

DIVING KOMODO ISLAND: THE LIVEABORD WAY



Steve Noble

I descended to 20 meters to admire a Barrel Sponge the size of a smart car; tiny-white Sea Cucumbers lived in every nook and cranny. A moment later a thundering explosion ripped through the water.

I looked to my dive buddy and saw in her eyes the same questions that were running through my mind “what in the world was that”? A thousand thoughts raced through my mind. Could local fishermen be dynamiting?

THE FORCE OF NATURE

Upon returning to the surface some 60 minutes later I had my answer. A towering mushroom cloud billowed from the lip of the volcanic crater. The tiny island of Palau Palue had just erupted. My first thought was **AWSOME!** It doesn't get any more primal than this!

Fine volcanic ash started to rain down on us. The tender returned us to the boat. Chairs, tables, stairs, everything was being covered in grey volcanic ash. I could not have asked for a more momentous beginning to my 12 days of diving on the beautiful live-aboard WAOW.



LIVEABORD IN INDONESIA

WAOW is an acronym for Water Adventure Ocean Wide. She is 60 meters beauty of a Liveaboard and hosts 9 spacious-upscale cabins. When she unfurrows her three great sails, she is truly an impressive site to behold.

The destinations of this particular voyage were the remote islands between Flores and Bali in Indonesia. This included ten days of diving and a land adventure on the Island of Komodo.

Komodo Dragons! Bam! There's another item I can check off my bucket list. Ever since I was a kid I wanted to see these living dinosaurs. To do this while diving some of the most remote and pristine reefs in the world, come on, slap me awake, this is too good to be true.



Each morning Jay Monney our cruise director and dive master would sing out "dive briefing, dive briefing, briefing dive". This simple cadence became an infectious song that reverberated in my head for many weeks. Dive diagrams and photos of the critters we might encounter on the dive were shown on a large LCD monitor during the dive briefings; I found this to be very helpful.

GETTING INTO THE WATER

On the count of three we all back-rolled off the tender into the water. This dive site was called Secret Garden.

The clarity of the water was amazing and the current was non-existent. This was a macro photographer's ideal environment. Within ten minutes I saw stunningly beautiful Nudibranch's, two Fire Gobies darting in and out of the coral, a pair of Signal Gobies and a giant clam, nearly as big as my microwave oven.

I am by no means a professional underwater



photographer. In-fact I shoot with a Canon G7 which is going on ten years old. I get a bit embarrassed when a 5D Mark III or a D800 gets whipped out but I have learned to deal with it gracefully.

WORLD CLASS DIVING

I looked in the direction of my dive buddy. My wife was frantically waving for me to come and see something. She was very excited so I quickly swam to her location.

Sitting on a rocky ledge were two Giant Frog fish, each the size of a medium pizza (that is huge in the Frog fish world). They were supremely confident in their ability to blend in as rocks, so they allowed me to get quite close and take a few shots.



NIGHT DIVING IS A PART OF LIVEABORD DIVING

As the sun set over Gili Banta I eased into the water for a night dive. My light quickly spotted something moving through the Staghorn Coral. It was the most bizarre crab I had ever seen.

It was a Decorator Crab, who (had he been human) would have had a successful career in high fashion in Paris. Each leg was adorned with really cool stuff, a piece of sponge here, a shiny shell there, Lady Gaga would have been proud.

Next up was one of the most fascinating things I have ever seen underwater. Attached to a rock was a tubular Anemone about 25 centimeters tall. Its tubular base was about 4 centimeters thick and about 20 centimeters long.

On top sat flowing white tentacles. I floated there mesmerized watching the tentacles move gracefully through the water. Some unknown sense guided the tentacle to seize a tasty morsel which was floating by. The tentacle then slowly delivered the prize back to the central cluster.



The anemone had dozens and dozens of tentacles and each appeared to move with independent thought. I watched this amazing scene for several minutes, it was hypnotic! It occurred to me that the most prolific science fiction writers in the world use their vast imaginations to depict bizarre life forms on distant planets. Their imaginary visions pale in comparison to the reality of what divers see every day.

KOMODO DRAGONS

Rincon Island is a sister island to Komodo. I excitedly went ashore on Rincon Island to photograph the Komodo Dragons. Trained guides met us and escorted us on a 2 hour hike to see the Dragons.

My expectations were quite high but unfortunately what I saw was not very impressive.

A few Komodo Dragons were hanging out by the camp kitchen asleep in the warm rays of the sun. Our hike yielded no additional Dragon sightings. Jay said not to worry, he knew a secret spot.



We boarded the tender and headed for a remote beach on Rincon Island. I had hoped to go ashore there and photograph real-wild Komodo Dragons. As we neared the shore I spotted two smaller dragons about 2 meters in length. When our tender approached closer to the shore the two dragons sprinted with amazing speed to our location. This commotion caught the attention of two much larger Dragons who were hiding in the bushes. These impressive predators were up to three meters – 9 feet long. They also bolted with alarming speed to our location. I looked directly into the eyes of one

of these prehistoric creatures. There was no fear there. They were the top predator on this island and I was the prey.

DRAGONS CLOSE UP

The Komodo dragon kills with one bite. Their saliva is highly infectious. They typically wait in ambush and inflict a fatal bite on their prey. Wild goats, feral pigs and water buffalo are all on their menu.

It can take up to two weeks for a water buffalo to succumb to the toxic bite. The dragons follow their prey, patiently waiting.

I was both surprised and delighted as a Dragon left the shore and entered the water to swim toward our tender. Jay was less delighted and directed the tender to a safer distance. Jay turned to me and said “Steve do you still want to go ashore?” I reflected for half a second and said “perhaps not”.



WONDERS OF KOMODO

During the dive briefing the next morning I asked Jay why our current dive site was named Cannibal Rock. Apparently one Komodo dragon was seen devouring another at this location.

I have been on amazing dives in the Red Sea, Bloody Bay off Little Cayman and swam with giant Manta's in Bora Bora, so when I say that this was an incredible dive please believe me. It is hard for me to put my finger on exactly why. I didn't swim with a whale shark or see a new species of Coelacanth, but this dive embodied for me the reason I love to dive. The colors of the soft coral were stunningly vibrant, massive schools of fish swarmed in every direction; the reef was pristine, healthy and alive.



There were crustaceans, Nudibranch's and my personal favorite, clown fish, who frolicked in and out of their anemones. A Reticulated Puffer and a Giant Morey Eel shared a cleaning station with dozens of Hinge-Break shrimp.

I watched a Sea Cucumber march across a coral head with their bizarre padded feet. The variety of life just blew me away.

A MANTA DIVE SPOT

There is a potential problem that can be created when a dive site has a very specific name. Such was the case with Manta Alley. Like most divers I have always been fascinated by Manta Rays. Seeing these huge creatures gracefully flying through the water is always a treat. But on this day Manta Alley was absent of Manta Ray's. It was still an exceptionally beautiful dive.

THIS IS DRIFT DIVING

The next morning we were at a dive site called Makasar on Komodo Island. Makasar is also known as "Airstrip". This is a drift dive with a very strong current. I back-rolled off the tender in sync with the rest of the group. The current grabbed me straight away and ripped us away.

Corine (my dive buddy) grabbed the collar of my BC and held on for dear life. I saw our dive guide and another pair of divers about 15 meters away. I signaled to Corine that we should make our way toward their location.



It was a futile attempt. The current had us in its grip and we were going wherever it was taking us. I watched as Hawe ourdivermaster rapidly faded from site. We descended to 18 meters so that we were hovering about 3 meters off the sea floor. Now for the first time I could see how really fast I was moving.

Man alive I was flying as fast as a man can run. In a current this swift you just have to let go, I relaxed, embraced the current and just went with the flow, it was really exhilarating!

I grabbed Corine's arm to get her attention and pointed to a shape about 20 meters away. It was a huge Manta Ray with its mouth open feeding in the fast current. The Manta receded into the distance but two more appeared in front of us at just 10 meters away. Then Mantas number four, five and six.

This was turning out to be another great dive. I was looking off to my right were most of the Manta's had been seen when I heard Corine scream. She squeezed my arm tightly and point straight down. Just two meters below us a gigantic Manta Ray with a wing span of at least 5 meters, effortlessly hovered in the current.

SAFETY ONBOARD

By the end of our dive I had lost count of the number of Manta's that we had seen. We surfaced miles from our entry point. WAOW equips each diver with a dive locator. I depressed button #1 which allowed me to send a voice transmission to the boat captain and the two tenders. Button #2 would have sent out a distress signal to all boats in the area. This device gave me a great deal of peace of mind. The tender arrived at our location in less than a minute.

Our last night we enjoyed a BBQ on deck under the stars, the menu included steak and prawns, corn on the cob and salad. We listened to music until 1 AM.

If you want to turn back the clock and dive like it used to be 60 years ago, this maybe your spot. The reefs are pristine, healthy, vibrant and alive with fish. All I can say is WAOW!

THE AUTHOR

STEVE NOBLE

My desire was to see and experience the world's most fascinating places. This desire combined with my love of photography has brought me to dive the Red Sea, swim with giant Manta Rays in Bora Bora, descend the face of Bloody Bay Wall off Little Cayman, and most recently a six week diving trip to Indonesia.