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# Stranded Aussies eye ‘asylum seeker’ style boat charters

*As COVID-19 cases rise to alarming levels across Indonesia, some stranded Australians are taking matters into their own hands to get home.*



The streets of Legian are empty of tourists. **Dian Rialdi**

**Dave Smith**

Aug 6, 2021 - 11.35am



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they are preparing to sail home on small wooden boats.

Sparked by a new cap on international arrivals that halved the number of passengers to 3000 per week and forced most commercial airlines to cancel their flights to Australia, the development draws parallels to the plight of the last wave of 'boat people': [asylum-seekers from predominantly war-torn Middle East nations](#) who sailed to Australia from Indonesia on dangerously overloaded leaky fishing boats between 2007 and 2017.

While there is no guarantee that these boats will ever leave, the fact that these boat operators are finding a market at all reflects the desperation of many Australians stuck in Indonesia.

An Australian man in Indonesia known only by his first name, Brenden, is offering members of the WhatsApp chat group, Boat to Oz, passage on a wooden yacht from Bali to Darwin via Kupang in West Timor for \$5000 per head. "We have permission to disembark Australians in Darwin [and] we should be ready to leave Bali in less than two weeks. There is a chance the boat might get stuck a few weeks after that with inspections, but it's all possible," Brenden says.



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Sibon Charters, an Indonesian charter company, is also offering evacuation trips to Darwin on a 70-foot aluminium catamaran with four air-conditioned cabins and chef-cooked meals for \$US20,000 (\$27,000) per person. "So far the most decent-looking sea vessel. Let me know if anyone is interested, wrote an Australian woman who has been stuck in Indonesia since February last year and is trying to pull together 10 more passengers to fill the boat.

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said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “Now I can’t even get a booking, so I thought going back on a boat might be feasible.”

She adds: “Now I know how the asylum seekers felt because right now it’s easier for me to get asylum in a third country than to get back home to Australia.”



Sibon Charters is offering evacuation trips to Darwin for \$27,000.

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Another Australian woman in Jakarta who asked that her name be withheld has accepted an offer of a free trip aboard a fibreglass yacht being relocated to Australia on the caveat that she works as a crew member during the week-long voyage. “I’m in a very vulnerable position. I need to get home to see my dying father,” she says. “I can’t tell you the name of the

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There are more than 38,000 Australians registered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as being stuck overseas and wanting to return home, including 780 in Indonesia. Among them is Amelia Lemondhi, a translator living in Indonesia since 2018 [who is infected with COVID-19](#).

“After getting sick, I want to go home and wait it out until the situation improves. I just can’t risk getting sick like this again,” Lemondhi told *AFR Weekend* between coughing fits from her apartment in Jakarta, where she is self-isolating.

“I have no way out at the moment. I can’t afford a \$10,000 flight that goes through Doha and I can’t get on a boat because my husband gets seasick. I understand peoples’ reasons for wanting to jump on a boat, but I don’t think it’s a safe way to get home,” she says.

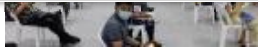
### **Last month Indonesia recorded the highest COVID-19 mortality rates in the world.**

Lemondhi, who worked at the Christmas Island Detention Centre at the peak of Australia’s boat-people phenomenon in 2013, says Canberra could be doing a lot more to get Australians home. “I understand there are problems, but having worked at the detention centres, I know there is space available for all 800 of us there. The politicians have so many excuses,” she says.

There does appear to be some light at the end of the tunnel for Australians stuck in Indonesia after [DFAT announced it’s working with Qantas to evacuate some 400 Australians it considers vulnerable on August 18, subject to final approval](#).

However, members of the WhatsApp group, Aussie Expat Flight, noted the flight sold out in minutes. They have launched a petition with the Australian Parliament to get everyone home. DFAT is also helping vulnerable Australians secure reasonably priced seats on Garuda Indonesia’s weekly flight to Sydney that are being advertised on the airline’s website for as much as \$8800.

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“My wife is pregnant and experiencing complications, so I just want to get her out of Indonesia to Perth, where it’s safer,” says an Australian man who identified himself only by the initials, SO, who returned home on Tuesday.

“The embassy did a really good job. We asked them for help and one week later they got seats for three of us – my wife, my three-year-old son and me – for \$2500 each. The staff were very nice, very compassionate. It deserves a mention. But it’s only because we were classed as vulnerable, because my wife needs to be treated in Australia.”

Last month, [Indonesia recorded the highest COVID-19 mortality rates](#) in the world: 2069 deaths in a single day. In Bloomberg’s recent COVID-19 Resilience Ranking of 53 countries, Indonesia is ranked as the worst place to be during the pandemic.

Nevertheless, Lemondhi in Jakarta holds little hope she will be classified as vulnerable by DFAT and get help coming home, leaving a slow boat to Australia as her only viable option. The first is scheduled to depart from Bali on August 12, according to a post shared on the WhatsApp group, Boat to Oz.

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WA Police Commissioner Chris Dawson signed orders to prevent MV Emerald Indah from entering WA waters. **Hamish Hastie**

But there's a final, ironic question in this crisis: will a boat full of people possibly infected with the highly contagious delta variant that started the outbreak in Sydney and has sent the city into an indefinite lockdown be allowed to dock in Darwin – even if it is to offload Australian citizens and permanent residents? Or will it be sent back to the Indonesian waters from where they came, as happened to the boats carrying asylum-seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan in the not-so-distant past?

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arriving by sea to Australia are subject to requirements under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*. “Failure to comply with these requirements may result in enforcement action being taken,” they said. The spokesperson refused to elaborate on what such enforcement might entail or describe conditions under which Australian citizens would be refused entry.

Last month, Western Australia’s emergency coordinator, Chris Dawson, signed orders to prevent the bulk carrier MV Emerald Indah from entering the state’s waters and sent it back to Indonesia after a member of the crew tested positive for COVID-19.


A Sydney solicitor and adjunct professor of law at Macquarie University who has worked tirelessly to free and improve the conditions of asylum-seekers in Australian detention centres for more than 10 years, George Newhouse, admits he’s stumped by the question. “Honestly, I don’t know if they can be sent back,” he says. “It’s not illegal for an Australian to come here, but we can’t be sure. They did ban people in India from returning home a while back.”


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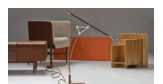
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