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ESCAPE

Edited by SASHA SLATER

*Aboard the 'Silolona'
in Indonesia*

WHERE OCEANS MEET

A sailing trip on a work of art.

*Plus: the most serene spa retreats;
and Tabitha Simmons on island-hopping in Croatia*

Photograph by HARRY CORY WRIGHT



HERE BE DRAGONS

A boat based on an Indonesian myth sets sail for a legendary island, home to Komodo dragons, at the point where two oceans crash and collide

By ALEX PRESTON
Photographs by HARRY CORY WRIGHT

'...suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic wood, comes out of the still night – the first sigh of the East on my face. That I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight.' *Joseph Conrad, 'Youth'*

I am clasped in the palm of a swift god, spread-eagled in the emptiness of the ocean, the world rushing to darkness beneath. All thought of control, of rescue, has gone, and it is only me, clutched in the current, careening through plankton haze. Coral formations rise and fall like brainy mountain ranges below. A school of orange wrasse flutters by, then a white triggerfish with a slur of pink lipstick across its face. For a moment, I turn and try to swim against the flow of the water, giggling bubbles at my helplessness. It is a relief to give myself up to the current once again, to succumb to the discipline of the physical world.

Now, rising out of dim depths, two vast, dark shapes. In my dreamscape, I follow them, tacking sideways into the current and down, deeper into the abyss. The seabed drops away to blackness. From that blackness, the two shapes rise, winging themselves against the current towards me. Cephalic fins as long as my arms pronging the water in front of them, they glide past, rising into aquamarine light. Fifteen feet across, the manta rays hang there above me for a long moment, blocking out whatever vague light filters down through the microscopic mist. I hover, stunned, in the eclipse of their undulating bodies; then they are gone, and I am 22 metres down and running out of air. I paddle upwards, pause as my air gauge ticks to red, then surface into sunlight, still drifting on the racing tide.

Dusk. The speedboat bounds across the boiling water of the sound, chasing the westing sun. A sharp archipelago juts up around us, islands rising like sharks' teeth from the ocean. I have spent the afternoon walking on sand the colour of strawberry Nesquik, red coral ground to a blushing dust. Now we leap homewards across the waves towards Komodo, where the *Silolona* is moored. The sunset traces the mountains vermilion, rising to lemon yellow in the heights. Behind us, all is ink-dark, the unpeopled islands drifting from view.

The necklace chain of Indonesia marks the meeting point of two oceans, the Indian and the Pacific. The currents here are wild and unpredictable, the Indonesian Throughflow, as the great surges of water are known, seething between the islands like water spat through teeth. The Pacific is up to a foot higher than the Indian, and contorts itself into vicious whirlpools and eddying flurries.

As we move over the face of the water, the tidal flux below reveals itself, readable in the weave of the dusklit waves. We pass Charybdis after Charybdis of plughole whirlpools, some 40 feet across and



Left: blue waters off Sabita Island. Right: the 'Silolona' in the channel between Pudar and Komodo



eerily spinning. Now the waters flatten into still mirrors, each holding the image of the sunset, the wash of pink and peach and violet skies. Long fringes of waves clatter and slap against each other, meeting and crashing apart like opposing armies.

Occasionally, the water just boils, great roiling bubbles rising up from the depths to burst on the surface. The moon begins to rise in the east, a yellow pearl lifting from the ocean. As we enter the harbour and glide towards the sleek floating castle that is the *Silolona*, flying foxes like dark albatrosses unhang themselves from the mangrove-trees on the shore and flock overhead in their thousands, outlining themselves against the golden moon. I can feel the breath of their wings in my hair.

The *La Galigo* is the 6,000-page epic poem of the Bugis, the wandering pirates of Indonesia. One story tells of a woman called Silolona, the lover of Atuf, king of the Tanimbar Islands, who died in the flower of her youth. Atuf swore he'd build a boat every bit as

The ship rose out of a myth, and it continues to weave its way through the islands

beautiful as his dead mistress. When the boat was finished, he sailed into the sun, threw his spear into the sky, shattering the heavens and creating the planets and constellations. Several centuries later, Patti Seery, a Midwesterner who'd read *Moby Dick* as a child and dreamed of the ocean life, decided to create her own *Silolona*. The first woman



Komodo National Park. Above: guests aboard the 'Silolona'. Opposite: the 'Si Datu Bua' and 'Silolona'

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Left: crew preparing to rig the 'Sitolona'. Right: the coast of Padar. Below: coral viceweed while snorkelling. Below right: the writer Alex Preston discovers a turtle. Bottom left: the schooners beside Sanggang Api Volcano



Left: Nasir, first mate of the 'Sitolona'. Below: a Komodo dragon



to build a traditional *phinisi* schooner, Seery worked with Konjo shipwrights from Ara, a small village in Sulawesi. She drew up the scantling herself after research in Dutch shipping archives, picked the ironwood for the keel in the jungles of Borneo, and built the boat in a mangrove swamp. The sails are dyed black with mud, the dye set with water-buffalo urine. The Konjo people use a hand-blade called a *cangkul* to carve their boats. There are no visible nails or nuts or screws; it is a sculpture as much as a ship. The five guest cabins of extraordinary luxury are decorated with artefacts that Seery has collected from around the archipelago. Above the breakfast bar hangs the *cangkul* that Nasir, the chief boatbuilder and now first mate on the ship, used to shape the boat's curves. Everything onboard is beautiful, but the beauty is never merely decorative. The ship rose out of a myth, and it continues to weave its way through the islands, keeping the spirit of Sitolona alive.

Early morning, the sun picks out lontar-palms on the high hills, like feathers in the caps of the mountains. I am on Komodo Island, looking for its eponymous dragons, one of the world's most ruthless predators. My guide carries a forked stick to fend off attacks. It looks absurdly flimsy. We walk through dense foliage, the calling of fire-birds in the custard-apple-trees above us. The path begins to climb and I start at rustling in the undergrowth. Two deer and a grubby-snouted wild pig look warily at me. 'They are friends,' my guide says, 'and soon they will be dinner for a dragon.'

We reach the crest of the hill and the landscape unfurls below, thick jungle with palm-trees reaching out of the greenery to bend and sway. It is a vision of a lost world; I half-expect an iguanodon to come lumbering towards me. Or a dragon. Sulphur-crested cockatoos fly

screaming from branch to branch below, stretching their wings and nodding their mohicans. Closer by, a black-naped oriole is an iridescent yellow flash against the leaves. Green imperial pigeons purr their coos around us as we make our way into the valley, and there, on the dust track, is a chalky smear of dragon scat.

Komodo dragons are the world's largest lizards, growing to three metres in length. They are a relic of the dinosaurs, envoys from the Pleistocene era, when monsters such as this roamed widely across the arid islands north of Australia. As we follow the white trail of dragon dung deeper in the jungle, my guide tells me that only a week ago, a local boy was killed by one of the beasts. 'It bit his stomach out,' he says. The dragons have no natural predators – the greatest threat to a young dragon is its own mother, which will often pick off a few of her children for breakfast. The dragons prey on deer, pigs and water buffalos, biting their victim and then relying on the 57 strains of virulent bacteria in their saliva to infect, and kill, the unfortunate animal. Death can take up to five days, during which the dragon, horrifyingly, follows its prey until it keels over. Scientists are yet to understand how the dragon's saliva, so fatal to anything it bites, doesn't kill the creature itself.

We are moving downhill again. Wild orchids and other gaudy air plants lace up the trunks of jackfruit-trees, string along branches

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Left: the 'Sitolona'. Right: fish and coral beneath the waves. Below: Patti Seery and Alex Preston onboard. Bottom: 'Si Datu Bua' anchored in Tebuk Slatwi Bay



spray. I stay there for hours, drinking and watching the luminous waters churn and lather below.

It's morning, I'm hungover, and I stumble from the air-conditioned darkness of my room and onto deck. Kadek hands me an orange juice, which I drain. I grab my mask and, moving too swiftly for misgivings,

dive into the turquoise water. I come up shouting, elated, and decide to swim the 300 yards to *Si Datu Bua*, *Sitolona's* sister boat.

With my mask on, I gaze into the world below, and see a river of bright-blue fish run past, glittering and unending. Clownfish and Moorish idols rise in iridescent clouds around great mountains of coral. By the halfway point, there are dolphins frolicking around me, darting beneath and then racing

I see a river of bright-blue fish run past, glittering and unending

where their heads nod in the breeze. We reach the shore, scrubby grass growing between palm-trees down to the rocky waterfront. A few isolated huts broil under corrugated roofs. Komodo was once a penal colony, and there is still the feel, here on the coast, of a cursed place, something malevolent dwelling just out of sight. We hurry back to our boat, the dragon's trail gone cold, the guide shaking his head.

It is as we are following the seafront, crossing a bridge over a dried-up riverbed, that we see the dragon. He moves low to the ground on well-thewed legs; his head swings from side to side as he runs, his tongue darting out to sup the air. The dragon has the over-inflated waddle of a professional bodybuilder and, as if aware of his spectators, he pauses and looks at us, barely 10 feet away, protected only by the flimsy stick. Behind him, there is a cartoon sign warning against approaching the lizards – 'Danger is my business,' the cardboard dragon says. The real one, scenting deer perhaps, shakes his head and pads away, his talons clacking on the dusty path.

It's 11 at night and I'm face down over the waves, which are radiant with phosphorescence, colours from a child's crayon set frothing in the foam below. The wind is up and the *Sitolona* is cutting through the high sea, curving down across the straits to Rinea. Under the pointed prow of the boat, a nest of black netting is tied, and I'm down there, suspended over the rushing water in my cross-hatch cyrie. Every so often, Kadek, one of the endless array of smiling staff aboard the boat, drops a cold Bintang down to me. When we ride up a particularly steep wave, my beer and I rise into the air for a moment, before crashing down into the salty

in front of me, making my weary crawl seem absurd and sluggish. I spot a leathery turtle burrowing into a tower of coral, his dorsal fins paddling, his old man's head coming up every now and again to inspect the teeming world. Finally, just before I reach the steps of *Si Datu Bua*, which have already been lowered into the water, I see the slinking shadow of a reef shark moving like an evil thought below. I hurry up the steps, to find that the boat's staff have cooked me pancakes while I've been swimming.

My final day and I'm sitting with Seery on deck. The full sails are billowing black as we race along the verdant coast of Flores towards the harbour town of Labuan Bajo. I sip a beer and look out across the teeming currents of the ocean, and see a whale plume, like an exclamation mark, leap from the roiling waves. □

The writer travelled with Original Driving (020 7978 0505; www.originaldriving.com), which offers tailor-made sailing and scuba-diving trips to Indonesia. A six-night itinerary around Komodo National Park onboard 'Sitolona' costs from £6,600 a person, including flights.

