

Horseshoes and Dragons

by Mark Webster

Rinca Island recently featured in the international and diving press as the landfall for a group of divers who had been swept away by strong currents following a dive in the Komodo National Park. Much was made of the wild nature of the island and the danger of the local population of Komodo dragons which the survivors apparently had to fend off. However, Rinca Island has built a reputation amongst underwater photographers in the know for very different reasons – the defining feature of this island is Horseshoe bay which has perhaps the finest selection of dive sites in the Komodo National Park.

The Komodo National Park is so unique that UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site in 1989. Non divers will certainly have heard of the fabled Komodo Dragon and the majority of the visitors to the park are intent on seeing them and the other prolific wildlife. But many of them do not realise that Komodo's richest treasures lie below the surface of the surrounding seas.

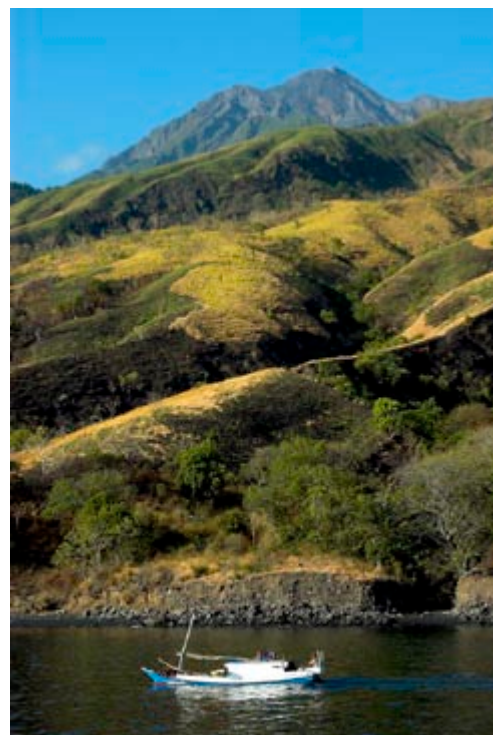
The unique qualities of this area were first recorded by Alfred Wallace, a 19th century naturalist who

developed the theory of evolution along with Charles Darwin. He spent over ten years exploring the archipelago and discovered that Indonesia is the location where two bio-geographic zones meet, the Oriental and Australian, which played a pivotal role in planetary evolution. This conjunction became known as the Wallace Line and the division runs north to south between Borneo and Sulawesi and then to Bali and Lombok. The Indian and Pacific

(Top) Komodo dragon on Rinca Island. Nikon F90X, 28-200mm zoom, Ektachrome Elite 100, f11 1/160

(Right) The backdrop to Horseshoe Bay is impressive and dominated by evidence of volcanic activity. Nikon D100, 28-200mm zoom, ISO 200, f11 1/125

(Far right) There are striking combinations of colours where soft corals and sea fans compete for space on the reef walls. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm FE, Sea & Sea ys120 + Isotecnic 33TTL, ISO 200, f11 1/60





oceans meet at this point and the confluence results in perhaps the richest marine biodiversity on the planet. The Komodo National Park lies just three hundred miles east of the Wallace Line which has led to the development of the most diverse reef systems which have to be seen to be appreciated.

There are often strong currents in the area and oceanographic studies have revealed that there is a difference in sea level between the Pacific and Indian Ocean sides of these islands. This amounts to only 20-35cm (eight to fifteen inches), but it is more than enough to generate a 'downhill' flow



into the Indian Ocean. The islands strung along this area, including Rinca, are in fact acting like a dam blocking the warmer Pacific waters. This results in large volumes of water being squeezed between the islands creating strong surface currents running south which in turn suck up the relatively colder waters from the Indian Ocean which propagates constant phytoplankton blooms and it is this of course which supports the marine eco system.

This oceanic activity also has other side effects, perhaps less welcome to the visiting diver. The sea temperatures on the north side of the islands is invariably warm at 27° to 30°C (78°-82°F) and the visibility good, but just a few miles away on the southern side you can encounter visibility more like the UK and chilly up-wellings and thermoclines are common. This is dependant also on the season – the warmest time to visit, with potentially the best visibility, is between November and March, but the wise diver will pack an extra neoprene vest and a hood just in case, although many of the boats carry these to keep their clients comfortable.

Horseshoe Bay on the south side of Rinca Island a short transit from Komodo Island itself.



(Far left) Some of the larger residents are also extremely well camouflaged like this mated pair of giant frog fish. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm FE, Sea & Sea YS120 + Isotecnic 33TTL, ISO 200, f11 1/60

(Centre) Cannibal Rock is a pinnacle dive and your first impression at the top of the reef is one of constant movement and schools of snappers, surgeon fish, goat fish and fusiliers part before you. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm FE, Sea & Sea YS120 + Isotecnic 33TTL, ISO 200, f8 1/60

(Above) The corals throughout the bay are in impressive condition. Large table corals are found in abundance in shallow water. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm FE, Sea & Sea YS120 + Isotecnic 33TTL, ISO 200, f11 1/60

This bay provides an idyllic setting with a sheltered anchorage behind the island of Nusa Kode which sits smack in the middle of the horseshoe – which is all that remains of a volcanic cone and flooded crater. The island has steep slopes with dense foliage which tumble to a shoreline fringed with pale sandy beaches often patrolled by the dreaded



Harlequin shrimps tend to be territorial and will haul back a starfish meal to their lair which may keep them fed for several days. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Inon wet lens, f11 1/125.

Komodo dragons.

There are several fantastic dives within the shelter of the bay with some interesting names including Cannibal Rock, Yellow Wall of Texas, Grandma Bangs Bommies, Banana Reef and Torpedo Alley and most live aboard trips to this area will dedicate several days of the schedule to this one location. All these are within a 5 minute boat ride from the mooring so the diving could not be easier.

Your first dives here are a little

overwhelming – you suffer a visual overload and your guide will be constantly banging his tank to show you the next remarkable or unusual creature. As photographer you barely have time to set up for each subject if you try to keep up, so you have to discipline yourself not to move on too quickly – the subjects will still be there on the next dive. There are numerous ‘stand alone’ species – frog fish, ghost pipe fish, blennies, mantis shrimps, leaf scorpion fish,



There are literally thousands of feather stars in every hue imaginable to be seen on each dive. Look closer for those hidden residents to be captured with a macro lens. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm FE, Sea & Sea YS120 + Isotecnic 33TTL, ISO 200, f11 1/60

morays, ribbon eels and so many species of nudibranchs it is difficult to keep count – and then there are the symbiotic species, in fact almost everything has a partner species.

It is worth checking everything from anemones to sponges, sea squirts, feather stars, sea urchins, sea



As the sun goes down a number of species will emerge to forage for food. This little decorator crab is scaling a sponge in search of a meal, neatly protected by his collection of stinging polyps. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 200 f16 1/125.

fans, starfish and even the nudibranchs for symbiotic shrimps, crabs, squat lobsters cling fish and tiny isopods that look just like lady birds. There are some rare species here as well which include the glorious but tiny Coleman shrimps which only live on one species of fire urchin, sometimes



There are some impressive seafans to be seen throughout Horseshoe Bay which are fed by the sometimes brisk nutrient laden currents. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 10.5mm FE, Sea & Sea YS120 + Isotecnic 33TTL, ISO 200, f11 1/60

accompanied by zebra crabs which are equally unusual. Another tiny commensal species are the pygmy seahorses which are found on certain sea fans – even when your guide points these out to you they are very difficult to spot and even more difficult to photograph well at the high



A rarer find on the abundant fire urchins are pairs of Coleman shrimps. These are usually found at the top of the urchin where they have picked out a few spines to make a home. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Inon Wet lens, ISO 200 f16 1/125.

magnifications required.

With such prolific macro life it is very tempting never to look behind you into open water and miss some of the larger action. At the deeper elevations of the reef you will often see eagle rays and torpedo rays cruising by and reef sharks are

common but often missed. In fact during my last visit I was informed that the week before a whale shark spent several hours hoovering up the plankton soup around the bay – why is it always the week before?? I salved my disappointment with the fact that I would have had a macro lens on anyway!

My favourite dive here is Cannibal rock, which is a wide ridge of coral that rises from 35-40m to just break surface on low spring tides and is classic multi level dive. If there is some current running here it is simply a matter of choosing the protected side, but it is often worth the effort of exploring into the current to see what the bigger pelagic fish are doing. The top of the reef is draped with dozens of huge carpet anemones each with a seemingly different species of clown fish – up to eight different species have been recorded here. The shallow area is full of ledges, small walls and overhangs and swim throughs decorated with colourful corals and some amazing seafans in only a few meters of water. Going deeper you will find that there is a mixture of steep coral slopes and drop offs before you reach a gently shelving seabed at the base of the reef. Throughout any dive here the most overwhelming feature is the sheer density of the coral and invertebrate cover, there is not an inch to spare!

Night diving here is equally spectacular and should not be missed. The favourite site for this is Torpedo Alley (named for its numerous small electric rays) where armies of decorator crabs emerge, some so burdened with their lumps of sponge, anemones or hydroids that they can barely drag themselves over the reef in search of dinner. Dozens of sea pens rise from the dark sand slopes and spread their arms to gather plankton and it takes a keen eye to spot the tiny porcelain crabs, shrimps and gobies that blend with the colour of their host. Snake eels peek out of the sand when you least expect it and minuscule bobtail squid frantically try to bury themselves when you play your torch light on them. Lion fish and dwarf lion fish shadow you waiting for the torch to reveal and freeze an easy meal – you must also be cautious with all these distractions as stone fish and Inimicus scorpion fish are also common and very difficult to spot.

Between dives relax and absorb the spectacular volcanic scenery, watch sea eagles gliding effortlessly on the thermals before plummeting on some hapless fish and of course observe the march of the Komodo dragons along the water's edge looking for an easy meal or maybe even considering each other for dinner!

Rinca Island and the Komodo



(Above) Some nudibranchs have striking patterns which in this case contrasts well with a tiny symbiotic imperial shrimp. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Inon Wet lens, ISO 200 f16 1/125.

(Left) There are some impressive sea fans to be seen throughout Horseshoe Bay which are fed by the sometimes brisk nutrient laden currents. Nikon F90X, Subal Housing, 16mm FE, Sea & Sea YS120 & YS30, Ektachrome Elite 100, f11 1/60

area can be dived year round but perhaps the best time to visit is between the monsoon seasons – the wet monsoon season ends around April and the following dry monsoon finishes in November when the best visibility and warmest water conditions dominate.

There are not many live aboards operating in this area, and you can spend a whole week without seeing another boat. One of the established departure points is Bali, although other boats originate in

Flores or Sumbawa and various itineraries may see you board or disembark on another island and then return to your departure point via a local flight. Komodo has been discovered but it is a long way from being developed – go now and discover this unique wilderness and astonishing marine life.

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