

# AFAR

## Exploring Indonesia's Remote Islands on a 12-Person Luxury Sailing Yacht

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*Get off the beaten path and far from the summer travel crowds on “Vela,” a UNESCO-protected style of passenger vessel known as a phinisi.*



“Is this real life?” the writer asked as she swam with whale sharks during a recent sailing experience with *Vela*. Courtesy of Kathryn Romeyn

Floating between two whale sharks, their colossal fins swirling about as the day's first light danced through the turquoise water, I found my happy place. I hovered in snorkel mask and flippers in Indonesia's Saleh Bay among the gargantuan fish. Although they were sucking up gallons of seawater thick with tiny critters—they feed voraciously like this during a new moon, I learned—and despite the fact that one was some 25 feet long, I swam fearlessly, magnetized. The literal biggest fish in the sea showed interest in me, too, but zero malice.

I was the first one in the water as the sun rose and, still enraptured an hour and a half later, I was told gently it was time to get out. “Is this real life?” I’d been asking myself silently while savoring one-on-two time with these mysterious behemoths, a visual mashup of so many different species. The profile of their face said fish while their dorsal fin screamed shark; the rippling gills reminded me of manta rays. I tried to memorize every marking, every otherworldly movement before it was time to board the Zodiac rigid inflatable boat (RIB) and return to *Vela*, the beyond elegant charter *phinisi* yacht on which I was a guest this April.

Joining these gentle giants in their space had been one of the most peaceful moments of my life. This access is the luxury of sailing with *Vela*, which sleeps just 12 guests plus a mostly Indonesian staff of 18. Guests enjoy immersion into beautiful landscapes and environments and a private up-close whale shark encounter thanks to generous compensation provided to the fishermen whose wide *bagan* boats attract them.



This Indonesian yacht experience is a sure-fire way to escape the crowds of summer travel. Courtesy of Kathryn Romeyn

## What it's like to sail on a contemporary phinisi

In 2004, the late Patti Seery pioneered a modern version of the **UNESCO-protected phinisi** (also spelled pinisi), a luxury leisure vessel named *Silolona Sojourns* modeled after the early 1900s hybrid cargo boats with sails built traditionally in the Indonesian island of South Sulawesi. Her Java-born son, Tresno Seery, was the naval architect behind *Vela*, a 164-foot yacht designed to usher in a new generation of phinisis. Think Hermès fabric-covered headboards and throw pillows alongside vivid original Indonesian artworks and sustainably sourced teak decks. As for modern conveniences, there was staff ready to mist my face with chilled cucumber-infused water and hand me a refreshment such as pineapple *tepache* or pandan iced tea each time I stepped back on deck.

So intimately associated with—and reliant on—nature, *Vela*, which first set sail in July 2022, strives to be environmentally sensitive. The boat uses desalination and an advanced reverse osmosis process to make drinking water from seawater—the system pumps seawater through the hull and separates the brine (or salt), releasing it back into the ocean, after which another reverse osmosis system coupled with UV treatment and three more filtration processes turns it into drinking water. There’s also a marine-based air-conditioning system, a freon-free way to cool the engine room using seawater (so there are no visible outdoor AC units on the top deck releasing hot air and making noise). Guests receive reef-safe SPF and chemical-free toiletries. To help compensate for the timber felled to craft the yacht, the company recently planted 2,000 hardwood trees in Kalimantan, where most of the wood for *Vela* was sourced, through the nonprofit [One Tree Planted](#).



On *Vela*, there isn't a bad suite (pictured) or stateroom onboard. Photo by Tommaso Riva

Suites and staterooms include an owner's suite with a 270-degree view on the bridge; a master suite with a generous marble vanity, original photography, and chic upholstered bed; and four smaller cabins below deck with porthole windows. There is no bad room, however, and all of them feature showers with tile mosaics hand glazed in Bali and naturally dyed kimono robes.

Meals consist of robust breakfast spreads with the option to order eggs and other à la carte dishes, family-style lunches, and multi-course dinners around various long wooden tables and plush banquettes. Chef Agus takes into consideration guest cravings for his menus, which span all types of cuisines. My favorite meals, however, were the Indonesian ones. Fall-apart tender *bebek betutu* (roasted duck), *sop buntut* (oxtail soup), fish sate, and corn fritters were a few standouts. I loved his creative dessert of poached pear topped with *rujak* (sorbet inspired by the sweet-and-spicy Indonesian street food take on fruit salad). Our tiki torch-lit barbecue dinner of pork ribs and curry on the sand was memorable, too. Negronis were a favorite libation as was the insanely drinkable cocktail we dubbed the Komodo G&T, with citrus, rosemary, and masui tree bark from Papua.

# Uncovering hidden treasures of the Indonesian archipelago

The number of islands in Indonesia is, interestingly, **still up for discussion**, but it's somewhere in the 17,000 to 18,500 range, and many of them are accessible via *Vela*, the name of a constellation, meaning “shoreline” in Sanskrit.

“Indonesia’s got 3,000 kilometers of this,” cruise director Dean Noble exclaimed to me on one of the many occasions I sat staring out in awe—I had eased into the slowness of traveling on water where simply gazing outward toward prehistoric-looking panoramas felt like a totally respectable activity.



*Vela* can bring travelers to the thousands of remote islands in Indonesia, taking them far off the well-trodden path. Courtesy of Kathryn Romeyn

Over four nights and five days I discovered that perhaps the most compelling reason for intrepid adventurers, the wildlife obsessed, divers, and boat aficionados to charter *Vela* is its mission to take you truly and completely off the beaten path. There’s no hotel on Earth where you can tuck into a plush duvet outside, surrounded by saltwater—on the long daybed along the boat’s aft deck—and sleep beneath the Milky Way with the only audible sound a fresh, steady breeze. I did that on one special night, but inside or out, *Vela* quite literally rocked me to sleep like a baby. I awoke each day to new sights: an active 6,394-foot Sangeang volcano one day, the twinkling stars giving way to the sun rising another.

During the day, there were swims off pristine sandy beaches in chilled water that sparkled and sweaty 700-step climbs up island peaks to take in views of the island of Padar’s jagged bays. We observed famously vicious but rather lazy looking Komodo dragons in the wild on just-reopened Rinca island (it closed pre-COVID for renovation and expansion of its facilities and reopened in April 2023) and jumped into a hot and salty volcanic crater lake. I snorkeled between Gili Lawa Darat and Komodo islands, where the corals delighted in shades of lavender, blush pink, and celadon.

Another major highlight came as we sailed to Karang Makasar, home to Manta Point, an area within Komodo National Park famous for being where manta rays gather to feed. The sky was already starting to glow that end-of-day gold when we spotted manta ray wingtips breaching the surface. I jumped in and felt immediately transported into a slow-motion world of aquatic, balletic beauty while swimming as fast as I could to see the 18-foot-wide megafauna. A lone hawksbill turtle and a shadowy blacktip reef shark even visited, rounding out our count of the most exciting species one could wish to meet in the Indian Ocean.

That, maybe, is the magic of sailing on such an intimate vessel where people are far outnumbered by fish.

On *Vela*, the suggested itineraries are simply a starting point. The company offers trips from Sumbawa to Komodo, like the one I did, and through the famously biodiverse archipelago Raja Ampat, but also Alor and the Forgotten Islands, home to scalloped hammerheads, and the unspoiled diving destination of the Malukus (aka Spice Islands). Every charter is customized to the guests and their desires, whether they want to get PADI certified by ex-Amanwana dive master Yoyok Hariawan, the experiences manager, focus on a specific species (from whale sharks to birds to orangutans), or get a more in-depth understanding of the culture and communities of the islands.

*The 2023 rate for chartering Vela is \$12,000 per night with a four-night minimum, which includes all meals, snacks, nonalcoholic beverages, activities, and spa treatments for 12 guests (essentially, \$1,000 per person per night if you fill the six cabins).*