

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





Komodo



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

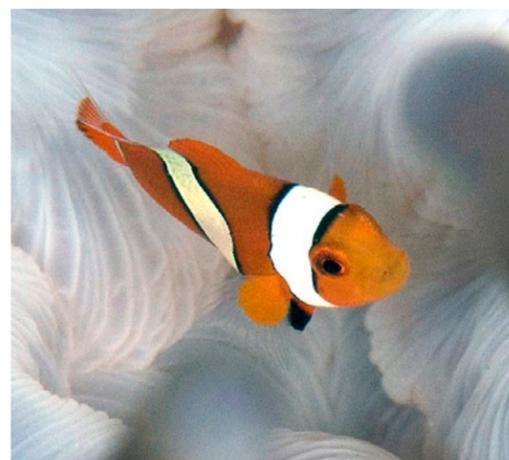


largely by Larry Smith, revealed the wonders below the land of the lizards. Hence, the park, in its entirety, was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991.

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.

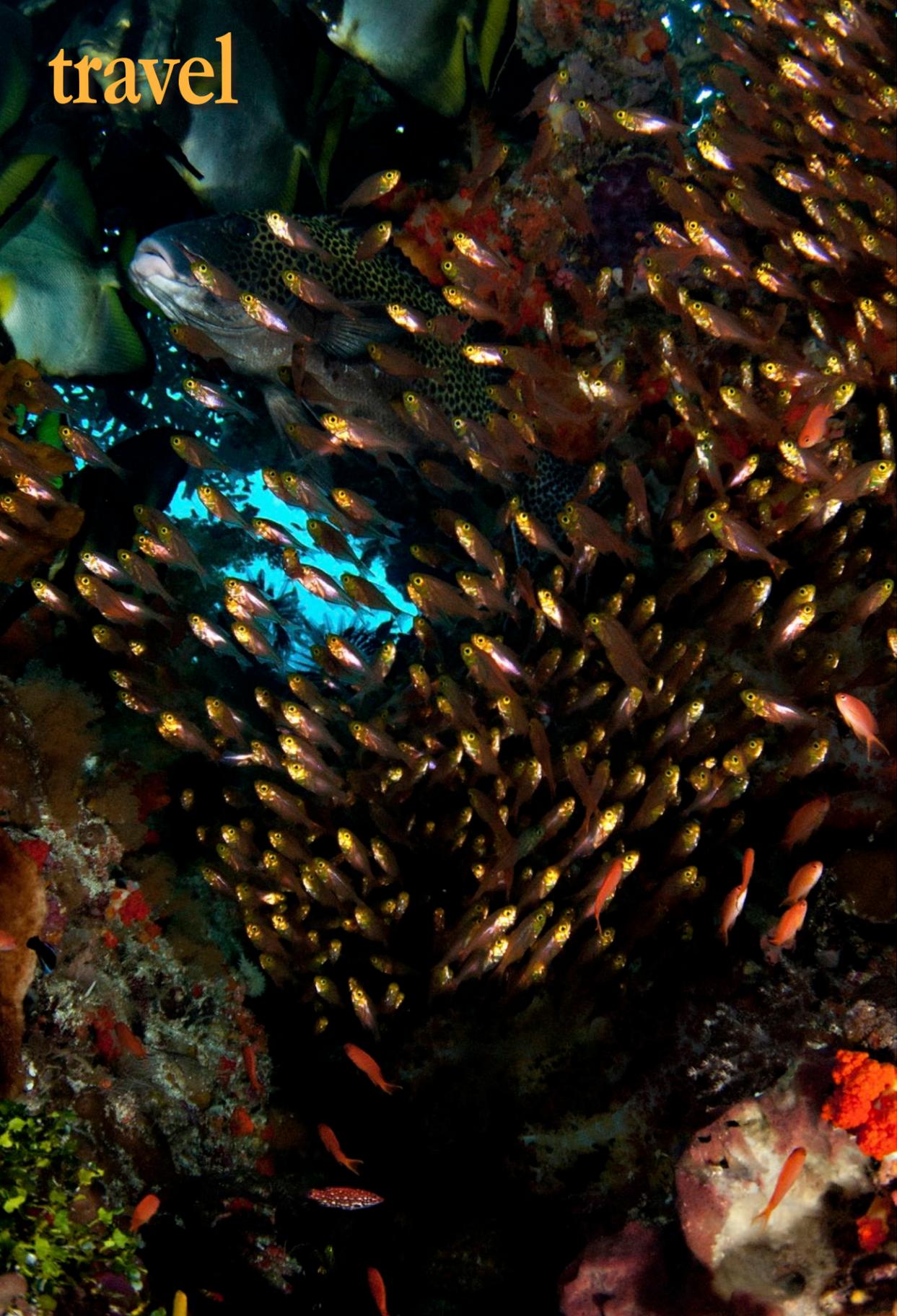
Here, life thrived and critters jostled for precious real estate. As we slowly sank down the wall that comprised this dive site, I heard our talented cruise director, Debbie Benton, giggling through her regulator and pointing. On the wall, tucked into some sponges, was the tiniest juvenile warty frogfish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



Komodo



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 liveboard as there are no resorts within the park itself. However, if you choose not to book a liveboard, 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 liveboard 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



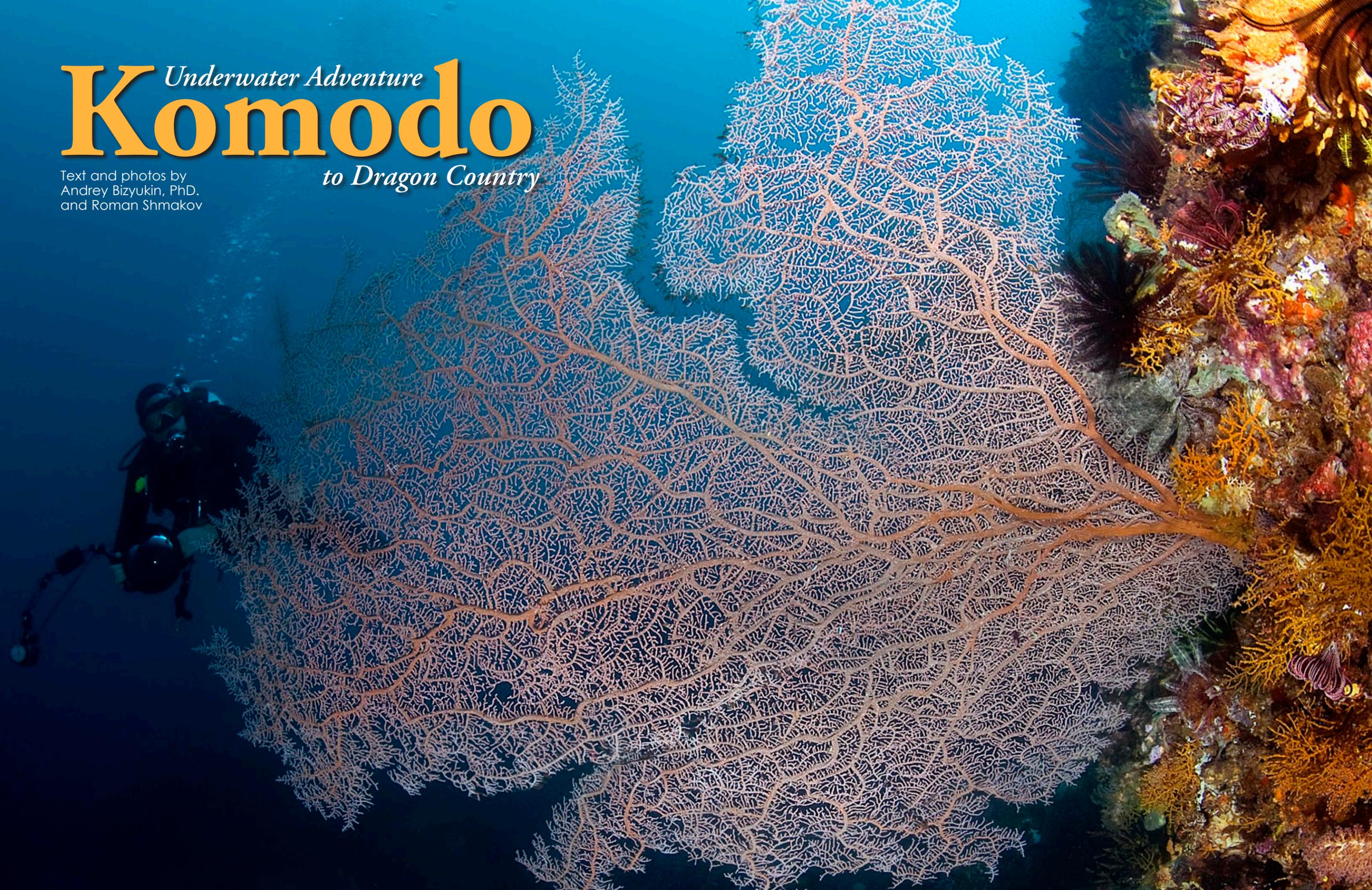
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SHARKPROJECT
www.sharkproject.org

Underwater Adventure **Komodo**

Text and photos by
Andrey Bizyukin, PhD.
and Roman Shmakov

to Dragon Country





Komodo



Komodo is a wildlife paradise both on the surface and underwater, with many quiet bays hidden from prying eyes—an ideal haven for pirates. Frogfish (right)

The new year was coming—the Year of the Dragon on the Chinese calendar—when an old friend of mine called from Singapore and told me about the amazing diving on Komodo Island, where the last living dragons on our planet still existed. In anticipation of the Year of the Dragon and the possibility of diving off the island of the descendants of dinosaurs made my heart beat faster, pushing me to pursue this adventure.



Komodo dragons. PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver and giant gorgonian at Komodo

Our plane landed at Denpasar International Airport. We took a short trip to the Benoa marina and stepped onto a large, two-masted, four-decked schooner with a magical name, *Damai-II*. The luxury boat with a length of 40m and a width of nine meters was designed for only ten guests, primarily underwater photographers. The vessel had a sculpture of a graceful mermaid under the bowsprit and the largest diving deck we had ever seen.

The photography room was equipped with specialized

areas for ten cameras, as well as tables and shelves for complete comfort when working with the equipment. Individual seats were equipped for each diver including a bench with a personal locked cylinder and an individual snow-white tub with fresh water for rinsing of underwater photographic equipment. All these features were of course immediately fascinating to us. There was a joyful smile on each team member's face. The large cabins had all the amenities. Fresh plush towels and bathrobes reminded



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Tropical storms with thunder and lightning followed our liveboard and dazzled us almost every night; Feather star; Brilliant soft corals; Clownfish in anemone; Giant sponges (right)

me that we were in the heady realm of luxury.

The journey

Our ship moved slowly between magical mountainous islands under the unfamiliar constellations of the southern hemisphere. A

bright moon lit our way. Light sea breezes soothed me. There were distant flashes of lightning in the night sky and faraway sounds of thunder. In anticipation of the approaching tropical storm,

I sank into sleep with thoughts of what it would be like diving Komodo, a place that made it onto the list of the Seven Wonders of the World in 2012.



people have had the opportunity to sunbathe on a beach of black sand. I wondered what was underwater.

Sangaung Island. On the way to Komodo, we did a couple of dives close to Sangaung Island. An underwater eruption created the broken valleys and hills of the island with the peak of its highest mountain reaching 1,200m, covered with black volcanic sand. Few

We dived at the cape, which protected us from tidal currents, and the water visibility immediately amazed us—about 30m. We started the dive in 29°C water. At depth, we passed through a thermocline and met 26°C water temperature. Right away, my 3mm wetsuit seemed too cold.

The underwater landscape of the island was a vast meadow of black volcanic ash—sand

partially covered with fresh colonies of corals and sponges. An unusually bright variety of colors immediately caught my eye. The corals seemed to be the same as everywhere else, but they looked much brighter and more saturated in color—astounding. We were immersed in an underwater canyon six to eight meters wide with completely vertical walls. It was dotted with huge gorgonians in purple, brown and green



Huge corals full of pygmy seahorses enchant divers for a long time



Nudibranches, big and small sea-horses, multi-colored mimic octopuses and giant-sized frogfish are typical at many of Komodo's dive sites

Hot Stones. Our second dive here was at the Hot Stones dive site. Volcanic bubbles of hot gas came out of the black sand, boiling gently as they rose to the surface. We explored a lava cave and saw an underwater forest of huge soft corals in the black sand, a unique sight with the combination of brightness and color. All of this diversity and variety created in our minds the feeling of being in another world, where one could still see the

creation of a natural masterpiece of color, poured against a background of black sand.

Bima Inlet. Despite our passionate desire to see the Komodo dragons as soon as possible, our guides strongly advised us to spend one more day diving on Bima Inlet (a site with a very fuzzy bottom). The first impression of the dive was just awful—full of muddy water. The visibility was about three meters. All it took was one awkward movement of the fins and muddy clouds lifted up from the bottom, covering everything with a thick layer of silt. But after a few moments of letting the silt settle, we started to look more closely through the murky

haze. We froze in surprise. We began to pick out the outline of a huge frogfish, unprecedented soft corals and large seahorses. Just a few yards further were two eye-catching striped shrimp and a few frisky octopi merging with the environment. Sand wafted outward from the writhing edges of these strange creatures with legs sticking out in all directions (like a new species of sea urchin). We then realized that we were in a macro-lover's paradise.

We paid closest attention to three frogfishes of various colors (yellow, black and red spotted). The yellow one was swimming around us, posing for photographers at different turns. The black one followed the red one relentlessly, so that the camera always framed two



shades, gray bushes of black corals, huge sponges, as well as stunning caves filled with curious fish.

We combed the bottom of the canyon in search of leopard sharks, which had been seen here at a depth of 40m just ten days ago by divers who came before us. My pressure gauge showed my air dwindling, but still, no

sharks.

The underwater landscape around was truly unique. To avoid the strong current, we had to quickly retreat back to the surface through a nearby canyon. We followed the computer's advice, made a micro bubble stop and returned back to the warm, sunny world of humans.



Komodo



THIS PAGE: Komodo diving is an unforgettable paradise for macro photography



frogfish and a diver.
 At one point, the yellow frogfish climbed onto a diver's back and inspected him from top to toe, not forgetting to look into the lense of his camera at the same time. Finally alone after the underwater photographers had enough of shooting and turned away from the frogfishes, the yellow one looked longingly after the retreating humans, already upset by the divers' neglect, and crept back into his cozy nest under a huge rock. After 85 minutes of immersion, rejuvenated by so many impressions, I came back on board the ship with only 40 bars in the tank.

Diving Komodo

At last, we anchored off the long-awaited country of the Dragon. We had been anxiously waiting to dive Crystal Rock and Castle Rock,

the two sites known as the best dive sites of Komodo. From the protected bay, we went out in a small speed boat in the direction of the three rocks standing in open sea about a kilometer from the shore.
 Our guide told us that it was very important to know the direction and strength of the currents in order to be able to get the whole group of divers quickly underwater. Once in, we fell like stones onto the reef. Indeed, the force of the current was so strong that it literally pushed us to the wall. We constantly had to deal with strong current. Air consumption increased several times beyond average, especially if you were carrying your camera underwater.
 Our team members had various levels of diving

experience, so we flew over long distances at different depths. I lost my friends quickly and caught a stone, hung on for a minute to catch my breath and looked around. Somewhere at

Blue-ringed octopus; Nudibranchs; Cuttlefish; Pigmy seahorse; Sea slug



Komodo

THIS PAGE: Komodo is an exciting place for marine biologists looking for new species, discoveries and scientific descriptions



the bottom of this 'Big Blue' there just had to be a shark. With this in mind, I rushed towards the depths. At 30m, a gentle sandy slope appeared. A pretty blacktip shark emerged out of the blue haze, heading straight towards me. It examined me curiously, all around, making a circle and dissolved into the endless sea. At the bottom, I could see a few sharks in the depths, but they were

too far away from me to take any good shots.

Then came the time to go back. I walked along the wall of the reef, as close to the slope as possible, fighting the current, trying not to break the camera, carefully controlling the air flow and regulating my breathing. At

three meters below the surface, the current was so strong that it literally tore at my flesh. And when, after a safety stop, I put myself into the hands of the underwater monster, I flew away like the last autumn leaf ripped off by hurricane winds. The boat, waiting dutifully on the ocean surface, quickly came to pick me up and delivered me back to the world of people where there was once again comfort and the calmly pacifying talk of food and the traditions of the world that surrounded it.

Castle Rock. Before the second dive, I was hoping that it would be more productive in terms of underwater



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Decorator crab; Frogfish; Painted porcelain crab; Moray eel; Boxer crab; Banded coral shrimp; Candy crab



The great underwater biodiversity of these sites attracts many curious and keen visitors, but few can fly to the opposite side of the planet to dive here often. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Green sea turtle; Reef octopus; Harlequin sweetlips; Cuttlefish; Blue-spotted stingray; Porcelain crab



Komodo



photography than the last one. But the dive on the next site, Castle Rock, was exactly the same. Forty minutes of endless fin-kicking and only four black tips sharks, plus some Napoleonfish, an octopus and corals, corals, corals. It was very difficult to take pictures in such strong currents. A photographer feels like a member of an audience riding in a compartment of an underwater highspeed train, outside of which slip by countless wonderful pictures.

A diver named Jeff tried to swim forward as fast as he could against the current in order to take a picture of our whole group dangling off our reef hooks. But when he was still raking a few meters ahead, he suddenly turned around to take pictures, quickly and deftly catching the reef with a hook and lifted up his feet. He immediately found himself in an upright position, head down, and flying over us, making acrobatic flips. In the next moment, he disappeared behind a small rock, where he managed to hide from

the flow.

We all climbed up via a buoy rope and were almost horizontal in position because of the strong current. Those who lost their grip just drifted away into open ocean. After such an extreme dive, a new nickname was coined for us—Flag-team divers—meaning a bunch of divers, caught on corals by hooks, who flutter in the strong current like flags.

Shotgun. Our next dive was at the Shotgun dive site. This was a narrow strait where there were two



currents meeting each other. Hence, the water turned into raging foam at the surface of the strait. We started the dive 500 meters from the entrance to the strait. It was easy for us, as the weak current accelerated gently and

slowly. Its gathering speed carried us forward. A wide channel filled with corals growing on the white sand opened up before our eyes.

We paused near some huge black corals. A large flock of glassfish lived in the corals' branches. We took photos and kept to a smooth pace in our underwater flight along the slope





Underwater photographers can spend hours underwater with great enjoyment and an incalculable number of small, beautiful creatures. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Crinoid shrimp; Blue seastar; Whip coral shrimp; Hairy squat lobster; Yellow sea cucumber; Various nudibranchs; Zebra crab



Komodo



slingshot, I flew up to a depth of four meters, just above the edge of the underwater ridge. Zipping along the current, I dodged huge bumps along the coral reef, all the while shielding my camera with my hands and body. This place had very strong currents, and divers were really flying around like bullets fired from a gun.

Komodo dragons

Our boat maneuvered between mountainous islands. We checked bay after bay for a good anchor site. These quiet bays were well-hidden from prying eyes—ideal havens for pirates.

Most of the large and small islands had symmetrical slopes, which was



of the broad, spacious ravine. We followed a turtle, which didn't like pesky photographers and used the current to easily escape his pursuers.

There was a visible sloping wall of an underwater ridge ahead, which blocked the channel. Here, the water slowed down near the bottom, forming a huge seafood pot. All around us was a soothing quiet. It looked like a great place to take pictures of tropical fish. But a strong current caught me again, and like a stone slung from a





indicative of their volcanic origins. This area of Indonesia was one of the most seismically active zones on the planet. For an experienced volcanologist, it would be immediately clear that the whole surface of the land was relatively recent (in geological terms) and rose out of the water. However, despite the relative youth of this land, it was inhabited by the descendants of one of the most ancient inhabitants on Earth—the Komodo dragon—a creature that evolved many eons ago.

We anchored in a quiet, enclosed bay called Horseshoe Bay. It was surrounded by Cannibal and Head Pelican rocks. Our ship had already been spotted from the shore by two Komodo dragons, which emerged from the jungle onto the open sandy beach. They sniffed and got accustomed to our ship. They headed into the water to get even closer to us, trying to choose a new victim perhaps or maybe looking for some human remains.

There are more than a thousand dragons living on Komodo. Their main sources of food are buffaloes, pigs, deer and monkeys (macaques). But Komodo dragons do not disdain humans. At the first opportunity, they courageously attacked people, thus demonstrating that only they were the true hosts of Komodo Island and did not want anyone else to share their land.

The normal life expectancy of dragons

THIS PAGE: Komodo dragons are the real bosses of the island. They patrol their land, keeping all unsolicited guests at a distance, even if they are humans

is only 50 to 60 years. They mate once a year in the hottest season. The male digs a few shallow pits in the ground. The female lays a few dozen eggs in one of these pits. Then both parents leave the eggs in this underground incubator.

Hatched dragons emerge from the ground after nine months. They are always hungry and ready to hunt prey as soon as they come out of the nest. But they have to escape to the trees, hunting birds and other small inhabitants of the rainforest, in order to avoid becoming victims of their own parents, who are apparently not averse to cannibalism.

The preferred hunting method of an adult Komodo dragon is to lie in wait for a victim and then make a surprise attack, with a quick bite to its prey, at least once. Even if the potential victim



flees after one bite, it has still been inflicted with an extremely toxic range of microbes, which are very comfortable breeding in the mouth of the Komodo dragon. Even one bite of a dragon is enough to kill a huge buffalo, which will die within a week of a bite. Some potent bites of the dragon are enough to kill a large animal after only an hour and a half. The cause of this quick death is sepsis. After an attack, a Komodo



dragon will then haunt its prey constantly, until it dies, and finally, eat it.

The favorite hunting time of Komodo dragons is in the morning when the sun has risen and temperatures warm up. Komodo dragons have attacked one ranger of the national park. He was rescued and survived only by sheer luck. I asked the local rangers: "Do dragons dive?" It turns out that none of them had ever seen a dragon diving, but we all knew that they came up to their necks in sea water and spent a long

time seeking out something in the coastal waters.

Dragons also do not leave out divers as a potential meals on Komodo. There was a case when Komodo dragons attacked divers who came ashore out of the water instead of off a boat. So, here on Komodo, it is necessary to always respect the territorial claims and gourmet tastes of the local residents, day and night.

Cannibals Rock. After making close acquaintance with the dragons, we continued our introduction with underwater world of Komodo and ready for next dive on Cannibals Rock, with a range of 27°C to 32°C water temperature depending on depth. The sea was overflowing with life. Underwater, there were

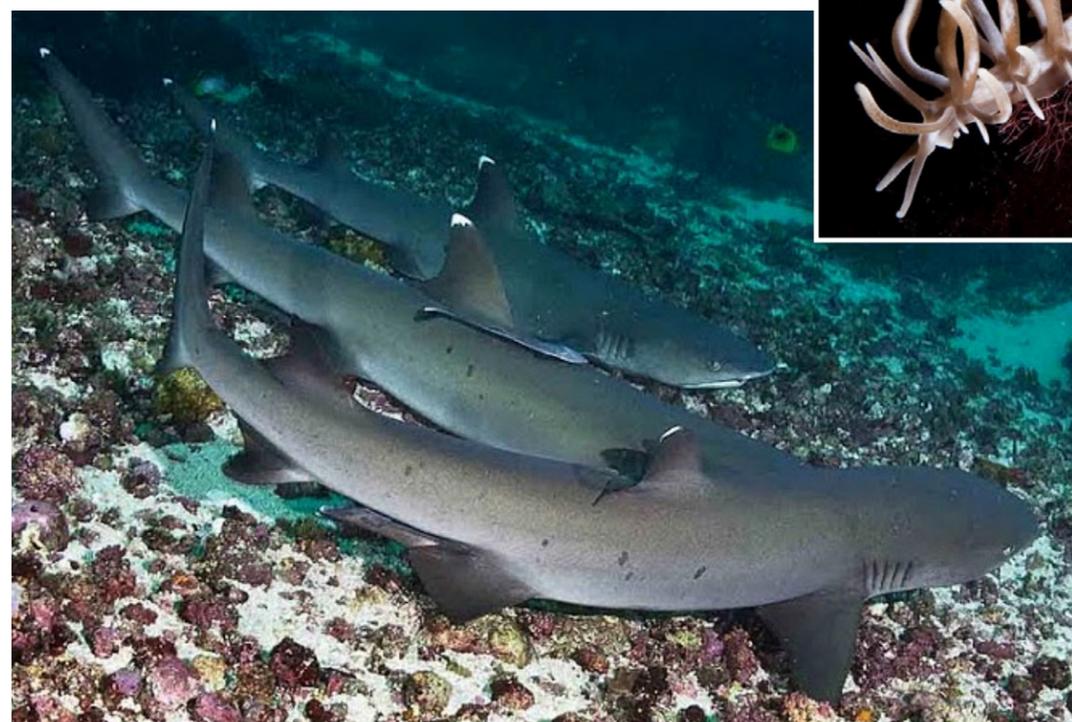
The team placed a buoy, and we leaped into a strong current dive descending to ten meters very quickly. We got on top of the rock, trying to hide from the current and descended to a depth 30m. There should be hammerheads and white tips sharks here. We were promised barracudas and stingrays, too. We went even deeper and crossed a second thermocline. The water temperature dropped to 28°C, and immediately much more life was visible in the cool water—big fishes, jacks, rays and sharks—but too far away from us to take good pictures. It was nice to see these deep sea inhabitants in their natural conditions. They were all such beautiful creatures.

white octopus, sleeping nurse sharks, lots of lemon-colored nudibranchs and huge black coral bushes—in general, a paradise for the underwater photographer, or a person addicted to the contemplation of beauty.

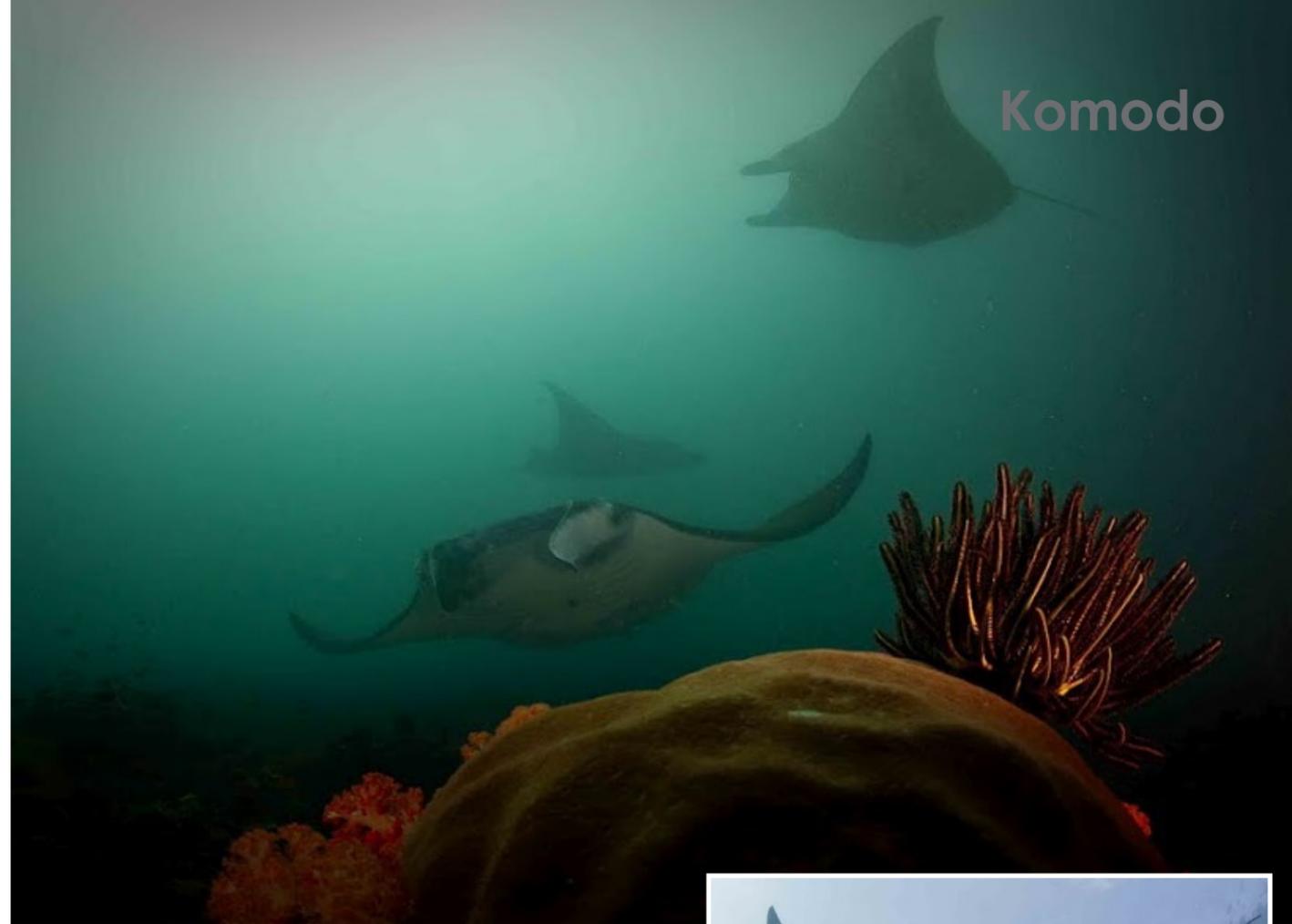
Along the perimeter of the bay, there were always hungry and constantly vigilant Komodo dragons watching from behind us.

Rodeo Rock. We tested our strength at Rodeo Rock, a dive site on the reef at the entrance of the bay.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: School of glassfish; White octopus; Bamboo shark; Scorpionfish; Nudibranch (inset)



Komodo is the country of sharks. They prefer deep, cooler water, which is not so easy for divers to get to. But we were happy to take pictures of at least a few of them: sleeping nurse sharks (above), a friendly group of whitetip reef sharks (right) and the very rare bamboo shark (top right)



Komodo



which brought us a lot of trouble. Someone lost a lid at depth, another was taken almost a kilometer out to open sea, and someone else picked out the buoy. It is not an easy job for the underwater photographer here, if he or she is going to capture pictures of this underwater Rodeo on camera.

Manta Alley. On our last day on Komodo Island, we went to the Manta Alley dive site. This was a narrow and short channel between the Pacific and Indian oceans. And here was the strongest current, as always. But this place had been for many years chosen by large oceanic mantas.

They gathered here in groups of several dozen individuals, and their mouths were wide open. They were relaxed, swinging huge wings as they soared to meet the current, passing through a ton of water and plankton. We were in the mad

flow, clinging to the bottom and hiding behind rocks, trying to crawl up close to them with but one wish—to make another stunning shot.

We had three dives with the mantas at Manta Alley. Time flew by quickly, as if in one breath, with our enthusiasm for the mantas. The beauty and perfection of these fascinating marine giants did not leave us indifferent. The great shots captured will long remind us of the amazing strait of mantas off the dragons' island.

Afterthoughts

With the help of our experienced dive operator, we were pleasantly impressed with the high level of professionalism and diving organization on Komodo. The crew team helped us not only to dive successfully and safely but also to actively engage in photography



during all ten days of diving in such difficult underwater conditions. It was a rare and unique opportunity to dive with professionals who gave us a chance not to be distracted by the little things but be focused only on the most important thing—the process of underwater photography.

Associate editor and cave diver Andrey Bizyukin and rescue diver Roman Shmakov are underwater photographers based in Moscow, Russia. ■

THIS PAGE: Scenes from Manta Alley; Black manta (right inset)

