

Komodo Beneath the Dragon's Realm

Dec 2002

Visit a land of primeval landscapes and prehistoric creatures; a place so remote and fantastic the diving is possibly the wildest on earth!

Words and Photos by Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock

To celebrate our 25th trip to Komodo National Park, we set out to discover what lies below this fabulous destination, outside of the now-famous sites in Horseshoe Bay. Burt and I have been diving around Komodo since 1993, when we joined an exploratory trip led by our friend and Indonesia uber-expert Kal Muller. Late one night Kal sipped tea with us in a starlit Balinese garden, and stirred our imaginations with tales of diving adventures beneath the dragon's realm. Days later our group pioneered several of Komodo's most well known dive spots – the Yellow Wall, Urchin Garden, and Cannibal Rock.



On that first trip we anchored at the southern tip of Rinca Island, and followed a large dragon up one of the rocky cliffs at the edge of Horseshoe Bay. When we caught up with this large, prehistoric lizard it was happily munching on a miniature version of itself, starting the legend of Cannibal Rock. On cautious descent, we looked out to sea and noticed a large semi-circle reef that extended south and away from the main island, and decided to dive it early the next morning. When we slipped beneath Cannibal Rock's cool waters and left Rinca's primeval landscape behind, we knew we had come to a special place: Everywhere we looked the island's volcanic slopes were covered with flamboyantly coloured soft corals, sea apples and masses of transparent fish.

Yet after several hundred dives on Cannibal Rock it was time to chart new waters. We joined Kararu Dive Voyages on a trip east of Bali, to explore Komodo's lesser-known dive spots. Cocooned in the ship's cosy lounge, that first day we reminded ourselves that we were floating close to the epicentre of the infamous "Ring of Fire", where tumultuous inner earth activity spawned the hundreds of islands we passed on our way to Komodo. We had a tingling sensation, a gut feeling perhaps that we could be in for the wildest dives of our lives.

Strange Surprises

In fact our first dive of the trip was beneath the ancient volcano of Satonda Island, located off Sumbawa's northern coast. When the Kararu team first dived the site they called it the Sand Box, where divers would spend their time on the sandy slope, home to Inimicus scorpionfish, hermit crabs and many species of juvenile fish.



As a prelude to the entire trip, we embarked on a night dive that would be different. We moved away from the slope to an astonishing Magic Rock covered in cleaning shrimp and crowned with shoals of glassy sweepers. None of the divers in our group strayed a metre from the positions staked out around the rock until we had to ascend up the slope and return to the boat. After a decade of diving in and around Komodo, it was thrilling to find new wonders so quickly.

As the boat motored closer to the western boundary of the park, the shadow of Sangeang volcano loomed larger off our port side. The group dived in at the base of this active volcano and discovered a haven for nudibranchs, pipefish and tiny frogfish camouflaged among fields of tunicates. The ocean swell and cold water forced us away from Sangeang before our time was up, but Sascha promised an excellent night dive at Banta Island just on the outskirts of the park.

It was a calm, moonless night, perfect for exploring a narrow inlet along Banta's irregular shoreline. Sand divers and garden eels, still feeding in the early evening on suspended plankton, plunged into the sand as our bright lights illuminated the darkening water. Although the seascape looked drab and uninteresting, we knew that sand bottoms like Banta's reveal their secrets slowly. Within minutes strobes flashed and sand flew as divers raced from one intriguing subject to the next. Emperor shrimp danced over sea cucumbers' backs and stargazers gazed into the blackness with their sad smiles. We caught a fleeting glimpse of a bob-tailed squid as it popped out of the sand, surveyed the commotion and immediately

settled back beneath the substrate.

Warmed by hot chocolate and banana fritters glazed with sweet syrup, we gathered on Kararu's back deck to count stars and plot the next day's course. Though most of the group preferred to remain around Banta, Tony convinced us to push east and south to Komodo.

A Jurassic Seascape

On previous trips we had always entered the park from the south, rounding the narrow bottom of Komodo Island and heading straight for Horseshoe Bay. On this journey we motored into the sun instead, toward the dramatic silhouette formed by Komodo's northeast corner.



When the boat was a few kilometres from the main island, Kararu's divemasters loaded their gear into one of the aluminium dinghies and set out to buoy Hard to Find Rock, a seamount that rises to within five metres of the surface. Within seconds of descending we knew HTF Rock was an extraordinary site.

The water was cool and clear, and the strong current that broke around the pinnacle ushered in a parade of fish life: clouds of baitfish and anthias, along with a mix of jacks and barracuda. A pair of manta rays even glided through the crowd. Those divers searching for the small animals turned up an amazing bounty of pygmy seahorses and rare invertebrates, including one of the loveliest nudibranchs in the Pacific, the *Miamira magnifica*.

Glorious Reunion

When we surfaced a sleek white speedboat had moored alongside Kararu. Two park rangers sat in the shade under the boat's awning, but leaning over the rail to greet us was Dr Jos Pet of The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

We met Jos in the mid-'90s, when he was based out of the TNC office in Labuanbajo, Flores, at the eastern boundary of the park. He and his staff worked hard to eradicate illegal fishing within Komodo and to educate the local people about the marine environment. Now based in Bali, Jos reminisced about the early days in Komodo.

With his background in fisheries and marine conservation, Jos knew that Komodo occupied a unique geographical position in the middle of the southern tier of Indonesia's archipelago, which divides the Southern Pacific from the Indian Ocean. There is a consistent sea level difference between the northern and southern shores of Komodo, and it is just enough to generate a gross downhill flow into the Indian Ocean, especially when the tides and winds are favourable. The landmass of the islands acts like a dam and holds back the warmer Pacific waters, which are then forcibly discharged through numerous narrow straits or spillways into the Indian Ocean.

Jos believed that the resulting strong currents created pressure voids along the park's rocky shores. Cool, deep water upwellings rushed in to replace water removed by the surface currents and brought with them increased levels of phytoplankton and dissolved nutrients. The currents thus provided food for small plankton feeding fish that in turn supported a succession of actively swimming larger predators. Despite this nutritional bounty Jos found that by the mid-'90s Komodo's fish population was dwindling, mainly due to illegal poaching. Now, three years into a stricter park management program supported by the Indonesian government, TNC and the Komodo Marine Tourist Association - the umbrella organisation for most of the live-aboards and shore-based operators - Komodo's marine life is more populous than ever. After our fish-filled dive at Hard to Find Rock it was hard to disagree.



The crew took Kararu into the bay at Loh Liang, headquarters of Komodo National Park. There on the white sand crescent beach an enormous dragon was sunning himself close to the water line. When the first dinghy approached the dragon unexpectedly waded into the bay. With speed and grace not apparent on land, the dragon quickly swam away from the boat propelled by its long, powerful tail.

An Oddball Assortment

Komodo's dragons share these inhospitable islands with few other animals. Feral horses, water buffalo and wild deer roam parklands while camouflaged vipers coil in branching trees and wait for small prey, including immature dragons. The wild sounds of sulphur-crested cockatoos were our morning reveille, and the screams of sea eagles fighting over a bit of fish reverberated between Komodo's hills.

Exhausted after a dusty hike to the old dragon feeding ground, all of the divers opted for a lazy afternoon of cruising and reading. Kararu's captain took us on a northern route around Rinca, then south through the narrow Molo Strait, where our boat reached an astonishing speed of 12 to 15 knots! It was a wild ride as the boat snaked and sometimes surfed on current-born waves as we motored south through the narrow gap between Flores and Rinca and into the Indian Ocean.

Our destination was Gili Motang, a small island on the edge of western Flores. There we dived a stunning reef. Carpeted in soft corals, two submerged seamounts spired toward the surface. It felt as if we were deep into the pulsing heart of Komodo's reef life at last. Anthias moved in seemingly choreographed waves in and out of the protection of the corals; crinoids gripped every surface, feathery arms spread wide in a group feeding frenzy. Almost every crinoid sheltered a commensal shrimp or crab; nearly every soft coral was a haven for an allied cowry, brittlestar, or juvenile basket star.

Intent on photographing baitfish swirling among the enormous sea fans, I ignored an insistent tug on my right fin. As the tugging grew more intense, I grew more irritated, until I finally turned and glared into Burt's smiling face. Grinning so broadly that his mask skirt was stretched and leaking, he shoved a slate in my face. It read "Happy Anniversary. On the occasion of our 25th dive trip to Komodo National Park I have found the perfect gift."

He pointed down the reef slope just a few metres from the other divers. There sat what appeared to be a stunted lump of purple soft coral. A strange sort of calm settled over me as I struggled to make sense of the lump. Slowly I began to solve the living puzzle - first the eyes, then the upturned snout, finally the wide-stretched fins as delicate as hand-woven lace.

Burt had found one of the most rare scorpionfish, a Rhinopias, its lavender colour beginning to pale in the late afternoon light.

We ascended to a sea and sky glowing red with the setting sun. As the tinted light cascaded over us we looked down once more into Komodo's depths, satisfied that our 25th trip was as mesmerising as the first.

Bearings



Getting There

There are daily international flights to Denpasar, Bali, with dozens of carriers including Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, Malaysian Airways, JAL and national-airline Garuda. Trips will either depart from Benoa Harbour, only minutes away from the airport, or guests fly to one of several provincial towns in Komodo where they would then embark on the live-aboard.

Entry Requirements

Visitors must have a valid passport of six months. Most nationalities receive a 60-day tourist pass, but some require a visa (check with your local consulate). Make sure to have your return ticket handy.

Climate

Komodo experiences two dramatic climate changes in a year. April through mid-November is the dry season, while December through March is the monsoon. Temperature range: 26-31°C.

Best Time to Dive

There are many dive sites both in the south and north; there is no "best" season. Depending on the marine life opportunities, it is best to check with the operator to decide the best time for you.

Health and Safety

On a live-aboard, mosquitoes are not a concern, but take precautions on land. Drink bottled water, and make sure vaccinations are up to date.

Language and Local Customs

Bahasa Indonesia is the official language, but live-aboard and resort staff speak English.

Currency

Indonesian Rupiah (IDR). US\$1 = 9,200 IDR

Electricity

Power supply is 220V, with UK standard three-pin socket.

ASIAN DIVER

http://www.asiandiver.com/magazine/03feb_mar/dragon_realm.htm

> 250 Tanjong Pagar Road #06-01 St. Andrew's Centre Singapore 088541 Tel: +(65) 6324 1230 Fax: +(65) 6324 0506 Email: webmaster@asiandiver.com