

Indonesia's Dragon Isle Komodo

CLOCKWISE: The brilliant colors of a fire urchin; An impressive view of the surf break below Uluwatu; Komodo dragon



Komodo Island kept bobbing in and out of my field of vision as we continued to circle in water that was churning. I could almost see the Pacific colliding with the Indian Ocean. Ali, one of the many talented dive guides from the luxury liveaboard *Arenui*, popped up from the depths and shouted, “The current is going off!”

The negative back roll entry couldn't come soon enough, and promptly, we were plummeting downward in cool blue water swirling with life. Ali was right, the current was pumping, and we worked hard to get down to depth—all the while, jacks and fusiliers were cutting lazily through the water as if there were no resistance at all.

We were here because when two oceans meet, there is magic to behold. The cool, nutrient rich

waters of the Pacific combine with the warm shallow waters of the Indian Ocean are the perfect recipe for thriving life and diversity. Add into the mix a living volcano and deadly oversized lizards and you have yourself Komodo National Park.

The area of Komodo is comprised of three large islands, Komodo, Rinca and Padar as well as 26 more, and was originally protected in 1980 for the dragons themselves. However, later exploratory diving,

Text and photos by
Abigail Smigel Mullens





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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A snorkeler enjoys crystal clear waters and white sand beaches; One of the visitor's for which Manta Alley was named, located in Tora Langkoi Bay along the south coast of Komodo; Pink Beach magic—a green sea turtle, schooling fish and sun rays. INSETS: Colorful flora of Indonesia

we swam into a flatter patch of the dive site known as Crystal Rock and had a reprieve from the impressive current. Here, brightly colored soft corals bloomed around us, and the fusiliers and trevally continued their tango of cat and mouse above our heads.

When the sun suddenly became blocked, all our heads snapped skyward to witness the fusiliers compacting tightly into a seemingly endless school, as the trevally made their move. It was impressive, and I sensed that we were not the only ones on the reef observing the action.

Continuing on, we again fought the current and connected our

reef hooks to the cusp of the reef. Below us, we beheld the show of white-tip sharks and the occasional

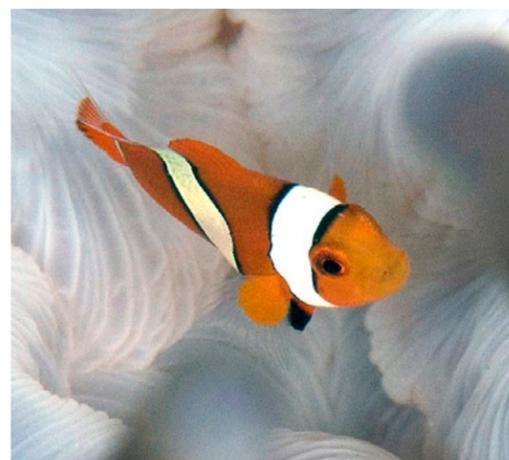


largely by Larry Smith, revealed the wonders below the land of the lizards. Hence, the park, in its entirety, was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991.

Diving

Skirting the edge of the seamount,





grey reef shark while our regulators ceaselessly vibrated against our mouths.

Both Crystal Rock and Castle Rock are dive sites where one could feel the power of Komodo's unpredictable and infamous currents. But to really experience the bounty these nutrients' yield, we had to travel south, and add another layer.

The waters in Horseshoe Bay, at the southern end of Rinca Island, harbor constant and unpredictable upwellings of cold ocean water from the Savu Sea. These currents carry nourishment and spark phytoplankton blooms that on one hand drop the

visibility, but on the other produce the most resplendent reefs I have ever laid eyes on.

Tucked in Horseshoe Bay is Cannibal Rock, named for a voracious Komodo dragon observed eating another. To say the reefs are flourishing is an understatement.

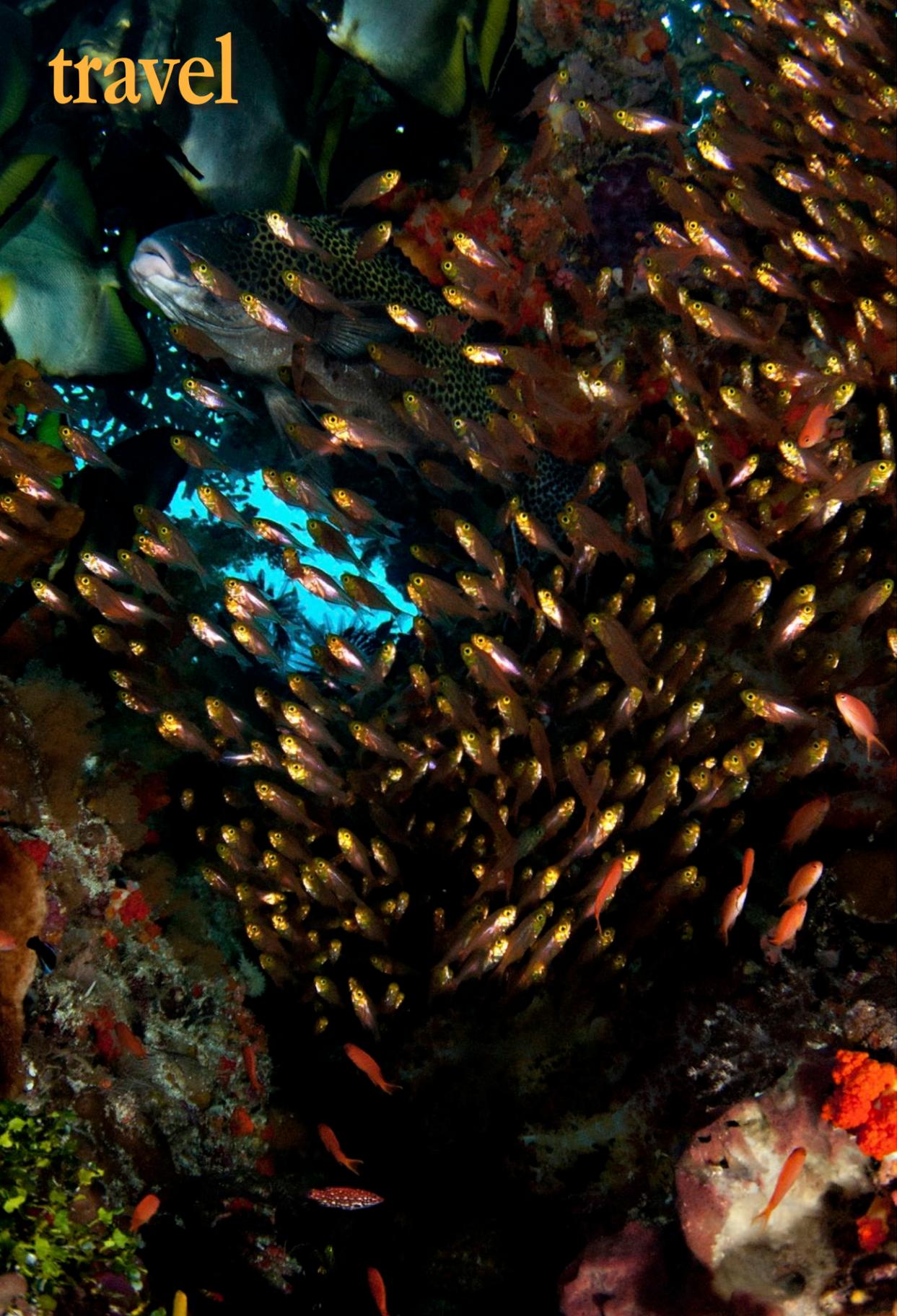
Here, life thrived and critters jostled for precious real estate. As we slowly sank down the wall that comprised this dive site, I heard our talented cruise director, Debbie Benton, giggling through her regulator and pointing. On the wall, tucked into some sponges, was the tiniest juvenile warty frogfish I had ever seen. How she spot-

ted it, I will never know.

The icing on the cake was located at the base of the wall in all his pink glory—a paddle flap rhinopia. He shifted to show me his best angle, and I snapped a few photos. The dive just got better as we continued—nudibranchs, sea apples, anemonefish, eels, crabs and more frogfish. I was dazzled by the shades of purple and green, as we made our way up the wall.

In this area, night dives became even more appealing than an early cocktail on the upper deck of our splendid boat. Although they were shallow, 45 feet at most, the black,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A tight school of fusiliers swim past a soft coral covered rock off Crystal Rock; A pink Paddle Flap Rhinopia mugs for the camera; One example of the unique and gorgeous nudibranchs found in Komodo (*Eubranchus mandapamensis*); Juvenile anemonefish in purple anemone



Komodo

lunar landscape was host to some of the most bizarre critters most of us hoped to find.

I was seeking the bobbit worm. Named after the infamous Lorena Bobbit, this creature is the stuff of nightmares. It has an opalescent, segmented body, topped with incisors that look like they were put there for a reason. Even more disconcerting is that for the three to six inches exposed there is liable to be nine feet more below the sand.

On our second dive at Torpedo Alley, I responded to much tank clinking and swam to a group of at least six divers surrounding one such critter. Apparently no one else had brought their camera, and they ushered me into the stew pot to shoot. As I lined up for my first frame, I looked up and noticed I was suddenly alone with a bobbit worm. One flash of my strobes and the thing emerged two more inches. What was I dealing with here? I wracked my brain but couldn't think of any diver tales of bobbit worm attacks. I shot a few more frames and swam off, looking over my shoulder as I went.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are Komodo's manta rays. One of the best locations

to consistently see these gentle giants is at Manta Alley, located at the southern tip of Komodo Island—although the day boats will tell you, Takat Makassar.

Here, the currents smashed up against the rocks concentrating phytoplankton for feasting. Small mantas skimmed the surface above us while the occasional

large manta swam low across the bottom, over the tops of the divers as if patrolling the deep. These mesmerizing creatures would hover motionless for several seconds and then, with one beat of their expansive wings, disappear into the blue.

Of course, we walked with the



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Glassy sweepers swirl under a coral outcropping; A lizardfish secures dinner; A cuttlefish profile; Juvenile clown frogfish in the reef



A temple attendee in Bali (left); A small Balinese temple goer (below); One of many Balinese temples (right)

Komodo



A temple offering in Bali (left); A resident of the island of Bali, which flights to Labuan Bajo fly through (right); Something not to miss are Bali's colorful temples (far right)

Komodo dragons as well, the draw for almost 45,000 visitors a year. Unique to this area, they are found nowhere else in the world.

Dive sites

Komodo National Park is comprised of several islands, the largest being Komodo and Rinca. This dive trip is a two-wetsuit trip with warmer waters along the north and waters cooled by upwellings along the south. Although cool water sounds less than appealing on a tropical vacation, with it comes nutrients that creates an explosion of life below the surface.

Hot Rocks. The dive guides will assure you that Gunung Api, the volcano on Sangeang Island, is "alive" rather than active. Black sand contrasts with the fluorescent colors of soft corals and crinoids creating a feast for the eyes. The volcano won't allow you to ignore its presence however, bubbles of gases escape through the black sand in streams that you can swim through.

Castle Rock. An exhilarating dive with strong currents, you will want to bring your reef hook for this one. Hook in and watch the show while whitetip reef sharks pace back and forth along the reef and trevally hunt fusiliers. Don't forget to take your eyes off the show to view lush soft corals all around you.

Crystal Rock. Just the tip of Crystal Rock juts out from the swirling waters, leaving no indication of the riches that

surround its submerged self below. Schools of anthias and fusiliers pulse over the rich underwater landscape of soft and hard corals. If you look into the deep blue you may catch a shark sighting.

Cannibal rock. This dive site got its name from the large Komodo dragon feeding on another of its kind when this area was being explored. Below, the richness of this reef will leave you



awestruck. Frogfish, nudibranchs, anemonefish and even rhinopias, if you're lucky. You won't even mind the cooler temps and green water.

Torpedo Alley. Torpedo Alley is named for the small electric stingrays that can be found here. This shallow dive makes for a productive night dive with usual suspects of frogfish, bobtail squid, skeleton shrimp and even the bobbit worm. Hop from interesting critter to even more bizarre critter for your entire dive at 30 feet.

Manta Alley. This is the spot for in Komodo for diving with mantas. It is located along the south coast of Komodo and harbors strong currents in relatively shallow water that the mantas love. Feeding lazily at the surface or hovering

with what seems like no effort at all, these animals are a sight to behold.

The diversity of life that we witnessed, large and small, land and sea, will keep me coming back to this very special place. A dive location anywhere else in the world will be hard pressed to top it. ■

Abigail Smigel Mullens is an underwater photographer based in San Francisco, California. She specializes in both underwater children's portraits and travel/lifestyle underwater photography. See: www.seas-tarportraits.com and www.abigailsmigel.com



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Underwater photographer, Abigail Smigel Mullens; Residents of Bali's Uluwatu temple; Not a bad view from an Indonesian villa's pool; A Komodo dragon walks along Rinca Island; The *Arenui* with a late afternoon glow

fact file



Komodo, Indonesia



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, SCUBADOC.COM, E-MED.CO.UK

History Komodo National Park was established in 1980 and was declared a World Heritage Site and a Man and Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1986. Initially created to conserve the Komodo dragon, the park now encompasses marine species as well as terrestrial.

Geography The Komodo National Park is a national park in Indonesia located within the Lesser Sunda Islands. The park itself includes the three larger islands of Komodo, Padar and Rincah, as well as 26 smaller ones, with a total area of 1,077 square miles.

Climate The climate is one of the driest of Indonesia with annual rainfall between 31.5 and 40 inches. The dry season runs from May to October and the average temperature runs about 100 degrees fahrenheit.

Population Approximately 4,000 people live within the park. These inhabitants are members of villages that existed prior to the park's inception in 1980. Just outside the park's borders the population increases dramatically with

a number just under 17,000.

Currency

Local currency is the Indonesian Rupiah. American dollars are also widely accepted here. There are a handful of ATMs in Labuan Bajo, but your best bet is to bring cash to avoid the high exchange rate.

Language Indonesian is the official language here, with a smattering of local languages spoken as well. Additionally, many people speak English.

Health Malaria and diarrhea are problems in the villages within the park due to the scarcity of fresh water, especially during the dry season. All of Mesa island's water is brought in from Labuan Bajo.

RIGHT: Location of Komodo on global map
BELOW: Location of Komodo on map of Indonesia



Park is on a liveaboard as there are no resorts within the park itself. However, if you choose not to book a liveaboard, Labuan Bajo is a great destination for day trips to the park for scuba diving as well as experiencing the majestic dragons.

Getting There

The jumping off point for Komodo is Labuan Bajo. Flights are almost daily from Denpasar, Bali via the four airlines Merpati, Lion Air, Trans Nusa and Indonesia Air Transport. Your liveaboard will more than likely assist in booking this leg of travel.

Web sites
Indonesia Tourism
indonesia.travel ■

Decompression Chamber Unfortunately there is no decompression chamber in and around Komodo. The closest chamber is located in Bali, Indonesia.

BALI, INDONESIA
Sanglah General Hospital
USUP Sanglah Denpasar Jl.
Diponegoro, Denpasar 80114
62-361-227911 extension 232

Planning Your Trip
Currently the only way to sleep in Komodo National





ANDREY BIZYUKIN

Issues with cyanide fishing

The coral reefs of Komodo are amongst the richest in the vast Indonesian archipelago and yet, despite being designated U.N. World Heritage Site and a National Marine Park, they continue to be plagued by the twin scourges of cyanide and dynamite fishing.

The remoteness of the 202,340-hectare reserve means that it is extremely difficult to police the marine park, and rogue fishermen take advantage of this to ply their incredibly destructive practices.

There are conflicting reports as to the severity of these practices, with dive operators and conservationists saying the government is not doing enough to protect the area while Sustyo Iriyono, the head of the marine park authority, said problems are being exag-

gerated and denied claims of lax enforcement.

Iriyono said park rangers have arrested more than 60 fishermen over the past two years, including a group of young men captured recently after they were seen bombing fish in waters in the western part of the park.

One of the suspects was shot and killed after the fishermen tried to escape by throwing fish bombs at the rangers, Iriyono said. Three others, including a 13-year-old, were slightly injured.

"You see?" said Iriyono. "No one can say I'm not acting firmly against those who are destroying the dive spots!"

Dive operators beg to differ and say enforcement has dropped dramatically since 2010, when the government reclaimed sole control of operations.

For two decades before that The Nature Conservancy, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization, had helped the government confront destructive fishing prac-

tices in the marine park by creating "no-take zones", protecting spawning areas, putting coastal areas off limits and using park rangers, navy personnel and local police to enforce the restrictions.

Then in 2005, the government gave a 30-year permit to Putri Naga Komodo, a nonprofit joint venture company partially funded by The Nature Conservancy and the World Bank to operate tourist facilities in hopes of eventually making the park financially self-sustaining.

Entrance and conservation fees, previously just a few dollars at the time—went up significantly giving the park, with around 30,000 local and international visitors annually, a budget of well over US\$1 million. But outraged government officials demanded that the funds go directly into the state budget and the deal collapsed in 2010, when Putri Naga Komodo's permit was terminated.

■

„If the sharks die,
the oceans will die!“

Andrew Cobb, Ambassador Sharkproject South Afrika



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