

Condé Nast Traveler

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

JULY/AUGUST 2023

the eternal appeal
of the
amalfi coast

INDONESIA
SOUTH DAKOTA
JAPAN

+ find your next
CRUISE

Diving off *Vela*,
a luxury yacht built
in the traditional
Indonesian phinisi
style, into the
sea around Komodo
National Park





sail away

Cruising around the starkly beautiful islands that make up Indonesia's Komodo National Park, Sunil Badami discovers there's so much more to the region than just the famous dragons

Photographs by Andrew Urwin



S

oon after the turn of the 20th century, rumors began making their way west that man-eating lizards, 10 feet long and weighing up to 350 pounds, with fearsome talons, chain mail scales, and serrated teeth dripping with venom, had been found living on a remote Indonesian island. The source of the reports was Lieutenant Jacques Karel Henri van Steyn van Hensbroek, a Dutch colonial officer, who revealed the existence of *Varanus komodoensis*, the world's largest extant reptile, in 1910. But it was a 1926 American Museum of Natural History expedition to capture live specimens, led by a flamboyant Vanderbilt scion named William Douglas Burden, that caused interest in the creature to explode in popular culture. Burden's gripping account, *Dragon Lizards of Komodo*, inspired his friend Merian C. Cooper to dream up the primordial *Skull Island* for

Crew members fit two of the eight sails on the double-masted *Vela*

Opposite: Padar Island, the third largest of the 29 islands that make up Komodo National Park





Clockwise from above: Sternside cocktails aboard Vela; a breakfast of tasty dishes including mee goreng, Indonesian stir-fried noodles; taking in the view from the phinisi's main deck; a mother macaque, a species of monkey found on the islands of Komodo National Park, with her child



his classic 1933 film, *King Kong*. Civilization was steaming forward, and yet, in that era, the map still seemed to hold places that hid ancient secrets.

I arrived in Labuan Bajo, on the western coast of the Indonesian island of Flores, to find out if, nearly a century later, there was still anything left to discover. The town is the gateway to the 670-square-mile Komodo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that encompasses the forbidding volcanic islands of Komodo, Padar, and Rinca as well as numerous smaller ones. They're home not only to Komodo dragons but also to whales, turtles, dugongs, manta rays, and more than a thousand fish species. I had come to meet Adrien Portier, a young French entrepreneur, who, with his business partner Dimitri Tran, commissioned *Vela*, a luxurious 164-foot sailboat that is designed to cruise Indonesia's wildest and most beautiful islands.

Vela is a modern take on the phinisi, a two-masted, eight-sailed timber boat. Traditionally, phinisi sailed throughout Indonesia's 17,000 islands, but they were built mostly by Konjo-speaking people from the village of Ara, on the island Sulawesi. The boats fell out of favor as Indonesia's commercial and fishing fleet modernized, but in 2004 American expat Patti Seery pioneered luxury phinisi travel with the launch of a boatship called *Silolona*. Seery wanted the journeys to be as amazing as the destinations themselves; she also wanted to honor the cultural legacy of her adopted home country. *Vela*, its descendant, has room for 14 guests and a crew of 18—including a mixologist, a yoga instructor, and a photographer on request. It was designed by Tresno Seery, Patti's son. Tran and Portier commissioned the boat after falling in love with phinisi cruising, tweaking the design based on their own experiences as guests on other vessels.

Tran and Portier took the same sustainable approach to luxury with *Vela* as they did with Nirjhara, an eco-resort they opened in Tabanan Regency, an administrative district in southern Bali, in 2020. "Even though *Vela* is an Indonesian boat with an almost entirely Indonesian crew," Portier told me, "we recognize that we are still guests in these waters." This is one reason the pair sought to keep its footprint small. They shaped *Vela*'s handcrafted ironwood hull in a way that would optimize fuel-efficiency while motoring. They sourced all of the boat's custom teak furniture from sustainable forests in Java managed by the Indonesian government and partnered with the global charity One

Tree Planted, committing to plant two trees for each one used in the construction of the phinisi. On board, guests will find only glass bottles and handcrafted ceramics; palm-oil-free, reef-safe toiletries and sunscreen; and drinking water that has been reverse-osmosis-filtered. And while most other motorized phinisi have nonfunctioning masts without sails, *Vela* is fully rigged. That means way less fuel dependence—and a lot more romance.

Labuan Bajo wasn't as wild as I'd imagined. The airport was upgraded in 2016 to handle its 1.5 million annual visitors. New hotels and resorts were carved into the hillsides surrounding a harbor that teems with luxury yachts. *Vela* was anchored away from the crowds, beautiful with her painted dark blue hull and polished teak accents. Upon embarking, I was greeted with a welcome drink and some nibbles, then Portier took me on a tour. He

Even with their stubby legs, Komodo dragons can sprint 12 miles per hour and take down fully grown water buffalo

and Tran sourced everything, from the sails to the bath towels. The finishes were sumptuous and sophisticated. Sun lounges surrounded a long communal table on the foredeck. The cabins ranged from the opulent owner's suite up top, with its marble bathtub and private patio, to smaller rooms below, all decorated with natural Indonesian fabrics and works by emerging local artists. My cabin on the main deck had a king bed and ample space to unpack, although I spent most of my time in swim trunks. Shoes were always optional.

We left the crowded harbor behind and made for the islands of Komodo National Park. The product of volcanic eruptions that occurred when the Australian and Eurasian tectonic plates collided, the jagged isles loomed dramatically on the horizon. Recent fossil evidence has revealed that Komodo dragons, once believed to be endemic to these islands, origi-

nated in Australia and crossed to Indonesia over what was then dry land some 900,000 years ago.

After a couple of hours of cruising, we entered the park's waters and dropped anchor. As the sun set, the cocktails arrived. After dinner I climbed to the roof deck for a nightcap, gazing with wonder at the sheer number of stars that punctuated the ink black sky. I slept like a baby that night, rocked to sleep by currents that flow up from Antarctica and through the Sumba Strait.

The next morning, after croissants and espressos, we sailed to Padar, about five nautical miles southwest of Komodo. Once on land, a small group of us climbed its steep, craggy hills, passing goats and deer grazing on the thorny brush as well as Indonesian day-trippers who paused to take selfies in hijabs and designer gear. From the summit we could see the island's five bays, separated by ridges. The view resembled an enormous splayed hand. As I tried to catch my breath, Yoyok, *Vela's* affable activities director, thoughtfully handed me a cold drink and a cool towel.

Back on the boat, I made a beeline for the nasi goreng and mee goreng—rice and noodles studded with shreds of cabbage, carrot, spring onion, and chicken, stir-fried in kecap manis, that syrupy, smoky Indonesian soy sauce, and topped with a perfectly sunny-side-up egg. It was accompanied by ubiquitous sambal, the bright, glossy Indonesian chili paste ribboned with makrut lime leaves. The rest of the afternoon, we alternated between relaxing on deck and slipping into the sea, a patchwork of different shades of blue, to cool off. I watched as a pair of stingrays cruised the deep water beneath the boat. When the sun began to dip, we took a tender to a mangrove forest near one of the small islands in the park and watched as a stream of Sunda flying foxes, an indigenous bat species, soared into the purple sky.

That night I slipped out of my cabin to sleep under the full moon. At sunrise I was awakened by a pod of dolphins splashing by the bow as sunrise painted the horizon in cotton candy hues.

We were scheduled that day to swim with reef manta rays in "Manta Alley," off Komodo's southern tip. But the moon had done something funky to currents, and the water was too rough. Secretly, I was relieved. I hadn't swum seriously since high school, and I didn't relish the prospect of doing so again in the company of 11-foot-wide leviathans, no matter how "gentle" or "intelligent" Yoyok assured me they



Clockwise from above: A Komodo dragon in the national park (there are fewer than 1,400 left in the wild); lying low on *Vela*; a cocktail spiced with star anise, which is cultivated throughout Indonesia





were. Instead, I got a traditional Balinese massage in my cabin. The next few days were a blissful blur of reading, eating, lazing, and swimming. One memorable afternoon, we visited a beach whose sand was tinted pink by microscopic foraminifera. Only seven of these so-called pink beaches can be found in the world, and this park has two of them.

On our last full day, it was finally time to see the dragons. The main entry point is the rangers station on Komodo, where a large population of Komodo dragons can be found. For millennia they've coexisted with the local Ata Modo ethnic group, whose name translates to "forest people of the dragon." Believing themselves to be descended from the same ancestral set of twins as the dragons, the Ata Modo long left a portion of what they gathered from fishing, hunting, and farming for their reptilian relatives. When the park was established in 1980 to protect the dragons, fishing and hunting were prohibited within its boundaries. Since then, many of the Ata Modo have taken jobs in tourism, as guides and as crew members on luxury boats. Komodo, along with Borobudur and Bali, is an Indonesian tourism hot spot, and there's no doubt the park brings much-needed income to East Nusa Tenggara, one of Indonesia's poorest provinces. But there is still work to be done to balance the needs of the local ecosystem and the local economy.

Our guide, Rahman, his face etched by sea and sun, smiled wickedly as he told us that, even with their stubby legs, dragons can sprint 12 miles per hour, take down fully grown water buffalo, and smell blood from more than six miles away. He waved a forked stick to fend off any encroaching reptiles, but I still kept my eyes peeled for unexpected ambushes.

Though the paths we walked were well-trodden, the surrounding jungle felt primeval. Strange sounds echoed here and there. Shadows darted behind the enormous trees. We saw boar, jungle fowl, cockatoos, a sea eagle circling the cloudless sky. But no dragons. Then, as we reached the beach, Rahman called out. Ambling toward us was a young male, around seven feet long, its claws sharp, its jaws dripping with drool. It was thrilling to be so close to a Komodo dragon in the flesh—even if we were the same distance from the souvenir shop.


Before we started our final cruise back to Labuan Bajo, Yoyok suggested a last swim in the marine-life-rich waters around Gili Lawa Darat Island, a few

Clockwise from right: *Vela's* spacious owner's suite has a private terrace with 180-degree views; sunrise over the island of Padar; snorkeling in Komodo National Park, whose waters support tremendous biodiversity





miles north of Komodo. I gave myself up to the waves as I drifted above the reef, gazing through my snorkel mask. Below was a dizzying spectrum: harlequin flashes of cobalt and hot pink, gold and silver, as clown fish, trevallies, and parrotfish zigzagged by in a flash. And, gliding serenely through the slip stream like some ancient, scrimshawed monolith, a critically endangered white hawksbill turtle stroked past.

I clambered back onto the tender, flush with joy and the feeling that the world still held a few secrets. I had come to look for the dragons but ended up discovering more. 

Indonesia by phinisi

Peak time to cruise around Komodo National Park is May to September, outside the monsoon season. (Vela also visits several other Indonesian destinations throughout the year, depending on weather conditions and availability.)

Chartering Vela in Komodo National Park starts at \$13,500 a night, with a minimum sail of four nights. All food, activities (including diving, with PADI training and certification offered at additional cost), entry permits, and taxes are included in the charter, as are up to four hours a day of relaxation and beauty treatments; sailvela.com