

TRIPS

Pinch Us! This Indonesian Phinisi Adventure Deserves Dream-Trip Status

BY KATHRYN ROMEYN | 19 Sep 2023 06:01 AM



The journey really is the destination on a *Vela* cruise, a new, traditionally built luxury phinisi yacht for charter, with a dozen of your besties, Hermès decor, an ex-Aman dive master and masseuses, and one-of-a-kind experiences galore.

I DOUBT RALPH WALDO EMERSON ever sailed through central Indonesia on a luxury phinisi yacht, but after having done it myself it certainly feels as though his famous quote, “It’s not the destination, it’s the journey,” was written about that unparalleled voyage.

It all began on the island of Bali, where I checked into a chic waterfall-adjacent villa at the 25-room resort Nirjhara, whose young French owners are the same as Vela, the newly built, bespoke phinisi that entered Indonesian waters in July 2022. Following a divine 90-minute body scrub and massage, and Indonesian feast of a dinner at Ambu restaurant, I set out early morning on a quest to experience her elegant beauty in the West Nusa Tenggara region of Indonesia, east of Bali.



And what a quest it was. Our flight to Sumbawa had been cancelled last-minute and our only option was to fly first to Makassar before zigzagging in a propeller plane down to Bima. There, we hopped in cars that drove us a couple hours west to a port to meet *Vela*, which was coming from Raja Ampat. Along the way there were goats trotting down the street and brightly colored mosques, mountains, rice paddies and lovelorn calls of “I love you, *bule!*” (which means “tourist”) from local teenage boys.

We made our way through the shacks of a seafront village to a jetty where kids played and eyed us through giggles. We’d departed Nirjhara at 5 a.m. and, at 4 p.m., were finally aboard the Zodiac rib craft headed toward *Vela*, the yacht anchored still another 45 minutes away. As we flew past Mount Tambora (the volcano whose 1815 eruption was the planet’s most deadly) on smooth cerulean water, a pod of adorable spinner dolphins dove and twirled alongside us like a greeting committee.

“Welcome to *Vela!*” shouted Dean Noble, our cruise director, pumping his fist in the air excitedly as the boat named for a constellation (and also the Sanskrit word for “shoreline”) appeared on the golden horizon. It was hard-earned but we’d made it aboard the 50-meter wooden vessel with six generous guest cabins, a teak yoga deck, multiple dining areas, gargantuan daybeds and a 18-person crew that includes a chef well-versed in gourmet Indonesian and Western cuisines. *Vela* itineraries are fully customizable, and the yacht can sail virtually anywhere in Indonesia, from the Malukus to the Forgotten Islands to Raja Ampat with a four-night minimum. (GBP 9,690 per night is the all-inclusive cost for 12 passengers.)



I’d never seen stars, galaxies and planets as piercing and mesmerizing as I witnessed that night from the top deck of *Vela*, where in proper yacht-style we sipped cocktails expertly made by the resident mixologist, Bawa, like the Journey to Bajo—tequila with torch ginger, jamu reduction and housemade ginger beer—fitting, since that’s what we were on: our final destination was Labuan Bajo, Flores. Noble briefed us on the goal for the morning: swimming with whale sharks. And so, after dining on exceptional *bebek betutu* and banana cake under a sliver of a copper-colored moon that set early, plummeting into the black water, I tucked myself into bed like a kid on Christmas Eve who can’t wait for the sun to come up.

We’d traveled to Saleh Bay where a couple of the largest fishes in the sea did grace us with their presence for a slow, awe-inspiring swim so beautifully dreamlike it left me speechless. Twelve hours on *Vela* and it already proved more than worth the effort for this once-in-a-lifetime encounter. From there the journey flowed, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. We wound our way west toward Komodo as the

seascapes and islands became ever more ancient looking. Our slow, eight-knot cruising speed meant leisurely mornings and afternoons sprawled on a daybed simply watching the scenery and cornflower blue silken sea move past, including a startlingly close-up view of Mount Sangeang volcano. I consciously tried to sear the scenes into my being.

All the while the chef kept us sated on Indonesian favorites—mahi mahi sate, mie goreng, gingery tuna, and a spicy dessert take on *rujak*—sprinkled with elevated international plates for some dinners. And the mixologists quenched our thirst not only with craft cocktails every evening but a unique beverage each time we returned from an excursion, from hot jamu to pandan iced tea and “holy water” (iced coconut water with lime).

My mermaid fantasies were fulfilled in Komodo National Park where we caught a current just right and drift snorkeled above tropical fish. I felt like Superwoman flying through the impeccable cyan water into which sparkling sun rays illuminated corals. One restorative massage and a few more picturesque hours of cruising later we jumped excitedly into the water alongside manta rays, which simultaneously felt like a slow-motion ballet and a high-speed pursuit.

One manta in particular seemed to be saying, “Come, I’ll show you around,” while leading me on a tour of its ocean home. It flew, wings wide, while I kicked furiously, my heart racing, trying to keep up with its effortless soaring between corals, over a blacktip reef shark and past a hawksbill sea turtle calmly swimming in the depths. A baby made a playful appearance, too, diving straight down and spiraling up as if showing off its agility to this clumsy human. We swam what felt like a circuitous marathon, and whenever I got close, I felt a gravitational pull like a rip tide created by their powerful flapping.

As the expedition stretched on, each phenomenal moment built on the last. At sunrise we said hello to a deer sitting in sand then climbed 150 meters to the top of the Jurassic Padar Island, home to Komodo’s famous pink beach as well as black and white ones, too. A Robinson Crusoe–esque beach on Padar Kecil proved an idyllic place to relax and swim post-hike before we made our way to Rinca, which had just reopened with a new museum and walking paths after a four-year renovation project. The Komodo dragons there truly did look prehistoric as they slowly stalked around, split white tongues darting out to smell and sense the foreign interlopers. A rainbow stretched 180 across the sky as we took the Zodiac back to *Vela* where the sun quickly dropped into the ocean surrounding around us.



Indelible wonders aside, my favorite part was easing into the slowness that supplanted my typical rushed daily life. *Vela* provided the most beautiful balance of active aquatic engagements with completely passive ones from a floating five-star boutique resort. The entire trip was the destination and instead of one peak I experienced high after high, which left me, even weeks later, in a state of total disbelief that this was, indeed, real life.