

Indonesia's **Komodo Island**

Text and photos by Brandi Mueller





View of Gili Lawa Darat off Komodo Island (above); *Stiliger ornatus* nudibranch (right)

It was one of those diving vacations where the weather was perfect, the seas were calm, the sun was shining, and the waters were warmer than expected, with good visibility and plenty of life. The boat was beautiful, the crew was fantastic, the food was amazing, the coffee hot and the beer cold. And the diving location was like no other. Let me take you to Komodo.

(I will warn you in advance: This story is about one of "those" trips. It might make you green with envy, but it will definitely make you wish you

were there, and will probably have you planning your next dive trip to take place in this magical spot.)

For me, diving is like pizza, it's always good. But some trips stand out. Sometimes service goes above and beyond what is expected, and sometimes the ocean smiles upon you and shares her most amazing secrets with you.

Most dive travelers are pretty capable, we don't need anyone to greet us at the airport and collect our bags from the baggage claim so that we don't



Komodo dragon lizard



Colorful coral reef, Komodo Island, Indonesia. PREVIOUS PAGE: *Flabellina rubrolineata* nudibranch with eggs





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Indo Siren liveaboard in the bay of Komodo Island, Indonesia; Cheesecake dessert on Indo Siren; Dive gear neatly stowed for each guest aboard Indo Siren; One of the comfortable cabins of the liveaboard

diving. But, I will admit, all of the above sure is nice.

The liveaboard

The fantastic service of Siren Fleet started as soon as our little party of divers arrived in Bima on the island

of Sumbawa, just a short flight from Bali. We were greeted at the baggage claim and taken a short distance to the harbor where a dingy met us and took us to the beautiful liveaboard, *Indo Siren*. The *Indo Siren* was built specifically for diving and is a traditional ironwood Indonesian Phinisi sailing ship. The ship takes up to 16 passengers, but we lucked out with only five guests on our trip, with a crew of 15! Onboard, we spent some time getting to know our home for the next ten nights, including unpacking in our spacious cabins with ensuite bathrooms, and setting up dive gear on the dive deck, which had plenty of space with individual drawers to store things like flashlights and reef hooks and places to hang wetsuits.

The indoor lounge had comfy sofas and a large flat screen

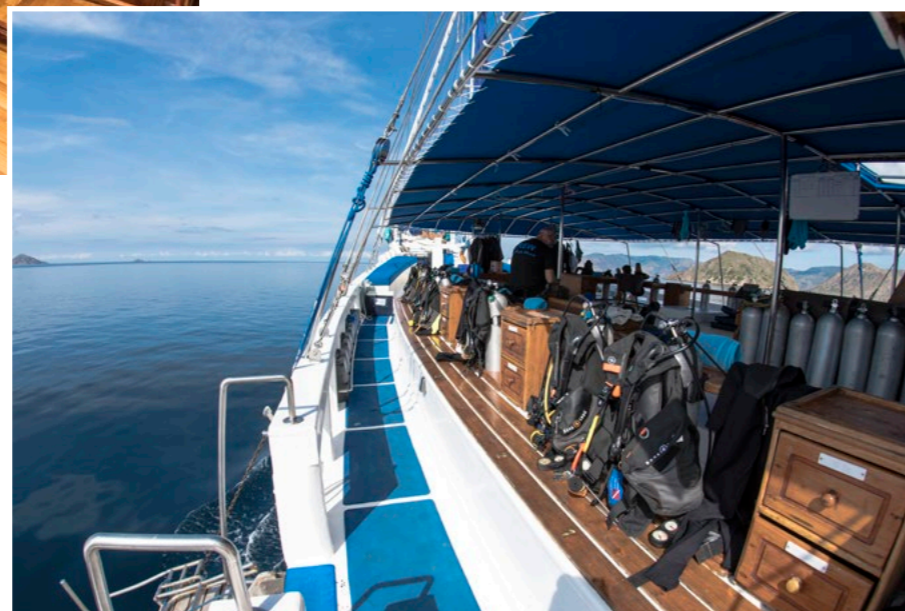


TV, and the dining area at the stern of the ship was open air, but with the possibility to drop plastic curtains to keep the rain out. My favorite area was the sundeck with lounge chairs, which was a great place to hang out while the boat was transiting.

For the photographers, there were several large tables with plenty of charging ports for camera set up, lens changes and charging. Each diver also got a drawer under the camera table to store chargers and other dry items.

After unpacking and exploring, we got settled in for the boat and dive briefing. After a fantastic dinner that promised of more to

even have to lift them. We don't need the crew to carry our cameras for us into the dingy or allow us to take scuba kits off in the water and pass them up to preserve our backs. We don't need someone making us eggs to order for breakfast, or four different options of entrées at lunch and dinner, as I'd happily eat peanut butter and jelly while diving, if that's all there was. We don't need laundry service or to get massages on the sundeck after



WWDAS
WORLDWIDE DIVE & SAIL
presents

Siren Fleet

Dive Komodo with the Indo Siren
Deluxe en-suite cabins, outdoor dining
& plush lounges, spacious dive deck,
camera station.

**FREE Nitrox and
Rental Equipment**

Contact us for
further information



Bubbles rising from the sea floor due to volcanic activity at the dive site known as Hot Rocks (left); Mimic octopus (above and below); Juvenile guineafowl pufferfish (center)



Eubranchus sp. Nudibranch

come, we had a few local Bintang beers and got to know our shipmates before heading off to bed for an early night.

Day 1: Sangeong Island

Bonito Reef. The captain and crew were up early, moving the boat northeast to the island of Sangeang, and our first dive was at Bonito Reef, a muck dive that was also our check-out dive. It was a pretty amazing check out dive too.

One of the muck critters that have eluded me for many years of diving is the mimic octopus. On this dive, I was following our dive guide, Inyo, when he stopped and put his hand up for me to stop too. I watched him get closer and slowly put his pointer stick out in front of two tiny eyes



sticking out of the sand. A few seconds later a tentacle emerged and touched the stick, checking out what it was, and then there was another tentacle. In a flash the whole mimic was out on the sand flashing white and brown stripes and gliding along the bottom. (I saw this all through my lens as I was snapping away). Back on the boat, I was laughing to myself how I

just checked off a major critter on my wish list... on the first dive!

Moving around Sangeang the water was flat as a lake and while we were sipping hot tea and coffee and talking about the first dive, dolphins broke the glass-like water right

next to the boat. Behind the dolphins, we looked up at the volcanic peak on Sangeang, which had small wisps of smoke emerging. The crew reassured us the volcano is "alive", not active, and it was just a little smoke.

Hot Rocks. More evidence of the volcano was seen on the second dive at a site called Hot Rocks. Streams of bubbles could actually be seen coming up from the sand and several rocks underwater were hot to the touch. As if just seeing the bubbles rise wasn't cool enough, there were also large sea fans with longnose hawkfish, brightly





Corallimorph decorator crab (left); Blue ribbon eel (above); Common octopus (right); Scorpionfish (below)

Stargazer Beach. Our last dive of the day was the night dive, and as we pulled away from the Indo Siren in the dingy, I was taken aback by how dark it was away from the lights of the boat. The moon had not



colored anthias and two leaf scorpionfish right next to each other.

Deep Purple. The dives seemed to get better and better and our third was at Deep Purple, named for the huge purple sea fans which were numerous. And guess what lives in sea fans? Bargibanti pygmy seahorses. I am always amazed when dive guides point these tiny beauties out because they blend in so well, but our dive guides found tons of them! We also saw blue ribbon eels, in both the black and the blue stages.



yet risen and there were more stars than I thought imaginable. The black outline of the island's hills sharply contrasted the star-spotted sky and the Milky Way was bright directly above us. Our night dive site was called Stargazer Beach, named after the critter, not the

actual stars. But at that moment, I was a stargazer and couldn't take my eyes off the sky until it was time to back-roll into the inky black water.

I have a theory that once you name a dive site after something, you never see it again, and although they guaranteed me there were plenty of stargazers there, I didn't see any. It didn't matter though, because there was plenty of other things to see, including wild-looking corallimorph decorator crabs, flatheads, nudibranchs and tons of huge

Juvenile yellow spotted boxfish



Schools of fish at Shot Gun (above); View of sunset over bay from top of Gili Lawa Laut (right); Hawkfish with isopod (below); Lionfish and anthias on reef (left)



lionfish, which seemed to sneak up on you and hide right under your stomach. Not a bad ending to a pretty awesome day.

Day 2: Komodo Island

Coral Garden. Continuing east we woke up to the island of Komodo and did our first dive at a site called Coral Garden. Fire dart fish were every-

where, and streams of dark-banded fusiliers swam past us. In the sand, long garden eels emerged feeding on plankton, until we got close and then they lowered themselves back into the sand.

Crystal Rock. During breakfast, we moved to Gili Lawa Laut, and the second dive was at Crystal Rock where there were lots of hawkfish with large isopods on their heads or tails. I always feel bad for these guys, as having a parasite on you must not be very nice.

Shot Gun. Our third dive was a bit

of an adrenalin rush called Shot Gun. The dive goes through the pass between Gili Lawa Laut and Gili Lawa Darat, which eventually narrows into a steep canyon filled with fish. The current builds as the canyon narrows and shoots you at high speed through the canyon. At the end of the passage, the current calmed down, and yellow sunbeams were just breaking through the water, giving the reef a peaceful glow after the adventure.

Sunset hike. Instead of a night dive, we went for a sunset hike up Gili Lawa Laut and I will admit during the hike, I was wondering what we were doing. This was vacation, no exercise necessary, right? But the view from the top was worth it. Looking down on the green hill islands, with contrasting sap-



Emperor angelfish and fan coral

SEACAM

silver



cinema of dreams



www.seacam.com



Sweetlips and anthias under a table coral

phire water of two bays, was fantastic, as the sun was setting and the sky began to turn orange.

Day 3: Currents and mantas

Castle Rock. First up was Castle Rock, one of the icon dives of the area, which is a pinnacle subject to strong currents. We back-rolled into the current, reef hooks ready, and it felt like we had just plunged into fish soup—except it was fast soup. The current was raging, and the fish were swimming just as fast. Huge schools of unicorn fish, jacks and banner fish rained down on us as larger groupers, tunas and sharks passed through them, as if the current wasn't even there. Off in the

distance, I saw a large shadow, which turned out to be a massive school of batfish that got closer and eventually passed right around me.

I kept thinking to myself after every dive, "How are they going to top that?" And it honestly did just keep getting better and better. After our post-dive hot ginger tea and another fantastic breakfast, we were off to Batu Bulong, which I would rename Anthia Heaven if I could. This area is also known as Current City, and when there is current, the marine life is amazing!

Batu Bulong. This site is another pinnacle rising from the seafloor, and the entire pinnacle seemed to move constantly, with orange, purple and pink



Nembrotha chamberlaini nudibranch





© J. Haschek

CLICK
HERE

EXPLORE THE
UNDERWATER
WORLD



BS KINETICS | EXTREME
PHOTO & VIDEO | CARBON FIBER
UW HOUSINGS

www.bskinetics.com



School of batfish (above); *Cuthona kanga* nudibranch (top right)

School of goatfish (above); Tiny goby (left) on sea pen

anthias. They coated the reef, and if you got close enough, they would surround you, almost blocking out the light. Sometimes it was hard to see through them to the reef and the

ed to see if it would change. While waiting, a few of us decided to go for a quick snorkel to check the current. We got in the dingy, headed over and dropped in.

As we were swimming, I was thinking to myself, what are the odds we will see a manta just aimless swimming around this reef? And then there were four, in a train, moving right past us! The cruise director called us back to the dingy, it was time to go diving.

Makassar Reef is a really long dive site, and with a quick current, divers travel a considerable distance during the dive. The current still wasn't quite strong enough when we jumped in, but it was still like flying over reef for ages and ages. We only had one manta on the dive (you only need one though, right?) But we also had three turtles, and even some blacktip reef sharks and Napoleon wrasse, while the other group of divers from our boat saw an eagle ray.

other critters, which included a considerable amount of nudibranchs, eels, lionfish, sweetlips and more.

Makassar Reef. Later we moved to Makassar Reef, one of two famous spots in Komodo for mantas. The current wasn't quite as strong as the crew wanted (more current means more mantas), so we wait-

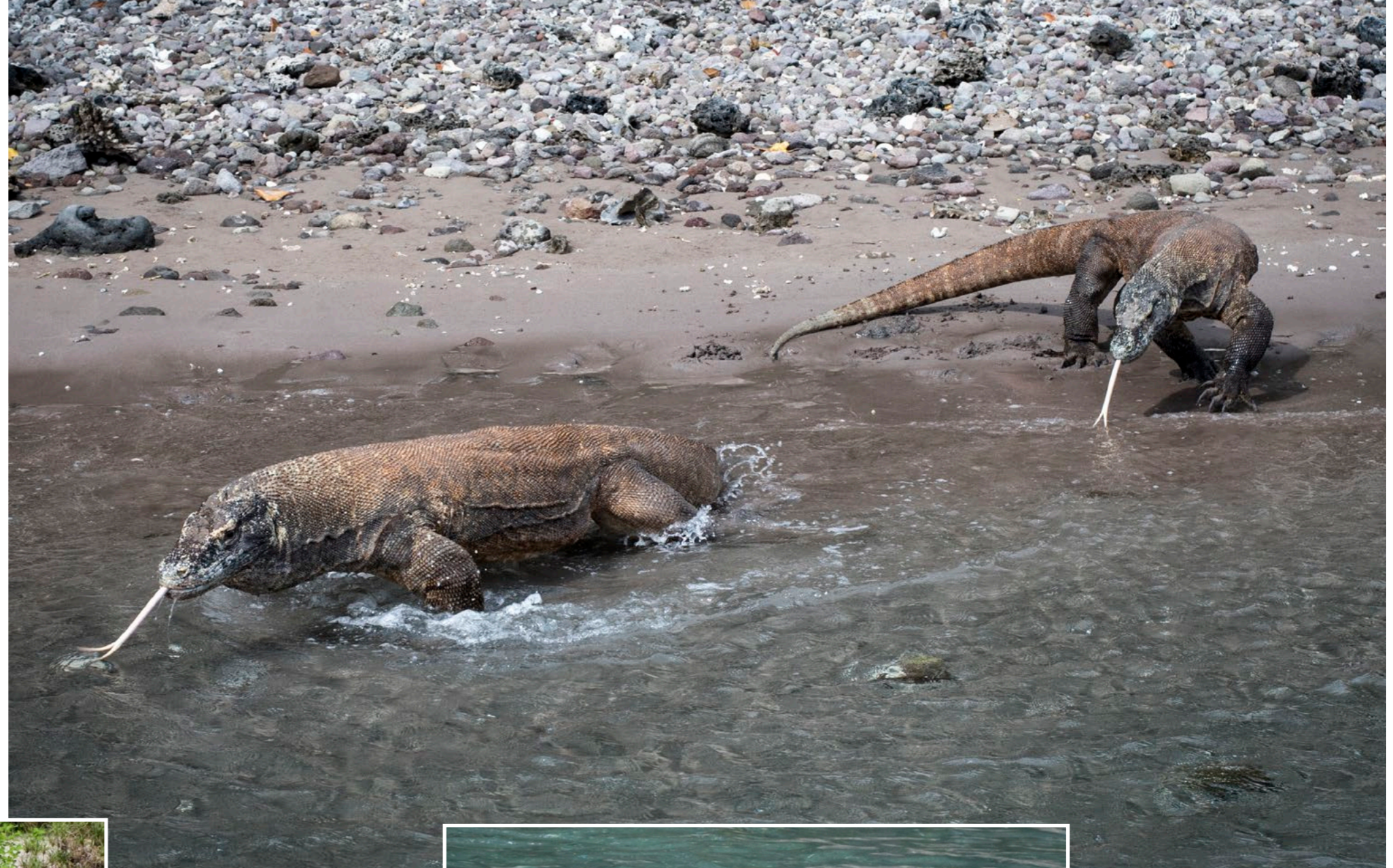


Day 4: DRAGONS!

Seeing Komodo dragons has been on my bucket list since I was in college and read Douglas Adam's book, "Last Chance to See." In it, he goes traveling to see several of the rarest and most endangered species on earth. I had never even heard of the Komodo dragon before or that they were the larg-

est species of lizard on Earth, weighing up to 70kg (150lb) and becoming three meters (10ft) long. Or that they can run up to 20km/h (12mph) and smell dead meat from up to eight kilometers (5mi) away.

The komodo dragon has two glands in the lower jaw that secrete toxins and some research



has shown the toxin may be an anticoagulant and cause muscle paralysis, or loss of consciousness, in their unfortunate prey. This correlates with the theory (which not all scientists agree upon) that Komodo dragon saliva has bacteria in it that increases the likelihood of sepsis in an animal they bite. So the dragon only has to bite its prey and then wait until the prey subsides to sepsis before getting an easy meal.

These lovely animals are also cannibalistic. In fact, after hatching, their babies hide in trees for up to two years, so they don't get eaten by adult



dragons, or potentially, their own parents. I was so excited to see them!

We took a short dingy ride from the Indo Siren to the

National Park, and park guides gave us a tour to hopefully show us some dragons. With dragon sticks in hand, we only walked for maybe ten minutes

and saw the crowd of people before we saw the dragon. I have never seen anything before that looked so prehistoric—like a dinosaur robot on display, but it was real. Constantly sticking its tongue out into the air (smelling us), it hardly moved, and even let park guides take photos of us standing behind the dragons. On the rest of the short walk, we saw one more dragon off the trail, and we saw several deer—dragon food—roaming around the park.

Manta Alley. Back onboard the *Indo Siren*, it was time to dive, and we were headed to



Komodo



the world famous Manta Alley. We did two dives here, and the current wasn't as strong as the dive guides wanted, but it was still magical. A manta was right below us when we jumped in, and it swam around us several times acting like we weren't even there.

reef to be cleaned. We stayed there as long as our bottom time would allow and made our way up to the alley-like treadmill. There was not much current, so we headed back to where we started and spent another 20 minutes at about 10m (30ft), with one manta that repeatedly swam around us.

We made our way to about 30m (100ft), where there was a cleaning station. Here, five mantas were doing barrel rolls and coming close to the

Torpedo Alley. After dragons and mantas, it had been a pretty spectacular day, and the boat moved to the southern tip of Rinca Island to an area known as Horseshoe Bay. We did the night dive at a muck site just off the beach called Torpedo Alley and even more amazing things were to be seen.

Nudibranchs, orangutan crabs, and crazy decorator crabs of all colors, were everywhere. And there were bobbit worms! Talk about your creepy nightmare creatures, this worm buries its body (up to 3m or 10ft long!) in the sand except for its

THIS PAGE: Manta rays at Manta Alley





Orangutan crab (top left) on bubble coral; Wire coral goby (above) on whip coral; Cuttlefish (left); Bobbit worm (lower left)



antennae and waits for prey to swim directly over the top of it, when it attacks! Its teeth can cut prey in half, and it has toxins it injects, which can kill prey much larger than itself. Here were things that go bump in the night—literally. There were bobbit worm antennae sticking up in the sand everywhere! It was a little creepy, but pretty awesome.

Day 5: Horseshoe Bay

We woke up to the sun rising and hadn't yet seen Horseshoe Bay in the daylight. The view from the boat was stunning. We were the only boat in the bay and green hills rose on all sides, with calm blue water below us.

We were only a little distance from the black sand beach we had dived the night before. And then I saw what was on the beach—more komodo dragons—right near where we had been diving

the night before! (The crew assured me that they do not go in the water unless they are really hungry... Good to know.) As we drank our coffee, we saw three dragons and a few monkeys on the beach.

I was still thinking after every dive, "It can't get any better than this," and then we saw the dive sites around Horseshoe Bay. It was by far some of the healthiest coral reefs I have ever seen. It was just life upon life upon life, with healthy hard corals, colorful soft corals, thousands of crinoids, sea fans and fish of all colors—everywhere. There were nudibranchs, cuttlefish and anemones with clownfish, too. I couldn't take enough photos, and our 70-minute



Cowfish on reef

another muck beach dive called Rhino Rocks where we saw the cutest little torpedo rays, snake eels, Coleman shrimp and a huge Spanish dancer nudibranch, over a foot long.



dives felt like only a few minutes.

We visited sites called Boulder, Cannibal Rock, and the Yellow Wall of Texas, which all had beautiful walls covered in life. I even saw the only-found-in-Komodo amphipods, which look like tiny ladybugs but live underwater. On the night dive, we did



Two baby white tip sharks hiding in reef at Batu Bolong (left); Scorpionfish and crinoids (above); Moray eel being cleaned by cleaner shrimp (right)



Wolf's pygmy octopus on night dive at Banana Island

Day 6: Rinca, Nusa Koda and Banana Islands

Rinca Island was as far southeast as we would go on this trip, and the crew left it up to us to choose which sites we would like to revisit on the way back to Bima. We decided to spend another day diving the amazing reefs of Horseshoe Bay. We dived the entrance of the Bay around the island of Nusa Koda, and Cannibal Rock again, as well as Rhino Rocks during the day, and had another awesome night dive at Banana Island.

One really cool thing we saw on the night dive was what I think is a Wolf's pygmy octopus. One of the world's smallest octopuses, it is red in color, and

the males have tiny filaments on the last few sucker discs of their arms.

Day 7: Mantas and Batu Bolong

It was time to start heading back north and west. We made a unanimous decision to stop at Manta Alley and do two more dives there. Twelve mantas showed up on both dives this time, and it was spectacular.

After that site, we headed to Batu Bolong, and although the current wasn't strong, we were once again engulfed by brightly colored anthias. One of the divers even found two baby whitetip sharks, hiding together in a hole, that were just adorable! After a hard day of diving amazing dive sites,

we decided to check out a nearby resort to have a few cocktails on the beach—not a bad way to end a day.

Day 8: Revisiting favorites

Golden Passage.

It was really nice to be able to go back to our favorite dive sites and do them again. We went back to both Crystal Rock and Castle Rock, and for the third dive, we did Golden Passage, which



had some of the strongest current we'd seen. The dive was nice and easy though, just going where the current pushed us, watching the pretty corals and fish go by.





Tiny amphipods on sponge (above); Manta ray at Manta Alley (right)



Scorpionfish resting on reef

I will admit that the perfect weather changed slightly, and we had a little rain on this day. The glassy water had changed to some small waves, which made the boat rock back and forth, with a slight creaking in the wood that made me feel like I was in an old house being rocked to sleep.

Day 9: Gili Banta

Tandak Rusa. We couldn't believe the end of our trip was already upon us, with only two dives left. Back at Gili Banta, we did a dive at Tandak Rusa, which was a sheer wall with sea fans and whip corals jetting off into the blue. Stonefish were everywhere, and I spent a long time photographing an orangutan crab, which was just in the right place.

At the end of the dive, we

were doing our safety stop in quite a lot of current, and I kept looking at the dive guide to make sure we weren't supposed to drift off with it. When I looked towards him, he pointed off into the blue. I turned the other way, and there was a manta, at least two meters across, almost right next to me. I stopped kicking in the current and drifted with the manta for a few minutes before finishing my safety stop and ascending.

Gili Banta. Our last dive was also off Gili Banta, and it was a pretty reef upon which we could reflect on our amazing

adventure and say goodbye to Komodo. Back on board, the crew took care of everything for us, making sure our gear was washed and dried, while we broke out some local Bingtang beer to relive our trip with our new-found friends and pretended to pack.

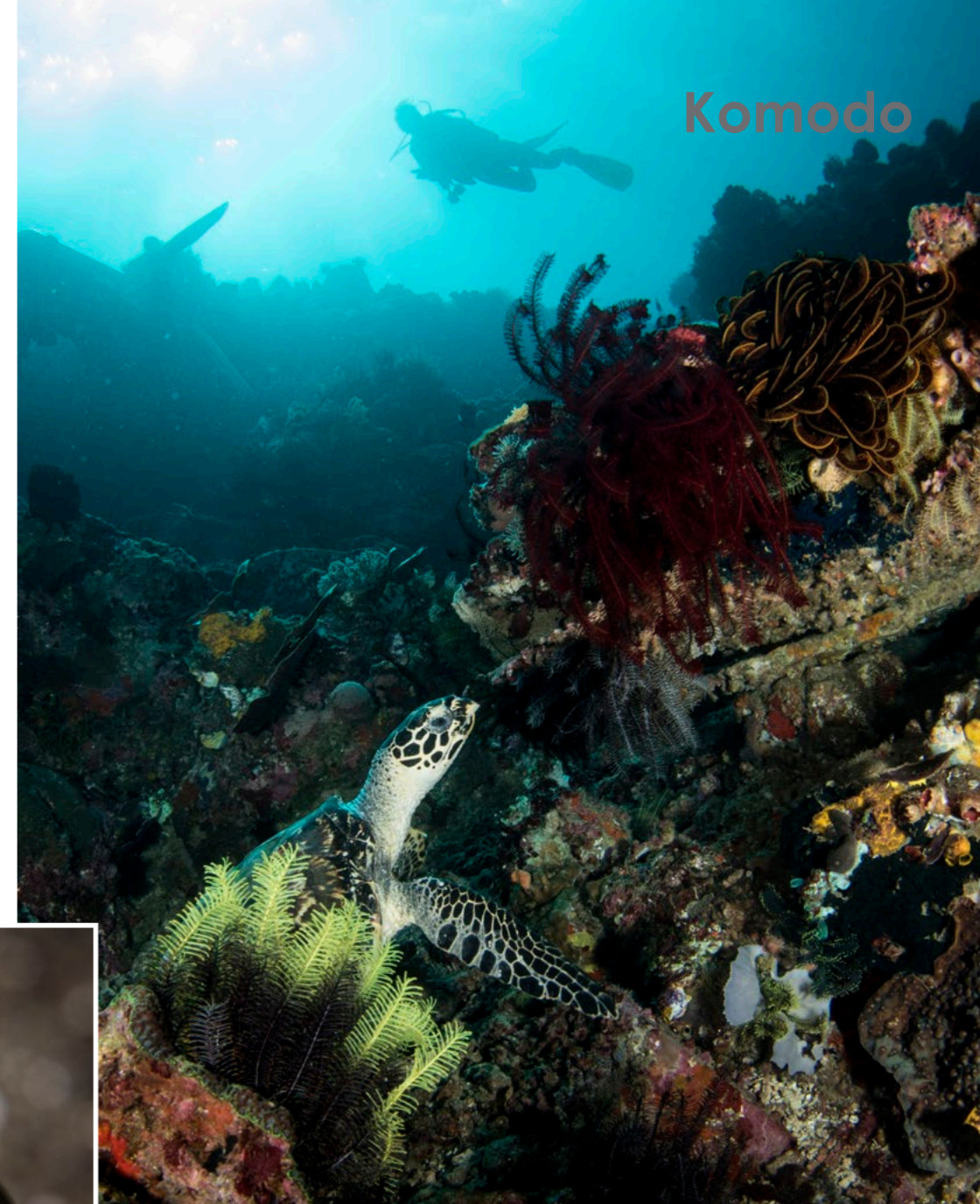
Dive conditions

It has been documented that the region, this year, has been experiencing a severe El Niño event. I was quite worried about diving in the cool the waters of southern Komodo and Rinca (usually 18-22°C, July through October). However, for us, the



Common cuttlefish





LEFT TO RIGHT: Torpedo ray; Moorish idols and anthias on reef; *Tambja morose* nudibranch; Diver and sea turtle on reef; Hinge-beak shrimp



Two-eyed coral fish

waters were abnormally warm, and I didn't experience anything colder than 27°C.

While I enjoyed diving in only a rash guard, excessively warm temperatures like this are not good for the reef, and we did see evidence of coral bleaching. The crew also noted that some of the critters they usually see were not present. Normally a 5-7mm wet-suit is recommended for diving Komodo, even though we didn't experience those cooler temperatures on our trip.

Much of the diving and marine life is also affected by strong currents, making diving difficult but also bringing the most life—particularly big animals. Stronger currents occur during the new and full moon, and we did not see the strong currents for which the area is usually known. Marine life was

still plentiful, and diving was easy, without much current. But I am told there is usually a lot more current than we saw on our dives, and reef hooks are a common accessory most divers usually need to use on a lot of dives.

I may have said this once already, but for me, diving is always good. But this was one of those trips where everything fell together perfectly. The boat, the crew, the other guests, amazing diving, good company, and amazing experiences have all led to some pretty fantastic memories.

I also really loved the combination of diving and a few land excursions to really feel like I got to see a lot of what the area has to offer both above and below. Just



going to Komodo was a check on my Bucket List, and I also got to check off Komodo dragons, mimic octopus, at least three species of nudibranchs I had never seen before, and I made some amazing new friends. It doesn't get any better than this. ■

Special thanks goes to Siren Fleet for their generous hospitality and assistance (SirenFleet.com).

Brandi Mueller is a PADI IDC Staff Instructor and boat captain living in the Marshall Islands. When she's not teaching scuba or driving boats, she's most happy traveling and being underwater with a camera. For more information, visit: Brandiunderwater.com.

SOURCES:
[HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/KOMODO_DRAGON](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Komodo_Dragon)
[HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/EUNICE_APHRODITOIS](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eunice_Aphroditois) (BOBBIT WORM)
KOMODONATIONALPARK.ORG



THIS PAGE: Floating dead fish—the result of illegal blast fishing in Horseshoe Bay, part of the No Take Zone of Komodo National Park

Dynamite fishing still a hazard in protected areas

Text and photos
by Brandi Mueller

My head was just not grasping what I was seeing, as my gaze extended across the surface of the water where fish floated upside down and sideways, all over the place. Still not understanding what I was looking at, one of the dive guides said, “Dynamite.”

Dynamite fishing is an incredibly damaging way of getting fish quickly, by setting off small explosions on the reef. The fish die from the blast impact, with many rising to the surface because of inflated swim bladders, making it easy and quick to collect many fish. Unfortunately, this practice destroys the reef and causes many of the fish to rupture their swim bladders, sinking to the bottom (and cannot be collected). It

is also wasteful, as only the larger fish and a few species are desirable for eating. The rest are left dead and floating, while vast portions of reefs are reduced to rubble.

I had heard about this practice, read about it in my college conservation classes, and had seen it listed as a threat to the ocean. But never before had I seen the surface of the water littered with dead fish.

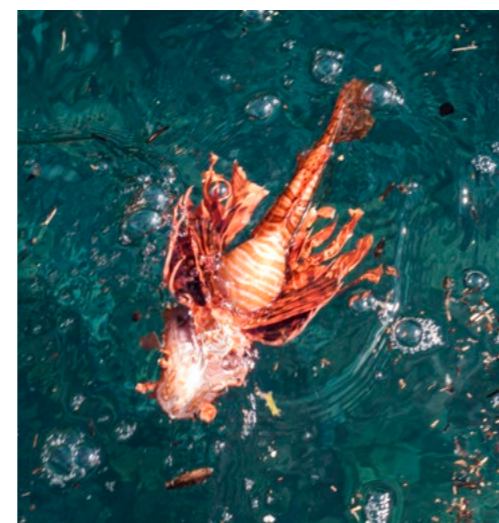
Devastating impact

As divers, we scuba dive to get a brief glimpse of a world that is a large part of our planet, but at the same time, a different place from the one in which we live. But these days, it is hard to find a television program, book or magazine about the ocean without at least a succinct message about how the oceans are in danger. Overfishing, destructive fishing practices, pollution from both trash and land run-off dumping chemicals into the water, climate change—the list goes on and on. Rarely do we see first-hand, the

results of these activities. In video or film, we might see shark fins piled up on a dock, or photos of trash in the water, but it leaves one with the idea that this is happening in a faraway place.

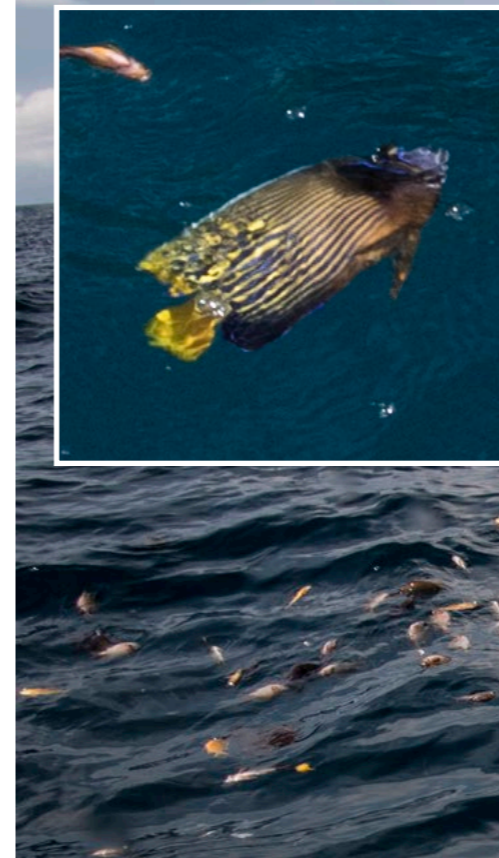
First-hand observation

During my trip on the *Indo Siren* liveaboard, our group of divers were diving Horseshoe Bay on Rinca Island. On the second day, we had just finished a fairly epic first dive. The sun had just risen over the island hills and was shining down on the wall covered in



corals, sponges and dotted with crinoids. We had just ascended after a 70-minute dive, and with BCDs inflated, were floating in the clear blue water, with blue skies above us.

I was thinking about a small turtle we saw, which was munching on some coral, and the tiny amphipods we observed, which are only found in this region. It had been a really good dive. I had taken probably one hundred photos. We were happy and radiating post-dive bliss as we waited



for the boat to come pick us up.

The inflatable dingy made its way to our group. As we passed up fins and climbed out of the water, I looked over at the little bay and I noticed some trash had welled up in the calm outcrop—not an uncommon sight in Indonesia, or in most places, these days. Everyone was in the back of the boat, and the dingy driver pointed down into the water where there was a yellow tang beside the boat.

It must have just happened, the fish still looked perfectly intact, like they might just spontaneously recover and swim back to their colorful reef below. But they didn't.

Damaging heritage sites

It amazes me that this is happening in Komodo National Park, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site and a No Take Zone. This is an area where tourism brings in a massive amount of money and which requires tourists to pay a park fee to “maintain” it. And it happened with our

44m(145ft) boat nearby.

We wondered if the dynamite fishers had just done it, and when they saw our dive skiffs come around the corner, they had fled; Or if they had already collected what they wanted and just left the carnage they would not even eat behind.

Eye-opener

As you can imagine, seeing the results of blast fishing put a bit of a cloud over us all for the rest of the day. But for me, I am glad we saw it. I think it is important to be reminded that there is still a problem. The hazard is not just to fish and reef, divers have also been injured or killed by blast fishing in other parts of the world.¹

This perfect, incredible, beautiful, amazing area I had just experienced is in danger still. These practices still happen. It is easy to just not think about it, or think that “it used to happen”, when in fact, it is still happening. A solution needs to be found, or wonderful dive trips like the one I just experienced on the *Indo Siren* will not

be something a person can experience again or share with others.

Finding solutions

Playing devil's advocate for a moment, I know that some people who are dynamite fishing are doing it because they have a need to feed and support their families, with the money they gain from selling the fish.

Our solutions to the problem need to address how to better feed the Earth's current population of seven billion people. To prevent blast fishing, alternatives need to be made available for fishers, awareness must be raised, and we need to make ethical fishing gear available to everyone. The Indonesian government has taken measures to curb blast fishing in Komodo, but enforcement continues to be a challenge.²

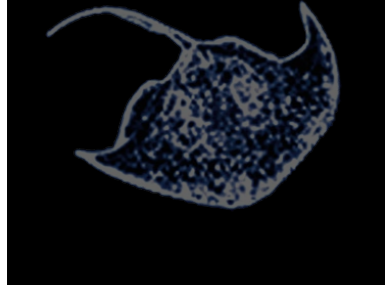
I do not have the answers, but I have to admit, seeing one of my favorite fish—an emperor angelfish—dead and floating on the surface, needlessly killed and left to rot, broke my heart. ■

¹ GMANETWORK, PHILSTAR, SUNSTAR

² WORLD WILDLIFE FUND



fact file



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, STATE.TRAVEL.US, CDC.GOV

Komodo Island, Indonesia



Location of Komodo Island on global map (right); Location of Komodo Island on map of Indonesia (below)



NASA

tradition and dress modestly.
Internet users: 20 million (2009)

Language Bahasa Indonesian, plus 253 tribal languages. English, Spanish and German are spoken on dive liveboards.

Health Mosquito-borne illnesses are a problem and there are cases of malaria, dengue, Zika, and other. Avoid mosquito bites by using mosquito repellent and covering up during times when mosquitos are out. Water and food-borne illness can also be a problem so be sure to drink only bottled or filtered water and that food is cooked thoroughly.

often accepted onboard liveboards and in resorts. MasterCard and Visa are widely accepted in cities and tourist areas. Major airports and cities have

Decompression chamber Indonesia has several hyperbaric chambers, including chambers in Bali and Makassar.

Travel/Visa Passport valid for six months beyond intended stay is required. There is a Visa-On-Arrival for 35 countries including USA, UK, most European and Asian countries. It is US\$25 for a stay of up to 30 days.

Security Indonesia has had recent incidences of terrorism and travelers should be aware of their surroundings, avoid public demonstrations, and be cautious or avoid traveling at night. Petty crime is a problem, especially in cities, and credit card and ATM fraud are on the rise. Use only reputable and marked taxis, preferably arranged by hotels or shopping centers.

Web sites Indonesia Travel www.indonesia.travel/en
Komodo National Park www.komodonationalpark.org

History Indonesia is made up of about 13,500 islands, 6,000 of which are inhabited which straddle the Equator. Komodo National Park was created in 1980 to protect the Komodo dragon and it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Man and Biosphere Reserve. The reserve includes the islands of Komodo, Rinca, and Padar and 26 other smaller islands. Beyond just protecting dragons, it also protects an immensely biodiverse marine environment, which makes up 67 percent of the reserve. Government: presidential republic. Capital: Jakarta

Geography Located in Southeastern Asia, Indonesia is an archipelago situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Coastline: 54,716km. Terrain consists primarily of coastal lowlands, with interior mountains on larger islands. Komodo National Park is 1,817 sq km, with extensions being proposed. The park sits over the juncture of two continental plates which had led to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. There are no active volcanoes in the park, but nearby Gili Banta and Gunung Sangeang Api cause tremors.

Climate Komodo has one of the driest climates of Indonesia, with the dry season occurring

May-October, and the rainy season, November-April. Throughout Indonesia climate is usually tropical, with hot and humid weather year-round and slightly cooler temperatures in mountain regions. Typhoons are rare. Water temperatures vary from the north and south of the park. The north of Komodo National Park the water temperatures range from 25-29°C, in the south water temperatures are 22-28°C. Temperatures as cool as 18°C have been seen in the south, however, this year, probably due to the El Niño event water temperatures were considerably warmer than normal with the coolest temperature we saw being 28°C. Diving can be done year round in Komodo but the calmest weather and the best time for seeing the most marine life is during the dry season of July-October.

Environmental issues Indonesia has an immense amount of important ecosystems both above and below. Rainforests cover over 57% of the land and 20% of the world's coral reefs are in Indonesian waters.

Studies have shown there are over 3,000 species of fish, over 600 species of corals in the area and reef surveys have shown the Raja Ampat Islands to have the most bio diverse on Earth and the northern tip of Sulawesi having more than 70% of all known species to be found in the Indo-Western Pacific. There are 8 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Indonesia including Komodo National Park. The large and increasing population as well as continued industrialization has led to many environmental issues in Indonesia. Deforestation and pollution, threatens topside ecosystems and underwater treats include commercial fishing, destructive fishing practices, pollution, chemical runoff from things such as fertilizers, dredging, and climate change. This year's El Niño has caused warmer than normal water temperatures lead-

ing to coral bleaching. The waters of Komodo National Park protected but this protection is rarely enforced.

Economy A vast polyglot nation, Indonesia has experienced modest economic growth in recent years. Economic advances were made with significant financial reforms. In 2009, when the global financial crisis hit, Indonesia fared well compared to its regional neighbors. It was one of the only G20 members posting growth in 2009, alongside China and India. However, the government still faces ongoing challenges of improving the country's insufficient infrastructure, labor unrest over wages, and high oil prices affecting fuel subsidy programs.

Currency Indonesian rupiah (IDR). US dollars and Euros are

ample ATMs but they can be scare (and possibly not working) on the smaller islands. Currency exchange rates will be better in large cities like Bali and Jakarta and it may be difficult to exchange money in places such as Bima. The Indo Siren accepts credit cards, US dollar, and Euros onboard. Exchange rates: 1USD = 13,264.76 IDR; 1EUR = 14,936.17 IDR; 1GBP = 17,468.06 IDR; 1AUD = 10,102.04 IDR; 1SGD = 9,782.70 IDR

Population The population of Indonesia was 237.6 million in the last census in 2010. Komodo National Park has a population of about 4,000 people and just outside the park over 17,000. Religions: Muslim 86.1%, Protestant 5.7%, Roman Catholic 3%, Hindu 1.8% (2000 census). Note: Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Visitors are encouraged to respect local

