

# A fine phinisi

Scuba diving in coral gardens, idyllic beach forays and... omg... Komodo dragons! Cruising Indonesia aboard the stylish *Alila Purnama* is an exercise in adventure.

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Komodo dragon

ANNA KUCHEROVA / STOCK

Scales glinting, the Komodo dragon looks...well... stoned. Never mind that it's the world's largest and most lethal lizard – in 2009, two dragons attacked and killed a fisherman when he fell from a wild apple tree. Or that the deadly creatures (which usually lunch on goats, deer and wild boar) have inch-long serrated teeth that drip hemorrhagic venom. This dragon looks harmless, dozing in the sun – like a college student on a Sunday, lazing about with earbuds plugged in. This is the beast we'd so wanted to see?

But whoah! When it moves, spitting out its menacing tongue and throwing its body from side to side, its powerful tail snaking behind, it's another story.

"Dragons run fast, up to 12 mph," warns Tasrif, our ranger-guide as he hustles us out of its way.

Curiously, Tasrif has no gun, just a large forked stick, which he holds at the ready as we cautiously walk around this specimen and continue our hunt for more sightings – the infamous dragons are found only on Komodo and neighboring Indonesian islands.

Cruising on the *Alila Purnama* to Komodo National Park tosses up a host of surprises, of which the dragons are just one. Indeed, one of the biggest surprises is how luxurious a bespoke sailing experience can be.

Launched in 2012, the *Alila Purnama* (translated, the *Full Moon*) was hand-built in the style of a traditional phinisi. These two-masted ships were used by the Bugis – Indonesian seafaring traders – in days gone by. All polished teak and rattan, with billowing, camel-colored sails, the *Purnama* is a 150-foot beauty. Her five nautical staterooms could be mistaken for stylish hotel rooms (Singapore-based Alila Hotels and Resorts manages the ship) – with queen-size beds, 400-thread count linens, mother-of-pearl mosaic tiled showers and individually-controlled air conditioning. And oh the goodies! Pillow-soft bathrobes, a wicker beach bag, sunhats and sarongs, a yoga mat and a huge wooden box filled with lemongrass body lotions, after-sun cooling gels, face mist and more.

PHOTOS COURTESY ALILA HOTELS AND RESORTS



Alila Purnama





This page (clockwise from top left):

Dining under the stars.

Evening on deck.

Lounge and dining.

Mandura suite.

Facing page:

The bow deck features cushioned double daybeds under parasols.

View of Komodo Island.

Up top, on the sweeping bow deck, there are cushioned double daybeds under parasols for each couple to lounge on (iced cappuccinos anyone?) and lots of space for privacy too, including a small library with books on the colorful local sea life. Most important, the service on-board is first-class. In no time at all, the Indonesian staff know each guest's individual preferences for drinks, teas and coffees (double shot? extra foam?) which magically appear before anyone can ask.

If this is sailing, Jack Sparrow can sign us up.

Our voyage starts with a 95-minute prop flight from Bali over velvety green islands, ringed by different shades of turquoise ocean. Indonesia is a vast archipelago of over 17,000 islands (only 1,000 inhabited); we'll be sailing to a select few. In Labuan Bajo on Flores island – a tiny speck of a town with tin roof houses and feisty chickens scurrying across red dirt roads – we transfer to the *Purnama*.

Up first – abandoning our shoes and sandals. Going comfortably barefoot is the rule onboard. Over lunch around the massive dining table, we meet our six fellow guests – a Singapore-based couple celebrating their 10th wedding anniversary, two French women friends and a honeymoon couple from Mexico City.

Later, the certified scuba divers among us suit up for an easy reef dive, surfacing at sunset beneath an apricot sky. The *Purnama* has its own licensed PADI dive center. All the diving beginner and expert divers could possibly want is included. Over the course of our cruise, dive master Johnny and cruise director Mario (also a master dive guide) take us out on as many as three dives a day, even a night dive.

Our eyes pop at the sights in these remote ocean waters. We explore garden upon garden of candy-colored corals in wonderful and weird shapes – lilac fingers, monster brain coral and yellow heart valves. Bug-eyed garden eels peek from their sand holes. Blue-spotted stingrays float by. Yellow-and-black striped Moorish Idols, their graceful dorsal fins fluttering behind, nibble away.

At Castle Rock, a colossal coral-encrusted underwater pinnacle – rated one of the world's 10 best dive sites – Mario expertly guides us into the muted currents of a fish superhighway. We're engulfed by marine life – schools of silvery jackfish, white-tipped reef sharks, slow-cruising turtles, lionfish, fat puffer fish, even a pair of lacy, superbly camouflaged leaf scorpion fish. When we clamber back into the Zodiac, we're handed fluffy towels.

PHOTOS COURTESY ALILA HOTELS AND RESORTS





Our last evening brings a special surprise. For dinner, a motorboat takes everyone to a beach, where the staff has created a restaurant in the sand. Lanterns hang on sticks and candles glimmer in holes in driftwood and rocks.

Minutes later on the *Purnama*, we're welcomed back with glacier-cold facecloths and fresh-squeezed tropical juices. One of the 16 staff always starts helping us off with our wetsuits. "Sit, please sit!" we're cajoled, and the neoprene is peeled off us while we snack on smoked salmon appies.

Sometimes we join in the non-diving guests' activities – kayaking (the *Purnama* carries its own sea kayaks), snorkeling, going for a spin on the 'doughnut' inflatable pulled behind a high-speed boat. On a couple of occasions, discreet hands set up cushions under umbrellas on deserted islands and haul over coolers of sodas so we can lie back and revel in being the only souls on a strip of talc-white sand. One afternoon, we all scramble up an islet's rocky cliffs for a sunset view of the islands below and Mount Sangeang ("mountain of spirits" in Balinese) in the distance. The volcanic mountain sits in Indonesia's notorious Ring of Fire. Thankfully, its spirits are feeling kindly this day and the mountain slumbers in peace.

And then, in the sweltering heat, we arrive at Komodo for our walk through the nature park. About 50 to 60 intrepid visitors set foot on the island each day to look for the dragons (over 1,800 call the island home). Tasrif tells

us one dragon is occasionally fed so it stays close to the ranger hut, guaranteeing expectant visitors at least one sighting. We're lucky to spy two more in the bush.

Back at the landing site, the biggest threat we face is to our souvenir money. "Real" black pearl necklaces go for \$10 or less, and we're mobbed by a crowd of friendly young men hawking carved dragons and local artefacts. Of course, a two-foot wooden dragon comes home with us.

Our last evening brings a special surprise. For dinner, a motorboat takes everyone to a beach, where the staff has created a restaurant in the sand. We're led to our table along a sandy path bordered by hand-placed seashells, past a lovingly-built Komodo sand dragon. Lanterns hang on sticks and candles glimmer in holes in driftwood and rocks. Our meal is served – course after course of lobster and seafood. At the urging of his staff, Mario picks up a guitar and starts singing. We join in too – we've all become family over this week – and can't believe this once-in-a-lifetime adventure must end soon. ■

**IF YOU GO:** The deluxe *Alila Purnama* sails two six-night itineraries: Komodo Island from May to September and the remote Raja Ampat (in Indonesia's West Papua province) from October to March. Rates include all scuba diving, activities and meals (but not alcohol). For more information visit: [www.alilahotels.com/purnama](http://www.alilahotels.com/purnama)

## Alila Hotels' sumptuous private-pool villas make a splash in Bali

**ALILA ULUWATU** – When we grow up, we want to live in a house like our Alila Uluwatu villa. Alila Hotels has made a splash in Bali with two ultra-sumptuous, private-pool villa resorts. Alila Villas Uluwatu clings to a clifftop on Bali's southern coast; the Soori retreat, surrounded by UNESCO's world heritage protected rice paddies, hugs a black sand beach on the southwest coast near the sacred Tanah Lot Temple. Both crank up the wow factor for boutique villa resorts, making you wish you could replicate their fab architectural features in your own home.

The 65 extraordinary Uluwatu villas are all larger than 3,000 sq. ft. From the living room, we could push back the glass wall-to-wall windows and dive right into an L-shaped pool. In fact, most of the window walls around the villa opened up to the outdoors to allow the sea breeze in. The bathroom boasted an indoor and outdoor shower, together with his-and-hers, leather-and-wood amenity boxes with organic products – scented pillow spray anyone? Nothing is cookie-cutter. Wood design materials have been recycled from railway sleepers and telephone poles. And a huge birdcage (aka, a sunset lounge) is cantilevered over the cliff edge beside the resort's main infinity pool – from here, the Indian Ocean looks as if it stretches forever beyond the horizon.

**ALILA VILLAS SOORI** – Transferring to Alila Villas Soori, we checked into a palatial beachfront villa. Also attended by a butler, it was decorated in a cool ivory-and-black color scheme with masses of marble. The resort's candle-lit spa seduced us with a Balinese massage and body mask of ginger, cinnamon and rice. The eclectic tasting menu for breakfast was a delicious first for us.

Add attentive whisper service and bespoke activities to the mix, and these two properties are reason enough for visiting the already-appealing Bali.



Alila Uluwatu one bedroom villa



Alila Uluwatu one bedroom villa



Alila Uluwatu one bedroom villa



Alila Villas Soori ocean pool villa

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