

'World voyagers find sector in Indonesia the toughest challenge'

Evi Mariani, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta

Briton Jason Lewis, 38, has been bicycling, rollerblading, boat-pedaling and paddling canoes intermittently for the last 11 years during his human-powered, round-the-world expedition.

Lewis, accompanied by different partners, has crossed vast oceans -- the Atlantic and Pacific -- with a pedal-powered boat, Moksha, which has a speed of 1.5 knots -- about walking pace.

Once in the Pacific he pedaled the boat for 480 kilometers only to find that it had become a Sisyphean task because the sea current reversed his efforts.

Equipped with compass, global positioning system device and marine charts, Lewis and other intrepid voyagers have crossed world borders, immersing themselves in different cultures and tested their own patience and forbearance.

All the voyagers, including Lewis, occasionally became ill. At one time, Lewis recalled he had blisters all over his body from spending weeks at sea.

However, he and his current expedition partner, Chris Tipper, 34, told The Jakarta Post recently last week in Jakarta that thus far the toughest part was the Indonesian leg.

Due to sharp coral reefs in Indonesian waters, Lewis and Tipper decided to dock Moksha, the pedaled-powered, well-equipped boat, and cruised the eastern Indonesian waters by small fiberglass kayaks.

The change of transportation mode sparked problems as the kayaks could not accommodate much supplies, most importantly potable water.

Sometimes, after rowing the kayaks for hours, they had to take a rest at a deserted beach, where they had to drag the heavy kayaks meters in from the edge in order to keep them from the high tide.

However, although the toughest stage, the first day in Indonesia bode them well.

After embarking from Timor Leste, Britons Lewis and Tipper landed on a remote beach on Alor island in eastern Indonesia.

Very warm welcome

"The local people, about 50 of them, picked up the boats very quickly. They would probably have picked them up with us still in them if we had not been quick enough," Lewis said, smiling. "That was our welcome to the archipelago."

Starting in May this year, the Indonesian leg was the 12th of a total of 16 legs, crossings and hikes.

Kayaking across eastern Indonesia, Tipper, Lewis and others landed at East Java, later to continue the leg by riding bicycles.

On Oct. 16, Lewis -- alone again, after Tipper returned to England the previous day -- safely but arduously crossed the Sunda Strait.

Lewis will be biking across Sumatra to finish the Indonesian leg in Riau Island.

The intrepid voyagers will cross Asia -- Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China including the Himalayas and India -- by bicycle. They will later cross the Indian Ocean to Kenya, Africa, using the

pedal boat.

However, due to financial constrain, Lewis often had to go back to the UK or the U.S., where his wife lives. In either country Lewis can work and earn money to fund his voyage.

Once in the U.S. he spent three years breeding bison, resulting in US\$15,000 in savings to continue the voyage, which has cost the team US\$500,000 so far.

"Fund-raising in America was good. When we paddled across the Atlantic to Miami, we raised a lot of funds: Americans are generous -- they gave us equipment," Lewis said.

UNESCO has supported the expedition right from the very beginning, since 1993. In Paris they met the organization's director general, who gave them support -- not financial, but help to connect them with schools in each country.

In eastern Indonesia, the voyagers visited schools in Kalabaihi in Alor and Maumere.

"On each island we have tried to reach at least one school, creating a pen pal exchange, helping students to practice their English, with letters written in both Indonesian and English. It's not much, but it's the way, hopefully, to reach people in remote islands in Indonesia," Lewis said.

"Most of the students read newspapers, but they feel trapped because they cannot afford to go to university. So they are really keen on the idea of being connected to someone in another country," he added.

Besides meeting students, the voyagers also met many different kinds of people in the country.

"We met Catholics, Protestants and Muslims, and animists in the east," Lewis said.

Indonesians, Lewis added, had the habit of asking a litany of questions when they met someone for the first time.

"'Where are you going? Where you from? Are you married? What's your religion?' Those are the typical ones, in that order," Lewis said grinning.

Months of experience in Indonesia have provided them with many anecdotes, mostly interesting and funny.

The expedition team has maintained an informative website, www.expedition360.com. In the logbook link, surfers can check the group's daily updates.

For curious readers, the website also answers lots of inquisitive questions.