

# Deck passage: Makassar to Bitung by KOMERING

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Before the second world war, the ships of the K.P.M. [Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatechappij] constituted the only means of passenger travel between the scattered islands of Indonesia, from the Dutch officials in first class to the Indonesians in the tween decks. Because all main centres are now linked by efficient air services, government officials, businessmen and rich people travel by aeroplane. Cabin accommodation is available on some PELNI and former K.P.M. ships and is used by families and groups of students as more economical than air transport, but there is no longer any resemblance to the luxury of first class travel by the K.P.M. before the war when ships were kept spick and span, ran to an exact timetable and provided good food and service.

In those days, a traveller could voyage in the greatest comfort to the most remote islands of the archipelago, as a glance at an old K.P.M. handbook will attest. Shipping, however, remains the only means of interisland travel for the average Indonesian, civil service clerks, soldiers, students, small traders and the like. Because the few specialised passenger ships of the PELNI cannot meet the demand, dispensations are granted to ordinary cargo ships to carry deck passengers under temporary canvas awnings. For most companies this is quite a profitable supplement to freight earnings, partly because the number of passengers carried is limited only by the amount of available deck space and not by the dispensation. The lack of facilities on such ships can cause conditions to be primitive in the extreme.

I chose to travel in relative comfort onboard an old K.P.M. ship, the *Kaimana*, now sailing under the Indonesian flag as KOMERING. (*Kaimana* is a port on the south coast of West Irian, and Komering is a river in east Sumatra). She is one of nine 1,800 ton-deadweight cargo/passenger ships built in Holland in 1948, and although the prototype was *Janssens* of 1936, they are probably still the best ships yet designed for Indonesian waters. The tween deck, which can also be used for cattle, is open and continuous for the length of the ship; the deck passengers arrange themselves around and on top of the hatches. The side plating can be opened to permit a flow of fresh air and when the tween decks are already full with either passengers or cargo, the deck can be brought into use by rigging large canvas awnings between fixtures in the fo'c'sle, mast-houses and superstructure so that the whole deck is in shade from stem to stern. The accommodation is designed with similar care – the large tall windows in the first- and second-class saloons open inwards and are suspended horizontally from deckhead brackets; the small windows looking forward are fitted with wooden slatted blinds that can be raised against the tropical sun. To look at, the ships are unmistakably Dutch and typically K.P.M. Straight up and down, they are characterised by a straight stem, flush deck and shapely counter stern, a square superstructure with large windows and topped with a ridiculously small cowl funnel, and two tall masts which serve three hatches, two forward and one aft.

Although not large they are as imposing as ships many times their size and inspire a confidence in their seaworthiness that is not misplaced, as KOMERING proved one evening when she butted through heavy swells for several hours, almost not acknowledging them.



KOMERING at Donggala, late January 1974, large windows in forward superstructure, some sideports open, awnings removed over hatches (H. Dick).

All nine ships of the class are now sailing under the Indonesian flag. Perhaps 'sailing' is not quite the right word for Karossa and Bian (ex Kalianda) are laid up awaiting repairs. The other two of the class that were sold by PELNI in 1969 are now sailing between Jakarta, Surabaya, Makassar, and Bitung as Kedawung and Kebon Agung. The other five ships are owned by P.T. Sriwijaya Raya Lines, Klingi and Qgan sail between Jakarta and North Sumatra returning via Singapore, whilst KOMERING, Lematang and Leko sail from Jakarta, sometimes Surabaya, to Makassar, Donggala (west coast Central Sulawesi/Celebes), Bitung [the port for Menado in North Sulawesi], loading rice, sugar, flour and general cargo outwards and returning with copra from Ternate in North Maluku/Moluccas and/or the Bay of Luwuk. In fact, this is the same route they plied for the K.P.M until December 1957. It may also be mentioned that they have deep tanks with a capacity of about 500 tons which are used to carry coconut oil from Bitung to Java.

Despite her 25 years, KOMERING was still in reasonable condition although the Indonesian disregard of inessential maintenance was evident. Scuppers, drainpipes and fittings were rusting, woodwork cracking for want of oil or paint, rails no longer fitted together, doors had lost locks, taps did not function, and so forth. The attitude prevails that painting is the job of the dockyard and in port there is no-one overside chipping paint, whilst at sea there is no-one painting the fittings. Actually, Indonesian ships carry large crews, though not as many as in Dutch times, but there are seldom more than two or three seamen. Of particular concern to the passengers was the poor condition of the canvas awnings, which in port were left lying round the deck and acquired many holes that let in the rain during tropical downpours. The safety equipment consisted of six lifeboats, two with a capacity of 45 persons each, one for 22 persons, a motor-launch of about the same size, and two small boats aft with no-ropes in the davits, probably of no consequence

because they were unlikely to float. Lifeboat drills are never carried out for the calmness of Indonesian waters and the absence of typhoons breed complacency. It is horrifying to think what could happen if such a ship, with 700 persons on board, did strike a reef at night and quickly begin to sink.

Indonesian ships seldom sail to any schedule and even after KOMERING had berthed at Makassar it was still not clear when she would depart. There was a full cargo from Jakarta, a large part of which was to be unloaded, and in the godown there were several hundred tons of bagged rice and flour to be loaded for Donggala and Bitung. Rain considerably added to the time taken. Intending passengers were able to book places but were not allowed to collect their tickets until a few hours before the ship was ready to sail. Apparently, this was for the very good reason that if the tickets were issued sooner several people could be expected to board on the same ticket, used a number of times. All the same, it was annoying having to make repeated trips to the shipping office to obtain the latest information on when the ship would sail and when the tickets would be issued. The other drawback was the bun-fight that ensued in the shipping office when a couple of hundred people all tried to collect their tickets at the same time. If the office had not been so hot and stuffy one might have seen more humour in it. Having been written out, the tickets were passed back to a small glassed-in room, designed to ensure that the payment for the ticket went to the company and not into the private pockets of the employee. Rather ludicrous were the variety of techniques employed by those crowding outside it to have their ticket dealt with first, probably all in vain as the choice of the harassed employees shut up inside appeared to be quite random. More frustratingly, they seemed to work with disorganised incompetence, no doubt put off by all the faces pressed against the glass demanding their attention..

When one arrived on the wharf later that night, it appeared that the crush at the shipping office might have been training for the job of boarding. There were two ways of entry, by the gangway, and by the sideport. These were defended by officers and crew, who tried to distinguish the wharf labourers and others authorised to board from the passengers. Nevertheless, a number of people had managed to bluff, bribe and infiltrate their way onboard and stake out positions and, while the other passengers sat amidst their baggage on the wharf, they were engaged in hauling up the belongings of their friends and relations by means of ropes slung over the side.

As the loading had not yet been completed, it was a continual battle to keep the hundreds of waiting passengers from encroaching so far across the apron that further work was impossible. There was a moment of drama to distract attention from the struggle for position to be first aboard, when a tractor being loaded onto the battened-down number two hatch was almost deposited over the side after the insecurely fastened wharfside derrick swung across with the load. Another tractor waiting to be loaded was pressed into service to haul it back into position, after which a daring crewman acted as dog-man, being hoisted on the cargo hook to free the block at the top.

Soon after this incident, loading was completed and permission received to embark. Everyone crowded so closely around the sideport that it was a struggle to stay on one's feet, but eventually the ticket was inspected, thence into the tweendeck to search for a place to settle. Because there was a full cargo, the deck passengers could not all be accommodated there, so instead the former second-class saloon, which

until Makassar had been filled with cartons of clove cigarettes, was cleared for the purpose and the overflow arranged themselves as best they could amongst tractors, crates and steel-piping on the weather deck, also on the fo'c'sle among the winches and anchor cables, at the stern, and beneath the lifeboats. From stem to stern, there was almost nowhere to place one's feet. The number of passengers onboard was unknown but, according to the number of tickets issued, there were about 600, though there seemed to be a much greater number, despite all efforts to control unauthorised boarding.

One quickly came to speaking terms with those close by, establishing basic details like filling out a form of name, place of origin, destination, purpose of visit, and so on. Eventually, one tried to sleep. A wooden deck turned out to be no harder than a wooden floor in a camping hut and one did sleep, albeit fitfully in the case of a foreigner. More upsetting than the hardness of the deck was the squalling of angry babies. Parents came prepared with thick double springs, which they suspended from the deckhead end attached to them the young children wrapped in sarong knotted into a triangular shape; they were soothed by being bounced up and down. Unfortunately some stubborn children refused to be placated, although it was a bit quieter once the ship had sailed and there was a flow of cool air. Also distracting was the man who incessantly cleared his throat with a great noise, punctuated by spitting over the side. One wondered whether it was a bad habit or tuberculosis; the former was more acceptable.



Deck passengers on their bamboo mats amidst their luggage, all very friendly and informal (H. Dick).

In the morning I awoke at sea, well before the sun, to the sound of a cock crowing. Inspection showed that there were indeed two roosters sitting proudly on the rail, secured by a piece of string. This absurdity accorded with the sudden transformation in circumstances between night and day. Night had been the crowded wharf, the hustle and bustle of boarding, the stuffiness and noise of the saloon...above all a world of people. By first light the people, like the survivors of an all-night party, had lost their significance, just as the ship itself was but a speck on the ocean, pushing through the calm waters at a steady nine knots or

so. 'A steady nine knots'. It would be the same hour after hour, no sensation of speed, just the fresh breeze, the gentle splash of water along the side, the dull throb of the engines, the sun rising in the sky, a world in slow motion. Time had ceased to be of any consequence.

There was little to do to pass the time. Many people slept, others talked quietly about nothing in particular, some played cards, and others looked after babies. I preferred to sit out on the gangway, which had been left in position over the side, and read, pausing from time to time to look at the blue hills in the distance or the waves lapping along the side of the ship.

The only routine that marked the passage of time was meals, which were served three times a day, at eight in the morning, noon and six in the evening. Passengers were expected to bring their own dishes, mugs and eating utensils, which together with water containers and sleeping mats are basic equipment. The food was served up at the galley at the after end of the tween deck, except for the engine room, probably the hottest part of the ship. Usually one person collected rations for several people but even so there was a good crowd and it took some time to receive the food, particularly when waiting behind people asking for eight, nine or ten serves. Having presented the ticket to be marked off against the appropriate meal, one received a large helping of very hot rice and a few morsels of vegetables and meat or fish very carefully measured out. Like Oliver, one very much wanted to ask for more. No doubt a foreigner would have received an extra helping but it would have taken unfair advantage of everyone else. For breakfast one was served rice with half an egg and some very hot chili sauce; after the first morning I found more satisfying the bread and cheese I had brought from Makassar.

Those who found the shipboard fare too limited and had not brought supplementary provisions of their own could frequent a small stall beside the galley that sold side dishes, noodles, fruit, peanuts, sweets, tea, coffee, and cigarettes. This lucrative franchise is usually secured by a relative of someone among the crew. After collecting the rations, one negotiated a way back between the cargo stacked in the tween deck, splashed through the water sloshing around as overflow from the galley, and escaped with some relief from the heat and stuffiness into the fresh air above.

The other challenge was washing and toilet facilities. In the early morning people washed their hands and face and cleaned their teeth with water from buckets in the corner of the saloon. A proper bath was not easy, partly because fresh water supplies are limited in many Indonesian ports and partly because the company minimised the amount carried in order to load more cargo. The water flowed for only brief periods in the early morning and late afternoon, when several hundred people had to share the very limited facilities, there being no baths or showers. The usual Indonesian technique is to soap up and then throw water over oneself with a dipper. It was the toilets that were really bad: they stank abominably. I was fortunate to receive a dispensation to use the officers' facilities which were clean, even though the toilet could not always be flushed because the water was off. Indonesians are scrupulous about personal cleanliness but rather lax over public hygiene. An example was that passengers were careful not to litter their part of the deck but showed no concern about spitting, cleaning dishes, throwing rubbish and even letting small children urinate into the scuppers, when it would have involved no extra effort to conduct the business over the side, a lackadaisical attitude from a foreigner's perspective.

Towards late afternoon, the tall bare mountains off Majene were looming off the starboard but it was dark by the time the ship drew abreast of them, by which time only the lighthouse was visible. From there on, the ship hugged the coast about three or four miles offshore. By the following morning the mountains bore a different aspect, being completely covered in thick jungle, with occasionally a small village nestling at their foot, just a few houses surrounded by coconut trees. The village people live off fishing, copra from the small plantations, and rattan from the jungle. The last-named is a jungle creeper which is cut green, hauled from the jungle, dried on the beach under the sun and tied in bundles for shipment, together with copra, by the small sailing perahu which are the only communication with the outside world. Although comparison is misleading, both by its appearance and its isolation this western coast of Sulawesi might be likened to the coastline between Cairns and Cooktown on Cape York Peninsula.

By dusk that day, the ship was closing upon the Cape that marks the entrance to a long sound and the port of Donggala. The lighthouse guided her over the last few miles and we anchored about eight at night beside the PELNI passenger ship Wakolo, which had sailed from Makassar a day earlier. It was not long before a crowd of boatmen were swarming aboard to bargain for fares and the saloon was soon piled up with luggage of passengers who were to disembark. It was necessary to keep a close eye on possessions when so many boatmen and labourers were milling on board. At sea passengers watch over each other's luggage and there is no worry. Disembarkation continued until well into the night and resumed early the following morning, after which there was room to move around for the first time in two days. Probably no more than a third of the passengers remained.



KOMERING discharging at the idyllic harbour of Donggala (H. Dick).

Donggala is a small sleepy place, established by the Dutch as their centre of administration when their Army brought that part of Sulawesi under their control in the 1900s. It was commercially significant only

because of the copra trade. The Japanese occupied the town in 1942 and it was largely destroyed by Allied bombing in 1945, the destruction including the splendid houses of the Dutch officials on the hills overlooking the sound. Its peacefulness was again disturbed in 1958 during the Permesta rebellion in Sulawesi when a rebel Dakota piloted by an American mercenary sank four small ships in the harbour. The wrecks are still unsalvaged.

In 1962 the Government created a separate province of Central Sulawesi and Donggala became its port for the developing regional capital of Palu, located 20 kilometres away at the end of the sound. It is a roadstead port, cargo being unloaded onto wooden lighters, KOMERING should have cleared in one and a half days but it took three because the simultaneous unloading of Wakolo taxed the port's limited facilities and rain frequently interrupted operations. KOMERING eventually sailed, as she had arrived, at night.

From Donggala I shared a second-class cabin, having had my fill of sleeping on the deck. Also, now that the tween decks were free of cargo, the remaining passengers had been moved below into the tweendeck, which for them was not as pleasant. The cabin was quite ordinary with three bunks, a wardrobe and two basins. Though adequate, it was rather spoilt by the initials cut into the wood by previous passengers, the failure of the taps to work, the cockroaches in the wardrobe, and the lumpy mattresses that were too big for the bunks. As has been said earlier, there is no comparison between cabin-class travel now and in Dutch times. Crew's cabins are often rented out, sometimes for passengers and sometimes for the safekeeping of traders' goods. It is a case of first-in, first-served, in fact nowadays it is rare for passengers to book cabins, preferring to buy deck passage and make private arrangement onboard.

Not much can be said about the rest of the voyage, which took two days from Donggala to Bitung. The coastline was much the same as that to Donggala but much of the first day and all of the second day the ship was well off the land. It was night when we rounded the northeastern tip of Sulawesi and anchored in the port of Bitung. KOMERING berthed next morning and the passengers quickly disembarked and boarded buses to the city of Manado about sixty kilometres away. After discharge, the vessel sailed on with residual passengers and cargo to Ternate in North Maluku before returning to Bitung load a cargo of rice for Luwuk on the east coast of Central Sulawesi. However, engine trouble delayed the ship in Bitung for two weeks, which must have been indescribably tedious for the handful of passengers who had embarked at Temate. Such are the pitfalls of interisland travel by sea. Those short on patience are better advised to travel by air.

This article was compiled by H.W. Dick in March 1974.