

on the water

# SILOLONA — REVIVING THE BUGIS HERITAGE

photos JOHN EVERINGHAM/ART ASIA



A remarkable ship and a remarkable lady, writes **Justin Doebele** about the *Silolona* and her owner.

Singapore has a long maritime connection to Indonesia's famous Bugis sailors — not only in the name for Bugis Junction, but also through the Bugis community that lived on Sentosa Island for many years. The Bugis name lives on in the name 'boogey man' of children's stories.

Sadly, much of the Bugis heritage has been lost. Although *phinisi*, as the Bugis boats are called, still ply the waters of Indonesia, they have lost much of their connection to the proud black-sailed ships that once followed the monsoon winds across the spice routes of Asia. Most today are closer to barges, with flat bottoms and large motors, and with only a single small mast to qualify for an Indonesian tax break on 'sail' boats.

One remarkable American woman, Patti Seery, has set out to rescue the centuries-old boat building tradition of Sulawesi, the center of Indonesia's *phinisi* industry. She constructed a 49m *phinisi* using the traditional methods

and employing Konjo builders (the people of Konjo, related to the Bugis, used to build such boats, while the Bugis were the sailors).

The result was the launch in July 2004 of the *Silolona*, a luxury sailing yacht for charter that preserves much of the *phinisi* tradition but was modified to ensure that the craft meets modern standards of comfort and safety. The *Silolona*, for example, is certified by Lloyds of Germany to meet all its safety standards. It is equipped with five spacious bedrooms (complete with flush toilets and showers) and one small cabin for a lecturer or guide.

"You know you are in Asia and feel part of history when on the *Silolona*," says Seery, who came to Indonesia more than two decades ago with her oil industry husband. She fell in love with the place, learned Bahasa and started offering tours of the islands to tourists, including NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw.

The boat is designed to tap into an unmet need in



Asia for a luxury charter boat that is actually connected to the maritime history of the region rather than being another 'me-too' modern yacht. Seery says that the response has been so good, she would like to build a fleet of ten *phinisi*.

The *Silolona* recently visited Singapore for Boat Asia 2005 and immediately stood out among other modern yachts parked in Sentosa Cove. "We got immediate respect and recognition," says Seery. "There was tremendous interest in the boat." A number of shipping companies in Singapore have approached her to charter the boat for corporate events, and the PSA has already held one function on board. Seery is also planning short cruises of the nearby Riau Islands out of Singapore.

The *Silolona* has proven its worth in both leisure and emergency. The Amanwana, part of the Aman resorts group, now charters the *Silolona* to take Amanwana guests on a cruise to the Komodo Islands, to see the famous Komodo dragons. But more importantly for Seery, the *Silolona* helped

tsunami-hit Aceh. On December 26 last year, the *Silolona* was in Phuket, but fortunately in one of the few harbours untouched by the waves. At the request of some doctors, she sailed for Aceh within a few days and became one of the first to do a detailed survey of the tsunami-ravaged coastline, something that proved invaluable to relief agencies. When Seery showed her results at a summit of all the relief agencies in Aceh, she said, "I got a standing ovation."

The Aceh trip was also a chance for the *Silolona* to show its true mettle. Seery nervously took it around the tip of Aceh, a place where the waters of three oceans meet — notoriously rough seas even for large modern ships. Despite waves crashing high over the deck, the boat passed the test with flying colours. "The *Silolona* has turned out to be more capable than we ever expected," says Seery. Still, Seery would rather stick to more peaceful trips out of places like Phuket and Bali, and her quickly-filling charter log is proof that she can. 