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WE DECIDED TO DO KOMODO A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY. ENLISTING THE HELP OF AN OLD FRIEND, GRAHAM ABBOTT, FOUNDER OF DIVING 4 IMAGES, WE ORGANISED OUR OWN LITTLE LIVEBOARD TO VISIT PARTS OF THE ISLANDS HARDLY, IF EVER, VISITED BY DIVERS. BREAKING WITH TRADITION, WE DECIDED TO GO OVER CHRISTMAS, WHICH IS CONSIDERED OFF-SEASON, BUT WE WERE REWARDED WITH NEW SITES, NEW SPECIES AND CONDITIONS RARELY EXPERIENCED IN SOUTHERN KOMODO.

Komodo is one of those places you can visit time and time again and never tire of. You simply never know what to expect in the contrastingly cool waters of the south and the warmer north. A few islands east of Bali, in a chain known as Nusa Tenggara which runs west-east along the southern border of Indonesia, Komodo has been World Heritage listed since 1991. It's regarded as both a marine and terrestrial site of outstanding natural wonder and of universal value to humanity, and I certainly agree with these statements!

Meeting Charlie Our little boat for this exciting adventure was endearing but she did give us cause for concern on a couple of occasions. *Charlie* was quite tall but with a relatively small hull, which was fine until a gust of wind caught her broadside and sent everything flying! There were three cabins, two with bunks and one double 'owner's suite'. It was maintained in ship shape and great for diving – the dive deck was at the back so we could jump in whenever we fancied. The dive deck doubled as the kitchen so you could gauge how long to make your dive judging by the state of dinner!

We had some of the best critter spotter eyes in Indonesia with us on the trip. Graham, who organised the trip, is well known in Indonesia's critter hunting/muck diving circles as the go-to man for this sort of thing. We'd first met nearly 15 years ago when we were both just beginning our Indonesian addiction and still neither of us can get enough of this amazing country. Also on board we had Yann Alfian,

- 1 A pair of nudibranchs relatively common in Komodo, the stunning *Ceratosoma magnificum*.
- 2 An unusual colour form of the estuary seahorse *Hippocampus kuda*.
- 3 A small but deadly blue-ringed octopus.
- 4 A gravid female painted frogfish.



KOMODO OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED...

another old friend who showed me my very first pygmy seahorses – which I subsequently studied for my doctorate! Yann, in my opinion, is the best dive guide in Indonesia and a great guy to dive with. Even after countless thousands of dives in the region he maintains an extraordinary enthusiasm for the creatures he sees and rarities he keeps finding.

To begin our expedition we flew from Bali over Lombok, Sumbawa and Komodo itself to reach the western tip of Flores Island, a town called Labuan Bajo. This is a great starting point for Komodo as it cuts out the 24 hour boat journey from Bali. The Nusa Tenggara islands aren't densely forested as

you'd expect in the tropics – they receive very little rainfall and are barren, mostly treeless hills which are brown in the dry season and for a couple of months resemble rolling English hills in the rainy season.

Getting Wet Our first port of call, after acquainting ourselves with Charlie, was a small island named Wainilu. I'd dived this spot a couple of years before but only had time for a single dive then, although I saw a hairy octopus being hunted by a flamboyant cuttlefish so we thought this would be a great place to start! It turns out this site is brilliant for cephalopod encounters (the group containing cuttlefish,

squid and octopus for non-science folk) and after the hairy encounter my image search was set for little cryptic creatures. I was pleasantly rewarded with two blue-ringed octopuses, plus plentiful crinoid cuttlefish and a wunderpus octopus. Wunderpus are a cousin of the mimic octopus but in my opinion even more beautiful. The rusty orange and white banding, delicate ornate eye-stalks and the species' habit of opening out the arm membranes make for an excellent display. The animal was hunting over a small rock, which it covered entirely with its arm membranes and then, using its arm tips, searched within the enclosing web for tasty morsels.

Arriving in the shallows as the dive progressed, I remembered this as one of the only places I've ever seen the elusive picturesque dragonet. It's very similar in appearance to the mandarinfish but covered in colourful circles rather than lines. I searched the broken corals in only a few metres of water and finally found one of the fish weaving through the network of branches. Soon I noticed them all around and decided a dusk dive was in order to see if the picturesque, like the mandarinfish, sets aside this time of day for courtship, settling territorial disputes and mating. Unfortunately, I'd got ahead of myself and we didn't see much activity when we went in a few hours later. Perhaps it was the wrong time of year or dawn is preferred for social activity in this species.

Varanus komodoensis These islands are most famous for the giant Komodo dragons, the world's largest lizard reaching three metres in length. Between dives one day we visited the ranger station at the heart of the islands to see the creatures and weren't disappointed; dragons lay all around. They seem slothful in this state but when food is about or they become hungry it's a different matter. It was long thought that bacteria-ridden saliva felled their buffalo and deer prey, causing septicaemia within a day or two. Recently it's been found they're one of only three lizard species with a venomous bite, the others being the bearded lizard and Gila monster. The newly discovered dragon venom has been found to lower the blood pressure of prey animals and add anticoagulants to prevent wounds from healing. Dragons are a real danger to Komodo inhabitants and even the occasional tourist; fortunately we had a ranger on hand (albeit, armed simply with a stick!) to ward off potentially ravenous dragons.

A Lucky Omen No visit to Komodo is complete without spending a few days in the amazing Horseshoe Bay. I've been on boats where people have been underwhelmed by its signature site, Cannibal Rock, due to the poor visibility and cooler water in this southern region. At this point I should mention that Komodo has two extremes of underwater environment. The north of Komodo and Rinca (pronounced Rincha) is more typically hard coral dominated and with pristine tropical coral gardens and the usual critter suspects in bountiful supply. The south is quite distinct from these stereotypical reefs due to the upwelling of

cool nutrient-rich water so adored by phytoplankton. These little algae flourish and, to the annoyance of divers, make the water a greenish colour more common in temperate than tropical seas. Our trip in December coincided with the two months a year when the upwellings slacken and the southern waters become warm, clear and relatively calm. This meant we could reach some of the ocean-exposed sites that are normally off limits due to swell and crashing waves. Unfortunately, calm seas in the south means rough in the north so we were unable to reach the hard coral gardens and big fish that flourish on the Flores Sea side of Komodo.

The clear blue water we experienced in the south actually took the edge off the vibrant colours of the reef a little. It's the invertebrates feeding on the plankton that are so colourful and they tend to lose a little of their lustre when food isn't abundant. The flip side of this is that the true numbers of fish, usually obscured by the murkiness, became apparent. Endless rivers of fusiliers flowed over Cannibal Rock and uncountable thousands, if not millions, of silversides evaded hundreds of hunting trevally. The swirling masses were actually using me as a protection, I guess assuming the trevally would rather not go too close to a bigger predator. At one point, avoiding a trevally ambush, the whole school of silversides shot over, under and all around me, leaving a Richard-shaped hole in the school!

Every inch of rock in Horseshoe Bay is covered with life of some sort. Sponges, soft corals, crinoids and gorgonians are abundant, whereas hard corals are notably diminished due to their inability to compete in the



5 A goby guarding eggs on the surface of a tunicate.

6 Three imperial shrimp riding a nudibranch *Nembrotha milleri*.

7 A rich spot on Cannibal Rock dive site.

8 A tiny and very rare nocturnal frogfish sometimes called the Lembeh frogfish.

9 A large Mariona nudibranch.





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- 10 Scarlet coloured robust ghost pipefish.
- 11 An undescribed species of velvetfish that has thus far eluded even our own Neville Coleman.
- 12 Millions of silversides evading predators.

cool water with so much light lost to the plankton above. Large fire urchins harbour zebra crabs or Coleman's shrimp, basket stars emerge at night with tiny shrimp scurrying over their incessantly moving fronds and occasionally pygmy seahorses adorn gorgonian corals.

To boldly go... We made the most of diving new sites outside the protection of Horseshoe Bay given the ideal weather conditions. A little gem we came across on one dive was a deep-water pinnacle that topped off at around 30 metres. A kaleidoscope of colourful invertebrates and innumerable glass sweepers covered the pinnacle, epitomising the diversity and abundance of life in this part of the world.

Heading north to central Rinca we tried out some new muck sites and found such exotic beasties as Ambon scorpionfish, velvetfish, bottletail squid and Yann even found what appears to be a new species of scorpion or velvetfish. He found a pair of these pink and white fish on a night dive, at a site rarely, if ever, dived. We also came across one of my favourite fish, the robust ghost pipefish in what must be the most gaudy of colour forms I have ever seen. At 25 metres they looked dark brown in colour but the camera flash exposed their true scarlet colouration. Since red light is the first to be attenuated by the water column they were well camouflaged unless they came up to the shallows where their vivid colour would have been very apparent.

Some places are really special and truly deserving of accolades such as world's best, healthiest reefs and, lucky for us all, awarded international protection such as World Heritage listing. Komodo is one such place and I am eager to make my fifth trip to this special area. I'll have to put some long hard thought into the best season and way of accessing the region so I can see it in yet another new light. Our trip just goes to show that doing things a little differently can sometimes shed new light on even the most well-known destination.