

Phinisi yachts get new design ideas from Pacific High

SCROLL DOWN

BY RYAN SWIFT on 19 Apr 2023

Marine carpenter Yann Martinie fell in love with Indonesia's phinisi over 10 years ago. Now he has a fleet of phinisi charter yachts

Indonesia's legendary phinisi, traditional, handmade wooden vessels built in a style reminiscent of the Portuguese exploration ships of the 15th century, are slowly getting a design makeover, thanks to Yann Martinie, co-founder of Pacific High Yachts.



Pacific High's Dewata, at anchor near Misool, Raja Ampat, Indonesia

In 2009, Martinie, a French carpenter, arrived in Indonesia and was immediately taken with the phinisi boats. Martinie made his way to Bira, on the southern coast of Sulawesi. It is on the rocky beaches near Bira cape that crews of highly skilled carpenters use the simplest hand tools to turn raw logs into phinisis.

Traditional phinisi build methods

"I was really intrigued by the phinisi and the techniques of construction," says Martinie. "So when I arrived, I was very curious about this. I came to this place, Bira. I fell in love completely with the place! So, after two weeks in Indonesia, I had already sailed on two or three boats and then I directly started to build my first boat."



Yann Martinie aboard Zirbad

Martinie built an 18-metre sloop, *Zirbaa*, for his own use. He kept the yacht for five years before selling it to build another. In 2018, a Danish couple joined forces with Martinie as investors. Together, they founded Pacific High Yachts.

The idea was to build a fleet of phinisi that could be the core of a charter fleet, while offering services for any interested parties that wanted to build their own phinisi.



Phinisi in build at the beach – the construction techniques have barely changed over the centuries

Traditional phinisi building is supervised by an experienced elder or master shipwright, who doesn't work from a plan. Builders hack and smooth the wood into place, starting with the keel and then adding planks before building the hull frame to fit. A western boat is normally built with the frame first, then the planking.



The foredeck lounge on Senja

Phinisi are still built on the beach and then heaved into the sea when the hull and decks are completed, as has been done for centuries. Luxurious fit outs are often done in Bali. Martinie says that while he has introduced some new design ideas, the techniques the builders use are the same as they've always been.

When Martinie started his first project with the builders in 2009, he thought he could bring his tools to the beach and join the crew, possibly exchanging knowledge about boat building. That proved to be a mistake.

"After a few months of work, I realised that I had to relearn everything," Martinie says. "I really thought that I knew everything about boats. I took me almost one year to realize that no, I know nothing. I'm going to learn from scratch and really let them lead the way because you cannot really go against their traditional techniques." Martinie stopped using his own tools years ago.

After years of working on several phinisi yachts, Martinie says that the builders are getting more curious about what they can do and the new design ideas that Martinie wants to develop for Pacific High. "They respect the work we have done together all together, and they love it. They see that people love it, that the company is working. Now they agree to learn more."



Senja features a lower profile and better sailing performance – on location in Raja Ampat

Martinie has focused his phinisi designs on having a lower centre of gravity. In recent years, a number of phinisis have been built with ever larger decks built higher and higher. Martinie says this has made them top heavy and, he suggests, a little less beautiful than they should be. Also, his boats can use their sails (with the wind), while most others have their sails as decoration.

"I try to build boats that are extremely safe, that go well on the sea, and that are elegant, with a beautiful line," he says. "We really do a lot of work on the concept and the design. And because I spent many years on the sea on the boat that I built, I really tried to have a new design and concept."

Creating new designs for phinisis – slowly

Martinie may not want to change the way luxury phinisis are built, but he certainly wants to change the way they look and how they function.



The main deck master stateroom on the 31m Senja is designed for couples

On one of his creations, the 31-metre *Senja*, has just one master stateroom on the main deck, with a second cabin below deck. Instead of having two levels above the main deck, there is just one large stateroom on the main deck. Pacific High markets *Senja* as a romantic getaway experience.

Perhaps Martinie's boldest idea is to add a modern-style beach club to the transom. Phinisis are not built with such features, as their hull shape is governed by centuries of tradition. To get into the water or board the tender, guests normally use stairs at the side.



Pacific High is aiming to create a Bohemian Chic style aboard its phinisi yachts

Martinie's newest designs are aimed at what he and Clarice Jamain, Pacific High's new general manager, call "Bohemian chic". Jamain, a long-time veteran of the yacht industry in Southeast Asia, says that Pacific High's new designs are a progression from existing, upmarket phinisi designs.

Martinie says his next design is for a 54-metre phinisi "superyacht", which will have 45 metres of main deck length. There will be an aft beach club space of 100 square metres.

"It will be the first phinisi to have that kind of concept," Jamain says. "It will take longer to build – we're looking at 2.5 to 3 years to build it." Martinie adds that the beach club on his new design will resemble an aft terrace, which allows the builders to stay within their traditions while adding a big dash of modernity.



A beach launch for a new phinisi still requires plenty of muscle

Getting to yes with the boat builders of Bira on such a project will take the kind of special relationship that Martinie has built up over ten years. "I have worked with the same 40 guys for more than 10 years," says Martinie, who is now fluent in Indonesian. "I know their families, their wives and kids. It's a life that I love, but it is also like living in a small village in the 19th century."

But that, says Martinie, is the only way to build the kind of phinisi yachts he wants to build. Simply placing an order with the builders and coming back every year to check on progress was a common occurrence in years past.

Phinis are constructed entirely of wood, making it more difficult to find the logs needed to build such boats. Martinie and Jamain say Pacific High only buys wood from regulated government plantations.

[Read: The wooden experience – Indonesia's incredible phinis](#)

The whole notion of the luxury phinisi came into being with the launch of Silolona by [Patti Seery](#). In the years that followed, other buyers from the US and Europe came to Indonesia seeking their own luxury phinisi. The market continued like this, with about ten boats in build at any one time, until Covid-19 lockdowns decimated the travel business.

Phinisi tourism after Covid-19

Jamain and Martinie both say that the restrictions of Covid resulted in much more interest in phinis from buyers and charter parties in Jakarta, many of whom could not leave the country. Having more wealthy Jakarta residents coming out to spend time in their own magnificent seascapes is both good for a local yacht market and for ocean conservation.

In addition to building phinis for clients, Pacific High is building up its own charter fleet. The fleet sails to well-known destinations, such as the Raja Ampat and the Forgotten Islands. Pacific High is looking for new destinations that will be of interest to charter parties. Sumba Island, south of the Tenggara Islands, is one such place.

Jamain says that Pacific High has supplied the phinisi and guidance for a National Geographic expedition on several occasions. Another, unnamed, client is working on a special bird-watching itinerary through Indonesia that will last a month and cover 450 nautical miles.



Serja at Wayag Island, Raja Ampat

Pacific High has built five phinisi so far (they each take about two years to build). The latest project was launched in January for a client who will operate the yacht himself. The company is now in discussions about two new projects, and Martinie hopes building will start this year.

Pacific High is also in talks with a Philippine buyer who is interested to have a phinisi cruising in the Philippine archipelago – something that obviously intrigues Martinie.

With Covid now but a memory, tourism to Indonesia is rebounding very quickly. In February 2023, foreign tourist arrivals jumped over 560% year-on-year from February 2022, to over 700,000. Bali, the capital of Indonesian tourism, has seen its numbers rise dramatically.

With that, Pacific High will be back to business, with their new brand of phinisi yachts at the ready to take guests to Indonesia's best cruising water, or to start work on a new phinisi with a modern twist.



Pacific High co-founders Charlotte and Peter Galsgaard (standing, centre) and Yann Martinie de Maisonneuve (standing row, 7th from right), with the building crew for Pacific High

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