

from Cannibal to Komodo

: TONY KARACSONYI

> "WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SEE A DRAGON?" SHE ASKED. "RUN" REPLIED THE RANGERS. BARELY OUT THE DOOR, SHE TURNED TO DISCOVER SHE WAS STARING HEAD-ON AT A DRAGON. SHE JUMPED ONTO A BENCH, THEN A CHAIR. AS THE DRAGON REACHED THE CHAIR SHE JUMPED ONTO A TABLE TOP. THE DRAGON LEAPT BEHIND HER. "HELP!" SHE SCREAMED AS LOUD AS SHE COULD...

This was the first encounter skipper Frank Van Der Linde's partner Rung had with a Komodo dragon. She was rescued by a man with a long forked stick, who held the dragon back while she ran the 500 metres back to their yacht, screaming for Frank all the way!

I first became interested in the Komodo Islands when I was diving the Spice Islands. I asked a lady who had dived widely in Asia what was the best dive she'd ever done. She thought for a moment then said "Cannibal Rock. It's the best dive on the planet!" I slotted it into my mental must-do list. Some months later Frank Van Der Linde called to say there was room on the Philippine Siren and it was sailing to Komodo. I was soon flying to Bima near

Flores to join 16 other adventurers for 10 days on the S/Y Philippine Siren

LET'S DO CANNIBAL ROCK

Cannibal Rock is a ridge between Rinca Island and Kode Island in the southern Komodos. It rises from over 30 metres deep to within three metres of the surface and is only 100 metres from shore. The reef, constantly swept by currents, is absolutely covered in crinoids, nudibranchs, tubastrea coral, anthias, grey frogfish, blue, mauve, yellow and orange anemones, sea apples, crocodile fish, and hundreds of juvenile yellow sea cucumbers.

The Rock is a macro paradise and you'll want to keep going back for more. In any one patch there are starfish, sea

Main: Tiger anemones cover a seawhip in Bima Bay. Left to right: Sangeang Island volcano at sunset; Beautiful anemones and anemonefish at Cannibal Rock; Cannibal Rock has to be seen to be believed.





Pink anthias hover around a green tubastrea coral, feeding in the current.



A frogfish at Unusal Suspects dive site.



KOMODO DRAGONS are endemic to five islands in central Indonesia to the west of Flores. Komodo and Rinca Islands form the Komodo National Park. Known locally as 'ora', Komodo dragons are the world's largest lizard weighing up to 166kg, and growing up to three metres long, with teeth 2.5cm long. The bacteria in their saliva is quite toxic – be careful near these well equipped carnivores. Visit the Komodo National Park website for more details: www.komodo-gateway.org

cucumbers, anemones, seafans and all the rare critters: pygmy seahorses, commensal shrimps, gobies, frogfish and amphipods. This site is worth several dives with a 60mm macro lens, and perhaps some super-macro for the blue amphipods. I can't stop raving about this super-rich dive.

SHOT GUN – WHAT A BLAST

Mere mention of this site conjures up a big blast, and this is exactly what you get – near the end, but there's a whole lot more to it. Shot Gun is a pass between Lawalaut and Lawadarat islands. Where the pass narrows and the seafloor rises, the current 'shot-guns' divers up and over the reef at great speed, then spits them out into deeper water on the other side. Divers are dropped in well out front of the pass and drift slowly over white sand and bommies covered in vibrant soft corals. This is a prime spot for wide angle. As the current picks up and the pass converges, you reach a spot with two channels going off to the left. Here the walls are covered in sponges and there's fish everywhere – black snappers, trevally, drummer and nurse sharks – a sort of fish soup!

CRYSTAL AND CASTLE ROCKS

At Crystal Rock near Lawalaut Island I swam to the head of the current where it first hits the two bommies. Fusiliers were being hunted in a small cave, and every big reef fish wanted in on the action. There were giant trevally, giant Maori wrasse, and a super-sized moray eel, plus clown triggerfish, eagle rays, whitetip reef sharks and bull sharks.

Castle Rock, also at Lawalaut, is one of

Frank's favourite dives. Here giant and blue-finned trevally hunt blue fusiliers, as do the bigeye trevally. On the reef there are emperor angelfish, surgeonfish and whitetip reef sharks. The bommy is about four metres on top and drops to over 30 metres all around.

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

Bima Bay reminds me of Ambon's magical muck dive the 'Twilight Zone'. On the sandy slope are gaudy fire urchins, Coleman shrimp, zebra crabs, cuttlefish, yellow seahorses, big flatheads, wolf eels, cockatoo waspfish and sea moths. The list continues with yellow ornate ghost pipefish, mantis shrimp, pipefish, spider crabs, transparent shrimps with white spots, and Ambon scorpionfish. In one small area there are orange and black frogfish and spotted moray eels. We counted over 21 rare and unusual critters in a single dive!

SANGEANG VOLCANO

Remember the scene in the movie *King Kong*, where the expedition ship first sights the island where the gorilla lives? Sangeang Island fits the bill perfectly, with an active volcano, black lava flows and jungle slopes. At Tecno Reef hot water and bubbles trickle from vents on a black sand slope and the coral bommies are home to white leaf fish, gobies, bubble coral shrimps, panda clownfish, and four yellow ghost pipefish living on black coral. The Estuary has ornate ghost pipefish, xeno crabs, blade shrimp, yellow pipefish on black coral, juvenile warty frogfish, yellow leaf fish, painted frogfish yellow/red in colour, and pygmy seahorses.

THE CIRCUS - BANTA ISLAND

On a night dive in 10 metres we spotted mimic octopus, spiky devilfish, sponge crab, flounders, moray eel and a stunning dragonet with gold eyes – this was a macro delight.

BATU BOLONG - HOLE IN THE WALL

This tiny island has a hole through it above water. The current absolutely rages around it. The RIB's dropped us on the lee side, where we were sandwiched by the current on both sides. At 20-25 metres there were big Napoleon wrasse, giant trevally and three whitetip reef sharks. We finished in the shallows where a



gang of giant trevally were hunting fusiliers. This is a good dive for big marine animals, but don't wander off to the sides or you'll get swept away like the other reef fish at about 20 knots!

PINK BEACH AND THE MANTAS

Pink Beach is at Pantai Merah near the Komodo National Park. It's one of the best dives for wide angle, with bommies at 25 metres covered in crinoids and reef fish. Helmet gurnards spread their lovely pectoral fins over the sand, making for great photography. Manta Valley on the south tip of Komodo is



Clockwise from top left: A striking white anemone on the reef at Castle Rock; Cannibal Rock is a riot of colour and life, with yellow tubastrea coral polyps or daisy corals, and hundreds of crinoids or feather stars; Common helmet gurnards shot out of the sand and spread their ornate wings at the Pink Beach site; This parrotfish is just one of the many colourful reef fish in the Komodo Islands. The islands are part of the marine biodiversity hotspot in Indonesia.

- DIVE SITES
- 1 Cannibal Rock
- 2 Shot Gun
- 3 Crystal Rock
- 4 Castle Rock
- 5 Bima Bay
- 6 Sangeang Island
- 7 Banta Island
- 8 Batu Bolong
- 9 Pantai Merah
- 10 Manta Valley



Note: Due to the variety of words used in the Indonesian language that mean 'island', some islands may be known by a slightly different local name. Some common variations are: pulau, gili, nusa, meos, pulo, kiye, liito

WORLDWIDE DIVE AND SAIL

The Siren Fleet of Worldwide Dive and Sail is one of the largest fleets operating in south-east Asia. The S/Y *Philippine Siren* is one of the latest additions to the liveaboard fleet.

The yacht is 40 metres long and sports seven 'phinisi gaff-rigged' sails. The 14 crew includes two PADI dive instructors qualified for all PADI courses. NITROX is free to all certified divers. Camera



benches, strobe charging points and computers are located throughout the yacht. All food, beer and soft drinks are included. www.worldwidediveandsail.com

“Welcome to the Komodo Islands – a real life Jurassic Park in the heart of Indonesia.”

famous for manta rays which regularly visit the cleaning station. At first there was one, then two, three, four – fantastic! The best moment was when four manta rays approached us in two pairs. A wide angle lens is a must for this adrenaline pumping dive.

DANCING WITH DRAGONS

The crew went on 'dragon watch' when we arrived at Rinca Island. The dragons,

scenting breakfast cooking on the boat, have been known to swim out and attempt to board the yacht; Frank and his crew have even had to push a few off the stern. The crew took some fruit and vegetables to the island for the macaque monkeys and wild boar. As the day warmed up the dragons made an appearance too. We counted four on the beach; some were fighting and a pair were mating.



Manta rays at Manta Valley.

The prehistoric Komodo Islands, with active volcanoes, super-sized dragons, raging currents and coral reefs teeming with bizarre marinelife, are one of the world's most exciting diving destinations. Sailing among them onboard the S/Y Philippine Siren is simply grand.



TRAVEL FACTS

- **BEST TIME TO DIVE**

October to May, but seas can be rough from January to March. The water can be 18-22° C in southern Komodo so take a 5mm wetsuit.

- **HOW TO GET THERE**

Fly to Bali, then Bima. Worldwide Dive and Sail can book your internal flights.

- **WHERE TO STAY**

If stopping in Bali for a few days there are many guesthouses ranging from A\$20 per night to A\$200.

- **HEALTH & SAFETY**

Use malaria medication. Dengue fever is common in Bali.

The Komodo Islands were granted UNESCO World Heritage Site Status in 1991. ■