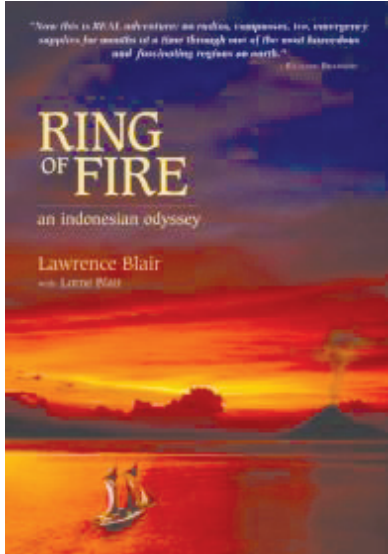


# TOKO BUKU

Reviews of English language books on Indonesia

## Ring of Fire by Dr. Lawrence Blair with Lorne Blair



*Ring of Fire* is the story behind an incomparable 2,500-mile voyage, begun in 1972, in a wooden sailing schooner through the fabled Spice Islands of Indonesia. The original book, *Ring of Fire: Exploring the Last Remote Places of the World* was published in 1988. For nearly two decades, first the film and then subsequent editions of the book have inspired many

thousands to visit Indonesia.

This third 2010 edition, *Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey*, opens with a foreword by Bali-based writer Jamie James, an old Indonesian hand who states that it is “an essential modern text about Indonesia’s far-flung islands.” The Introduction by author Lawrence Blair explains all the momentous changes that have taken place since he and his brother Lorne filmed their four-hour epic *Ring of Fire*, which was first, aired in 1991.

Chief among the changes since the first of their historic voyages was that Lorne died of septicemia in 1995. Indonesia’s forests have also been reduced by nearly a third, the political system has been democratized, the nation’s population has doubled from 120 million to 240 million, and many place names in the book have changed.

The first edition was written by the brothers while they were also writing the dialogue for the film series. The 80 hours of usable footage spanned 10 years of independent filming taken during nine separate expeditions. The book was intended to match the film series and describe what wasn’t seen on camera, which was, as Lawrence writes, “virtually everything.”

This is adventure travel writing at its best, as good as any that has ever been written about Indonesia. Sharply observed and detailed as well as eloquently written, the book is not only first class travelogue but also encompasses the fields of anthropology, archaeology, history, political science, cosmology, sociology, zoology, biology, ornithology, geography, performing arts and literature.

The lessons in these disciplines are always related within the context of Indonesian cultural and historical experience that has taken place across the richest kaleidoscope of ethnic groups on earth. The author uses the country’s astoundingly rich reservoir of cultural and natural geography as a prism by which he reflects upon nearly the whole spectrum of human knowledge.

There are learned discussions on the professional infighting for accreditation between Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, vivid accounts of the disappearance of Michael Rockefeller and a visit to the habitat of giant man-eating monitor lizards, the puppeteer’s art of wayang kulit, the funeral rituals of a Torajan King, encounters with transvestite priests (*bisu*) and Bugis boat builders.

In their 10 years of wandering the archipelago without guides, radios or compasses, the brothers endured near drownings, starvations, falls and fevers. They were driven by storms in mountainous seas, dropped by light aircraft into jungle clearings, ran unchartered rapids in Dayak canoes, climbed erupting volcanoes, sluiced off roads in

monsoon flash-floods, nearly vaporized by an exploding petrol truck, subjected to antagonistic hordes of howling stone-throwing children. Travel in such places of innocence, adventure and danger is no longer possible.

With backing from Ringo Star of the Beatles, they departed London’s Heathrow airport with two still cameras, a tripod, two 16-mm cameras with underwater housing, a tape recorder, a small Honda generator, a five minute sun gun for night filming and a pocket sized slide projector. Their film stock and equipment comprising nine-tenths of their luggage, and without any insurance or filming permits, the Blairs flew into the steaming metropolis of Jakarta.

Their plan was to practice a form of guerilla ethnography: to record the lives of the planet’s least contacted tribal peoples - eating their food, speaking their languages, sharing their lives. Among Indonesia’s 17,000 islands were lands of real living kings and queens, dragons and pirates, cannibals and headhunters, mystics and magicians. Both filmmakers were amazingly lucky to come back alive from their numerous expeditions.

The authors lived among the Asmat tribesmen of Papua, *dukun* healers in Bali, and the elusive “dream wanderers” of Borneo. They encountered deadly Moluccan Blue-Ringed octopus, pythons inside of rancid bat dung covered caves in Sulawesi, the “dancing trees” of the sensationally exquisite Greater Bird of Paradise living 80 feet above the ground in the wild rainforests of the Aru Islands.

The brothers were in many cases the first travelers on the scene since the 1930s and in some cases even the first since the Age of Exploration. The book provides the written record of the film footage of peoples and environments which have long since vanished or been changed beyond all recognition.

Lawrence Blair is a vastly entertaining writer, whether he is describing villager following him into the darkness while he is stricken with diarrhea or his frantic attempts to save his 14,000 slides from an intense fire engulfing his A-frame house in Hollywood. Lovers of the sea will enjoy his swash-buckling and erudite tales of sailing in a traditional 8-sail *pinisi* across expanses of open ocean fraught with hazards.

Those who love the tactile attributes of a real book rather than a Kindle will be pleased with the book’s heft, the satisfying feel of lovely thick paper turning crisply in the hand. Eight pages of non-glossy photomontages support the text. A two-page map of Indonesia in the front matter enables you to continually keep track of where the events described are taking place. A serviceable index makes the text a valuable source of research.

Blair is an interpreter of Indonesian culture of the top rank, in the best tradition of such great British explorers as T. E. Lawrence, Sir Richard Burton and Sir Alfred Russell Wallace himself. He has captured in words (and on film) the story of one of the most captivating and intriguing explorations of the late 20th century.

*Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey* by Dr. Lawrence Blair with Lorne Blair, Editions Didier Millet ([www.edbooks.com](http://www.edbooks.com)) 2010, ISBN 978-981-4260-10-7, paperback, 288 pages, notes, supplementary reading, index, dimensions 6 cm x 8.5 cm. Available for Rp190,000 at Periplus, Gramedia, Gunung Agung, and Ary’s and Ganesha of Ubud.

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