Diving Komodo National Park

By Ross and Diane Armstrong

Komodo had some of the most colour reefs we have seen. Soft corals, sea fans and hard corals take up almost every space on this part of the reef. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Sea&Sea housing, F8 @ 125th, dual Ikelite SS200 Strobes. Kodak E100VS.

If you looked closely you could find tiny gobies and shimps on almost everything. In this case we found two imperial shrimps on a seacucumber. SubEye Reflex, 60mm, F16 @ 60th, dual Ikelite SS50 Strobes. Fuji Velvia.

Two more blasts from Lisa's underwater horn indicated that she had found something special. This time it was a fire urchin with two Coleman's shrimps living on it. Between Lisa's horn, Sascha's rattle and Graham's tank tapping there was always something new to see. Not that is was difficult to find things ourselves, but four sets of eyes are always better than one.

We were diving in Komodo National Park (KNP), an area of 1,817 sq km located between Sumbawa and Flores in the Indonesian Archipelago. KNP includes four main islands, Komodo, Rinca, Padar and Palau Motang plus many smaller islands and rocks. Sixty seven percent of the park is sea where only traditional fishing methods are permitted. Two floating ranger stations, equipped with machine guns, ensure that practices such as dynamite and cyanide fishing do not occur within the park.

The marine biodiversity is incredible with over 250 species of reef building corals and more than 1000 species of fish so far recorded with new species still being discovered on a regular basis. The reason for the abundance and variety of the marine life is that Komodo National Park lies near the middle of the evolutionary epi-centre of tropical marine life on earth. In the triangle between Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Bali you find more tropical marine species than anywhere else in the world. The further you travel from this area the less species you will find.

The reefs around KNP are still largely unexplored and difficult to get to. However Lisa Crosby, Sascha Dambach and Tony Rhodes have started a new liveaboard dive operation, Kararu Dive Voyages, which offers trips to Komodo National Park and other remote areas in the Indonesian Archipelago. Leaving from Benoa Harbour in Bali, the water temperature and visibility generally reduces as you get nearer to the park. We had visibility ranging from around 10m to over 30m and water temperatures between 23 and 28 degrees Celsius. The cooler water and reduced visibility are caused by upwellings of nutrient rich water and in these conditions we encountered the

Pygmy seahorses are not what you would call common, but we found them at half a dozen different dive sites.Nikon F90X, 105mm fish eye, Sea&Sea housing, F32 @ 125th, dual Ikelite SS200 Strobes. Fuji Provia

greatest variety and numbers of marine life.

We had wrongly assumed that we would be diving around Komodo Island but only had one dive there. Some of the best diving was around Rinca and Flores. At Rinca we dived a site called Cannibal Rock in Horseshoe Bay, happy to learn the site was named after a large Komodo dragon was seen devouring a smaller dragon rather than other reasons that may spring to mind about the friendliness of the locals. This area has been rated by many marine biologists as among the top five dive sites in the world for marine life.

At Cannibal Rock we encountered our first pygmy seahorses, including a rare yellow pygmy seahorse. Here we found our first fire urchins with resident coleman shrimps, zebra crabs sheltering between their poisonous spines. Adding to the colour of the reef were sea apples. These are large round seacumbers with colourful tentacles that they wave in the current for food. Colourful anemones were very common with many different species of anemone fish, although another unusual occurrence we witnessed at Cannibal Rock was that hawkfish and blennies have taken to living in the anemones, sometimes displacing the anemone fish in the process. Cannibal Rock was so special that we spent two full days there. This allowed us several opportunities to dive Cannibal Rock and some of the other excellent sites near by.

A night dive on Cannibal Rock is amazing, we did two and the noise of the reef at night is very loud, a real sign of a very healthy reef. On our second night dive we found a giant moray which gave us a real fright when our torch beams revealed it looking out of its hole. We checked the identification book afterwards and found they grow to 2.4m but looking at it in the dark it sure looked bigger and we were glad we did not encounter it out in the open.

All the night dives were superb; we particularly enjoyed night dives on sandy areas that seem to come alive after dark with weird and wonderful creatures. We found crocodile fish, squid, cuttlefish, mantis shrimps, decorator crabs, many species of sea pens with resident shrimps, crabs and gobys. Again the guides were excellent at finding the more unusual critters for us, although locating the source of the rattle sometimes proved challenging in the dark.

Not all the diving had poor visibility. On some of the outer reefs and islands closer to Bali the visibility averaged between 20 and 30 metres. These sites offered good wide-angle photography opportunities with large barrel sponges, soft corals, colourful reef fish and clouds of anthias hovering above the reef. We saw the occasional larger animals such as turtles, tuna,

Visibility on some of the outer reefs was superb, with large barrel sponges and colourful schools of anthias. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Sea&Sea housing, F8 @ 125th, dual Ikelite SS200 Strobes. Kodak E100VS.

Finding a crab completed covered with stingy hydroids was what makes night dives in KNP so exciting.
SubEye Reflex, 60mm, F16 @ 60th, dual Ikelite SS50 Strobes. Fuji Velvia.

mobula rays, the odd shark and a single manta ray. However anyone going to Komodo National Park thinking they will encounter big animals on every dive are likely to be disappointed.

This is a place where little creatures, rare creatures and creatures so ugly they are beautiful, rule. We found more nudibranchs, crabs and shrimps on this trip than probably all the trips we have done previously. We soon gave up trying to remember them all and find them in the identification books on the boat; instead relying on our photos to make positive identifications. Sometimes even our guides had not seen some of the animals before.

Our previous trip to Bali introduced us to some of the wonderful diving available in Indonesia, but at Komodo National Park we were completely overwhelmed us with abundance and variety of rare and spectacular marine life. You know that a place is special when other divers on the trip, many of whom had done over 1000 dives all around the world, talk about seeing things they have never seen before after almost every dive.

If you want to find out more about diving in Komodo National Park visit Kararu Dive Voyage's web site at www.kararu.com.

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