



# AN ANCIENT CRAFT

Why the traditional boatbuilding techniques of the Buginese people in Sumbawa continue to thrive

**I**t's all in here," says Dafrin, tapping his head. We're in the village of Wera on Indonesia's Sumbawa island, home to the seafaring Buginese who build their wooden ships entirely by hand. I've just asked the boatbuilder how he and his people construct colossal sea vessels without any blueprints to speak of. In fact, I've just disembarked from one such ship – a phinisi schooner built in this very same village.

A quiet and reflective man, Dafrin wears a hint of a smile. To

**BELOW:**  
THE OMBAK  
PUTIH, A PHINISI  
SCHOONER, IN ITS  
FULL GLORY

him, my question is an odd one: boatbuilding is in his blood. But to me, an inhabitant of the urban jungle, the construction of a 40-metre, 350-tonne Indonesian phinisi seems, to all intents and purposes, a very technical project.

For the Buginese, boatbuilding is a time-honoured tradition that's been passed down from one generation to the next. "We cannot draw. Instead, we work from experience. We just know that this piece here goes together with this and that," he explains, pointing to different slabs of ironwood.

Remarkably, Wera's master shipbuilders use only basic tools. No screws or metal are employed; instead, wooden pegs are hammered into hand-drilled holes. Sandpaper comes from grinding limestone with coconut and spreading the mixture onto papaya leaves. Watching Dafrin work alongside his friends, I'm humbled by the authentic sense of community. The scene is far removed from an automated factory: in the sweet, sawdust-scented air, the Buginese work at their own pace.





Anastasia Louhenapessy, my adventurous Indonesian guide, tells me that each phinisi has seven sails and two masts. “It’s believed they protect the vessel and its passengers against evil,” she says, pulling her shaggy black hair into a tight bun before going on to describe the slightly gruesome ceremonies performed during each building project.

Before the first plank is laid, blood from a chicken is poured over the wood. “The spirit of the wood accepts the offering, which gives the boat life,” she explains.

Then, when the boat nears completion, a goat or cow is sacrificed, depending on the size of the vessel. “The animal’s front legs are cut and hung at the front of the boat,” she says, her hand

slicing through the air. “The back legs are placed in the captain’s hut.” Like the first ritual, this ceremony breathes life into the phinisi through blood sacrifice.

Once the vessel is complete, a chicken, a goat and a cow are sacrificed for a village feast, held at high tide. The whole community prays before coming together to push the mammoth vessel into the ocean, celebrating as it floats, perfectly balanced, into its new life.

Fortunately for these traditional craftsmen, phinisies remain in high demand for use as cargo carriers, high-end liveaboards and privately owned charters. The vessels can take up to 18 months to build, and they don’t come cheap. Prices for the hull alone range from US\$130,000

**ABOVE:**  
IN WERA VILLAGE  
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for a 15-metre schooner and up to US\$645,000 for a 40-metre one; and the outfitting is extra.

As I travel back across the Flores Sea aboard the majestic handmade phinisi I arrived on, I fervently hope that this demand will continue, allowing the Buginese to keep their age-old craft afloat in our constantly changing world.

## GET ON BOARD

SeaTrek Sailing Adventures offers a range of luxury cruises on their phinisi schooners, the *Katharina* (12-guest capacity) and the *Ombak Putih* (24-guest capacity). The Dances, Dragons & Magical Lakes cruise (US\$2,590, all-inclusive) starts from Bali and calls at Wera as part of the seven-day itinerary.

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