seven nights and nothing's repeated." He adds that each day's menu is planned to accommodate a "see-saw of relaxation and adventure". "If guests are sailing between islands, then the protein consumption is lowered. If they're diving or exploring an island, the calorie need goes up and the menu caters to that."

On most days, we wake to deserted islands and dive on nameless reefs.

I spend happy hours listening to my breathing getting slower and slower as I lose myself among coral landscapes of feathers, trees and antlers. Small, dream-like shows play out – an octopus opening its elastic, eight-armed shroud, baby clownfish peeking from soft noodles of anemone, lobsters waving their antennae. When we re-board, salty and tingling, we make a surreal transition, welcomed with platters of pressed juices and the sounds of Café del Mar.

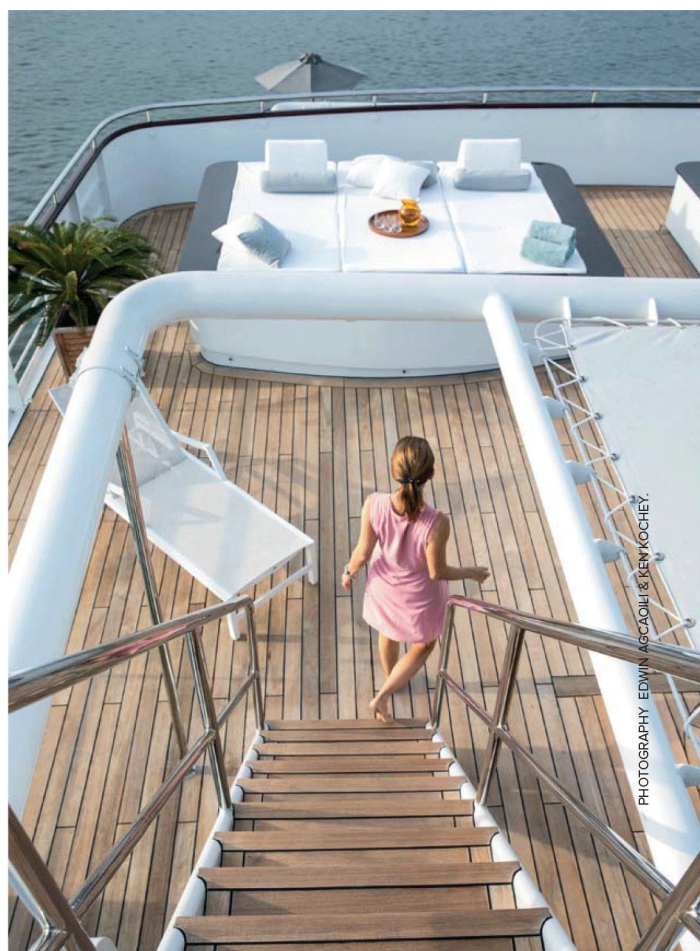
If diving leaves me glowing, nothing is quite as luminous as the history of these islands.

Landing on Banda Neira, I discover a living fable. It's a place of rusted roofs, fortified bastions and 17th century Dutch architecture, faded mansions of white gables, curlicue lamps and louvred windows.

Banda's huge nutmeg plantations made this the Saudi oilfields of its day. Among the steamy streets of



**Clockwise from top:** sop buntut with oxtail and dashi broth, charred onion and tomato; giant Papuan prawns; on board Aqua Blu; nutmeg plantation. **Opposite:** snorkelling off Aqua Blu.



PHOTOGRAPHY EDWIN ACCIOLINI & JEN KOCHEVY

old cobbles and abandoned canons, I learn how the Dutch would stop at nothing to protect their monopoly. In the dusty Rumah Budaya museum, a painting depicts Banda natives being dismembered by samurai swordsmen. In 1621, the VOC accused island chiefs of selling nutmeg to foreign powers; 1600 troops and 100 Japanese mercenaries would steadily reduce 13,000 islanders to 1000. The workforce was replaced with slaves from Bali and Sulawesi.

When the Brits secured nutmeg plantations on a neighbouring island called Run, the Hollanders resorted to diplomacy to remove the threat. In 1667 they persuaded Britain to surrender their island in exchange for a redundant bit of Dutch property off the American coast. To ensure their nutmeg monopoly, the Dutch signed away territory that would one day be called Manhattan.

But I'm left with a question. Where is the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

Fortified by my Negroni and slathered in sunblock, I'm boated across to the volcano on

Serua. Francesco leads us onto a tiny beach to meet the chief of Waru village. Francesco is tall and immaculate in polo shirt, the chief is short and stained at the mouth with betel. Through interpreters, the chief tells us he's proud to receive the first boat to his village - then prays to his ancestors, asking they admit us.


We mount hundreds of steps hacked out of the jungle, dripping fat drops of Tarzan sweat before emerging at the church with the tin roof. It's dark inside - the village has no electricity - but a little cooler.

I ask the chief - are spices still grown on Serua?

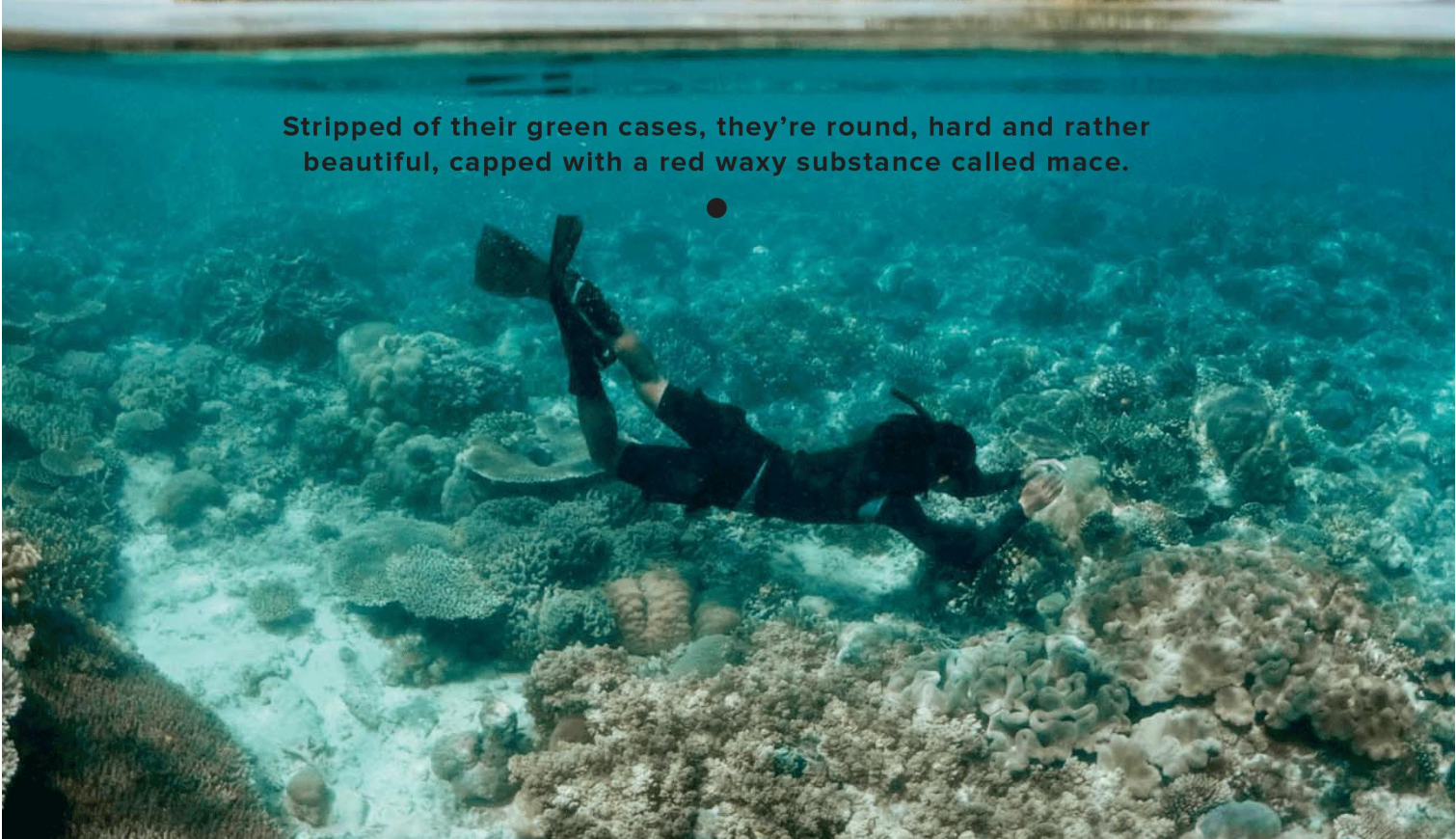
He produces a thin plastic bag and withdraws a handful of nutmegs. Stripped of their green cases, they're round, hard and rather beautiful, capped with a red waxy substance called mace.

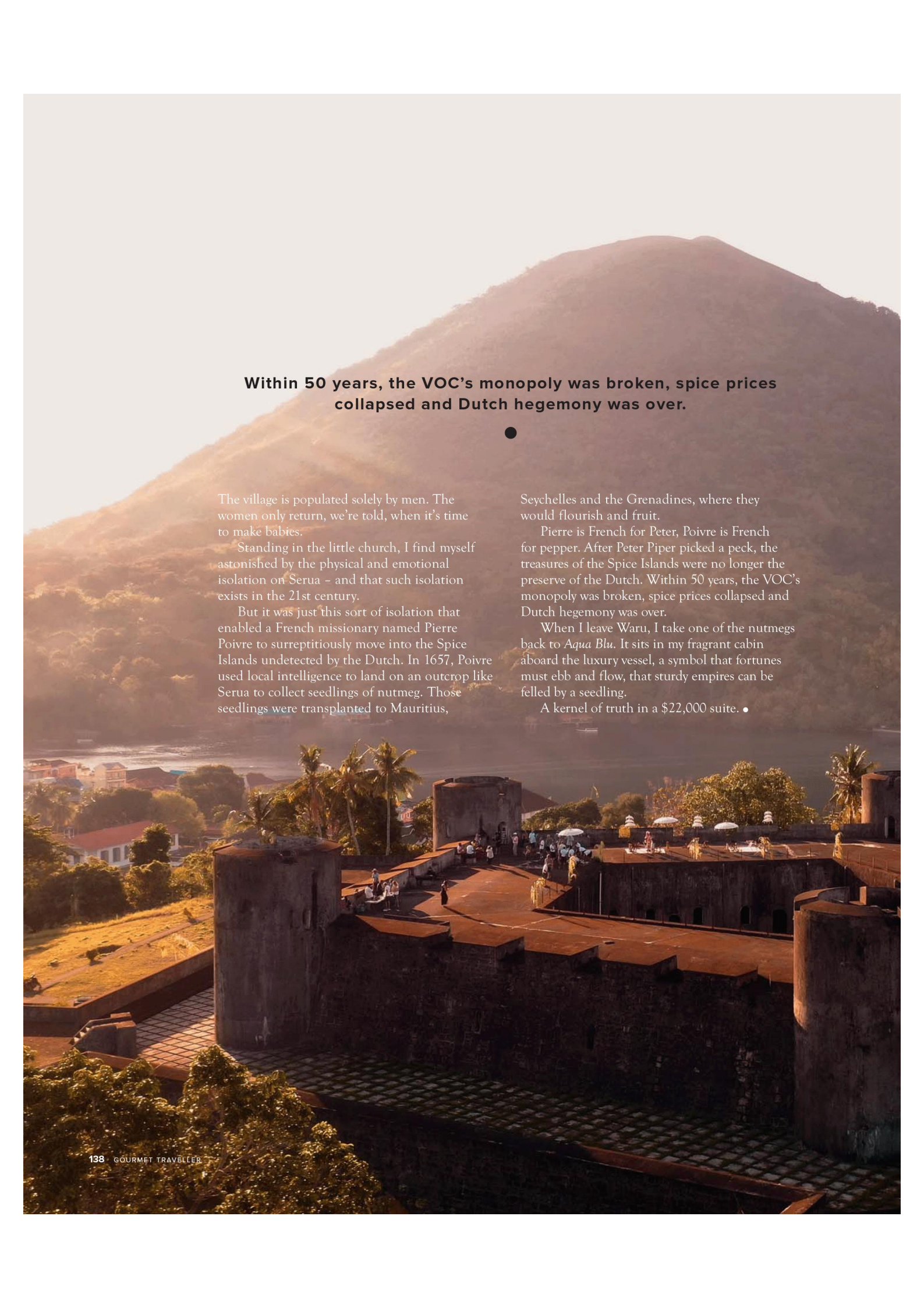
"How much do you sell this for?" I ask.

He says the equivalent of \$5 per kilo. The meagre monies are sent to an island 24 hours away by boat, where the island's womenfolk live, overseeing their children who attend school. ▶



**Stripped of their green cases, they're round, hard and rather beautiful, capped with a red waxy substance called mace.**





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The village is populated solely by men. The women only return, we're told, when it's time to make babies.

Standing in the little church, I find myself astonished by the physical and emotional isolation on Serua – and that such isolation exists in the 21st century.

But it was just this sort of isolation that enabled a French missionary named Pierre Poivre to surreptitiously move into the Spice Islands undetected by the Dutch. In 1657, Poivre used local intelligence to land on an outcrop like Serua to collect seedlings of nutmeg. Those seedlings were transplanted to Mauritius,

Seychelles and the Grenadines, where they would flourish and fruit.

Pierre is French for Peter, Poivre is French for pepper. After Peter Piper picked a peck, the treasures of the Spice Islands were no longer the preserve of the Dutch. Within 50 years, the VOC's monopoly was broken, spice prices collapsed and Dutch hegemony was over.

When I leave Waru, I take one of the nutmegs back to *Aqua Blu*. It sits in my fragrant cabin aboard the luxury vessel, a symbol that fortunes must ebb and flow, that sturdy empires can be felled by a seedling.

A kernel of truth in a \$22,000 suite. ●



✈️  
**How to  
 book**

Seven- and 12-night cruises on *Aqua Blu* through the Maluku Islands are available for late 2022, starting from \$10,925. Abercrombie & Kent offers a 12-night cruise aboard *Aqua Blu* from Bali to Lombok for \$15,045. This includes four days touring Bali, staying at the Nirjhara resort north of Tanah Lot and Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan near Ubud. [aquaexpeditions.com](http://aquaexpeditions.com); [abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)



Clockwise from top: grilled barramundi; outdoor dining on board *Aqua Blu*; a skiff excursion. Opposite: Fort Belgica in Banda Neira.

PHOTOGRAPHY KEN KOCHÉY.