

Komodo – Underwater Photo Cruise

By Jeff Mullins © 2009

What do you do with an enthusiastic bunch of underwater photography students? A collection of guys & girls that have seen the best of Bali's underwater photo sites and now they want more.

Someone suggested a live-aboard photo trip to Komodo National Park, which was quickly followed by a resounding yes vote. So we chartered a traditional *Phinisi* live-aboard dive boat and ten dive/photo enthusiasts were on our way to explore some of the World's richest reefs on an eight day trip in Indonesia.

After meeting in Bali we flew an hour and a half east to the port of Labuanbajo on the western end of Flores Island. The last 15 minutes flying were directly over the islands of Komodo, so everyone had a bird's eye view of massive Komodo & Rinca Islands and some of the sixty-odd islands that surround them.

From the airport we were driven to nearby Labuanbajo Port and loaded the luggage onboard our boat. Followed by a leisurely two hour cruise out to the islands of Komodo, just enough time to each lunch, unpack dive gear and prepare camera equipment.

We chose to do our first dives at the Sebolan Islands north-west of the port, as here the currents are minimal and visibility is normally very good. Also the reefs have a good variety of colourful sea whips, soft corals and gorgonia fans, ideal conditions for wide angle photography. We weren't disappointed. At Sebolan Kecil, the smaller of the two islands; we descended on a sea mount in a slight current with 30 metre visibility. Each group of five divers descended twenty minutes apart; this gave each diver the opportunity to take wide angle photos without the inevitable 'unwanted diver' appearing in the backgrounds of their photos.

The top ridge of the seamount had a large group of red sea whips and billowing soft corals on its slopes, where a decent sized white-tip reef shark meandered past us, in no hurry at all. While above and around

us a huge school of fusiliers raced around, trying to escape a dog-tooth tuna that was eying them-off.

There were also plenty of anemones where we found five different species of anemone fish. We crossed over a narrow sand gully where a colony of garden eels watched us warily, finally ascending up the reef slope surrounding the island. Here we explored among the hard corals in the shallows, finding nudibranchs, crinoid shrimps and watching the schools of fusilier's parade past.

Back on the boat, it was bedlam as all the photographers compared photos and everyone was abuzz with what they had seen. So after a quick snack and a short break, we were back in again at Sebolan Besar, the larger of the islands. As the sun was very low, the dive was going to become a night dive after 30 minutes, so we took torches along.

The first thing we saw was a juvenile banded sea snake searching among coral outcrops on the steep slope of the island. This tiny snake was the smallest we'd ever seen, maybe 30cms long with very distinct colours - like it had just left the paint-shop. Then a beautiful red octopus crawled along the reef and into a large ledge, where it stayed for a while with arms splayed-out searching in every small nook and cranny.

As the light faded we could see the photographer's strobes flashing along the reef-face. I swam along looking over the shoulders of each of them, at their subjects and watched their techniques so I could offer advice later, when they were reviewing their photos. Torches were now all on and our guides were finding lots of variety of shrimps, crabs, nudibranchs, lionfish and scorpion fish. Pretty soon the reef slope resembled a fireworks display as strobes all went off in quick succession.

We surfaced at the end of the dive to find the dinghy's hovering just metres from us. With willing hands to help with camera's and equipment we were back onboard our boat and sitting down to dinner within a few minutes after surfacing. The table was once again a scene of excited chatter about the dive



Photographers enjoy a round-table discussion between dives.

and everyone's discoveries and photographic triumphs.

After dinner I ran the first of a series of photo editing sessions for anyone that was interested (and not too tired), on the use of *Adobe Photoshop* for editing underwater images. Over the next six nights these collectively gave the photographers a clearer understanding of most editing functions of what can be a very daunting program for the uninitiated.

The next morning we left our overnight mooring just before sunrise to travel west to the north coast of Komodo Island. This area has some exquisite coral reefs that offer pelagic fish action and stunning reef life around a couple of world-class dive sites.

Our first descent was on Crystal Rock, our dive master *Sangut* warned every one of the currents that can be experienced here. Depending on the tidal direction and strength we would head deep to around 25 metres at the beginning of the dive and later in the shallows we would need to shelter on the lee side of one particular large submerged rock during our safety stop. If we didn't, we would be carried off, as the current would increase as the dive progressed.

On the bottom, we moved from the shallows at 10 metres, into a slight current down a sloping reef to around 15 metres. Here a spread-out group of giant trevally were cruising around the reef. Within seconds we were surrounded by a massive school of fusiliers that became progressively denser, so that we eventually lost sight of the surface. The fusiliers seemed to be pouring in from some invisible point to our left, streaming over and around us in their thousands. The giant trevally were now on high alert as they streaked around us in pursuit of their prey. The fusiliers tried to hide around every prominent point of reef, when three white tip reef sharks joined in the melee and spooked the fusiliers even

more.

Then as if on cue, four dolphins entered the fiasco. Two mothers, each with a young dolphin at their sides cruised down among the smorgasbord for breakfast. All the while we just looked-on in awe.

As quickly as it started, the fusiliers and dolphins vanished. The trevally went back to cruising around the reef, and we began our ascent to find our shelter rock. On the way passing a couple of huge sweetlip, a large cod and a school of batfish. It was only during the ascent that most of the group noticed what magnificent corals covered the bottom. Until then there had been so much action happening, that no-one had even noticed the reef itself!

We were 'blown' by the current around the large rock we were finishing our dive behind. It was surprising how calm it was on the lee-side, where we watched a large turtle quietly munching on soft corals, oblivious to the action on the other side of the rock. It was with some degree of regret that everyone surfaced after this dive. Back onboard, it was hard to get a word in to let everyone know that breakfast was being served.

So began each day of our photo trip. Up early for coffee and cereal, followed by an early dive, then a full cooked breakfast, morning tea and another dive around lunch time. A quick rest (or change of memory card or lens) while we moved location and ate lunch. Then back in again for another afternoon or night dive. We covered the northern, eastern and southern areas of the National Park waters over eight days. With each dive offering new seascapes, animals and ocean temperatures. From Manta's buzzing over our heads at sunset, to clinging to a sheer rock-face in a screaming current at lunchtime or meandering quietly along a sand slope photographing rare creatures on

a moon-lit evening. We saw a big chunk of what Komodo is renown for - its huge diversity, with no two dives alike.

So what brings about this incredible bio-diversity? Firstly, strong tidal currents flowing through the Sape and Linta Straits, to the east and west of Komodo Island bring upwelling's and high oxygenation to the relatively shallow waters of the park. But also these currents bring nutrients, larvae and plankton from both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. And this is the secret to Komodo's richness and diverse marine life.

The northern dive sites experience warm/clear waters most of the time (around 28-30°C and 20-30 metre viz). While the southern dive sites are often plankton rich/cooler waters (around 22-24°C and 10-18 metre viz). The eastern dive sites contain a mix of both, depending on current direction and strength; they can be cool and loaded with plankton, or warm and clear.

The biggest temperature change along with the most incredible marine life is found around the south coast of Rinca Island. In a sheltered fiord-like bay named Horseshoe Bay are a handful of dive sites that have been described by well-travelled divers as being in the top-ten dive sites in the world.

Cannibal Rock, Yellow Wall and Torpedo Alley surprised us on each dive. Giant frogfish, sleepy turtles, inquisitive cuttlefish, and sea apples in every colour imaginable. Walls coated in orange soft corals as far as the eye can see, a zillion nudibranchs, crabs I can't find in ID books, anemones loaded with anemone fish, octopus crawling around and nurse sharks asleep in ledges. All this topped-off with incredible above water scenery and every morning Komodo dragons wandering along the beach. No wonder after three days tied to the mooring in Horseshoe Bay no-one wanted to leave!

But we needed to head back north to do a trek on Rinca Island to see komodo dragons and other wildlife in the bush there. So it was with some reluctance we left this 'bay of plenty' and headed north for more adventure.

(See Jeff Mullins full report on Komodo in a future issue of Sportdiving Magazine).

Jeff Mullins has been photographing the underwater attractions of Indonesia for almost 30 years. He currently runs scheduled Live-Aboard photography trips to Komodo each year. Dives are conducted on the area's prime photographic sites along with onshore visits to photograph the Komodo Dragons. Trips include free underwater photo help and evening workshops on photo editing using Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Lightroom.

Check out www.ReefWreckandCritic.com for details.



A group of Manta Rays came to feed around us near sunset.