



Footprints in the mud on Seram

An eight-day trek across the island was, for **Andrew Marshall** and **Leanne Walker**, the highlight of a visit to rugged Seram

With the Himalayas, the Amazon and even Borneo now regular travel fare, it is a refreshing change to visit a destination about which little is known. Seram is just such a place. At 340km from east to west, it's the largest island in the eastern Maluku province of Indonesia.

Heavily wooded, mountainous and primitively beautiful, it is home to various native peoples, collectively known as the *Alfuos*, the indigenous people of the interior who, it is said, possess mystical and magical powers.

The few people who do visit rugged Seram come for the unforgettable eight-day trek across the island from Hatumetan to Sawai visiting and staying with indigenous tribes and experiencing the Manusela reserve, one of Indonesia's least accessible and most beautiful National Parks.

Most trekking groups total about a maximum of eight led by Seramese guides and backed by local porters



sporting backpacks made ingeniously from vines and bark.

From Hatumetan the trek leaves the coast before a steady climb up heavily-forested slopes pitted with crags, partially covered with morning mist and clouds, that rise like the massive green wall of a fortress.

Represented by a cluster of bamboo and thatched huts on stilts, the

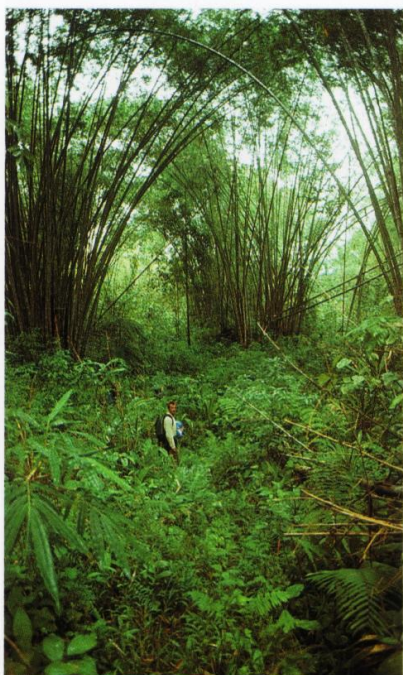
Leaving Seram's south coast, trekkers (above) set off for the island's interior; one of the many villages (below) that lie deep within the rainforest

village of Srinhari is the first day's target. Accommodation for the night is a length of bamboo slatted floor beneath the thatch of a communal hut. Srinhari is a small community of hunter-gatherers, the *Nuauulu*, who derive up to 80 per cent of their food intake from the surrounding countryside. During the course of the day various members of the village including the children will head out and later return bearing cassava roots, green fern vegetables, sago and freshwater shells.

The highlight of Srinhari is meeting the Bapak Raja, the village king, who, resplendent in red cloth and shells, may grant you permission to view the *rumah adat* (village spiritual house) and the skulls that have played an important role in the life of the village. Until relatively recently the taking of heads was an essential part of the ceremonial life for some villages; a gift to the spirits when a new house was erected or for the bride price when a marriage took place.

A typical day on the trek begins at dawn as the porters light fires, cooking huge piles of steamy rice and noodles. Dawn in the rainforest of Seram is a good time to contemplate some of the wildlife; lavishly-coloured butterflies alight to drink the dew off the leaves. The deep cry of the hornbill can be heard as parakeets flash through the canopy above.

The mornings are spent hiking



through vegetation so thick that only the guide will swear there is a track. The porters surge ahead through the mud proving their invaluable worth by greeting the slower trekkers with mugs of hot lemon tea at the next rest stop.

On the few nights when a village isn't reached, trekkers can look forward to a night spent beneath a *walang*; a native shelter built of timber stakes and fern fronds. It is a magical experience to sleep beneath mosquito nets, enveloped by the roots of a giant forest where fireflies draw spirals and arcs in the inky blackness.

The highest point of the trail is the locally named "Route of Sorrows" ris-

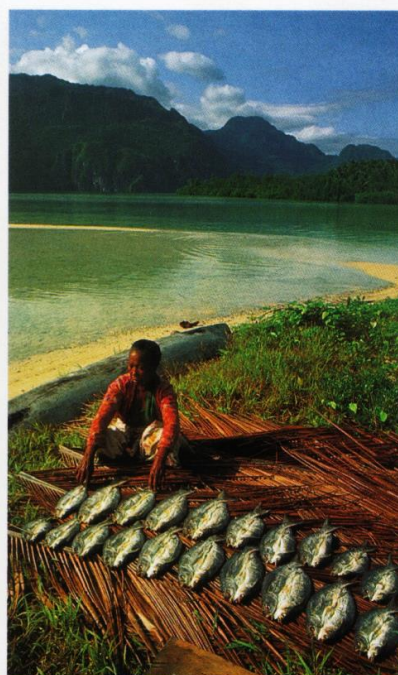
At the end of a day's trekking, the Seramese equivalent of a cool shower



ing to 2500 metres en route to the inner valley. The reward for braving this trail of treacherous roots, mud and fallen trees is the first sound, drifting up from the valley below, of drums performed for a *cakelele* dance, soon followed by a sight of the neat thatched homes and colourful gardens of Manusela village.

By the law of *adat* (village law) it is customary to pay the Bapak Raja a visit, bearing gifts of the preferred red cloth (the colour of blood) and tobacco. Tea is served at the king's door and more likely than not the village will perform the *cakelele*, where warriors stage elaborate dances depicting hunting forays on the warpath for heads, complete with much stamping of feet and flexing of bows.

Trekking through the rainforest



From left: the swamplands of northern Seram; a cakalele dancer; a day's catch laid out to dry on the north Seram coast

from village to village crossing the island of Seram, it is impossible not to learn from the warm and hospitable Seramese people. Their harmonious use of the rainforest for food, shelter, ceremony and medicine is food for thought for the industrial world.

Finally, after eight days, the sea and white sands of the beautiful north Seram coast are sighted ahead. Behind, the mountains still present their impenetrable face of fortitude, a land where you left only footprints in the mud. G

Andrew Marshall and Leanne Walker are Australian photojournalists



SERAM FACT FILE: Getting There: Garuda Indonesia flies regularly from Bali to Ambon. Ferries leave Ambon for Seram every three or four days. **Guides:** Of the few Seramese guides available, Nuiridin (Udin), contacted through the Beta Pariwisata (guest-house) in Ambon is the best. **When To Go:** Maluku has a different rainy season to the rest of Indonesia. The best time to visit is October to April (dry season) however brief tropical downpours can occur at any time of the year, especially in Seram. **Health:** Malaria is prevalent in Seram. Anti-malarial drugs, mosquito nets, and plenty of repellent are essential.