

The New York Times: -Manhattan or Pulau Rhun? In 1667, Nutmeg Made the Choice a No-Brainer- [C2]

Questa piccola isola indonesiana, dove veniva coltivata una spezia del valore dell'oro, era così ambita che gli olandesi la scambiarono con Manhattan. Più di tre secoli dopo, la vita sulle due isole è molto diversa.

The isles of Manhattan and Pulau Rhun could hardly be farther apart, not just in geography, but also in culture, economy and global prominence. Rhun, in the Banda Sea in Indonesia, has no cars or roads and only about twenty motorbikes. Most people get around by walking along its paved footpaths or up steep stairways, often toting plastic jugs of water from the numerous village wells or sometimes lugging a freshly caught tuna. But in 1667, in what might now seem one of the most lopsided trades in history, the Netherlands believed it got the better part of a bargain with the British when it swapped Manhattan, then known as New Amsterdam, for this tiny speck of land. The delight the Dutch took in the deal can be summed up in one word: nutmeg. With its forest of nutmeg, a spice worth its weight in gold at the time, Rhun used to be one of the world's most valuable patches of real estate. It is one of eleven small isles that make up the Banda Islands, formerly the only place where nutmeg grew. To the north lie the larger Maluku Islands, famous for cloves. Collectively, the two island groups were known to European colonizers as the Spice Islands. The European desire for nutmeg, cloves, pepper and other spices launched fleets of ships, setting off a wave of global exploration, colonization, exploitation and genocide. Although Rhun is little remembered today, some say the island's role in world history is far larger than its size of just two miles long and a half-mile wide would suggest. The British first reached the island in 1603, making it one of their earliest colonies. In the words of historian John Keay, Rhun is "the seed from which grew the most extensive empire the world has ever seen." Rhun islanders swore allegiance to the British in an unsuccessful attempt to secure protection from the Dutch, who committed genocide by killing or enslaving 90 per cent of the Bandanese people. Today, there are no native Bandanese living on Rhun; its residents are descended

from migrants from other islands. Reaching Rhun by boat four hundred years ago was a [daunting](#) journey. And it's still not easy getting to this spot 1,600 miles east of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta. Most travelers take a crowded, cockroach-infested ferry from the Maluku Islands to the main port on the island of Banda Neira. From there, they go by motorboat to Rhun, a trip that can take hours in [rough seas](#). Arriving vessels can wait hours more outside the [shallow](#) coral reef for the [tide](#) to rise. Despite this isolation, many on Rhun are at least vaguely aware of the island's connection with Manhattan, and although they know there are stark differences in wealth and public works, they think their home compares favourably. "Manhattan can have all the skyscrapers, but I am proud to come from Rhun because we have nature — the sea and the forest," said Burhan Lohor, fifty-one, a [deputy village chief](#) on the island who also farms [nutmeg](#), teaches at the Islamic school and runs a guesthouse. The junior high school, the island's highest level of education, sits at the top of the village. Rhun's colonial history is not part of the curriculum, but most students know that [nutmeg](#) was once highly prized and have heard of the [treaty](#) that exchanged Rhun for Manhattan. When a visitor showed the students a photograph of the Manhattan skyline on a cellphone, they [crowded around](#) for a closer look. Arzal Yadi, fourteen, one of the older students, was unimpressed. "It looks like a very [barren](#) place," he said, "because it has so many buildings." Much of Indonesia has benefited from a huge [push](#) by President Joko Widodo to improve infrastructure and bind the nation of 17,500 islands more closely [together](#), but such progress has yet to reach Rhun. The island's two thousand people live in a single village by the island's only bay. Colorful, metal-roofed houses [huddle](#) along the waterfront and on the hillside above. At low [tide](#), dozens of fishing boats lie [beached](#). The [steamy](#) island has no air conditioning, and there is electricity only at night. Cellphone service recently arrived, but connections are [spotty](#). Islam is the only religion, and no shops sell alcohol. With no [running water](#), students are assigned to bring [jugs](#) of well water to school for [flushing](#) toilets and washing. "It's like their homework," said Aldo Valentino Wattimury, twenty-nine, the science teacher at the junior high school. "Six students are assigned each day to bring water. We have a schedule. When there is a special occasion, every student must bring water." Rhun, like other Indonesian islands, is [plagued](#) by [litter](#),

especially plastic [waste](#). With no organized trash collection, residents [dump](#) garbage in the forest, on the beach or in the sea. The smell of burning trash often [wafts](#) over the village. Fishermen clean their [catch](#) along the waterfront, [tossing](#) fish heads and [guts](#) onto the beach. At low [tide](#), plastic [wrappers](#) and fish skeletons [litter](#) the [shallows](#), and [severed](#) tuna heads [stare up reproachfully](#) from the sand. Human-made [remnants](#) of the island's colonial past are few. Fortifications built by the British in the 1600s were reclaimed long ago by the jungle. In 2017, officials installed a white marble monument on Rhun's waterfront commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Treaty of Breda between England and the Netherlands, which set the terms for the trade. But like the history, the monument's inscription has [faded](#). What is still prevalent on the island is [nutmeg](#), which along with tuna is a [mainstay](#) of the local economy, although [nutmeg](#) is also grown in many other places now. Herman Abdullah, whose family has farmed [nutmeg](#) for generations, [hiked](#) up the hill above the village one recent day [to harvest](#) the fruit, similar in size to a large apricot. The aroma of [nutmeg](#) wafted through the [grove](#), with some trees more than seventy-five years old. Rhun is ideal for growing [nutmeg](#), Herman said, and a mature tree can produce one thousand fruits every four months. "Rhun has the best climate and also the best [soil](#) for [nutmeg](#)," he said. Two spices are derived from each [nutmeg](#) fruit — what the world knows as [nutmeg](#) is the seed, while the spice [mace](#) is the red membrane surrounding the seed. The soft outer flesh is [edible](#) but not widely marketed. After Herman chose a tree, his friend Sairin Kasem climbed up. More than fifty feet [15 metres] above the ground and nearly invisible among the dense branches, he [knocked](#) hundreds of [nutmegs](#) to the ground with a long pole. For a time, it seemed to be raining [nutmeg](#). Sitting in the shade, the two men sliced the fruit open, [casting aside](#) the outer flesh and keeping the seeds with their [mace](#) covering. Loading the harvest into a basket on his back, Herman headed back down the hill. **Published in The New York Times on February 4, 2024. Reprinted with permission.**

Glossary

- **dump** = buttare
- **wafts** = fluttuare
- **paved footpaths** = sentieri asfaltati
- **summed up** = riassumere
- **knocked** = far cadere
- **casting aside** = mettere da parte
- **steep stairways** = scale ripide
- **push** = impulso, spinta
- **together** = unire
- **remnants** = resti
- **nutmeg** = noce moscata
- **waste** = scarti
- **grove** = boschetto
- **mace** = macis
- **swapped** = scambiare
- **toting** = portare
- **swore allegiance** = to swear allegiance
- **wrappers** = confezioni
- **to harvest** = raccogliere
- **cloves** = chiodi di garofano
- **litter** = rifiuti
- **The delight the Dutch took** = apprezzare
- **barren** = sterile
- **tossing** = lanciare
- **shallow** = poco profondo
- **steamy** = umido
- **severed** = tagliare, troncare
- **rough seas** = mari mossi
- **guts** = viscere
- **faded** = svanire
- **patches of real estate** = appezzamenti di immobili
- **lopsided trades** = scambi sbilanciati
- **deputy village chief** = vice capo

- **huddle** = raggrupparsi
- **running water** = acqua corrente
- **soil** = null
- **could hardly be farther apart** = difficilmente potrebbero essere più distanti
- **treaty** = trattato
- **crowded around** = ammassati intorno
- **stare up reproachfully** = guardare con disapprovazione
- **daunting** = intimorente
- **plagued** = infestare, invadere
- **mainstay** = pilastro
- **edible** = commestibile
- **tide** = marea
- **beached** = arenarsi
- **catch** = pesca
- **hiked** = camminare
- **bargain** = affare
- **lugging** = trascinare
- **spotty** = irregolare
- **ugs** = brocche
- **flushing** = tirare lo sciacquone
- **speck** = particella