

A black and white portrait of Lea Salonga. She is wearing a dark, textured, belted jacket over a dark top with a white geometric pattern. Her hair is short and styled. The background is a dark, textured wall.

Tatlo

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LEA SALONGA



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SAILING FOR THE STARS

Hopping around the Indonesian archipelago on board the Celestia, a *phinisi*-style yacht, is the perfect way to capture the magic of the region *By Coco Marett*



Food is a critical part aboard the Celestia
Opposite page: View from the deck

The Indonesian archipelago is home to numerous fascinating stories, from tales of pirates to its role as the historical epicentre of the global spice trade. In recent years, more and more people have been curious to discover the country's magic—and increasingly, they are doing so by boat, for an authentic experience that echoes the region's past.

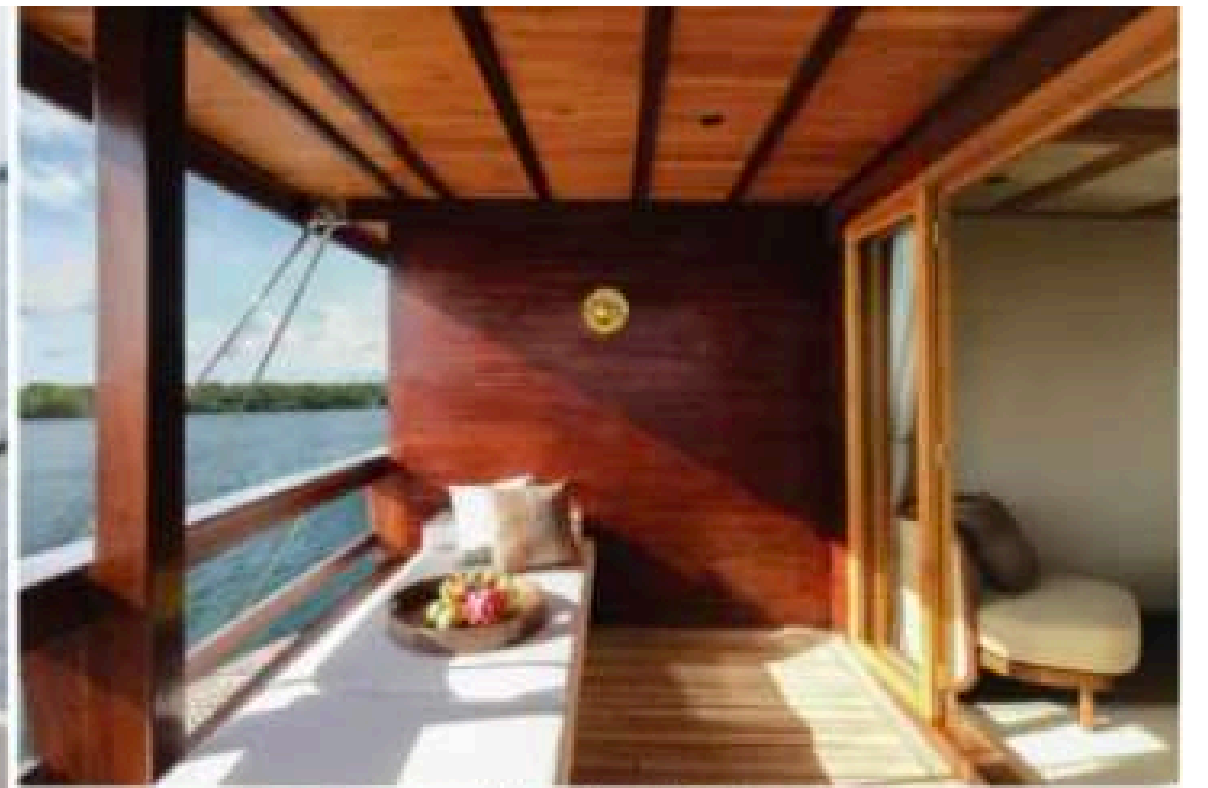
Enter brother-sister duo Jason Tabalujan and Jasmine Chong, who in 2023 launched the Celestia: a gorgeous wooden yacht built for private charters, on which guests can sail around the archipelago, embracing the slow life on board while immersing themselves in Indonesia's rich history, earthy design sensibilities and diverse cuisine.

The cruise takes guests island-hopping, allowing them to take in scenic hikes that lead to breathtaking vistas of the islands and to discover the archipelago's countless beaches, where the colours shift from white to black volcanic sand and dreamy pink from the coral. "In the Spice Islands [the Malukus], you can visit 400-year-old Dutch forts," says Tabalujan. "One of the activities we offer is a private seafood barbecue next to the cannons." You can also visit the Moyo Islands where, following a leisurely hike into the jungle, you'll find the multilayered Mata Jitu waterfall that Princess Diana visited in the Nineties.

For Chong and Tabalujan, the Celestia isn't just business—it's personal. The pair lost a number of family members to Covid; once the pandemic was over, they decided to create a "floating villa", a vessel where, as the world had opened up again, multiple generations of their family—or paying guests—could come together to explore the beautiful region. "It all started with this idea of a bucket-list adventure: sailing a boat in Indonesia," says Tabalujan.

Every element of the boat is distinctly Indonesian, starting with the design: it is built in the style of traditional





Clockwise, from left: An on-board bedroom; The dining area; Places to chill, delicious dishes; Wayan Kresna Yasa Opposite page: The Celestia in all its glory



Indonesian *phinisi*. “[The] vessel is unique—it’s not coming off an assembly line; it’s coming from the beaches of Indonesia, where they’re built by hand by boatmakers who have been making these vessels for five generations,” says Tabalujan, adding that the *Celestia* was built on the island of Sulawesi, where the siblings’ grandparents are originally from.

The vessel’s design pays homage to the centuries-old *phinisi* boatbuilding tradition, recognised by Unesco’s Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and uses sustainably sourced ironwood and teak. “We have a great relationship with the builders,” says Tabalujan. “In fact, we hired two of them as permanent crew—after all, they built the boat and know it better than anybody else.” While respecting these traditions, the yacht also integrates modern luxury and features a steel-reinforced wooden hull and interiors by acclaimed designer

Deirdre Renniers—who is also behind the design of the *Amandira*, the *phinisi* owned by Aman Hotels & Resorts that sails the same waters as the *Celestia*.

The aesthetic is inviting, understated elegance, incorporating hand-woven rattan panelling from Java, tropical textiles and the wood’s natural appearance. “A wooden boat is a wooden boat. We didn’t want to paint the inside white to attempt to make it look like something it isn’t,” says Chong. “We wanted the wood to shine because that’s where you see this impeccable craftsmanship. Instead, we complemented that with subtle design

elements, like duck egg blue Balinese tiles that we had custom made. We didn’t want the interiors to compete with the surroundings, because nothing can compare to the kaleidoscope of colours at sunset and mountain landscapes.”

The duo also worked with Indonesian furniture designers, such as Jakarta-based Alvin T. “It was important for us to tap into Indonesian craftsmanship at all levels—all the way down to the food,” says Chong. “In Indonesia, food and feeding people are a love language.”

Their search for the ideal on-board chef came to a very happy end when they met Wayan Kresna Yasa. After a friend connected them, the siblings flew to Bali to meet him. “Instantly, we knew it was a perfect match,” says Chong. “He grew up in Nusa Penida [an island close to Bali], was comfortable on a boat and knew how to fish. He was also well versed in preparing incredible food globally.” The chef trained in Chicago, then worked

in award-winning restaurants there and in New York before returning to Indonesia.

From wild-caught tuna with *sambal matah* to tamarind duck confit and pandan panna cotta, his dishes celebrate indigenous ingredients with fine-dining finesse—crafted daily based on the catch, the island and the story he wants to tell. “Wayan has this unique point of view of really knowing the ingredients he works with, especially the spices,” says Chong. “And culturally, he knows how to navigate relationships with local farmers and fishermen. That is the heart of the dining on the *Celestia*.”

Some of Chong’s personal favourite dishes by Wayan include *bubur ayam*, an Indonesian-style congee in a turmeric broth with chicken—“It’s so comforting and such a nice way to start the day,” she says—and *dabu dabu* scallops, sautéed in a kind of Indonesian salsa.



The crew help out in the kitchen too. “Our crew come from all over Indonesia and they all bring a diversity of flavours and approaches when it comes to hospitality, and especially when it comes to food,” says Chong. “Sometimes we’ll have a Balinese sambal next to a Manadonese sambal [from Manado, Sulawesi], and they are very different. That’s something that sets us apart: these layers of intimate knowledge of the flavours of the archipelago.”

Each dinner on board is staged under the stars, whether the boat is anchored near Raja Ampat, Komodo or the Spice Islands. And if somehow the food isn’t heavenly enough, the opportunity to stargaze as you eat surely will be. “In the night sky, with no light pollution, you look up and you see what looks like a dome covered in thousands of stars. You’ll even see shooting stars,” says Tabalujan. “That magical scene is how we decided on the boat’s name, *Celestia*.”