



Komodo in the Raw

with Mark Webster

Underwater photographers in search of new subjects and fresh challenges have long revered the infamous island of Komodo as perhaps the richest marine environment. Komodo's remote location at the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans ensures that it has been visited by relatively few divers. There are no resorts on these islands and so the only way to reach the area is by live aboard boat sailing from Bali or Flores.

I had been planning a visit to the Komodo National Park for several years and at last my opportunity arose to join a photographic group sailing with Kararu Dive Voyages from Bali. The trip turned out to have a double benefit as the group included Dan Baldocchi from Light and Motion, Berkley White from Backscatter in Monterey and commercial photographer Jim Watt who were hosting a digital workshop which included a wide selection of the latest equipment. Although a digital conversion has been looming close for me I had yet to make the final jump, but watching these guys at work and the

opportunity of playing with a D100 in a Titan housing has convinced me that I have to make the transition.

After my first night at sea I was woken by an unusual mixture of sounds - the creaking of timbers of the traditionally built Bugis schooner and the hum of modern technology in the form of air conditioning to ensure a cool night's sleep close to the equator. The Kararu live aboard is a large boat that comfortably swallows 16 guests and a total of 19 crew and two or three dive masters who are attentive to your every need but in no way intrusive. The boat has been set up with photographers in mind, boasting a long external camera table (with even a padded top) with individual equipment lockers below. In the roomy saloon there is a large charging area with 120v and 220v supplies plus projection screen together with slide and digital projector. Daily E6 processing is offered for those who simply cannot wait to get home and there is a comprehensive library of species reference books to help identify your

Reef scene - With all the wonderful macro subjects to occupy you it is easy to forget your wide angle lens and the colourful reef shots you can take on almost every dive. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, Isotecnic 33TTL and YS30, Elitechrome EX, f11 @ 1/60.



Kararu live aboard - The Kararu Dive Voyages live aboard is a traditionally built Bugis schooner and a very large and substantial vessel. Our cruise was more than 250 miles in each direction and was made in complete comfort. She is well equipped and crewed and laid out with photographers in mind. Nikon F90X, 28-200 zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60.

subjects whatever your recording medium. The en suite cabins are spacious and kept spotless and for extra romance or luxury you can select the double suite on the bridge deck.

Dives are made from two aluminium skiffs which are easily boarded from a stepped gangway on the starboard side. Each boat will carry a dive master but you are not expected to stay with the group unless you want to - solo diving is recognised as the norm here although the guides are invaluable for spotting the most elusive and best hidden critters. Tank tapping during the dive will ensure that a gaggle of photographers will appear to investigate the find and you can then wait your turn or return later in the dive. On the black sand 'muck' dives the guides would put chopsticks in the sand to mark an



Porcelain crab - Sea pens emerge from the black sand bottom at night and almost everyone of them will have one or more commensal inhabitants. In this case it is a tiny porcelain crab which catches nutrients from the gentle current. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm + Nexus wet diopter, Inon Quad flash, Fujichrome Velvia, f16 @ 1/125.

interesting find, but even so it would often take a few minutes to find the well camouflaged species!

The usual vessel routing is from Bali sailing east past the islands of Moyo, Santonda, Sangeang, Banta, Lawa Laut and then finally on to the jewels of Komodo and Rinca. Several dives are made en route which provide a taste of what is to come as you get closer to the Komodo National Park. The diving is very varied and the greatest contrasts are to be found when diving both the northern and southern sides of Komodo and Rinca. It is here that the two oceans merge and the northern side often offers the warm clear waters you expect in the tropics, whilst on the south you can expect rich plankton blooms, visibility which varies from 10-30m and chilly currents with temperatures ranging



Glassy sweepers - In the search for the exotic species it is all too easy to miss pleasing compositions using the numerous common species on the reefs. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, Isotecnic 33TTL and YS30, Elitechrome EX, f11 @ 1/60.

Saron shrimp - There are any number of attractive shrimps to be found on the reefs, but I had never encountered this very striking species before. He was hiding in a crack in the reef but was quite bold and inquisitive and would march backwards and forwards to get a better look at me. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, Inon Quad flash, Fujichrome Velvia, f16 @1/125.

from 18-30°C! However, this is what propagates the density of marine life and you can experience anything from whale sharks and mantas to frog fish and tiny shrimps on feather stars in every colour of the rainbow. I should point out here that my whale shark encounter was whilst I was clutching a camera armed with a 60mm macro lens - the only sore point from the trip!

Reef conditions are equally varied ranging from black volcanic sands reminiscent of Lembah Straits to lush coral encrusted pinnacles and walls, where it is difficult to see bedrock, to every combination in between. There are plenty of wide angle opportunities for even the most demanding photographer and there is a stunning manta dive at Toralangkoi off Komodo Island where these graceful creatures make repeated inquisitive passes close enough to touch. But it is when you stop to examine the macro world slowly and carefully that wealth of unusual critters, for which Indonesia is so renowned, slowly begins to emerge and will keep you engrossed for dive after dive.

One of the high spots of the trip is the time spent in Horseshoe Bay on the south side of Rinca Island. This is an idyllic setting with a sheltered anchorage behind the island of Nusa Kode. Volcanic slopes with dense foliage meet the shoreline fringed with pale sandy beaches. At sunrise you can watch



Komodo dragons wander down to the beach and patrol the water's edge for an easy meal before you prepare for the first dive of the day. There are several stunning dives within a 5 minute boat ride from the mooring which all have a unique character. Cannibal Rock is still fresh in my memory with its incredible density of coral and invertebrate cover and the discovery of exotic species like the *Miamira nudibranch* and tiny zebra crabs living in the spines of fire urchins. Yellow Wall of Texas is carpeted in yellow soft corals and huge sea fans whilst the strangely named Grandma Bangs Bommies are heaving in glassy sweepers and reef fish where we

also discovered a jet black giant frog fish. The reefs change again as soon as darkness falls and night diving should not be missed as this is when some of the most striking creatures make an appearance - more frog fish, ghost pipe fish, sea pens with commensal crabs, shrimps and gobies, stargazers and a host of other subjects which had the analogue photographers consuming their film in record time. I managed five dives a day whilst we were here and it still wasn't enough!

The Komodo area is also famous for its strong currents, but although we had some current on a number of dives the majority of sites offer protec-

tion from the reef which makes photography much less of a struggle. When we prepared for our day of manta diving at Toralangkoi the issue of reef hooks was an indication that it would be an interesting day! The dive is centered on a broad channel running between two surface breaking rock islands. At certain times the current can really rip here which is of course what attracts to mantas. However, even here it was possible to move out of the main channel into calm water and we found that the mantas were so inquisitive that they would swoop out of the current to investigate and come close enough to fill a fish eye frame. In fact the currents were far less of a challenge than I had anticipated and generally we would just move back down the reef into sheltered water. Whatever the conditions the boat cover was excellent and although we all carried safety flags or sausages no one had cause to use one.

Although I don't consider myself a total novice in the digital techniques, sitting in on the seminar was immensely instructive. Most of my experience with Photoshop has been pretty cursory so it was a real benefit to be walked through the major functions of the programme by those who use it daily. The boat is equipped with a digital projector, so workshops could be followed easily on a large



Jack fish - This resident school is on the wreck of the USS Liberty at Tulamben and tend to pack together as the current increases. This makes a great shot but maintaining position can be exhausting! Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm, Isotecnic 33TTL and YS30, Elitechrome EX, f11 @ 1/60.

screen. However, perhaps the biggest benefit was the wide range of equipment which Light and Motion provided which included Olympus cameras in Tetra housings and Nikon D100's in the latest Titan housings. Being able to try before you buy is a real bonus, but I didn't find it all plain sailing. The D100 is a very different beast to the F90X and F100 when used underwater. The camera is based on an F80 body and so the viewfinder is smaller and darker and the auto focus much less responsive. You also

have to go back to making manual flash exposures, although the Titan housing deals with this particularly well. The handgrips provide control of all the major camera functions and adjustment of the flash output over a range of twelve power settings. So you can adjust aperture, shutter and flash power without moving your eye from the viewfinder or your hands. I was impressed with the system but of



Cat fish - small dense schools of these venomous little fish are found mostly on muck dive areas where they continually sift the sand for food. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, Inon Quad flash, Fujichrome Velvia, f11 @ 1/125.

course everything is reliant on electronics which may not appeal to all. You very soon appreciate the benefit of seeing your shot immediately underwater, although it will take practice to determine if focus and exposure are in fact correct from the

LCD screen as the final image can look very different on a computer screen. So my metamorphosis is fast approaching, but the only concern that I have is that the changes in the market and equipment are accelerating fast and so choosing when to invest is a finely balanced decision. That said I am already fussing over whether to shoot RAW, tif or jpeg so there is no hope for me!

If you have the time on your return it is worth spending a few days in Bali which is simply a stunning island. Away from the hustle and bustle of Kuta and Sanur the countryside and soaring volcanoes offer a total contrast to the underwater world, although there is some excellent diving here as well if you have not had enough. I spent a few days at the comfortable Tauch Terminal Resort at Tulamben and could not get enough of the fantastic wreck of the USS Liberty, which lies just a few metres from the shore and is absolutely teeming with life. The beach diving here is really remarkable and there are even porters to carry your tanks and BC to the water's edge. This sounds extreme until you first walk across the volcanic cobbles on the beach and then you are eternally grateful for the service, which pampers your delicate western feet! The reefs to the north and south of Tulamben also offer great diving and photo opportunities and are easily

accessed by a short ride on one of the local 'jukung' outrigger fishing boats.

Despite the political woes of the area Bali is quiet and as potentially safe as any other location in the world today. I felt nothing but secure and relaxed and all the Balinese I met were warm and welcoming and grateful for those tourists making the effort to visit. Why is it that an entire country like Indonesia can be labelled as hazardous by our Foreign Office (they still advise against all travel) yet New York, Washington and London can suffer terrorist outrages but don't receive the same exclusion? There is a strange lack of logic to this situation but only you can decide where you will feel safer.

Information:

Flights: There are a number of routes from Europe to Denpasar in Bali via Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Jakarta. I flew with Malaysian Airlines and Garuda Indonesia and found the journey to be very easy and the transit period at KL easy and relaxing. Both these airlines offer an extra 10kg for diving/sports equipment.

Time in Bali is GMT +8 hours

Voltage locally is 220V with European style two pin plugs

Air temperature 27-30°C and humid

Water temperature 27-29°C and 18-25°C in the cold currents - 3-5mm wetsuit advised plus hood



Digital workshop - Students pore over their pictures on laptops between dives. The boat is equipped with both slide and digital projectors for reviewing the day's results. Nikon F90X, 28-200 zoom, flash, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60.



Digital selection box - Light and motion brought a wide range of equipment with them including the latest Titan housing for the D100. On the left is a Sea & Sea housing for the Canon D60. Nikon F90X, 28-200 zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60.



Komodo sunset - Indonesia is often referred to the land of fire due to the number of active volcanoes. However the sunsets will also set the sky ablaze and are irresistible. Nikon F90X, 28-200 zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f8 @ 1/30.

No visa required but passport must be valid for at least 6 months

Currently Bali has no requirement for anti malarial pills - But you should consult your pharmacist for the current situation and prophylactic

Currency - bring US Dollars to change locally into Rupiah. There are money changers everywhere, but exchange rates may be best in the banks and you can withdraw cash from ATM's

When to go: Live aboards sail to Komodo between April and Decem-

ber. Bali offers diving year round.

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Mark Webster

Mark Webster will be hosting a photo workshop with Kararu Dive Voyages in 2004/5. See website for details: www.photec.co.uk



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