



chapter seven

Changing Patterns of Trade

The Spice Routes Today



▲ *A ginger warehouse in the old Spice Route port of Cochin, where the spice trade still continues today.*

During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the major European powers increased their domination of the lands linked by the Spice Routes. At the start of this century the European colonial empires were at their peak: in Asia, the British held India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and the Malay Peninsula, the French Indo-China (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) and the Dutch most of the Indonesian Archipelago. The United States of America, a relatively new arrival on the Spice Routes, held the Philippines. But, by 1945, the financial impact of two world wars and the rise of Asian nationalism led to a rapid decline in western power. By 1947, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines had gained their independence and the rest followed over the next twenty years. Today no one country can be said to dominate the Spice Routes.

No one country can be said to dominate the spice trade either. In about 1770, Pierre Poivre, a botanist and government official in the



French colony of Mauritius, succeeded in smuggling clove and nutmeg seedlings out of the Moluccas. By 1776 the first crop of cloves was successfully harvested on Mauritius. It was the beginning of the dispersal of spice cultivation to countries with suitable climates throughout the world. Prices began to drop and spices ceased to be among the most prized goods traded along the routes that bear their name. Today, spices are still grown in Indonesia, but they are of less importance in the Moluccas than crops such as rice and exotic fruits.

The Spice Routes still serve as highways for the transportation of goods between East and West. Many of the ports that grew up along their course still flourish, such as Foochow, Singapore, Cochin and Alexandria. But now other precious goods are carried along the Spice Routes in giant tankers and container ships: oil from the Middle East and motor cars and electrical goods from Japan. The age of the sail is long over and these huge ships now take a matter of weeks to travel from the Far East to Europe, a far cry from the many months the journey once took. Even swifter is the journey by aeroplane, while by computer, telephone and fax, it is possible to communicate with the other side of the world in a matter of seconds. Most of the countries along the Spice Routes are now easily accessible to the business traveller and, increasingly, the tourist.

Partly because of these vast improvements in communications, international trade now takes place on a scale and complexity that the early Spice Route merchants could never have dreamed of. Despite this, war and political upheaval still have the potential to change completely the patterns of trade, as recent events in China and the Middle East go to show. But, whatever happens, the Spice Routes will remain a major channel for cultural exchange between East and West.

▼ A junk sails past the modern skyscrapers of Hong Kong, one of the world's major financial centres. Today, local trade along the Spice Routes is still carried out on traditional lines, in contrast to the international dealing in trade and commerce that takes place on the world's stock markets.

