

Floating hope



text DAMON EVANS
photos COURTESY OF VEGA



◀ Hard-to-reach communities benefit from Vega's mission.

◀◀ The Norwegian Vega: going strong.

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Vega's work is very much directly from the hands of donors into the hands of those needing help. Her modest overheads mean that over 90 percent of the donations received go directly to the supported programmes in the form of materials and supplies. sailvega.com

"The tsunami taught us something. It taught us that a 120-year-old historical vessel like Vega could be good for something and could actually have a productive life," says Captain Shane. "Her ability to carry small cargoes cheaply to places well off the beaten paths means that she is not only special from a historical point of view but also special for what we can accomplish with her."

Vega's mission is a simple one. Shane and Maggi seek out worthwhile grassroots projects on poor isolated islands and then return to their supporters in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, seeking donations for these programmes.

This year, she provided badly needed medical and educational supplies to many smaller island communities in Indonesia, as well as rural health posts and schools in Timor Leste. The vessel also ferries local doctors and their teams to these hard-to-reach communities providing a mobile operations base. The boat boasts World Health Organization approved freezers to transport vaccines as well as medical supplies for urgently needed child immunisation and public health programmes.

Each year, as more supporters make it possible, the couple reach out to new islands in need of their help or technical support, returning the following year with medical and educational supplies, and even solar panels.

"Our work is not about sweeping global changes demanding millions of dollars; it is about providing an old lady with a walker, a fisherman with fishing hooks or a child with immunisations," says Shane, summing up their mission aptly.

At first, many people thought Shane and Maggi had been in the sun too long. Now however, Vega is fast being recognised by their supporters and those they help as one of the most efficient and effective small aid programmes in the region. **AG**

FOR over six years, a very special boat has been delivering humanitarian aid to some of the most neglected communities in this region.

Vega is one of the last of her kind. Built in Norway in 1984, Vega's construction is reminiscent of wooden naval ships of that period. Designed as a deep-sea trader, her build is a blend of North Sea cargo ship and navel man-o-war. She now spends her time delivering cargoes of much needed aid donations to isolated island communities in East Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

Just as in the days of the legendary spice island trade, Vega sails along routes unchanged for thousands of years. Her movements are dictated by the winds of the monsoons as she makes her annual pilgrimage, loading her cargo of hope and assistance during one monsoon and then delivering supplies of farm, medical and educational assistance when the monsoon changes.

Shane Granger and Maggi Macoun have been doing this since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Vega was one of the few boats available to carry a reasonable amount of cargo in the area and took 25 tonnes of food and medical supplies to the Indonesian island of Pulau Weh. But when they got there, the pair found that help was more urgently needed not on the northern coast of Sumatra where Aceh was, but on the west coast. The seas were so rough that bigger boats trying to reach the west coast were severely damaged, but Vega, built for the North Sea and certified for the arctic, made it.

The natural disaster marked a turning point for the couple as they realised their boat could be useful providing humanitarian assistance to remote island communities.

Damon Evans is a professional journalist based in Asia. He writes about adventure sports, travel and energy.