



∴ ANGELA CHONG



# KOMODO

THESE INDONESIAN ISLANDS ARE FAMOUS WORLDWIDE FOR THEIR VARANUS KOMODOENSIS, A LARGE LIZARD THAT CAN WEIGH OVER 100 KILOGRAMS AND CAN REACH THREE METRES IN LENGTH. SCIENTIFICALLY DOCUMENTED (THE BULLETIN DU JARDIN BOTANIQUE DE BUITENZORG, 1912) THROUGH EFFORTS OF P A Ouwens, CURATOR OF THE BOGOR ZOOLOGICAL MUSEUM WITH LIEUTENANT VAN STEYN VAN HENSBROEK OF THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY, THE DRAGONS HAVE A FEARSOME REPUTATION AS A TOP PREDATOR IN THEIR ISLAND KINGDOM. TALES OF ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN INQUISITIVE TOURISTS AND THE ODD DRAGON WITH EXOTIC TASTES SEEM TO BE ENDLESS!

**I**t was hot when we left the dive boat to go to the Komodo National Park Headquarters at Loh Liang, and we were determined not to be too impressed with any overgrown monitor lizard, thinking that it was just so much media hype. We fidgeted and shuffled during the introductory speeches and were fast developing what felt like prickly heat but how quickly physical discomfort was forgotten when we actually saw these dragons. It must have been a dragon spell. We saw several large individuals at the ranger station and met several others roaming around the grassland of the island. When resting on the ground the dragons seemed innocuous and somewhat undeserving of their fearsome reputation – apparently they can devour up to 80% of their body weight at one sitting. However, when the dragons raised themselves on their stocky legs and

started to look around and move – there was no doubt that these were hefty, muscular beings possessed of a very primeval presence! Seeing them in the wild, we appreciated how fast they moved. Definitely it was a case of four legs better than two legs.

Dragons aside, the Komodo National Park is also equally famous for its marine life. The islands of Komodo, Rinca, Padar and several smaller ones islands along the Inner Banda Arc and the waters around them were declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco in 1986 with about 510 square miles being the marine component. In our opinion, this area now possesses some of the better-preserved reefs in Indonesia.

At Sape harbour the sight of the high masted pindisi boats lying quietly at

anchor with furled sails was picture book perfect and a wonderful way to start a holiday. Somehow these settings are always comforting and restful – until one is underway that is, and the sea state decides to take a nasty turn. On previous trips, our checkout dive has usually been at the Gili Banta islands on the day of embarkation, but this last trip no one in our group was quite perky enough. We just wanted to crawl into bed with a hot cup of soup.

But the next day we were up bright and early ready to dive at Batu Bolong or Current City – a little 'C' shaped rocky outcrop off one of the smaller islands (Tatawa Besar). This is one of our favourite sites and the first time we dived here, the whole sea surface was churning save for a little calm patch in the centre of the C. Fully geared, we'd

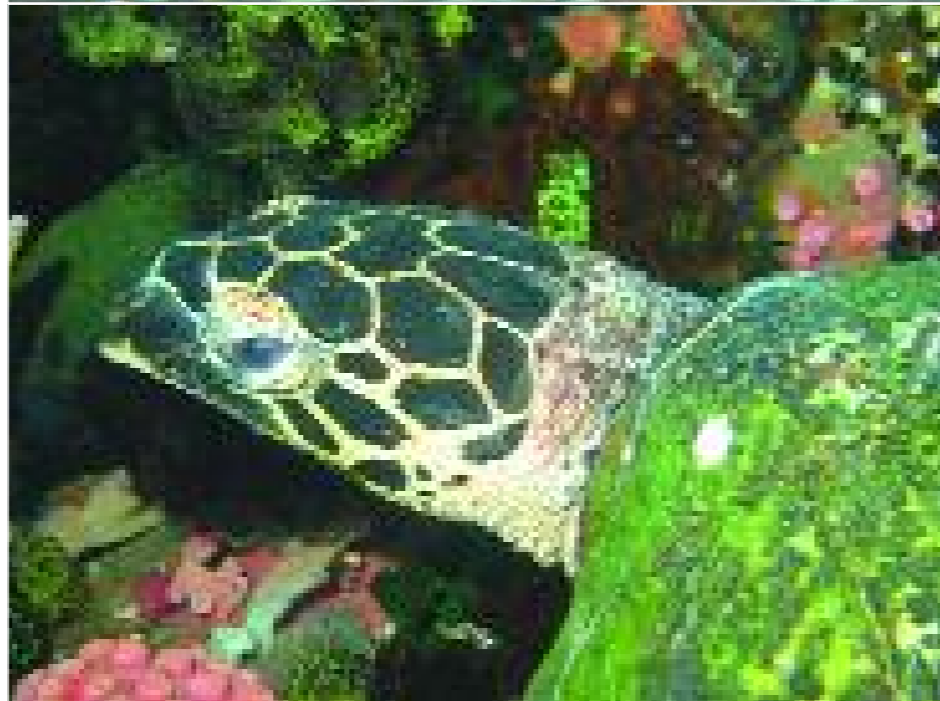
climbed onto a little dinghy from the main boat, and sat rather tentatively as it deftly picked its way in between the churning waters. To us, it seemed a bit dicey to dive in such waters but the guides had been reassuring. On reaching the calm bit of sea, we'd descended promptly on cue (admittedly dive discipline showed a marked improvement in the face of perceived adversity!). The guides were right, it was a fantastic dive.

Batu Bolo is a pinnacle of rock rising from about 30 metres. Descending into the lee side of the rock and from a protected perch at about 20 metres, we gazed up at the swirling currents at each corner and saw schools of magnificent black giant trevally cruising slowly through the turbulence whilst smaller fish tumbled around. There were sharks below, pelagic fish all around and the rock surface was covered with quivering pink anthias. With its excellent visibility and abundant fish life, this site we thought epitomized Komodo region diving.

Giant trevally and sharks apart, manta rays are another of our favourites. In Komodo these magnificent creatures have never failed to appear at one dive site or another. Manta Alley southeast of Komodo is supposedly a site where they are most regularly seen. When we dived here in June/July last year, the water was plankton-rich and had a definite Ow-factor as far as exposed skin was concerned. Mantas were aplenty except that we couldn't really see them until they were literally on top of us. We were bumped and buzzed by these playful mantas, who whizzed round perkily, probably intent on their planktonic buffet.

This year we dove here in late January when the water was clear and blue. There were far fewer mantas, but we could see them coming from way off. The underwater terrain was also stunning and we could see dramatic volcanic slopes rising from the sea floor as well as coral beds. I can only say that it was like being in the middle of a choreographed aerial display. It was lovely to see the graceful winged creatures as they swooped slowly up from the sea floor, cresting a seamount and gliding over divers as they searched for their favourite cleaning station. We were fascinated to see how once they'd found a spot, they'd settle down like big graceful space ships, hover and bump coral for a while before going off again. There were smaller individuals with white bellies and sharp wingtips and there was that handsome big black. We loved him and stayed there till our bottom time ran out.

We had spotted dolphins halfway through a dive off Gili Lawa northeast of Komodo Island. It was a little alarming to see something large barrel



through the water straight at you, and I honestly thought it was a tiger shark coming in for afternoon tea. But this thing swam with a strange undulating up-down pattern and had a huge upturned grin! What a relief. It came by, rolled over for us and left us when the rest of its pod came along. Unfortunately we had no photos of that encounter because the one and only functioning cameraman lost his fin when he saw the dolphin! Alas poor Romeo, wherefore art thou?

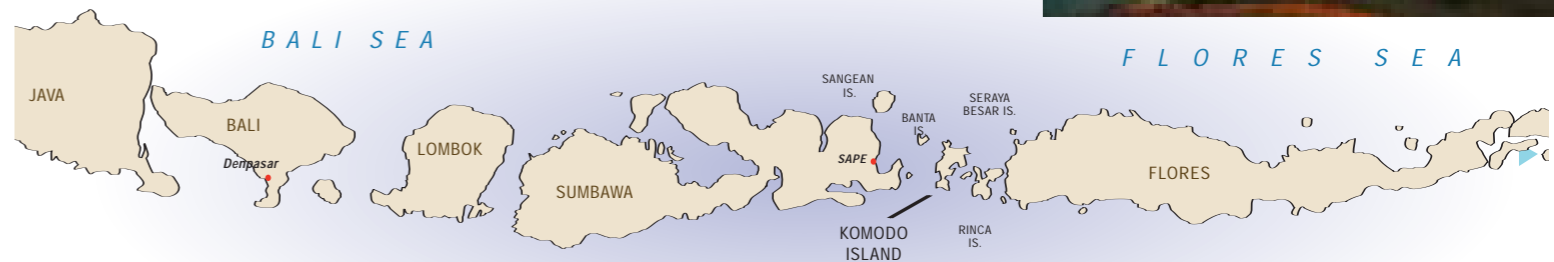


But we did record a most interesting encounter between an octopus and a damsel. The little octopus was out in the open hunting and we spotted it was perched high on its eight arms. Then from nowhere, a yellow damsel came and attacked the octopus with surprising tenacity. Again and again, the fish hit the octopus, aiming for the eye. The octopus retreated, changed colours, and even hit back in desperation, using two of its arms, yet the damsel kept coming, undeterred. It was unfazed by the few paparazzi who were desperately trying to record the fight. Finally, the poor fellow found a recess and stayed there. Unfortunately, he didn't stay hidden long enough, for when he poked his head out a few minutes later the yellow damsel was still around and fighting fit!

There are of course small benthic creatures in Komodo, but we were distracted by the larger marine life - besides it's a little difficult to take nice macro pictures of pygmy seahorses and crinoid shrimps with little housed digital cameras. Several lifetimes ago when we were all carrying housed monsters with

105mm lenses it might have been a different story! Both Herry and Weka, the dive masters with us on our trips, were expert at finding both the small stuff and the pelagics and perhaps more importantly, were knowledgeable about the local diving conditions. We can attest to the company's communications. They keep in constant contact with their headquarters in Bali and with their offices in the smaller towns. We also tested their evacuation systems some time ago when one of our parties decided to develop an infarct three days into a dive trip to what must be some of the more remote areas in Indonesia.

The currents in Komodo are quite swift and strong. They can also be multi directional depending the tidal flow and terrain. In quite a few dives it was rather





amusing to see the lead divers desperately trying to trim their buoyancy as the current flowed down over a ledge or up and out over another. The thing to do, I found, was to keep an eye on the leaders and be prepared to peddle desperately. And that's just to keep in a relatively level position. Alternatively, follow the divemaster's depth and path!

Night dives? Well night dives were on the itinerary and on previous trips, a few of the younger divers went down, thoroughly enjoying Spanish dancers, lobsters, basket stars and such. Me, I'm of an age where the evening of an ideal dive trip is spent soaking in the quiet of a golden sunset, with a sea breeze and a nice cup of coffee. Oh, and don't forget to bring some nice chocolates!

For our trip, we decided to use one of the wooden Indonesian-style Pindisi liveaboards which takes a maximum of 12 passengers. This was partly because we had wanted a total Indonesian experience. The other part was because we were a small group, we wanted to be the majority group on board! The dive boats of Grand Komodo Travel and Tours are moored in the port of Sape on the island of Sumbawa. To get there we had to catch an early morning flight from Denpasar, Bali to Bima in Sumbawa. This was followed by a picturesque two hour bus ride through the coastal salt farms, rice terraces and highland fruit orchards to Sape. Depending on the season, one might be able to buy some local fruits along the way.