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TROPHOMES *Tropicals*

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Indonesia

Return of the



Creator of the concept and ship, Patti Seery (above) sprinkles holy water during one of the ceremonies to initiate the boat in Bali. After half a lifetime chartering others' phinisi for cultural tours in Indonesian waters, she finally set sail on her own vessel, the ultimate re-creation of the ancient Bugis tradition.

Photography by John Everingham

*S*ilolona's ironwood keel measures 22 metres in length and 50 centimetres square. It's heavy enough that, when they dropped it on the flatbed of a six-wheeler in Kalimantan, the truck popped a wheelie. It has a rare, twisted grain that doesn't crack: not a single knot mars its entire length. As the boat took shape upon that extraordinary keel, perfect beyond the experience of any of the builders, legend and stories of magic grew along with her. For one thing, the Sulawesi builders and the local community around the yard in Bali where she was finished believe that *Silolona*, by way of her keel, is inhabited by the spirit of a beautiful woman.

And another spirit animates the vessel. Just as surely as the unique 22-metre ironwood keel constitutes *Silolona's* backbone, Patti Seery's enthusiasm and sense of purpose has been the driving force behind the enterprise as a whole. This 52-year-old American is known to her team of more than 120 master craftsmen as *ibu*, or Mother. "Right from the start," says Patti, "everyone concerned knew we were building something new, bringing an ancient tradition to the next level." Younger than her years, Patti is a locus of happy energy who has won the affection and respect of the remarkable team she assembled to build what may be the finest expression ever of the famous *phinisi*.

Patti first came to Indonesia from the States around 1981 with her husband, who was involved in oil refinery development. "This was before the more modern infrastructure was in place," Patti says, "and I travelled around the archipelago on a wide variety of local craft. I loved the associated history and lifestyle. People talk about Asia's Silk Road; this was the Spice Route. And, over the years, I watched the boats evolve."

Commonly known as the "Bugis boat", the distinctive *phinisi* has nevertheless traditionally been built by the Konjo, a related people also from Sulawesi; it has only been sailed by the Bugis. The *phinisi*s still constitute the largest commercial



The building of *S*ilolona revives a grand

Black Sail

By Collin Piprell



tradition, in even grander

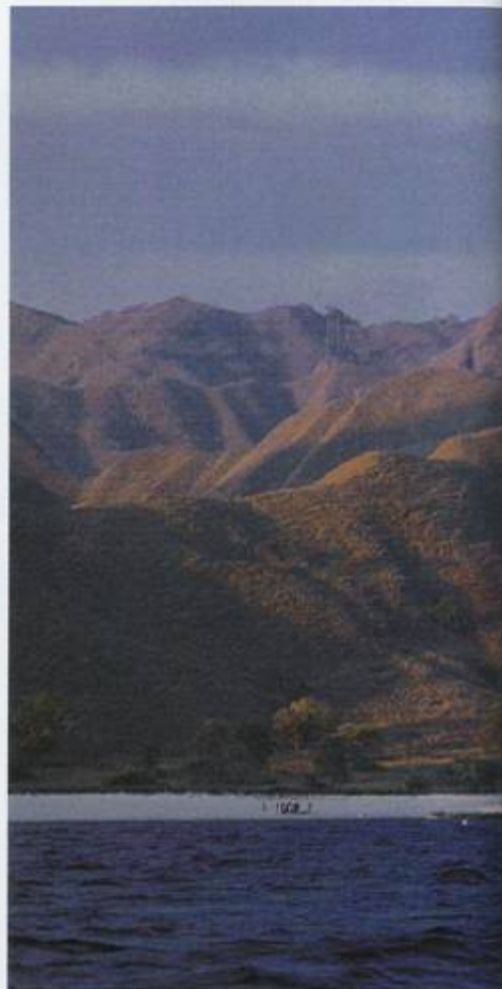


style



Patti Seery is a locus of happy energy who has she assembled to build what may be

To maintain the spirit of tradition, and peace of mind of the Indonesia crew, the calendar of traditional maritime rituals is played out aboard the vessel (right). The crew member pictured here is Nasir, foreman of the builders, who has decided to stay on as crew. The stern seating area is, like everything on this boat, spacious and comfortable (below). The boat's first season was chartered to the ultra-luxurious Aman group cruising the Komodo area of eastern Indonesia (right).



sailing fleet in the world (although they no longer work under sail, they're still classified as sailing vessels in law so long as they have at least one mast). They trade all around the world's largest archipelago - more than 17,000 islands - and, to compete with modern metal ships, the hull has become flattened, since, without sails, the deep, V-shaped hull ceased to be so necessary, while a flattened hull could carry lots more cargo. And the stern was chopped, again so the phinisi could carry more cargo (it couldn't store much in the point). Ultimately, however, competing with motor-driven ships has led to maladaptive evolution, forcing fatal design changes upon the phinisi. They've had to get bigger and bigger; at 60 by 12 metres, according to Patti, they are reaching the limits of their tensile strength. Even aside from these developments, the phinisi have never successfully made the adapta-

tion from sail to motor. In times past you sailed with nature - moving in one direction with the monsoon for months. Under power, you can force the vessel to proceed against wind and wave; in doing so, however, you subject her to unsustainable stresses. "Before building *Silolona*," Patti says, "I did a lot of research in boat graveyards." And her autopsies indicated the same cause of death in every case: vibration and lack of longitudinal strength.

Given these limitations, why build a phinisi? First of all, Patti was concerned with conserving traditional skills and a whole way of life. She also wanted to help conserve what has long been an intrinsic part of the archipelago's beauty. As Patti says, "It's the trade vessel that traversed the old Spice Route, the outer islands, the boat that held the archipelago together." *Silolona* is a continuation of a saga that spans millennia. And, to the extent

won the affection and respect of the remarkable team
the finest expression ever of the famous *phinisi*.



possible, Patti wanted to use traditional materials, tools, methods and design. Thus, *Silolona* has readopted the traditional hull shape, including pointed bow and stern. None of the other phinisi in service have 33-metre masts anymore, but *Silolona* sports two of them. Ironwood masts. The whole boat is ironwood, except for the teak trim and some *lengua*, a luminous red wood with a pleasing grain.

That much was traditional enough. But Patti also wanted a boat that would serve as an economical, safe and comfortable modern charter vessel. This demanded modifications. Indeed, both Konjo builders and Bugis sailors believe that *Silolona* is the greatest innovation since Portuguese influences led them to re-rig their boats back in the 1500s. With her V-shaped hull and anti-vibration measures, she's strong and stable enough to range the world.

For example, more than 10,000 galvanized

bolts provide reinforcement for as many as 30,000 wooden pegs, reducing vibration and increasing longitudinal hull strength. Besides using best-quality timbers of the maximum possible length, Lloyd's requirements have been observed in the proximity of structural joints, internal bilge and deck stringers, and watertight bulkheads. Long, heavy-duty engine girder timbers counter the additional stresses imposed by the machinery. "And," says Patti, "I spent more than US\$30,000 to install the Cadillac of flexible engine and coupling mounts, although this is ultimately an economy, since the reduced vibration extends the life of the boat." Other anti-vibration measures include flexible mounts for all motors, including those for the generators and pumps.

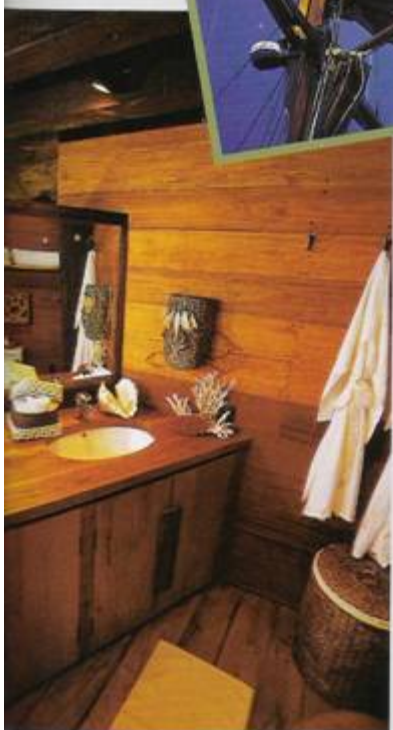
In addition, *Silolona* minimizes noise and exhaust. "You want to be comfortable, safe and," as Patti says, "able to hear the water and the birds."



First she planned to line the interiors with teak, but beams convinced her to leave



A man in the rigging gives an idea of the proportions of this vessel (left). A glimpse of a bathroom and breakfast on the foredeck show some of the comforts guests enjoy (below, left) while the spaciousness of the suites is only partially captured here (right).



[W]e have also made use of the traditional "seven sail schooner" [phinisi], along with traditional rigging methods wherever possible. Significant refinements have been made to the standing rigging in order to comply with Lloyd's, including the use of longer lasting rigging wire and chain plates to attach the rigging to the hull. The running rigging has also been upgraded, including modern sail cloth and Dacron line. These refinements will improve safety and performance, make the rig easier to handle, and will increase the life span of the rig.

Michael Kasten, from "A 36 Meter Indonesian Pinisi",
www.kastenmarine.com/phinisi.htm

Patti has worked in close collaboration with marine architect Michael Kasten: "He's made an enormous contribution to *Silolona*. The best thing about Michael, for me, is that he listens to the needs

of the client. Secondly, he's been able to blend East and West - he's had nothing but the greatest enthusiasm for the project, and, if anything, he over-researches. His fascination with the challenges involved has contributed to a huge body of knowledge that he can draw on. He's very practical, detail-minded, and he has a very refined aesthetic sensibility."

Patti herself is an architect. She has never practised architecture professionally, but she has done a lot of interior design. "I'd pick pieces of Indonesian art and send it to clients. 'Choose what you like,' I'd tell them, and then I'd design the entire house interior around what they selected. I always start from art. Until I have the palette. I don't have the energy, the feel of it." With regard to *Silolona*, "until I found the artwork for the lounge, I couldn't choose the colours; I couldn't do anything. But when I saw

finally the rustic beauty of the rough-hewn ironwood many structural elements open.



the red 'magic wood', as I call it, or *lengua*, I was inspired; I started with that, but made it more 'Bugis.' And the entire palette for the interior design derives from the black, reds and gold of an antique painted wooden panel from a Balinese royal temple. The furnishings are inspired by a rough old serving platter carved from a single block of wood, while the dinnerware and accessories were inspired by the bright colours of a carved and painted Bugis door panel.

Patti describes *Silolona's* interior as 'rustic' in style. The natural beauty of the timber and the quality of the work is such that, where Patti had first planned to cover the interior with teak, she decided instead to leave the structure of the ceilings and walls open wherever she could. The hull's exterior, meanwhile, was hand-sanded with a three-inch-diameter sander, day after day - an act of love - till

you couldn't see the joints; some observers thought it was metal. Then it was painted with 20 layers of base and a cream-coloured final coat, which nicely sets off the black sails (traditionally they were mud-dyed black).

Filled with pride at her accomplishment, Patti says, "This entire project has been the culmination of a whole lot of threads in my life - my training in architecture; my interest in traditional societies and their arts; and, ever since sixth grade, when I read *Moby-Dick*, my desire to captain a whaling vessel. I guess this is the closest I'll come. Patti has a second academic degree, an MA in Southeast Asian textiles from an Indian university, and she has combed the remotest parts of the Indonesian archipelago, over the years, pursuing her interest in the huge variety of indigenous textiles. "Cultural conservation is a big issue for me."



"I did a lot of research in boat graveyards,"
cause of death in every case: vibration



So is conservation of the natural environment. "As opposed to commercial clear-cutting, in Kalimantan we dealt with community owners of individual trees, paying the villagers directly." They bought the tree for the keel from a village, after months of searching, after other candidate trees fell short of the ideal and were turned into lesser timbers for the boat. (They didn't know that they'd found the keel until the tree had been felled and cut and they saw the unusual grain.) The teak trim, on the other hand, Patti collected over some years from old Dutch warehouses slated for demolition.

Given the design costs, inbuilt safety factors, and quality of materials, *Silolona*, cost at least six times more than other phinisis of similar size that have been built for charter. But she's been five to eight times less expensive than more conventional yachts of a similar size built in the West. ("Of course I

haven't been paid in three years," Patti adds, "which explains part of it.") Maintenance would be expensive with a Western crew, but here, she says, they can afford to have a very competent crew look after it. Everything was chosen with ease of maintenance and availability of spare parts in mind.

Silolona was launched 10 July 2004. Most of the early clients were guests from Aman resorts around tropical Asia on three- to five-day trips to Komodo National Park, Patti's specialty being culture and adventure programmes. One early passenger on the Komodo trip was Amanwana guest David Salmon. A long-time art and antique dealer who has spent 30 years globe-trotting, he's taken many boat trips to all sorts of remote areas of Asia, and had this to say about *Silolona*: "It's fantastic. Definitely the best boat my wife Sara and I have ever been on, by far. Patti has superb taste, and has done a fabulous job

Patti says. Her autopsies indicated the same and lack of longitudinal strength.



The guests enjoy the finest of comforts, while the crew pull ropes and pack away sails (far left & right). The upper and lower fore-decks are sweeping (left), offering get-aways and privacy to just 10 guests on normal cruises.

with this boat. There's really nothing else like it." Longer term, cruises will range the archipelago generally north and east of Bali.

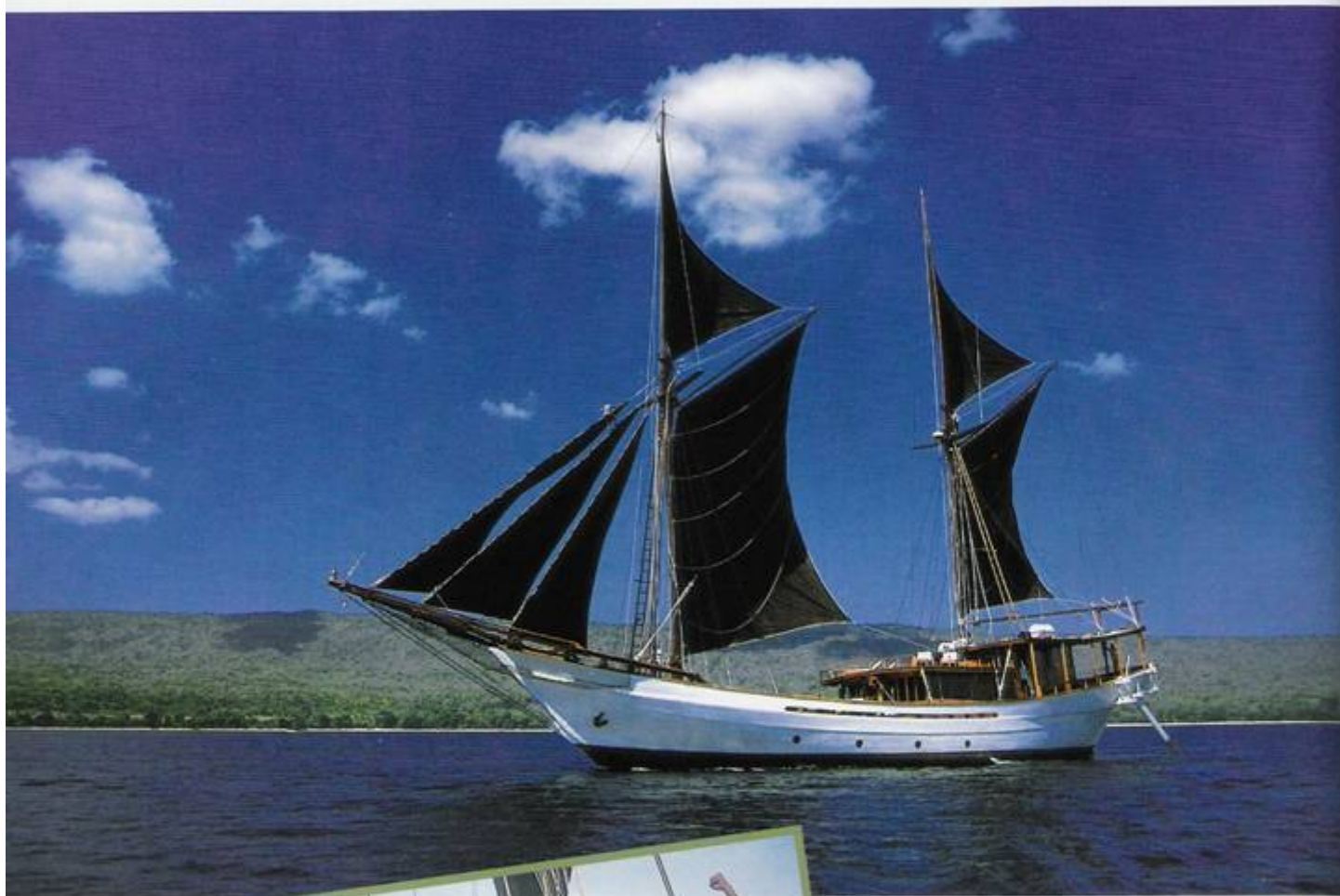
However pleased Patti and her team are with *Silolona*, they plan to do things differently next time. And there is to be a next time. Patti says she now has the team and processes to do world-class design and construction to specs'. "My next boat will be a bit smaller and not quite as sturdy as this one, which is designed for any sea in the world. With this first boat, I wanted to make a point about what the phinisi could really be. It's actually over-designed - it'll still be around for a couple of hundred years. But you should build a boat that's appropriate to the area where she'll be sailed. For Southeast Asian waters, you don't need a boat this big and strong that incorporates this much wood."

It's also an issue of costs. Still, she says, "I'm not

doing this to make money on a tourist boat. I'm far more interested in the history and culture involved. I'm interested to know whether these boats can become commercially viable again. Dozens of double-masted schooners are working successfully in Turkey, after all. As far as I'm concerned, now this boat doesn't really belong to me - it belongs to my team almost as much. These guys have done incredible things for me. They haven't made a lot of money, but they've never stopped giving. They're also in it for the concept and the pride.

"I'd like to start designing boats - private yachts, whatever - for the Southeast Asian market. I love this whole crazy process. I've been thinking of building a fleet of 10 on this prototype, and then have them managed by somebody like Aman Cruises. It would be similar to the rental tropical villa concept, except with boats."

"An important part of my job has been to provide the bridge between the two technologies and the two cultures."



During its first-ever fully-rigged sail in July 2004, the boat presented a sight of the distinctly traditional kind (top). Patti and many of her crew pose and celebrate following the success of the boat's first, hitch-free hoisting of the sails.

Given that *Silolona* is such a lovely vessel, and given that the design is such a workable one, isn't Patti afraid of stiff competition to follow? "I'm really, really hoping for copycats," she replies. "This is the way to go for Indonesia and for our visitors. Not the 700-passenger cruise liners. And we'll get the

acknowledgement that these people are capable of building exceptional craft to very high standards."

Patti and her husband left Indonesia in 1990 to return to the USA. For the past year and a half, they've been based in Arizona, although Patti says she's only been there a couple of months in all that time. They have two children back in the States. Tresno, who's 20, loves sailing and diving; he wants to become a marine engineer. Kerrie, who's 23, is in education - outdoor adventure programmes, one of the things Patti is doing here in Indonesia. Patti herself expects to spend the rest of her life in both Asia and America.

"My family's in the States, but my heart and soul lie here in Indonesia." And, for the past three years or more, her heart and soul have provided the vital spark for *Silolona*; promise of new life for the phinisi.

For more detailed specifications of *Silolona* please turn to page 95.