

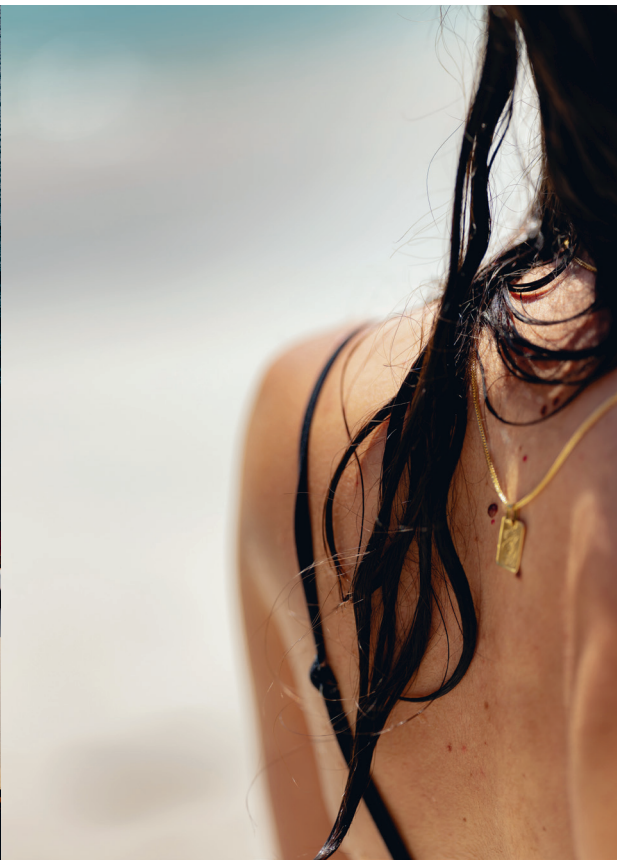


A large wooden sailing ship, a Phinisi, is shown from a low angle, emphasizing its massive scale. The ship's hull is dark wood, and its upper decks are visible with white-cushioned chairs. The masts and rigging are silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky at sunset. The water in the foreground is dark and textured.

Plain sailing

ABOARD A NEXT-GENERATION PHINISI, SUNIL BADAMI TRAVELS
THROUGH INDONESIA'S IRIDESCENT KOMODO NATIONAL PARK,
WITH ITS FEVER-DREAM REEFS AND FANTASTIC BEASTS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW URWIN



“**H**ERE BE DRAGONS”. So warned medieval maps of the dangers in the otherworldly reaches of the fabled Indonesian Spice Islands – and they displayed a certain prescience. Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, rumours began drifting west that man-eating lizards, 10 feet long and weighing up to 550 pounds, with fearsome talons, chain-mail scales and serrated teeth dripping with venom, had been found living on a remote Indonesian island. The source was Lieutenant Jacques Karel Henri van Steyn van Hensbroek, a Dutch East Indies colonial officer, who reported 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 called William Douglas Burden, that provoked a fascination that would explode into popular culture. Burden’s gripping account, *Dragon Lizards of Komodo*, inspired his friend Merian C Cooper to dream up the primordial Skull Island for his classic 1933 film *King Kong*.

I arrive in Labuan Bajo, on the western coast of the Indonesian island of Flores, to find out if – nearly a century later – there remains anything 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, and a constellation of smaller ones.

Recent fossil evidence has revealed that Komodo dragons, once believed to be endemic to these islands, originated in Australia. They crossed to Indonesia over what was then dry land, about 900,000 years ago. It’s estimated that only about 3,450 dragons remain, their numbers having roughly halved over the past quarter of a century. Despite their intimidating size and fearsome reputation, they’re endangered because of climate change, habitat destruction, human settlement, poaching and excess tourism. The islands are also home to whales, turtles, dugongs, manta rays and more than a thousand fish species. And an ancient, fragile human culture. The Ata Modo – meaning “forest people of the dragons” – believe they are descended from the same totemic twins as the dragons. They have lived here for two millennia.

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Labuan Bajo isn’t as wild as I had imagined. New hotels and resorts are carved into the hillsides, encasing a harbour that teems with yachts. The airport was upgraded in 2016 to handle its 1.5 million annual visitors. Here, Adrien Portier, a young French entrepreneur, along with his business partner, Dimitri Tran, has commissioned *Vela*, a romantic 164-foot sailing boat equipped to cruise Indonesia’s wildest and most beautiful islands. Anchored away from the crowds, with her painted dark blue hull and polished teak accents, *Vela* is a modern take on the phinisi: a two-masted, eight-sailed timber boat, and a showcase of fastidious Indonesian craftsmanship.

Phinisi once sailed throughout Indonesia’s 17,000 islands, built mostly by Konjo-speaking people from the village of Ara on the island of Sulawesi. The boats fell out of favour as Indonesia’s commercial and fishing fleet modernised, but in 2004 American expat Patti Seery pioneered the notion of top-end phinisi travel with the launch of a boat called *Silolona*. Seery wanted the journeys to be as spectacular as the destinations, and to honour the cultural legacy of her adopted country. *Vela*, designed by Patti’s son Tresno, has room for 14 guests and a crew of 18, including a mixologist, a yoga instructor and a photographer on request. Tran and Portier commissioned the boat after falling in love with phinisi cruising.

They adopted the same sustainable approach with *Vela* as they did with Nirjhara, their eco-hotel, which opened in Tabanan Regency, southern Bali, in 2020. “*Vela* is an Indonesian boat with an almost entirely Indonesian crew,” Portier tells me, “but we are still guests in these waters.” Keeping *Vela*’s footprint small means employing local guides and businesses, shaping *Vela*’s handmade ironwood hull to optimise fuel efficiency, and sourcing the custom teak furniture from sustainable forests in Java managed by the Indonesian government. For each tree used in the construction of the phinisi, two were planted by the One Tree Planted

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Vela’s deck; post-swim calm; porthole view of Padar Island; onboard bedroom.
Previous pages: Vela, moored off Padar Island



SWOOPING VOLCANIC ISLANDS ARE DRAPED IN SAVANNAH, SPIKED WITH



THORNY VEGETATION AND ROCKS, AND RINGED BY CUTICLES OF SAND

charity. Glass bottles and handcrafted ceramics made in Bali replace single-use plastics; the drinking water is reverse osmosis-filtered onboard, and palm-oil-free, reef-safe products and sunscreen are provided. While most other motorised phinisis have nonfunctioning masts and sails, *Vela* is fully rigged for sailing. That means much less fuel dependence, and a lot more romance. I feel like Keats's Cortés gazing out over Darien, standing out on the bow, the sails unfurled on the bowsprit, virtually indistinguishable from the vast tropical clouds out to sea.

The phinisi's interiors are crisply tactile, with custom furniture and contemporary Indonesian pieces by emerging artists, and bedecked in natural Indonesian textiles and some of the last rolls of certain Hermès fabrics ever made. The lodgings range from below-deck staterooms with bronze portholes to the Owner's Suite, a sumptuous apartment fitted with Italian marble fixtures and a private deck overlooking the bow. The boat has a proper gym and is packed with kayaks, paddleboards, water skis, jet skis, fishing gear and full scuba diving kit – although some of these are banned within the park, so must be reserved for other adventures.

Leaving the crowded harbour behind, it feels as if we are heading to Kong Island. It is hot and dry, and the light is bright and yellow, saturating swooping volcanic islands draped in savannah, spiked with thorny vegetation and rocks, and ringed by cuticles of sand. They rise up dramatically as if plucked out of the Flores

Sea – which they were, as a result of the volcanic eruptions spurting out of the collision between the Australian and Eurasian tectonic plates, which left the dragons marooned here on these islands. Two hours into cruising we cross into the park's waters and drop anchor. After dinner I climb onto the roof deck for a nightcap, gazing with wonder at the star-spangled, inky black sky. That night I sleep like a baby, rocked by strong currents tugged at by the supermoon.

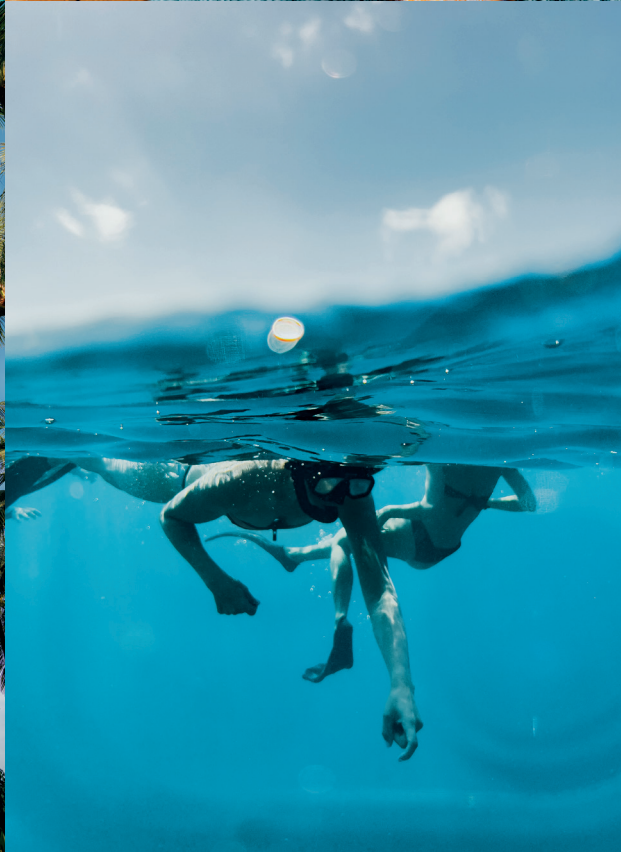
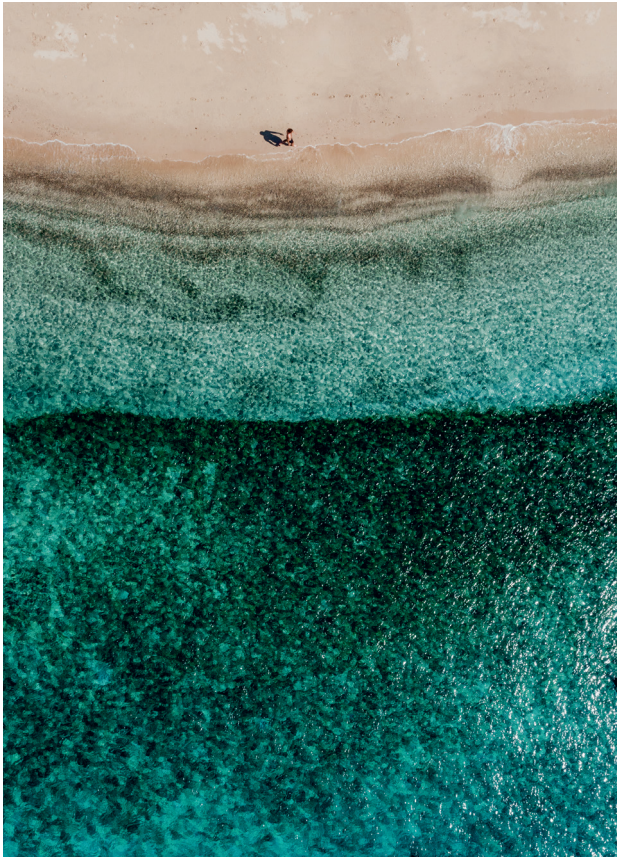
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The next morning we sail to Padar, five nautical miles southwest of Komodo. A small group of us climb its steep, craggy hills, passing goats and deer grazing on the thorny brush and Indonesian day trippers who pause for selfies in hijabs and designer gear. From the summit we can see the island's five bays, separated by ridges, a view resembling an enormous splayed hand. Then we descend to cool off at a pristine streak of blinding white sand spilling onto an iridescent patchwork of blueness. I watch as a pair of stingrays cruise the deep water beneath the boat across a shimmering reef.

As the days draw on, we settle in a routine of sorts. I devour breakfasts of nasi goreng or mee goreng: rice or noodles with shreds of cabbage, carrot and spring onion and dotted with chicken, stir-fried in kecap manis, that syrupy, smoky Indonesian soy sauce, and topped with a perfectly sunny-side up egg. It is always coupled with fresh fruit and sambal: bright glossy chilli paste with ribbons of makrut lime leaves. The days pass in a blissful blur of reading, eating and lazing. We swim off a beach whose sand is tinted pink by microscopic foraminifera – there are only seven of these so-called pink beaches in the world, and this park has two of them. We pull up by isolated coral-studded islets for surreptitious barbecues. I am secretly relieved when our swim with 11-foot-wide reef manta rays off Komodo's southern tip is scuppered by the currents – I have a Balinese massage in my cabin instead. At lunches on the stern, we feast on fresh calamari with turmeric and piquant ginger flower shoots, and rawon, a glistening broth swimming with lemongrass, tamarind paste and beef chuck, along with candlenuts and keluak nuts, whose creamy kernels lend a mahogany earthiness. At night, as sunset scatters copper across the deck, we maintain a ritual of cocktails before dinner under a canopy of fairy lights.

One night, as the sun falls into the mountains, we take a tender to a mangrove close to one of the small islands in the park, and watch a stream of Sunda flying fox bats soar into the twilight. That night, the supermoon swells luminous amid a bedazzlement of stars, nothing in its beam but mountains and water.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: turquoise waters off Padar Island; a traditional breakfast of mee goreng noodles; snorkelling in Komodo National Park; canopy suite at Nirjhara. Previous pages: aerial view of Padar Island





I wrap myself in a sheet and slip out to sleep on deck on one of the plush benches outside my cabin. The next morning, as sunrise paints the horizon in pastel pink, a pod of splashing dolphins wakes me.

Our allotted dragon day finally dawns. Although dragons also roam the encircling islands of Flores, Rinca, Gili Motang and Nusa Kode, the main entry point to see them is the shabby rangers' station on Komodo, where the Ata Modo people live in two small colourful villages perched on the shore. Where once they subsisted by fishing and some hunting and farming, these practices were largely prohibited when the Unesco-listed park was established in 1980. Since then their main source of income has been tourism, with many now working in Labuan Bajo as crew on phinisis, hotel staff or guides in the park, or making and selling souvenirs. With an influx of migrant workers from Flores and other Indonesian islands, their ancient culture, like their dragon twins, is under threat. Komodo, along with Borobudur and Bali, is an Indonesian tourism hot spot. There's no doubt the park brings much-needed income to East Nusa Tenggara, one of the country's poorest provinces. But the balancing act between protecting the local ecosystem and economy remains fraught. In 2022, when the park reopened after the pandemic, the Indonesian government raised the entry fee almost 20-fold to help pay for preservation efforts. Many local tourism workers and operators, still recovering from lockdown closures, went on strike. The authorities quickly retreated – as they have with a similar fee hike for the iconic Borobudur temple complex in Java.

Our guide, Rahman, his face sculpted by sea and sun, smiles wickedly as he tells 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 waves a forked stick to fend off encroaching reptiles, and recalls when rangers would feed them with goats, both to attract them and to continue the tradition of looking after their “twin brothers”.

Though the paths we walk are well-trodden, the surrounding jungle feels primeval. Shadows dart behind enormous trees. Unidentified sounds echo here as I step over strange fruit while keeping my eyes peeled for unexpected ambushes. Boar, jungle fowl and cockatoos emerge from the undergrowth, and a sea eagle circles the cloudless sky. But no dragons.

Then, as we reach the beach, Rahman calls out. Ambling toward us is a young male, around seven feet long, its claws sharp, its jaws dripping with viscous drool. It is thrilling to be so close to a Komodo dragon in the flesh – even if we are the same distance from the souvenir shop.

Before we start our final loop back to Labuan Bajo, *Vela's* activities manager, Yoyok Hariawan, suggests a swim in the sapphire waters near Gili Lawa Darat Island, a few miles north of Komodo. I drift over the reef, lost in a dizzying, colour-saturated spectrum of harlequin flashes – in cobalt and hot pink, gold and silver. Clownfish, trevallies and parrotfish zigzag by with the vivid intensity of a fever dream. A trio of juvenile whitetip reef sharks dash in and out of the coral, oblivious to our presence. Then, gliding serenely through the slipstream like some ancient scrimshawed monolith, a hawksbill turtle strokes past.

I clamber back onto the tender, flush with joy having glimpsed some of that great, timeless world which whirls and swirls as we splash in its shallows, its secrets and mysteries hidden from us even as its fragile existence is threatened. I hold that feeling close: that the planet still has its secrets.

Vela can go a lot further than we did. There are up to 4,500 nautical miles of far-flung adventure on offer, from West Papua excursions such as swimming with manta rays in Raja Ampat and diving with whale sharks in Cenderawasih, and exploring the hidden coves of Alor off Timor and Wakatobi in Sulawesi – or even on to Thailand, the Philippines or Burma. But by the time we dock back in Labuan Bajo, I feel like I have already been to the edge of the map. 📍

The peak time to visit Komodo National Park is from May to September, outside the monsoon season. Chartering Vela starts at about £10,525 a night, with a minimum sail of four nights, all-inclusive with up to four hours of wellness treatments daily. sailvela.com

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