

Simon Pratt, *Spice Islands Forts – An Illustrated History and Catalogue*

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Priceless nutmeg and cloves were for millennia only found on a scattering of active volcanoes rearing up from equatorial seas at the far edge of the world; the Spice Islands of what is now Eastern Indonesia. *Spice Island Forts* tells the story of these forgotten colonial outposts and includes stunning photography, a catalogue of the magnificent historical architecture and useful tips for adventurous travellers. There is also a bibliography and a necessary index at the end of the book.

Fortunately, Simon Pratt begins with a timeline so that those unfamiliar with the history of the Spice Islands – and the struggles between the local Sultans and between the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and the English for supremacy over the spice trade – can reach some perspective over the spice wars and the forts that were needed to protect the various combatants' dominance over the spice trade, a trade in the simple buds and seeds of the cloves and nutmeg that only grew in this small part of what is now eastern Indonesia, but which were some of the most valuable global trade commodities of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The book begins with background on what is known of the pre-colonial spice trade carried out from the earliest of times by the Javanese, Malay, Chinese, Indian and Arab traders, and which led to these valuable spices reaching China, India, Arabia and ultimately Europe. The value that these spices fetched on the European markets led to the Europeans – initially the Portuguese and the Spanish – to find a way to sail half-way around the world to reach the Spice Islands and claim them as their own, a period which in European terms has become known as 'The Age of Discovery'.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach the Spice Islands in 1512, followed by the Spanish in 1521. To warn off the Spanish, the Portuguese soon built the first Spice Islands forts. Profits were immense for whoever controlled these islands, a century of conflict and fort building followed as the local Sultanates, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch and the English all fought for control of the spice trade.

The book follows a detailed history of the Portuguese period from 1512-1575, then the era of Portuguese and Spanish conflict from 1575-1663, then the Anglo-Dutch wars and the eventual Dutch supremacy from 1663 up until the Japanese invasion of 1942. There is also a chapter on the modern battlegrounds of World War II, the Allied recapture of the region from the Japanese, and the post-war chaos. Those whose main interest is related to the history of the spice trade may choose to skip this chapter.

Then comes a chapter on Fortress Warfare, covering European fortress design and construction, European armaments, such as the cannon used to defend the forts as well as those mounted aboard the ships used to attack the forts, and an insight into garrison life. However, there are numerous terms in this chapter such as ravelins, tenailles, redoubts and bastions which could require explanation for many readers.

Now the guns are silent, the galleons long sailed away. But across these spectacular islands, still thick with the scent of spices, old ramparts and bastions remain as a testament to an historic era of conflict. In my ten years of visiting the Moluccan forts, it is worth noting the efforts of the provincial governments to stabilise and 'restore' so many, to build stairs, to make them safely accessible, and plant lovely gardens around some of them. This is most commendable when you consider what little tourism there actually is to these remote islands.

The Fort Catalogue at the back of the book provides a detailed description of at least 22 Spice Island forts, starting with the island of Ternate and followed by Tidore, Makian, Motir, Bacan, Halmahera, Ambon, and the Lease and the Banda Islands. If you are like me, then by the time you get to the detailed description of the forts in the Fort Catalogue, you may have forgotten some of the history of the fort about which you read more than 100 pages earlier. To make best use of the historical part of this book and the Fort Catalogue, I found it useful to cross reference the two while reading the book. For example, when reading about the history of Fort Kastella on pages 65-68, it then helps to refer to the detailed description of the fort on pages 201-207.

I congratulate the author on all the research that has been done, and in this book you can find almost everything you need to know about the Spice Island forts. In a large-scale format with 305 pages and hundreds of photographs embedded in the text, this book is a significant work of historical research, photography, and description of the more than 22 forts found in the Maluku region of Eastern Indonesia.

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