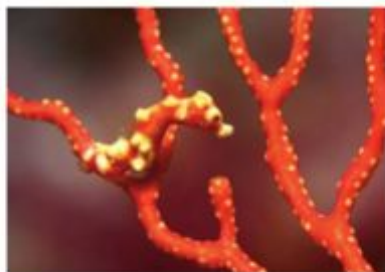




# INDONESIAN *DIVES*

By Dylan Benoit

**It's 5:57 p.m.** and the sun has just dipped below the sea, the evening sky is set ablaze by fierce refractions of light sending spectacular colors in every direction. If you turn around, the brightest stars are already faintly visible on the horizon, sections of constellations getting brighter by the second as the light quickly fades. The Water Adventure Ocean Wide (WAOW) Charters ship has just drawn anchor and begins her nightly voyage into the painted sky. The massive wooden vessel, which looks more akin to a pirate ship than a dive boat, left its home port of Benoa seven days ago. Embarking on a twelve-day excursion which began on the island of Bali, the guests and crew of WAOW have been meandering their way West across the Java Sea towards the island of Flores.

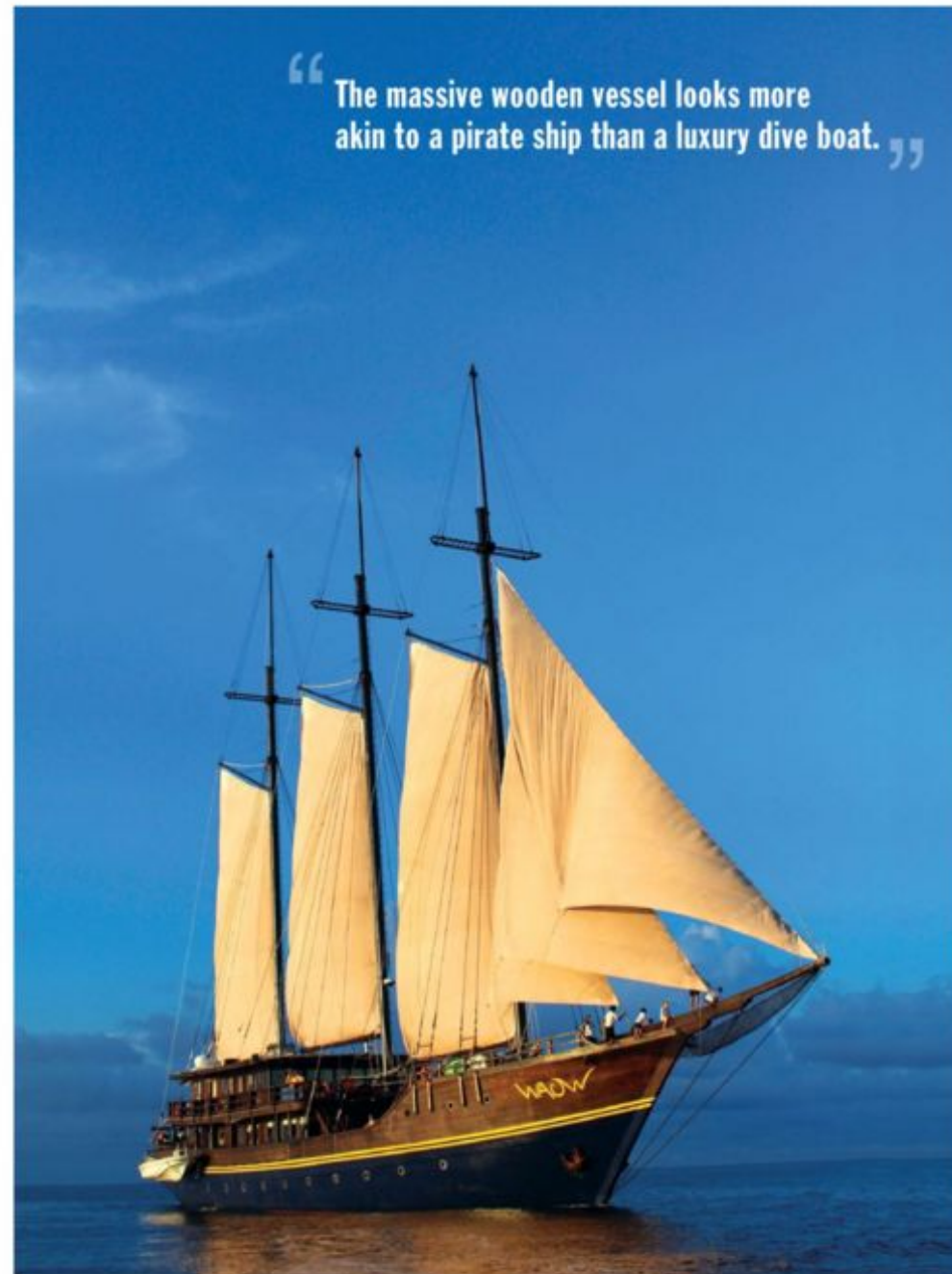


“ Spending just one day on each island, Indonesia would take more than 50 years to explore. ”

This particular itinerary entitled “West meets East” is one of many offered by WAOW, and after spending the day exploring the island of Komodo and the waters around its northern coast, the ship adjusts its course to head south in search of colder waters, and larger marine life.

Constructed almost entirely of “Ulin” wood (one of the hardest and most dense ironwoods on the planet) using traditional hand tools and methods, the construction of the vessel for WAOW Charters began in 2009 and was completed in early 2012. The ship was built in a small village on the Indonesian side of Borneo Island in the tradition of the “Phinisi”, conventional Indonesian transport ships, with a touch of inspiration from the American Schooners of the 1800’s.

Weighing in at an astounding 800 tonnes (that’s 1,763,698 pounds, or the equivalent of approximately 300 fully grown Asian elephants) the construction of a ship of this magnitude completely by hand was no small feat. Measuring over 200 feet in length, 38 feet in width and boasting 3 steel masts with a height of over 137 feet, WAOW is a ship unlike any other in Indonesian waters. Although it looks like the kind of ship Captain Jack Sparrow would be proud to commandeer for his missions of looting and plundering, **WAOW was built with one purpose in mind: Scuba Diving.**



“ The massive wooden vessel looks more akin to a pirate ship than a luxury dive boat. ”

The waters around Indonesia are world famous for their great visibility, strong currents and abundant marine life, so it's no surprise that multi-day scuba diving charters are common in this region. Due to the remote location and rural development of many of Indonesia's smaller islands, live-aboard boats are the most convenient and efficient way to maximize your diving vacation. With great attention to detail and an unwavering commitment to guest satisfaction, WAOW Charters has combined the luxury of a yacht with the hospitality and service of a hotel.

The full service dive shop and dedicated dive staff carry and set up your dive gear every morning so the only heavy lifting you need to do after you wake up is lifting your coffee to your lips. Two specially outfitted pontoon boats tender divers to and from the ship to the dive sites within minutes so you can spend more time in the water or on the deck working on your tan. The number of dives you can accomplish on any given trip depends on the length of the itinerary, however the average is 3-4 dives a day, which will make for a total of 32 dives on this particular excursion.



“ The waters around Indonesia are world famous for their great visibility. ”



Although WAOW is focused on diving there are plenty of above water activities for non-divers, or divers who don't feel like doing multiple dives in a day. Kayaks and stand up paddle boards are at the ready for some light exercise or exploration and on-land expeditions such as beachcombing and short hikes are often woven into the itineraries, providing spectacular views of the archipelago and its many volcanoes. There is a library of reference books on board to help identify exactly what that purple and green spotted fish was, and a sundeck where you can read (or nap) in comfort, soak up some rays or get an afternoon massage from one of the on-staff massage therapists. Whether you travel with a simple GoPro or a complex DSLR with an underwater house and external strobes, the purpose built camera room on the main deck provides a safe place to clean, store and charge underwater cameras and other electronics, making it the optimum place to download your photos to your hard drive.

The luxuriously appointed cabins on board are made from the same high polished Ulin wood used for the hull and main structure of the boat. The cabins are very spacious and are well equipped with a music library and a fantastic selection of movies in both English and French. Cabins are also outfitted with plug-ins for your personal devices to play your own music, movies or TV shows. Each room has everything

you would expect from a leading hotel such as high efficiency air conditioning units, full sized ensuite bathroom, hand carved stone basins and accents, plenty of closet and drawer space, a work surface and a safe for valuables. In the daytime, small portholes in the hull provide a unique perspective from the room to the outside world just feet above the ocean's surface.





Back up on the main deck a bell is rung, signaling to the passengers that dinner is about to be served. Some guests emerge from the saloon, others from their suites downstairs, everyone's hair still wet and salty from the dusk dive that finished less than an hour before. Three large wooden tables outside on the deck are set and wine is being served as guests and crew from France, Italy, Belgium, United States, Canada, Switzerland and Indonesia gather at the tables under the stars for a dinner of steamed clams with *crème fraîche* and *tobiko* roe, followed by seared local swordfish and finished with a house made decadent molten chocolate lava cake.

Before dinner commences, Reto Schlaepfer the ship's Cruise Director, stands before the group to give some context and history to the local geography. Originally from Switzerland, he has been sailing these waters for over thirteen years and is a wealth of knowledge on these islands.

"Indonesia is comprised of around 17,500 -18,300 islands. The variation lays on what some people consider to be the minimum land area required to be classified as an island. Either way it would take you 45 to 50 years to explore them all if you spent just one day on each island." So far on this journey the guests of WAOW have been ashore on three islands, only 18,297 more to go.

The tables at meal times aboard WAOW are usually alive with chatter about the day's dives; who spotted what marine life, the strength of the underwater currents and which group had the longer bottom time on the last dive. Tonight however, after spending the afternoon touring Komodo National Park and getting up close and personal to one of the worlds most notorious predators, the topic revolves around a land creature instead. A prehistoric reptile and the largest living lizard on the planet that is infamous for its bad temper and brutal bite, the Komodo Dragon.

There has been much discussion in the scientific world over the years about Komodo dragons and what makes them such efficient predators. Most believed that their powerful bite contained a potent cocktail of toxic bacteria that causes their prey to die slowly. However, Doctor Bryan Fry, a venom specialist from the university of Melbourne in Australia, discovered that Komodo dragons in fact kill their prey with venom that thins the blood quickly and quickly sends smaller prey into shock. In larger prey eventual blood loss and bacteria from the stagnant watering holes ultimately causes the deathly infections assumed to be caused by the dragon's mouth. Any way you bite it, Komodo dragons are fierce creatures that are respected among the locals and have become the subject of legends over the years. Their small but aggressive population and very remote habitat gives them an air of mystique to people worldwide, even after you have seen them up close.

## Indonesian *Dragon Legend*

Legend has it that on Komodo Island there once lived a Princess. The Princess got married and soon after gave birth to twins, one was a human boy called Gerong and the other was a female dragon, named Ora. As they grew older Ora became aggressive and showed violent tendencies, so she was banished to the forest and Gerong stayed among the humans in the village.

Years later when the twins were adults, Gerong set out to hunt deer. He was successful in killing a deer and when he moved close to collect it, out of nowhere appeared a large Komodo dragon. Gerong tried to scare the dragon away, but it did not move, so he raised his bow and arrow and took aim at the beast. Suddenly there was a flash of light and a beautiful woman appeared. It was his mother, the Princess. "Do not kill her," The Princess implored. "That is your twin sister, Ora." Gerong then put down his weapon and left the dragon in peace.

From that point onwards, the people of Komodo Island have lived in harmony with the dragons and would not hunt or hurt them. The dragons could hunt freely on the island and when they were injured, their human brothers would come to their aid. For the people of Komodo, the ancient animals are treated like siblings.





“Each Manta has its own unique markings on its belly, much like a fingerprint.”

After dessert Lorine Grandjean, the ship's assistant cruise director, perches herself on a raised hatch at the head of the dining tables and a hush falls over the crowd. The anticipation is palpable as she delivers her evening briefing about the itinerary for the next day. The whiteboard behind her has a detailed schedule written in blue and red dry-erase marker, outlining the day's dives, water and weather conditions as well as tide information. To everyone's excitement the schedule bares the name of the main dive site they have come to Indonesia to see.

"As you know, we are moving south now to the colder water on the bottom of Komodo Island," says Loraine. She explains that in the south there are deep water currents that bring a lot of nutrients up to the surface, which means lots of microscopic plankton, and hopefully lots of manta rays that feed on that plankton. "Tomorrow is a big day, we finally get to dive Manta Alley."

Indo Pacific manta rays (or *Manta alfredi*) are considered one of the ocean's gentle giants and they are a holy grail on almost every scuba diver's list of sea creatures to observe in the wild. They have large wing-like fins that can span up to 18 feet across and allow them to fly effortlessly through the water like a bird gliding on a warm air current. The top side of a manta ray is typically black, sometimes with some white areas around the eyes and mouth, while the underside is white with intermittent black markings. Each manta has its own unique markings on its belly, much like a fingerprint, and some are almost entirely black on both sides. The most distinguishing features however, are the two large cephalic fins that protrude from each side of the large oval shaped mouth and curve down towards the center of the animal, which some say give it a "devilish" appearance. Weighing up to 3100 pounds (1.4 tons) with a wingspan longer than a full sized pickup truck, these gigantic creatures may appear ominous at first, but are completely harmless to humans with the temperament and curiosity of a timid puppy.



The excitement is growing as Loraine tries to be optimistic without making any promises. "This is the season for mantas so fingers crossed we will have good luck. We will dive Manta Alley two times, back-to-back in the morning, to double our chances." And with that she bids the congregation good night and retires to her cabin for the evening.

The group disperse as guests finish they're glasses of wine; some heading to bed, some to the bar for another glass to enjoy on the top deck as the stars have now completely revealed themselves in astonishing numbers. You lay back in a hammock as the moon makes a late appearance, popping out from what must be the sole cloud in the night sky. The only sounds are the wind rustling the sails and the waves lapping up against the bow of the ship as it cuts through the now inky black water. The rocking of the hammock lulling you into a blissful state as your thoughts turn back to massive mantas, and the underwater adventures that await you in the morning.

