

Dragons & the deep

DESTINATIONS
INDONESIA | CRUISE

Hulking whale sharks and huge Komodo dragons are the big draws on a small-ship sailing in Indonesia, writes **Jeannine Williamson**



Whale shark

PICTURE: Wow Borneo

Of the few times I've been snorkelling, I've usually been the last person to spot anything. While others point in the direction of darting fish, I'm the one faffing around with my mask and mouthpiece. On occasions, I've been left wondering if I was even on the same trip when participants later reel off a long list of everything they've spotted.

However, this time even I can't miss the creatures we're all hoping to see. As I lower myself off the side of a small boat into Indonesia's invitingly warm Flores Sea, two enormous shapes immediately dominate the underwater scene. ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SeaTrek vessels *Ombak Putih* and *Katharina*; deck time; writer Jeannine (second left) with guests enjoying the Isen Mulang boat festival; Tundai village **PICTURES:** SeaTrek Sailing Adventures; Wow Borneo



ASK THE expert



Nancy Verboom, senior product executive, Kuoni

"SeaTrek Sailing Adventures offers the opportunity for clients to immerse themselves in nature and culture, which is at the very heart of Komodo and the surrounding islands. Each day is a mix of discovery, relaxation and exceptional Indonesian cuisine, curated by the passionate local crew, many of whom have been with SeaTrek since its inception. Along with the knowledgeable tour leaders, they take extra-special care of guests, and love to show Indonesia through the eyes of those who call it home. SeaTrek operates two traditional wooden sailing ships: *Ombak Putih*, with 12 cabins, and *Katharina*, with six. The latter can also be chartered for a family adventure. Bali, the Gili Islands and Lombok can also be added to make an epic multi-centre trip."



In front of our small group, and oblivious to our presence, are a pair of whale sharks, each about 12m long. Despite their size, they move slowly and gracefully, showing off their creamy bellies and blue backs dotted with hundreds of white spots. Sharks, rather than whales, they're the world's largest fish – but we have nothing to fear from these gentle and endangered creatures.

As filter feeders, they eat only plankton and small fish that they suck into cavernous 1.5m-wide mouths. They've formed a win-win alliance with local fishermen who work from floating wooden platforms off Moyo Island, getting to scoop up leftovers while giving visitors incredible close-up views. As with any wildlife, sightings are never guaranteed, but you stand a very good chance of seeing them here.

BALI BREEZE

Extraordinary as it is, this exhilarating encounter is just one of many big – in every sense – wildlife experiences during my SeaTrek Sailing Adventures voyage. I'm on board the 24-passenger *Ombak Putih*, whose name means 'white wave'. Built as a cargo ship, the masted *pinisi* (traditional Indonesian sailing vessel) has been lovingly converted and is now one of two character-packed ships run by the Indonesian expedition cruise operator.

"Whale sharks have formed a win-win alliance with fishermen, scooping up leftovers while giving visitors close-up views

The journey started with a one-night stay in Bali, before a short flight to Flores island. Meeting my small group of fellow travellers on the quayside, there's a tangible feeling of anticipation as we climb down into the transfer boat and catch our first glimpse of *Ombak Putih*'s distinctive pointed bow. Crew members wave from the deck, calling out "welcome on board" and greeting us with freshly squeezed juices.

I quickly settle into my cosy wood-panelled cabin and stow my things away in nooks and crannies. The rooms feature a mix of doubles and bunk beds and it's not long before I'm lulled to sleep by the gently soothing creak of the ship's ironwood hull.

IN THE PINK

The ensuing days fall into an equally easy pattern of exciting excursions, both on land and sea, and chilling ➤



ABOVE: Komodo National Park is the only place to see the world's biggest lizards in the wild PICTURE: Wow Borneo

out on gorgeous beaches tinged blush pink by glistening fragments of coral washed ashore by the clear waters. Invariably, we are the only people on the beach.

Indeed, while we see a few other boats during the week, including SeaTrek's smaller second ship *Katharina*, other vessels are a rarity. Most are tourist day boats and, at night, as the orange sun dips behind remote volcanic islands, we are alone beneath the inky star-studded sky. One night I camp out on deck, cocooned in a sleeping bag. Although I admit defeat and retreat to my cabin when the wind whips up in the early hours, it adds to the sense of adventure.

HERE BE DRAGONS

Another day brings the chance to walk with dragons. Unesco-listed Komodo National Park is an archipelago of islands, several of which are home to the world's biggest lizards and the only place to see them in the wild. The largest population of Komodo dragons is on the namesake island and our skipper ensures we're the first ship to arrive, providing the best chance of seeing them as they wake and emerge to warm up in the morning sunshine.

Lumbering out of the undergrowth, tongues flicking in and out, these 3m-long reptiles are a formidable sight. Like the whale sharks, they are indifferent to our company – although I feel reassured when the park guide says they eat only once a month.

Thankfully, we don't have to wait that long. Every day, the crew conjures up an array of fresh

“With their tongues flicking in and out, the 3m-long Komodo dragons are a formidable sight

and tasty meals from the small galley, with fish, stir fries, veggie dishes and salads served buffet style. After dinner, insightful talks by the excellent tour leaders prepare us for the following day.

The experiences come thick and fast. We snorkel above kaleidoscopic coral reefs; get hands on with an inspiring coral-conservation project; hop on the back of motorbikes to reach a waterfall, where we swim beneath the cascade; see a *pinisi* being built on a beach, using centuries-old techniques; and enjoy a magical beach barbecue under the stars.

One morning, we bathe in the lake on Satonda Island. Created by a volcanic eruption, the inland lake was later filled with seawater, following a massive tsunami wave. Today, the glassy crater lake feels serene and peaceful, surrounded by lush vegetation.

Locals believe it has magical properties, so we join in with the custom of tying a stone to one of the 'wishing trees' by the water's edge and making a silent wish. It's said if the wish comes true, you will return to the lake. I certainly hope mine does. **tw**

INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

🌟 **Who's it for:** Suitable for relatively active and mobile travellers of all ages, SeaTrek attracts solos, couples and groups of friends. Many would never consider big-ship cruising, so don't just think of established cruise clients – suggest it to those that book long-haul land stays.

🌟 **How to pack:** SeaTrek's ships are laid-back and passengers are encouraged not to wear shoes, to protect the wooden decks. Sarongs, water bottles, snorkelling equipment and sunscreen are provided, so advise customers to pack light. Do recommend bringing water shoes and a change of swimwear.

🌟 **What to do:** Don't let nervous clients be deterred by the number of snorkelling tours, as SeaTrek's guides can teach guests who have never snorkelled before. Flotation aids are available and swimmers can return to the vessel at any time.

🌟 **What to drink:** While a small selection of drinks is available to purchase, passengers are actively encouraged to bring their favourite wines and spirits on board. Mixers and soft drinks are included in the fare.



BOOK IT

Kuoni offers a 10-night SeaTrek with Whale Sharks, Corals & Dragons itinerary from £6,199 per person, departing in April 2026. The price includes a night before and after the cruise at Puri Santrian Beach Resort in Bali, plus eight nights on board (all meals and soft drinks included) and Malaysia Airlines flights from Heathrow. kuoni.co.uk