

The Naga Pelangi Project

From Rainforest to Sea

An important part of Malay maritime heritage has been the building of unique wooden sailboats. Within the Malay Archipelago, early techniques were developed for building wooden boats without a plan by building first the hull and fitting the frames later. The planks are fire bent and joined edge on edge using ironwood dowels. Before the new plank is hammered on, a strip of the bark of a tree is placed over the dowels.



Applying the caulking bark

The planks are separated by a 1 - 2 mm layer of a natural material with remarkable sealing properties. This is an ancient and unique building technique, the origin of which might date back to the Protomalay migrations that colonised the archipelago thousands of years ago.



Joining two planks

In Malaysia, these traditional boats are called *Perahu*. The sailboats, or *Perahu besar*, come in two types, the *Bedar* and the *Pinas*.



A Pinas



A Bedar

They are made of Cengal, an endemic heavy hardwood growing only on the Malaysian Peninsula. Until the 1980s, these picturesque boats, which had been plying the South China Sea for centuries rigged with a junk sail, were still operated as sailing freighters.



Cengal logs

Naga Pelangi: a story of passion and endeavour

Christoph Swoboda, a German national, had seen one of these traditional Malay *perahu*, the '*Burong Bahri*', in Bali. The owner was to sail back to her yard in Terengganu for repair works, and Christoph

signed on for the crossing. Quickly he was convinced that this was to be his new life. When introduced to the boat builder upon arrival, he contracted the late Che Ali bin Ngah on Pulau Duyong, Terengganu, to build him a 14m *Bedar*, and named it the '*Naga Pelangi*'.

Christoph participated in the whole construction. Later, he took this traditionally rigged vessel round the world and she became the first indigenous Malay sailing boat to finish a circumnavigation, thus proving the seaworthiness of this type of craft. By doing so, she and Christoph as her skipper fully demonstrated the high quality of Malay wooden boat design and building.



Naga Pelangi after the circumnavigation

After 20 years and getting older, the '*Naga Pelangi*' turned out to be too basic for a home at sea and so she was sold in 2000. Christoph followed his passion for wooden boats further and turned his attention towards European classical yachts. The famous Camper & Nicholson designs drew his attention. He visited their Gosport facilities in the UK and was soon lucky to work and sail on the 1925 built '*Sylvia*' in the Mediterranean, studying her construction and sea going abilities.

Soon Christoph made up his mind to build himself another boat. His experience with the Malay *Perahu besar* made him reflect on how to merge this unique style with the

advantages of purpose built yachts. The idea was born to take the challenge and turn the traditional Malay construction into a classical yacht.

The Naga Pelangi Project

1. Prototype of a future Malay classical yacht

Christoph started his new boat building project in 2003, again on Pulau Duyong. Based on his 20 years of experience in sailing the traditional Malay *Perahu*, he is building his second boat, this time the *Pinas* type with a length of over 20 metres. Modified to meet modern needs and international yacht standards, the *Naga Pelangi II* is supposed to be the prototype of a future Malay classical yacht.



The Naga Pelangi II in the yard

2. Project for the Revival of Traditional Boat Building

After finishing his circumnavigation, arriving in 1997 on Pulau Duyong, Christoph noted considerable changes in the boat building industry.

This once flourishing industry was a dying craft. Terengganu, on the East coast of the Malayan Peninsula, which once was its centre, has only a handful of boat builders left. Only motor driven fishing boats are still built using the old technique. The sailing *Perahus*, having lost their function, are not built any more, and the know-how of building as well as sailing them is on the brink of loss.

It seemed at that time that the new boat was not only the first traditional Terengganu-style *Perahu besar* of over 100 feet built in the last 50 years, but also would be the last of its kind.

Thus the Naga Pelangi Project was set up, aimed at raising public awareness of the traditional boatbuilding industry, its importance as an integral part of Malay maritime heritage, and the danger of losing a unique industry. It informed the public via a website, information VCD's, articles, TV-features and conceptual proposals. One of the proposals in 'The Transparent Shipyard' concept was realised in 2006. An on-site exhibition at the yard was organised through the kind sponsorship of the German Government. It attracted hundreds of visitors, foreign and domestic, and became a hot spot for tourists. The feedback has been excellent, highlighting the need for preservation of this unique national heritage.

All the while government bodies showed interest. One of the early visitors at the yard was the Chief Minister of Terengganu, Dato' Seri Haji Idris Yusoh. During the boat construction time, several ministers, both federal and state, visited the project. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, follows the progress closely, having visited the site many times.



From left - Terengganu Chief Minister Datuk Idris Yusoh, Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, owner Christoph Swoboda

New Horizons for Ancient Craft - a success story

It was a foreigner, Christoph Swoboda, who sailed a Malay junk around the world for the first time and invested yet again in this local industry, pointing the direction for its preservation and revival. The results have been immediate and dramatic. The Malaysian Government is committed to preserving this unique industry. Via various ministries' initiatives, the yards are busy

today with new construction projects and students now follow the craftsmen to learn their trade.

The community of Pulau Duyong now realises that this ancient craft has a viable future. Youth once more are encouraged to learn the skills of their fathers. The maritime heritage can be revitalised.

At the same time, with a foreign expert working among them and supervising closely, international quality standards are introduced and adopted. This is an essential feature when trying to access a world market.

With his passion and dedication to the Malaysian *Perahu*, Christoph is inspired and committed to sharing his knowledge as boat designer and sailor with anyone interested in seamanship and the further development of the boat building industry. Christoph's key to success is to enhance quality standards throughout, taking the original work-boat/freighter towards international yacht standards.

A Floating Heritage

The *Naga Pelangi II* is the first Malaysian *Perahu* to be based on the traditional cargo boat design but built to modern yacht standards. As the first traditional Malaysian yacht to cater to the marine charter business, The *Naga Pelangi II* can help establish Malaysia worldwide among boat building nations, which already have turned their ancient sailing freighters into successful charter yachts (e.g. Turkish gulleets, American schooners, Arab and Indian dhows and many others). As an "icon yacht" of a potential fleet of classic Malay-style sailboats, she can help promote Malaysia as Asia's hub for premium marine leisure activities.

In the water by the end of 2007, the '*Naga Pelangi II*' will offer luxury cabins for charter sailing cruises, act as a VIP platform attending international events or show up as a corporate ambassador. The '*Naga Pelangi II*' is moored in the Heritage Bay Club Marina, Kuala Terengganu, and should start operations in 2008.

www.naga-pelangi.de