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Meet Sammi and Kallum

This couple is the inspiration behind our latest campaign. Their Antipodean travel, connection, and true love story showcases the powerful connection of Kiwis and Aussies. Learn more about their story inside.

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OCTOBER 29, 2024



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CONTENTS

- 6** **MILES OF SMILES**
Malaysia's been designed for families
- 8** **BEAST FROM THE EAST**
On the prowl for wildlife in the Komodo Islands
- 13** **TASTE-TEST BANGKOK**
Thai cuisine is sizzling hot
- 16** **VIETNAM VENTURE**
Take a tour to fit in all its delights
- 18** **ASEAN AS 1-2-3**
India's Golden Triangle is perfect for first-timers
- 24** **CAMBODIA'S QUIRKY CUISINE**
Taste outside your comfort zone
- 27** **PARADISE FOUND**
Put Sri Lanka at the top of your wish list
- 31** **SINGAPORE ON A SHOESTRING**
No money? No problem



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Southeast Asia: Indonesia »

Face to face with a *Beast from the East*

With a group of friends, Erik Trinidad cruises around Indonesia's Komodo Islands on a classic, but modernised schooner, on the prowl for wildlife



The Komodo Islands' Pink Beach gets its colour from red coral fragments mixed with white sand; below, Komodo dragons can grow up to 3m in length and weigh more than 70kg. Photos / 123rf



When I accepted an invitation to be a part of my friend's trip on a luxury charter yacht cruise around Indonesia's Komodo Islands, I was excited that I might encounter the endangered giant lizards that are eponymous with the region.

With Komodo dragons on my mind, I'd somehow forgotten that Mother Nature has birthed many other creatures — and it wasn't long before some made their appearance. During our first sunset at sea, when our yacht anchored off the coast of Kalong Island, we saw not only our awe-inspiring star descending below the horizon but also the astonishing parade of fruit bats soaring above, ready to start their night.

Gliding in the orange hues of twilight, they flew high enough above us not to conjure up any feelings of supernatural dread, but rather, an appreciation for the wild, natural world.

As the nocturnal creatures began hunting for breakfast, I couldn't help but realise that we observed this spectacle of nature from the comfort of the KLM Celestia, just as we were about to enjoy a meal ourselves — no hunting required — and that perhaps our admiration for these wild fruit bats might not have been as magical if we hadn't been observing them from the luxury of a yacht.



Checklist

KOMODO ISLANDS

GETTING THERE

Fly from Auckland to Bali with one stopover in about 11 hours 30 minutes, or fly from Auckland to Jakarta in 16 hours 30 minutes with one stopover. Cruises going to the Komodo Islands typically start from Labuan Bajo on Flores Island, an easy domestic flight from either Jakarta or Bali international airports. However, since Celestia cruises are bespoke, some guests have journeyed to the Komodo archipelago and Labuan Bajo by sea from Bali's Serangan harbour.

DETAILS

When to go: It's best to go to the Komodo Islands in the dry season, April to October.

Visas: New Zealand passport holders can get a visa on arrival, which is valid for 30 days.

To charter Celestia for groups of up to 14 people, visit celestiacruises.com

Indonesia.travel

Komodo National Park has been a Unesco World Heritage Site since 1991; above, fruit bats, also known as flying foxes, can have wingspans of up to 1.5m. Photos / Farjaddin Mudzakir, Unsplash, i23if



Celestia is a classic but modernised phinisi — a traditional Indonesian schooner — that made its maiden voyage in June 2023 and has since brought small charter groups on tours of the Komodo Islands, the Maluku Islands, Raja Ampa and other destinations around the archipelagic nation. Celestia is the result of a pandemic times family project by Indonesian siblings Jason Tabalujan and Jasmine Chong, who commissioned the construction of the 45-metre vessel, combining old, Unesco-recognised boat-building techniques, new technologies, and modern amenities across its seven staterooms and common areas. It's aesthetically held together by a clean and elegant interior design tastefully executed by Jasmine Chong, who works as a fashion designer in New York City.

Celestia prides itself on the "art of being with nature, at sea" while also being proudly Indonesian-owned and operated amidst many foreign-owned charter yachts.

By the third day of our five-day/four-night authentically Indonesian sea voyage, I'd still not yet encountered a Komodo dragon, and I wondered if that was due to their dwindling population. However, I was still enthralled by other creatures, particularly those under water. Celestia is fully equipped with scuba equipment, and with the dive crew I marvelled at the multitude of colourful tropical fish, curious

moray eels, a peacock mantis shrimp, and two magnificent giant manta rays gracefully soaring right beside us while traversing a bay.

Above all, my mind was blown by a chameleon-like cuttlefish that first came into sight with its tentacles upright, appearing like dark staghorn coral, but then magically colour- and shape-shifted back to normal right before my eyes when swimming away.

As enthralling as scuba diving can be, it certainly takes its toll on the body — but that wasn't anything the onboard masseuse couldn't knead away in a massage therapy session. However, one organ still needed attention: my stomach, which was easily satisfied by Celestia's galley staff, under direction of Indonesian Executive Chef Wayan Kresna Yasa.

Over the five days, they prepared and served food ranging from Western dishes to classic Indonesian fare, including my local favourites beef rendang, tempeh lodeh (coconut milk-based veg stew), and gado gado (veg with tofu and fried peanuts) — all given a spicy kick with scratch-made sambal (spicy chili sauce).

Meals fuelled our bodies for water sports around the ship, and the several landings we made around the Komodo archipelago.

For a change of scenery one morning, we laid out to relax on the rose-hued sands of Pink Beach. One afternoon, we hiked up the steps to one of

the peak summits of Padar Island for another awe-inspiring sunset. Another day we strolled on the sandbar of Taka Makassar, which appears only at low tide.

We landed on a private island for a friend's birthday dinner party, perfectly executed by Celestia's crew with great food and live music. And because we were in the Komodos, we made an obligatory landing on Rinca Island, home of the main visitor centre for Komodo National Park, where I finally had an encounter with the indigenous dragons that had captivated me since before the cruise began.

A Unesco World Heritage Site since 1991, Komodo National Park is home to the majority of the remaining 3000 of the world's largest living, albeit endangered, lizards. With the guidance of a few park rangers, we sought them in their natural environment, and it wasn't long before one sauntered into our midst. Soon, we encountered a few more. If those fortuitous encounters weren't enough to gratify me, what followed was yet another scene of raw nature: a male mounted a female in a mating ritual, right before our eyes.

The sight of an endangered species procreating for its survival was another magical moment from Mother Nature. From here, we departed the wild to continue sailing in the lap of comfort and style, Celestia pampering us until the last sunset.