



Antique ship enthusiast Eric Kraus (above, with captain of the ship Kahar Djafar) fell in love with the phinisi, a traditional Indonesian sailing boat, and decided to build one for himself. PHOTOS: JOSEPH NAIR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES



PHOTOS: ERIC KRAUS

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A Frenchman takes a trip to Bali to escape cold capitalist Moscow, falls in love with the traditional Indonesian phinisi sailing boat and decides to build himself one. Sounds like a fantasy? His US\$2.5-million floating love is now docked in Singapore over the weekend for luxury yacht enthusiasts to gawk at.

In 2007, Mr Eric Kraus, a French fund manager based in the Russian capital since 1997, had been in Bali for just two weeks when he thought about getting his own boat to explore the islands east of Indonesia.

But instead of a modern superyacht, the antique ship enthusiast wanted a phinisi. Dating back to the 17th century, phinis are cargo sailing vessels with two masts, used by the Bugis and Makassar people.

Mr Kraus, in his 50s, recalls: "I wanted something I could live or spend a lot of time on. It had to have character and local flavour."

His 40m-long boat, El Aleph, took two years to build and was completed in 2009. Taken from the title of one of his favourite short stories by Argentinian

# In ship shape

The first Singapore Yacht Show takes place this weekend. Life! meets two boat owners who are taking part

author Jorge Luis Borges, the boat's name refers to an artefact that can reveal the entire universe at once. The aleph is also the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and an important part of mystical amulets and formulas.

Along with 11 other superyachts, the El Aleph is currently on display at the inaugural Singapore Yacht Show. The three-day show is on until tomorrow at the One Degree 15 Marina Club at Sentosa Cove. Admission is by invitation only.

Made of 100-year-old teak and ironwood, Mr Kraus' vessel has two steel

masts and five black sails. It has six air-conditioned cabins, including a 50 sq m master cabin with a queen-sized bed, a private terrace, bathroom and dressing room. The interiors, which also come with hand-blown glass aquamarine basins, are hand-finished by Balinese craftsmen.

There is also a library, a fully equipped kitchen comparable to that of a small restaurant and high-speed broadband satellite Internet access. Dive and water sport equipment, such as snorkelling gear, sea kayaks, wakeboards and fishing gear are also available.

Up to 12 guests can stay on the boat, which cruises at 9 knots, or about 17km per hour. Built in the traditional gaff-rigged style, it has a 10-cylinder Nissan diesel turbo engine. An electrical power system allows it to operate in "quiet boat" mode with all engines off.

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The 40m-long boat (above) has been to places such as the Andaman Islands and around southern Indonesia. The self-contained vessel has a dining area (left), a kitchen comparable to that of a small restaurant and six air-conditioned cabins (below).



# *Crazy idea made good*

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The boat's exterior took 40 to 50 men working day and night for a year to complete in South Sulawesi. And its interior took another year to complete in Bali.

On the sleek, minimalist design inside, its owner says: "I wanted to keep it as clean and uncluttered as possible but still comfortable because I want to live in it."

To achieve this, he rolled up his sleeves and pitched in, helping to sand down the wood inside.

On the socio-cultural hierarchy governing the Indonesian tribal craftsmen he worked with, he says: "They couldn't have a younger man giving me instructions, because it would be a loss of face for the both of us. So they pulled an older carpenter from his job to supervise me."

Since the boat's completion, Mr Kraus has sailed it to the Andaman Islands, Phuket, Langkawi and around southern Indonesia. The keen scuba diver is on the boat at least three months a year with friends, who fly from Russia to Bali, where the boat is moored most of the time.

Given the flexible nature of his job, he works onboard, too. "I go for a dive in the morning, have a large lunch, take a nap and wake up just in time as the markets are opening up," he says of his idyllic work-life balance on the high seas.

To cover the US\$250,000 (S\$314,000) cost of the ship's yearly maintenance, he charts it out. For US\$60,000 a week, guests are taken care of by five service staff and an additional eight crew. They are hosted by a Swedish cruise director, who plans activities such as snorkelling, diving and volcano-climbing in the Indonesian islands.

If Mr Kraus' tale of ship-building sounds romantic, he cautions that "it's the hardest thing I've ever done".

"Even after it's built, it's still time-consuming. There's always something that needs fixing or building," he says of his first and only boat so far.

And forget about making money from a yachting hobby. He says, deadpan: "It's like a hole in the water, into which you throw your money. It's better to just have a friend who has a boat."

That said, his phinisi is clearly the apple of his eye.

He says: "It was a crazy idea that turned into a labour of love and passion. In my humble opinion, it's the most magnificent sail yacht in the seas at the moment and I'm so proud of it."

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