



TIGER BLUE

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THIS 34 METRE PHINISI SCHOONER WAS HAND BUILT ON AN INDONESIAN BEACH BY LOCAL CRAFTSMEN USING HONED SKILLS AND ANCIENT TECHNIQUES. MOD CONS HAVE BEEN ADDED BUT SHE REMAINS TRUE TO THE TENET OF BEAUTY THROUGH SIMPLICITY, AND OFFERS A UNIQUE CHARTER EXPERIENCE FOR THOSE SEEKING ADVENTURE

Soaring up from the depths after a refreshing leap from *Tiger Blue's* aft deck, one breaks the surface to be confronted by a pair of desiccated goat's legs dangling under the massive teak bathing platform.

In the ordinary course of a tropical cruise, this might strike an unsettling note. But *Tiger Blue* offers little that is ordinary and much that takes the Western traveller into a new world of experience – a

world of 17,500 islands populated by dragons and volcanoes, of ancient landscapes, deserted anchorages, spicy cuisine and unfamiliar customs and rituals.

Preconceptions of Indonesia conjure up images of teeming cities wreathed in an equatorial haze of humidity and fumes, a claustrophobic bedlam of too much humanity crammed into too little space. In the cities that certainly holds true. A voyage on *Tiger Blue*, however, reveals

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Tiger Blue's owners went back to basics with their authentic Indonesian sailing vessel and tasked local craftsmen with the tricky job of building without a blueprint. Locally sourced materials were used throughout



an entirely different country of vast empty spaces, pristine waters, and abundant wildlife both in the sea and ashore. The goat's legs dangling from *Tiger Blue's* stern are part of that suspension of stereotype and relate to the customs and rituals that attend the launching of a new vessel in Indonesia.

Hand built of teak and ironwood by Bugis craftsmen on a beach in South Sulawesi, *Tiger Blue* reveals lines that reach far back in time. The profile arcs from a high prow, down through a low waist and then back up to a high stern, topped by a substantial deckhouse. Two stout masts of solid teak with gaffs support a low-aspect sail plan.

Although the look is distinctly Asian, it has echoes of the early ships that for 300 years from the 16th century braved enormous voyages from Europe in search of nutmeg, pepper, cloves and other spices that were often more precious than gold. These Phinisi schooners are based on trading vessels that have been built in these waters for centuries.

'They are strong, honest boats built with hand tools in a manner largely unchanged for hundreds of years,' says *Tiger Blue* co-owner David Wilkinson. 'The boatbuilders mainly use adzes and wooden mallets and everything is measured by eye. You give them a basic set of dimensions and they get on with it.'

The *Tiger Blue* project grew out of a number of planets aligning at an opportune time. Wilkinson is a third-generation Malaysian planter with a keen eye for design and architecture. With his wife, Rebecca, a noted textile designer and artist, they have undertaken a number of ambitious land-based projects, including a resort called Tiger Rock on the island of Pangkor and a major restoration of a merchant house in Penang called China Tiger. In all their projects, they pursue an ethos of low environmental impact, respect for local traditions and use of sustainable, often recycled, materials.

Several years ago, the Wilkinsons and their three children travelled to Indonesia on an adventure holiday with long-standing friend Nigel Foster, a UK-based restaurateur and entrepreneur, and his similarly aged family. With energetic teenagers keen on action and a general interest in nature and the outdoors, the two families chartered a Phinisi run by Hollander Wouter van den Houten.

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While retaining the simplicity of the structure, it was important to add modern comforts and conveniences, including a library and internet access, so the vessel would appeal to the discerning charter market. Interior decoration is by owner Rebecca Duckett-Wilkinson, an artist by trade. All cabins are air-conditioned and have en suite facilities, and there is room for 10 guests or a family group of up to 14



Van den Houten had settled in Indonesia after exchanging a successful career in corporate marketing for a life of footloose adventure. Determined to prolong his newfound freedom, he joined forces with a fellow Hollander, Paul Fransz. Together they went in search of a boat and on the beach of the famous boatbuilding village of Tanaberuh found a partially completed hull. They bought it, finished it, named it *Majestic* and ventured around the islands, exploring and diving.

'Eventually, we recognised we had a product that we could market to tourists,' says van den Houten, 'so we began a charter operation.'

The Wilkinson-Foster entourage loved their time on *Majestic*. 'We had such a fun holiday,' says Wilkinson. 'I had been wanting to build a boat myself for a long time, so that trip gave us an opportunity to see if the family would enjoy it and to look at the opportunities.' After seven years, van den Houten had amassed a lot of local knowledge and contacts and, just as important, had outgrown his existing boat. He was ready for a change.

Extensive discussions led to a detailed specification for a new boat, primarily retaining the traditional shape and lines of a Phinisi schooner, but adding the comforts and conveniences of Western expectations in the form of air-conditioned cabins, modern bathrooms with plenty of water for showers, extensive refrigeration and an efficient galley. Wilkinson's architectural skills have been applied to space planning, detailing and the general accommodations. Rebecca Duckett-Wilkinson's talents for design and colour are utilised in the décor and van den Houten supervised the build and now runs the day-to-day operation.

'Once we had decided this was the course we wanted to adopt, Wouter and I spent quite a lot of time looking at other boats to refine our ideas,' says Wilkinson. 'Some had much higher superstructures, which I felt lost some romance. We wanted to feel we were more in touch with the sea, so we kept the freeboard lower to retain that sense of connection. We spent a lot of time working out all the details.'

Once the details and dimensions had been established, master boatbuilder Haji Abdullah of Tanaberuh was contracted to build a vessel 34 metres long with a 7.5 metre beam and a three metre draft. The below deck accommodations include two king-size cabins, one cabin with two bunks and one family room with a king-size bed and two large beds, all with air-conditioning and en suites.

The superstructure comprises a wheelhouse, with the galley behind and an aft saloon at the stern. This is a delightful space for watching films, playing games or lounging with a book. If there is breeze, the large side windows and rear-facing bifold doors can be opened, or, if the heat is oppressive, it can all be closed and air-conditioned.

Forward of the superstructure across the mid-section and shaded by a permanent awning is a large dining table with plenty of beds for outdoor sleeping, or just lounging with a book. Stairs lead up to the roof of the superstructure, where more deck loungers are located for sun-worshippers, or for gazing at the night sky. A crane at the aft end of the

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superstructure roof is for launching and retrieving the large sports tender and crew tender.

The contract with Haji Abdullah was signed in December 2006. Renewable plantation teak was selected and the raw logs transported to the build site on the beach, where the process began with milling the timber and laying the ironwood keel – and with it, the first ceremony. This involved a feast, a priest making incantations and sprinkling drops of blood from the nicked comb of a cockerel, followed by the boatbuilder cutting a chunk of timber off the keel and throwing it into the sea as an offering.

‘The building takes place on this beach, which is about 2km long,’ explains van den Houten. ‘The boats are lined up side by side, stretching right along the beach with the builders milling timber and hammering away. The construction is unusual in that they start with the keel and a few key ribs. Then they begin planking from the keel up, forcing the planks into shape with wedges and tackle systems. Only after the outer planking is in place do they fit the intermediate ribs, which are huge: 15cm by 15cm timbers set at 40cm stations. They do not care about weight; they admire strength. Everything is done by eye, but it is amazing how accurate it is. Every now and then they check to make sure the hull is symmetrical and use jacks and tackle systems to correct any misalignment.’

In six months, the hull, deck and the framing of the superstructure was complete and *Tiger Blue* was ready to be launched. Again, this is an age-old process, involving two teams of men hand hauling the yacht down wooden ways, smeared with grease. It took two weeks of hauling day after day to get the hull afloat. This major milestone is once again marked by a ceremonial feast, with a goat slaughtered inside the engine room and its hind legs suspended from the hull.

Once afloat, the vessel was towed to a dock, where the installation of all the systems, machinery and interior fit-out was completed a year later. For the interior, a decision could have been made to go for a superyacht-style finish, but that would not have fitted the general idiom of the boat, or its use. Instead, the guest suites retain the rustic finish and appearance of the rest of the vessel, with limewash walls, flourishes of folk art here and there and simple joinery. Function rules over form, which is best illustrated by the marble. There may be no marble bathrooms, but there is plenty of marble on board – nearly five tonnes of it, in fact – offcuts from a local quarry used as ballast.

‘It is unpretentious but comfortable,’ says Wilkinson. ‘We decided to concentrate on providing good amenities with air-conditioned suites, privacy, en suites and good food and service: the things that really matter.’ With eight Indonesian crew on board, full and attentive service is provided and van den Houten directs the daily activities with friendly enthusiasm. He is a dive master with more than 2,000 dives to his credit and *Tiger Blue* is fully equipped with compressors and all the relevant gear. Anything from gentle snorkelling over bright coral gardens to



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Cruising in the Indonesian archipelago offers spectacular scenery, dive sites and diverse wildlife, including sperm whales and Komodo dragons. A full range of water toys means the promise of an adventure never goes unfulfilled



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Two couples' dream to create a unique holiday experience for their families proves the simplest ideas can often have the most satisfying results



energetic hunts for excellent edible fish is on hand – and what better accompaniment to a tropical sunset at the end of an action-packed day than fresh sashimi with a glass of wine?

Watersports, kayaking, surfing, hiking – there is no shortage of action, nor of fascinating wilderness to explore. This, perhaps, is the greatest surprise of Indonesia: the vast areas of unspoiled landscape and wildlife. Stretching across three time zones at the crossroads between the Pacific and Indian oceans, Indonesia is made up of thousands of islands, many volcanoes and a huge diversity of fauna and flora. One of the most bio-diverse countries on earth, some 17 percent of all the world's plant and animal species are found here.

The landscape varies from dry savannah to dense jungle, interspersed with neat fishing villages and, in the more fertile regions, terraces of bright green rice paddies. East of Bali is the famous Komodo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and home to the prehistoric Komodo dragons. These giant lizards can grow to three metres and 90kg. They are voracious carnivores that can eat a goat or deer at a single sitting and are not averse to attacking people. In early 2009, there were three known attacks, one of which resulted in the death of a fruit-picker.

Guided walks through the park are not to be missed. Pressure of urbanisation and development is threatening some of these areas and *Tiger Blue* supports the work of Conservation International, which is focused on creating a series of ecologically interconnected protected zones. Exploring this fascinating and extensive archipelago is unquestionably best achieved on the water and *Tiger Blue* provides an excellent platform for doing so. The winds in these equatorial zones of South East Asia are often very light, making sailing a rare proposition, so the tan sails are not often deployed.

That is not to say navigating these waters is without challenge. Alfred Russel Wallace, a 19th century scientist and social anthropologist, whose work rivaled Darwin and Huxley, travelled extensively through the Malay Archipelago. He observed the capricious nature of the sea, with violent currents so unpredictable and powerful 'that vessels

preparing to anchor in the bay are sometimes suddenly swept away into the straits and are not able to get back again for a fortnight'.

'You have to be very watchful in the straits,' agrees van den Houten. 'The currents can run at up to 10 knots. One minute it can be perfectly calm, the next minute you can be spun around in a whirlpool like a toy. It teaches you to respect the power of the ocean.'

Seas that look benign but under cloudless skies suddenly leap up and sweep vessels miles out to sea seem somehow appropriate – it is all part of the sense of mystery and surprise that makes a cruise in these islands such a memorable experience.

• Aside from offering charters, the Tiger Blue principals also offer a boatbuilding service. For more information, visit www.tigerblue.info 📍

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