

FINANCIAL TIMES

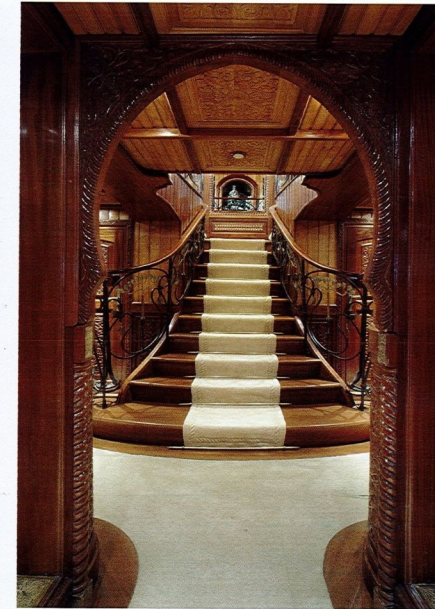
# Boats that rock

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how to spend it special boating edition

This page: The Dafai Langkawi's schooner Naga Pelangi. Far right: Moorish-style decor on La Sultana



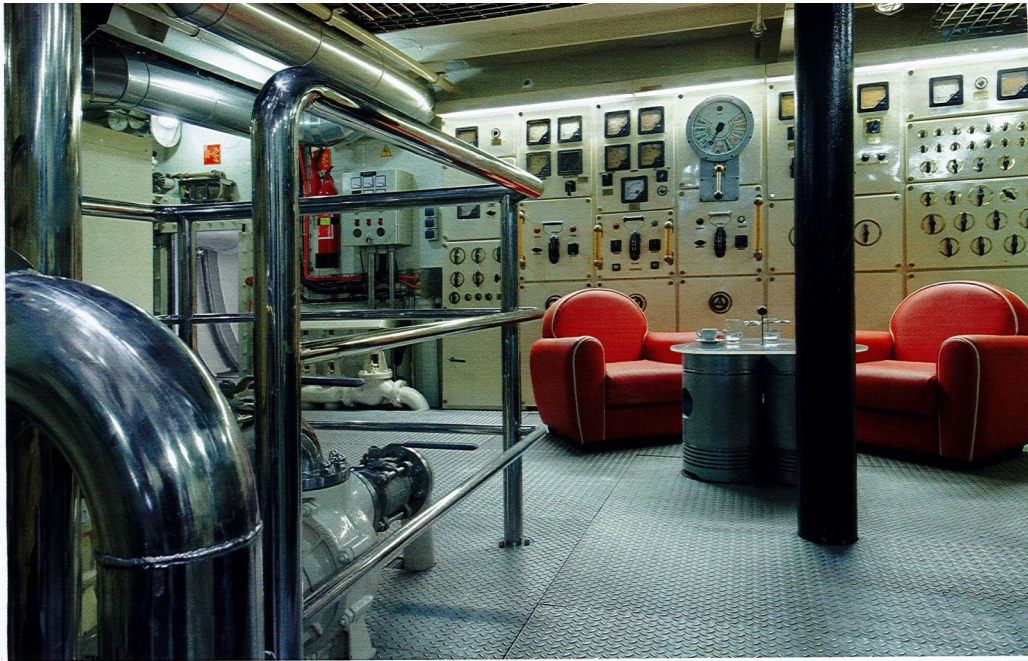
# PUSHING *the* BOAT OUT

Hotels from Morocco to the Mekong are extending their reach out over the waves with catamarans, phinisis or dhows for overnight journeys or longer expeditions to remote destinations. Maria Shollenbarger reports

**I**n 1962, in the Georgi Dimitrov shipyard in Varna, Bulgaria, a 65m, six-deck passenger ferry christened the *Aji Petri* was launched on the Black Sea. She was designated for shuttling between various ports, among them Yalta, Sevastopol and Odessa, and for several years went about this uneventful business. But in 1970, with Cold War tensions escalating, the *Aji Petri* was commandeered by Soviet intelligence agencies and relocated to the North Atlantic. Under the guise of conducting environmental research, her new crew of Russian naval and secret service officers spent a decade quietly spying on their UK and US counterparts.

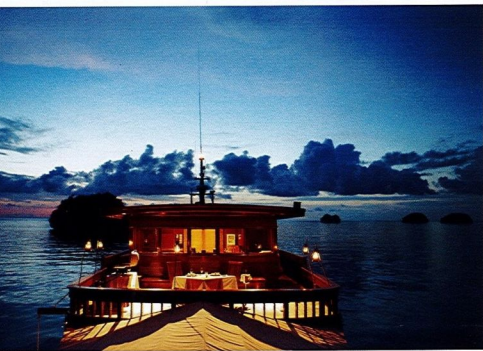
Cut to late May 2015 and the port at Málaga, Spain, and the *Aji Petri's* destiny has taken another odd turn – she has been rechristened *La Sultana* and is in the final stages of a full-scale fit-out as a seven-cabin luxury superyacht for charter in international waters. Late summer will see her call at various Mediterranean ports from Spain to Italy; and by early December she will have completed an Atlantic crossing to the Caribbean, where she will be based through the winter. Her new interiors (pictured above) reveal a somewhat surprising inclination towards the Moorish: intricately carved, arched wood doorways; desks inlaid with bone and mother-of-pearl; extravagant plasterwork; hand-crewelled silk upholstery, reminiscent of the djellabas sold at Beldi and Tazi Frères in the Marrakech medina.

But hold up – Marrakech? *La Sultana*? The well-travelled among our readers may have already made the connection. For those who haven't, this one-time Soviet spy ferry is now, quite improbably, the third member of the small Moroccan hotel portfolio of the same name, whose intimate properties in the Red City and the



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From top: a reception room on *La Sultana*. The upper deck of *Amanikan*



bourgeois seaside village of Oualidia have repeat-guest fans as far afield as Sydney and São Paulo.

The owner's initial idea for *La Sultana* was itineraries that would skew close to home, alternating the Barbary Coast (where Oualidia and one of the hotels are) with Saida in the western Mediterranean. But now, rather than being an adjunct to the La Sultana hotels, she will be more of an unofficial ambassador for them – an emissary in style terms, though otherwise totally independent not just of the hotels, but of Morocco. And what's arguably most interesting about it is that expanding the brand out over the water, if you like, is no longer an unorthodox choice for a hotelier.

Wherever there's a fine hotel in proximity to a seashore, there is the opportunity to create a link in the guest's mind to something more profound than material luxury: a connection to nature, an ineluctable sense of freedom and possibility or the anticipation of a journey. Permutations of it have existed for decades along the Amalfi Coast, the Côte d'Azur and in the Balearics; at Le

Sirenuse and Il San Pietro in Positano, afternoon cruises on the owners' vintage Rivas and Morgan 44s are as defining an element of any regular guest's stay as Le Sirenuse's signature Eau d'Italie scents or Il San Pietro's sublime mozzarella di bufala grilled in lemon leaves. More recently in destinations such as the Maldives and Thailand, the model has been expanded; among others, there is *Four Seasons Explorer*, a liveaboard it runs out of its resorts in the Maldives' North and Baa Atolls, which is available to charter (it's especially popular with the high-net-worth surfing classes who like to chase offshore breaks the world over).

Amanresorts, meanwhile, launched *Amanikan* (pictured above left), its own five-berth charter Indonesian pinisi (traditional two-masted sailing ship) in 2008. Based at Amanwana, on Moyo island east of Bali, *Amanikan* has been such a success that she has just been joined by *Amandira*, a second luxurious purpose-built take on the pinisi paradigm, this one clocking in at 52m, with five cabins. Like *Amanikan*, she will cruise between the

Komodo and Raja Ampat archipelagos. *Amandira* isn't really a harbinger per se – the charter market in southeast Asia is robust and leisure marinas are being proposed everywhere from Singapore to Manila; and other hotel companies such as Sonveva and Alila have launched boats like the *Alila Purnama* (pictured overleaf), loosely based at or near regional properties (often intended to be paired with stays at them). But *Amandira* represents the start of what looks to be a major investment on Aman's part in boats and boating experiences across the world.

"Boats can take you deeper into a place or culture, and this kind of experiential vein is something our guests are perennially interested in," says Aman CEO Olivier Jolivet. When we spoke in May, Jolivet expounded on an ambitious number of projects. Among them were a boat to circumnavigate Japan's north and south islands; a serious dive boat to be based in the south Philippines; three in Indochina (one each for Aman's hotels in Cambodia and Vietnam, as well as a river cruiser to ply the Mekong); and vintage Turkish and Italian sailing ships, currently being upgraded, to work a circuit from the Aman Canal Grande in Venice to the Aman Sveti Stefan in Montenegro, to the resorts in Greece and Turkey. "Luxury power yachts aren't really part of the Aman DNA; our boats are traditional local ones, with three, four or five berths" – small enough to be taken over by groups for private charter. Jolivet hints at eventual ownership schemes, not dissimilar to the residence structures at Aman Resorts in Greece and Tokyo, and even at plans for what he calls an Aman-at-Sea – a 20- or 25-room craft whose crew will take it wherever in the world Aman wants, whether St Barth's, South Africa or Sardinia. "I think across our markets we're finding the right models.

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Clockwise from above: an Ibo Island Lodge dhow cruising in the waters off Mozambique. The *Alila Purnama*, Indonesia



*Amanikan* historically accounts for only about five per cent of Amanwana's business, but it is incredibly popular. "A boat will enhance the occupancy of a property, he notes, but increasingly also have its own cachet.

For one particular hotel, however – which operates at the knife edge of where comfort and wilderness meet – it's less about a boat as a brand-enhancement tool and more about extending the experience far beyond hotel walls. From the day Kevin and Fiona Record purchased Ibo Island Lodge, a gloriously crumbling Lusitanian mansion in Mozambique's Quirimbas archipelago, they understood the value in pairing the unique cultural experience of Ibo – a 16th-century Portuguese colonial outpost on an ancient spice trade route – with the "marine wilderness that surrounds it. Most of Quirimbas' 32 islands are sparsely inhabited and home to hundreds of endemic bird species, not to mention some of the best-preserved coral reefs on the east African coast, and three years ago, the Records launched overnight dhow "safaris" for couples, with days spent snorkelling at reefs and shipwreck sites and picnicking on the sandbars that materialise and submerge with surreal speed in the Indian Ocean's tides. Modest tents on various islands with no electricity are the overnight accommodation.

Ibo is a long way from many things, not least the slick model of indigenous cruise experience proffered across

Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia. The lodge's dhows (one pictured top) are things of simple beauty, awash in beautiful local capulana textiles, but if guests sleep on board, they do so on an open deck. It's about the luxury around the dhow rather than on it: in the numinous roof of starlight, utterly unfettered by pollution, and deserted islands devoid of all sound but the nocturnal calls of red-eyed doves and the sea whispering against the sand on Mogundula or Matemo. Even as the Records evolve the experience, they're being careful not to gild it. This year, another dhow – accommodating up to 12 – will launch, with a seven-night programme that combines a stay at the hotel with four nights out in the archipelago. In 2016, however, they will enter a different game with two full-service catamarans for charter, each with three berths and bathrooms. Guests will book through the lodge, but no stay is necessary, and a skipper and chef will be provided. With Kenya's coast rendered off-limits by security concerns, as Record noted when we met, northern Mozambique is ripe for exploration; he sees Ibo Lodge as the gateway to it.

Some five thousand miles away, across the Indian Ocean, is the *Naga Pelangi* (pictured on opening pages), a traditional Malaysian junk-rigged schooner available for private charter. Last autumn, when Arnaud Girodon, general manager of The Datai Langkawi, was toying

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with the idea of purchasing a luxury catamaran for his hotel, he saw her moored in nearby Telaga harbour. "She was so elegant, I was blown away," he says. Enquiries about a partnership were initially met with scepticism, "but I went straight to the captain and made a proposal. We clicked, he understood the hotel and my clientele and we came to an agreement." Now, from December to April, the *Naga Pelangi* is exclusive to guests of the Datai, and along with half-day and evening coastal discovery and sundowner cruises, she can be outfitted for overnight journeys through the Butang archipelago and north into Thailand, to explore the islands outside Phang Nga Bay. The *Naga Pelangi* is no *Amanikan*, Girodon notes: while the bedlinens are fine, the bath amenities the same as the ones at the hotel, and chefs and massages therapists can be laid on, she has no air conditioning and the cabin, clad modestly in tropical wood, is smaller than The Datai's average double. "We bring guests to see her first," says Girodon. "They have a drink on board, get out to sea and feel the breeze. She needs to be seen that way, to be understood. "But with a hotel of this reputation, and with these islands so close and accessible, it seemed a shame not to have a unique way to experience the beautiful sea." ♦

#### OFFSHORE INVESTMENTS

**Alila Purnama**, www.alilahotels.com; private charters from \$11,000 per night. **Amanwana**, Moyo Island, West Sumbawa Regency, Sumbawa Besar 84301 (+62371-22233; www.amanresorts.com); seven-night Komodo expedition, from \$31,200 per couple. **The Datai Langkawi**, Jalan Teluk Datai, 07000 Langkawi, Kedah, Indonesia (+604-9500 500; www.thedatai.com), from £300; half-day cruises on *Naga Pelangi* from \$350pp; cruises to Thailand, from \$3,500. **Ibo Island Lodge**, reservations: 6 Carlton Close, Professional Village, Noordhoek 7975, South Africa (+2721-785,2657; www.iboisland.com), from \$335; seven-night dhow safari, from \$2,850 for up to four. **La Sultana**, 403 Rue de la Kasbah, Marrakech, Morocco (+2125-2438 8008; www.lasultanahotels.com), from €225,000 per week.