

Komodo and The Mermaid

by Anite Verde

Our driver weaves his way through the chaotic traffic leading to Bali's Benoa Harbor and pulls over, "we can get out here," he says. In a flash, our dive and camera gear are whisked down to the harbour by a friendly smiling Balinese gentleman, who I'm sure can't believe how much gear we've got as he struggles with our bags. We wave goodbye to our driver and make our way down to board our home for the next week, the MV Mermaid II. As we board, I remember I still have a banana in my carry on, I quickly eat it, everyone knows that taking bananas on boats is bad luck, right? At least that's what my dad always told me.

As we approach the Mermaid, her body glistening in the sun, the hustle and bustle of Bali begins to fade. We are on our way to Komodo, a land of Jurassic proportions, where rugged coastlines and hillsides of dry savannah stretch down to brilliant sandy beaches and delicate coral reefs.

As we board the Mermaid, we are greeted by our trip leader Montse who eagerly tells us about the exciting week of diving we're about to have. "Apart from the dragon" she says, "the mantas are the highlight

in Komodo". As we settle into our home for the next week, assembling our dive and camera equipment, we are thrilled to see that some Brazilian divers we met whilst diving the Alor Archipelago are also on board. It's going to be a fun week.

Located in the Lesser Sunda islands between Sumbawa and Flores, and bordering Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara and West Nusa Tenggara provinces, Komodo National Park is a biodiversity hot spot both terrestrial and marine.

Founded in 1980, the original purpose of the park was to protect wild populations of the world's largest lizard, the legendary Komodo Dragon. But as the importance of the region's unique marine biodiversity was realised, 113,000 hectares of marine reserve was added to form what we now know as the Komodo Biosphere Reserve and National Park.

A UNESCO World Heritage site for good reason, the park is believed to be home to almost 6,000 dragons across the islands of Komodo, Rinca, Gili Motong and some areas of western and northern Flores. Getting up close (but not too close) and personal with the dragon is one of the





many reasons' visitors come to the region. Yet while Komodo's top side attractions are certainly worthy of the effort, we came for the magic that lies beneath.

After a very thorough on-board safety briefing, we leave the chaos of Bali far behind as we cruise into the sunset on route towards Sumbawa. We spend this time socialising and getting to know our diving companions and crew for the next week. There are 17 guests on board the Mermaid, although she can take 18. With divers from all over the world, the boat is full of excitement for the week of

diving that lies ahead.

As my stomach starts to signal dinner time, our first meal magically appears - a delicious prawn curry and numerous side dishes served buffet style. When you're diving four times a day food is super important and can be the difference between a good and bad trip. After the first meal, I'm happy to say that chef Bruno and his team are up to the challenge.

As late evening approaches, we retire to our cabin; complete with double bed, its own air conditioning, bathroom and good storage space. It takes us a while to settle into the

rhythm of the sea and familiarise ourselves with the pulse of the Mermaid's engines as she moves her way through the open water. Regardless of how cosy we feel, the promise of tomorrow's diving means we're too excited to sleep well.

The following morning, we awake moored at Moyo Island for our first dive at Angel Reef. While we're not even in the Komodo National Park yet, the calm, clear waters below us are full of promise. On submersion, my tired eyes are now wide open as we explore the reef's beautiful steep wall adorned in its kaleidoscope of

soft corals. It's a vision so majestic, that I find myself unconsciously edging backwards as if that would somehow help me fit the entire reef into my field of view. With reef sharks, shoals of small fish and bigger species, like batfish, bannerfish and red tooth triggerfish dancing around us, this is a magical way to start our trip.

Unless you've been living under a rock somewhere, you'll undoubtedly be aware of the celebrated diversity of Indonesia's reefs. Komodo's waters provide a safe environment for hundreds of species of coral, sponges



and bony fishes along with crustaceans, turtles, dolphins, whales, manta ray, sharks and numerous invertebrates - all attracted by its nutrient rich waters and often ferocious currents.

Over a mouth-watering lunch which I added a regrettable mountain of chilli sambal, dive guide Yeray tells us that there are over 50 dive sites in the Komodo area. “There’s an astounding diversity of marine species here” he explains. “Almost anywhere you get in the water is an amazing dive site”.

With food in our bellies we retire to the sundeck for a quick nap. The soft breeze and warm sun is the perfect recipe for relaxing. As I begin to drift off to sleep someone shouts “dolphins”. Dragging ourselves up off the deck we approach the railing and peer over. Actually, it’s not dolphins, but mobula rays dancing at the surface. We watch them as they hunt a bait ball of small fish and wait in anticipation for their cheerful acrobatic display - but not today.

It’s not long and we’re back in the water searching for pygmy seahorse, before cruising two hours to Satonda Island for our first sunset dive at Satonda Sandy. We head to the dive deck and gear up. With quiet seas and the sky on fire we board our



dive tender. Yes, it’s as good as it sounds.

While the Komodo region can be dived via land-based operators out of Labuan Bajo in Flores, the absence of land-based operators in the National Park itself means long boat rides can be necessary to reach the park’s best dive sites. The region therefore lends itself well to a dive safari boat which ensures jaw dropping topside scenery and superior access to the park’s impressive dive sites.

Although most dive safari boats base themselves in Labuan Bajo, being ‘liveaboard virgins’ we chose to board the Mermaid II for its size, reputation and convenient Bali - Komodo - Bali itinerary.

Exploring Indonesia’s waters for almost



20 years, the Mermaid II is an impressive dive safari boat catering to 18 divers in deluxe accommodations. A large comfortable dive deck



and dive platform provide easy exits and entries to the dive boats, and as photographers, we were thrilled to see the dive deck was complete with camera setup and rinsing stations making it easy to keep our equipment maintained and clean.

Naturally, being our first liveaboard trip we were slightly apprehensive at first, but as we eased into the rhythm of the sea we actually loved being on board. I'm not sure if it was a side effect of the sea sickness tablets, but it was as if the Mermaid floated wherever it liked, and I wondered if actually a giant octopus

was gently carrying it around for reasons lost to time.

Each day on the Mermaid went something like this: eat, dive, eat, sleep, dive, eat, sleep, dive, eat, sleep, repeat. And while the daily naps weren't mandatory, we'd certainly recommend them.

Whilst it would take a lifetime to explore all of the dive sites around Komodo's islands, we spend the next few days enjoying some of the most famous sites in the National Park.

At Castle Rock huge schools of fusiliers and surgeon fishes seduced giant trevallies and Spanish mackerel.



White tip and black tip sharks also patrolled the area, alongside eagle rays, blue spotted rays and hawksbill turtles.

Cannibal Rock's stunning corals were home to sea apples, devil scorpion fish, pygmy seahorse, octopus and many varieties of nudibranch and flatworms, alongside large schools of fish, including big eye snapper and yellow-mask surgeon fish.

With low visibility because of its southern location and nutrient rich waters, Secret Garden appeared as a magical emerald underworld with masses of striking soft corals, cuttlefish, blue spotted stingray,

frogfish, leaf scorpion fish and schools of five-lined snapper and fusiliers.

When you're diving, it's easy to always focus on the majesty of the ocean, after all that's what we were here for right? It's only as the day of diving ended that I remembered to look around me to see the magnificent Padar Island. We board our dive tender, approach the island and surrender to the allure of land. As we climb to Padar's impressive view point, Komodo's rugged coastline is bathed in a soft glow. By the time we reach the top, a riot of colour confirms its status as one of Indonesia's most magical landscapes.

The Mermaid's eight-day,



seven-night itinerary included a total of 20 dives with the added highlight of walking with the dragons. Found nowhere else in the world, the Komodo Dragon as you may remember from its debut in James Bond's Casino Royale is known for its impressive size, formidable appearance and astonishing ability to devour very large animals. As we step foot on the island of Rinca our ranger Benny stands proud with a large forked stick. "Just in case they get a bit close" he explains. "But if they start to get aggressive, then get ready to run". He goes on to tell us that the

dragon's saliva contains bacteria that will eventually kill another animal. "The dragon bites the buffalo and then stalks it, sometimes for up to a week until it dies and it can be devoured" he says. Needless to say, our friendship with the dragon is somewhat aloof.

Before getting back on board, an impromptu game of football begins. Typical, you can always trust Brazilians to find a football!

The next morning, we attempt the most anticipated dive of the trip, the Shotgun. As we descend down and make our way towards an area known as the Cauldron, we are welcomed

by a large school of huge bump head parrot fish cruising the water like the coolest kids in school. We cross the Cauldron and approach a narrow passage of water; this is the Shotgun. When at its entrance, I expel the air from my buoyancy vest in anticipation of being shot headfirst and up towards the surface. Our dive guide Angela signals "one, two, three" and a gun with her hand as we feel the current lift us up and accelerate us forward. As we fly along, tumbling like a grain of rice in a boiling pot they appear; the most vulnerable, intelligent and enigmatic creatures in our oceans,

the manta ray. Gently flapping their pectoral fins, they hover in the strong current. Like huge fighter jets, their mouths are wide open as they enjoy the nutritious plankton rich waters. It's as if we have entered a manta mega restaurant! We continue to shoot the passage, passing more and more mantas as we go. I do my best to stay up current and enjoy an intimate moment with them. As always, these amazing creatures left a lasting memory that no camera could ever hope to capture.

Our exhilarating dive at Shotgun is followed by a dreamy dive at

Crystal Rock, where we spend most of the dive marvelling at turtles, rays and dancing with huge schools of jack fish.

That afternoon we begin to motor our way back towards Bali stopping off at the Sangeang Volcano. Every thirty minutes or so, a gust of ash rushes from its crater, a humble reminder of this strange rock that we live on. I was surprised to see that at the base of the volcano lay a small village settlement, Bontoh village - yes people actually live here!

Today's afternoon dive is located at the base of the volcano and is appropriately named Hot Rocks. As we descend down, I immediately make my way to the black sandy bottom to play in the bubbles caused by the persistent rumbling deep within the volcano's bowels. As I move closer to the bubbles and lay my hand on the black sandy bottom, I feel a significant rise in temperature. A good reminder of where we are! As we move through the dive, the bubbling black sandy area gives way to a huge concentration of delicate soft corals in a myriad of colours.

We make our way back to the boat for a quick snack before boarding



our dive tender to visit Bontoh village. On the shoreline, the children play by simple outrigger canoes painted in cheerful colours.

As we approach, my eyes strain in disbelief as we witness what looks like a huge ark being built on the village's black sandy shores. It turns out that the people here are actually descendants of the seafaring Bugis people from the Indonesian island of Sulawesi of whom were specialist boat builders and instrumental in the world's spice trade. The village here has been building ships for generations, but this is their biggest yet. It's for a Chinese client and is destined as a cargo ship. A handful of goats alongside the odd chicken guard the ship's hull. We gaze in amazement at the workmanship of this wooden ark, and wonder how on earth they will ever manage to launch it to the



sea.

Bontoh village doesn't have much, its square shacks cobbled together from a jumble of materials gestured a very simple life. But what they do have, is a world-class muck diving site which we were itching to explore.

After purchasing some traditional handmade wooden free diving goggles from one of the village's residents (and yes, they actually seal!), we make our way back to the Mermaid to gear up for what will be our last night dive and also a highlight of the trip.

In pitch black darkness, our

dive tender brings us to an area just off the village's shoreline. We turn on our torches and after a "one, two, three" back roll into the darkness. I descend to a max depth of around 8 meters and everywhere there is life. We explore the site for over an hour photographing crazy critters - crocodile fish, shrimp, octopus, hunting napoleon eels, nudibranch, soft coral crabs, scorpion fish and frog fish, all in great numbers. Now we understand why everyone said this was the night dive not to miss.

When to dive Komodo

While Komodo can be dived all year round, the best time to dive is generally considered to be between June and October when visibility is at its best (25-35 meters). From December to March, operators tend to dive only the southern dive sites where water temperatures are cooler and visibility is around 10 - 15 meters. We visited at the end of September and experienced calm seas and fabulous visibility on most sites. Water temperatures in the northern sites at this time are around 27 degrees, while southern sites are considerably cooler at around 24 degrees.

The Mermaid's Bali- Komodo-Bali itinerary provided the opportunity to dive both within and outside of the Komodo National Park, taking in dives at Moyo Island and Sangeang Island off the coast of Sumbawa, Satonda Island, and of course the Komodo National Park itself.

How to get there

Joining the Mermaid II is easy with the boat departing and arriving at Bali's Benoa Harbour. Bali is serviced domestically by Garuda Indonesia and Lion Air from Jakarta and numerous other Indonesian cities. If choosing a land-based option, your point of entry

to Komodo will be Labuan Bajo. For the adventurous island hopper, there are also several passenger ferries operating in the East Nusa Tenggara Island chain.

So now that we're no longer 'liveaboard virgins', I'd have to say that this type of scuba travel has won us over. A boat full of like-minded people passionate about the ocean and photography, great food, jaw dropping scenery, incredible diving and almost all the comforts of home - what's not to like? Oh, and did we mention you can duel with dragons?

For more information on diving Komodo aboard the Mermaid II contact mermaidliveaboards.com. A weeks diving Komodo aboard the Mermaid II will set you back around \$2,700 Euros per person.

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