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TRAVEL

In Search of Dragons and Gods with the WAOW Liveaboard

By Brandi Mueller, August 16, 2017 @ 06:00 AM (EST)



A coral cat shark peeks out from under a ledge

Most of us are not exclusively shooters of the world below the waterline. Whisk us off to some exotic destination, and we'll snap our cameras out of their housings, and indulge in some topside photo adventures, as much as anyone. So when my recent trip aboard the [MSY WAOW](#) turned into an expedition in multiple types of photography, I was in my element.

To begin with, the enchanting ship itself was so photogenic, a photographer could be satisfied for days above water enjoying photographing her from every angle. The attention to detail made it a true luxury experience, with things like live orchids in the dining room, lovely art on the walls, and even wood and stone accents in the bathrooms. Meals were an event in culinary beauty that had me leaving the table to rush to my cabin to get my camera. And, of course, the diving in Komodo National Park is a journey in color and life—with wide-angle and macro opportunities galore. There wasn't a moment during the trip I didn't have my camera—or if I didn't, wishing I had it.

A traditionally built phinisi-style sailing vessel, the *WAOW* is entirely constructed using beautiful—and seemingly almost indestructible—ironwood. The 850-ton vessel is just under 200 feet long, with a beam of 36 feet, and has three masts, making it one of the largest in Indonesia and giving divers the ultimate experience in spacious luxury. With 10 cabins and the possibility of 20 passengers (though there were only nine on my trip), the ship has a crew of 25 that makes every part of the voyage lavish and run seamlessly.

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Mark Thorpe
Expert Photographer

I started shooting underwater photographs way back in the early 90's during a military posting to Djibouti, as soon as my head went underwater for the first time I knew I had found my calling. On leaving the service I...

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The WAOW is a photographer's dream—every detail is picture-perfect

I was in a state of pure bliss as I lounged about the large sundeck, surrounded by comfortable pillows and towels, gazing off into the cobalt water. Or maybe it was from the massage I'd had—which were available throughout the trip. I found myself continuously wandering up to the bow of the vessel, taking the same photo with the boat in the middle and the gorgeous backdrop of the ocean and green, hilly islands of Komodo to the sides, ever-changing as we journeyed from Bali to Flores. It was tough to stop taking photos. We were blessed with sunny days throughout the trip, with cotton candy pink sunrises and sunsets, and the boom, masts, sails, and every coiled line all seemed worthy of an image.

The beauty of the ship was surpassed only by the excellent service provided on-board. My morning egg order was already remembered by the second day, and no matter what time of day you wandered around the charming ship, you were met with smiles and requests to see if you were okay or needed anything. The crew quickly made us feel at home on their ship—and a lovely home it was.

My cabin was spacious and comfortable, with a king size bed (that could be two singles if necessary), a big couch for relaxing and even an ample desk, which was great for post-dive photo editing. Port holes let in natural light and views of the ocean. The large bathroom area was decorated elegantly with a granite sink; stone, wood, and tile accents in the shower; and big fluffy towels. The rooms also have robes and slippers, flat-screen TVs connected to media servers with movies and music (though I didn't even turn mine on once), and several lighting options to set the perfect mood.



The lovely WAOW under full sail



© Brandi Mueller

The comfortable and spacious cabins make you feel at home

The *WAOW* offers three different cabin types; mine was a deluxe cabin. On the main deck are two roomy superior cabins with semi-private sundeck areas. The upper deck has one stunning master suite with its own private lounge and sundeck area, massive bathroom, sofas, and more. I know this because the lovely couple staying there during my trip were kind enough to let me take a look. They commented that it was bigger than their apartment in Paris, and I nodded my head in agreement, as it was also larger than several apartments I've lived in as well. (On the last night of the trip, they threw a little cocktail party for everyone on their private sundeck, which really went to show how comfortable we all had become on-board.)

The dining room area also became a favorite spot of mine. With comfortable couch-like seating, plenty of table space, and lots of light, it was the perfect spot to work on photos or read a book when it was too windy to be on the sundeck. And then there was the food. Every meal was a foodie photographer's dream. (I'm really not the "photograph-your-food" type of person, but *WAOW* turned me into one!) The variety of dining included elegant traditional Indonesian meals served on banana leaves, Western-style meals like pasta, and even an excellent sushi night. Beyond the mouthwatering cuisine, each meal was paired with carefully selected wines, and afterwards, a perfect cup of coffee to help you wake up from your sublime food coma.



© Brandi Mueller

The reef life in Komodo National Park is an endless lesson in color

Diving in Style

With its spacious deck area, the *WAOW* makes it easy to get ready for diving. The crew takes care of all your dive gear, including changing tanks, bringing gear to the tenders, and rinsing it each night. Our wetsuits were laid out waiting for us before each dive, with the cruise director providing informative site briefings. Diving was done from three dive tenders, two of which were ridged fiberglass, making them very stable.

After the dives, our wetsuits were taken by the crew to rinse and hang up, and the two hot water showers and dry towels made us quickly forget the chilly wind. Attention to safety, in all aspects, was impeccable: I was pleasantly surprised that the crew provided Nautilus Lifelines free of charge to each diver in the unlikely event of a problem.



At Siaba Besar, a turtle finds a soft bed of coral to rest on

Diving is done in groups of up to four, and with our small group of passengers, there were no more than three of us to a dive guide. I can't say enough about the dive guides and their experience in these waters. They were excellent at critter finding and made the sometimes more-challenging conditions seem easy and safe. At one point, in a moderately strong current, I was trying to take a photo and kept drifting past. The dive guide came over and held the back of my tank to help steady me. That's what I call service!

I'll admit that I'm usually weary of letting my camera out of my sight, but after a day I was confident in the crew's care for the photo gear—I think they might have actually treated it even better than I do. Each camera had a separate carrying container, used to move it to and from the tenders, and cameras were rinsed in two different tanks after every dive. There is also a well-equipped camera room with lots of shelves, towels, and electrical power points, which was perfect for setting up gear, charging, and downloading photos.



Komodo has some of the most biodiverse waters on Earth—you never know what you might encounter, such as this cuttlefish

Looking at WAOW's itineraries, I get the same feeling as when I see airline in-flight magazine routes: "I want to go there, and there, and there!" The WAOW doesn't just visit popular Indonesian dive spots such as Komodo and Raja Ampat; it also journeys to some lesser-known and more-remote locations like the Forgotten Islands and the Banda Sea. Indeed, the boat traverses almost every corner of Indonesia, and I would like to sign up for them all.

The trip I took part in, romantically entitled "[Dragons & Gods](#)," explored Komodo National Park, starting in Bali and ending in Flores. It wasn't just a dive trip though; it felt like an expedition. Not only did we go diving on all the famous sites Komodo is known for, but we also went on land excursions looking for the infamous dragons and spent another evening hiking to the top of Gili Lawa Darat for a postcard-worthy sunset—especially since we looked down to the harbor to see the lovely WAOW accenting the photo perfectly. And who could forget being met by the crew on the beach afterwards—with sangria and appetizers—and being serenaded under a star-filled sky?



© Brandi Mueller

A corallimorph decorator crab: Night dives with the WAOW were just as exciting as the day dives

Komodo Mojo

The diving around Komodo National Park is some of my favorite because it offers so much variety. You don't want to miss a dive because each one can be drastically different than the next. Some of the dive sites are known for their current and the pelagics that show up, such as Manta Alley (we must have seen at least 40 mantas on one dive), while others, such as Torpedo Alley in Horseshoe Bay, are perfect muck-diving macro dives, with Coleman shrimp in fire urchins, nudibranchs, and the occasional octopus. Dive sites such as Batu Bolong attract massive fish schools, with sharks and eagle rays swimming by, making it impossible to choose what lens to shoot.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site sitting right in the middle of the Coral Triangle, Komodo National Park is about 200 nautical miles from Bali and in-between the islands of Sumbawa and Flores. It includes the three large islands of Komodo, Padar, and Rinca, as well as 26 smaller islands. It's also one of the driest regions in the country, and the landscape is very different from the lush greenery you usually expect from Indonesia. While the park was primarily established for the protection of the Komodo dragon, the life in the water—no disrespect to the planet's largest lizard—has a beauty on a whole other level.



© Brandi Mueller

The dive guides aboard the WAOW are masters at finding tiny critters like this juvenile frogfish—about the size of a thumbnail



© Brandi Mueller

A crab poses for a photo

Our trip began in Bali, where the boat has just finished its yearly dry dock for standard maintenance, and we sailed over 24 hours past Lombok and around Sumbawa for our first dive. Several white sand muck dives got us off to the right start with three frogfish, seahorses, and even a rare Halimeda ghost pipefish. We continued to move east, diving along the way and entering Komodo National Park. Due to a forecast of strong winds, it was decided that we go to southern Komodo early in the trip in case it was too windy to get there later.

Arriving at Manta Alley, at the southern tip of Komodo Island, we back-rolled off the tender and were met with water a bit chillier than we'd experienced so far. But our shivers were soon forgotten when a dozen mantas glided in and strobes began firing. After snapping dozens of photos, my guide motioned us to swim and we headed around the reef area. It really was like being in the middle of a manta highway:

Mantas came directly towards us and every time I looked behind me there were mantas coming from behind us, too. We happily did three dives at this site, and I think I could have spent several days if they'd have let me.



© Brandi Mueller

The famed Manta Alley, on the south end of Komodo Island, is wholly deserving of its moniker



© Brandi Mueller

A school of yellowmask surgeonfish at Castle Rock

For our next stop, we moved to the southern part of Rinca Island, to the famous [Horseshoe Bay](#). Water clarity wasn't so great—which is common in the colder months—but the marine life was spectacular. On one dive, we came across dozens of fire urchins, home to Coleman shrimp and zebra crabs. Examining each one, I found two of the crabs and then hit the jackpot with a pair of Coleman shrimp. After taking a few shots, I noticed the smaller one was acting a little strange, and then I realized that it had just removed its exoskeleton—a most unusual sight to witness.

With the wind picking up, we headed north to the well-known sites of Castle Rock and Crystal Rock. Both underwater pinnacles are subject to strong currents and are teeming with life, both large and small. Big schools of yellowmask surgeonfish, trevally, and batfish swarmed the pinnacles as sharks, turtles, and eagle rays swam by in the blue.



A Coleman shrimp after shedding its exoskeleton



The fabulously colored Nembrotha chamberlaini nudibranch

The next morning we ventured on shore to get a glimpse of the Komodo dragon. These ambush predators are at the top of the food chain on their islands, and their bite can deliver toxins that slowly kills their prey while the dragon waits patiently for its meal. We were treated to a walking tour by a local ranger (toting a stick with a V-shaped end to deal with any overzealous lizards, if necessary), and we saw five different dragons plus lots of crab-eating macaques. We were also warned of saltwater

crocodiles and a dozen species of snake—including cobras, pythons, and vipers—and the boat looked better and better after a few hours on land.

After our reptilian excursion, we dived a site known as Shotgun, which is an incredibly fun dive between two islands. Their proximity causes the current to increase throughout the dive and “shotgun” you through a small channel in the reef. After we flew past the narrowest part, a manta was in the channel, and it stayed alongside us for several minutes as we used our reef hooks to cling on—fabulous! (We heard that at the same spot, two days later, some lucky divers encountered the extremely rare megamouth shark. Oh well, day late and a dollar short, I suppose, but definitely something to go back for!)



© Brandi Mueller

If you go night muck diving, you can only blame yourself for finding creepy critters like this!



© Brandi Mueller

A flamboyant cuttlefish shows off its exuberant colors



© Brandi Mueller

A longnose hawkfish with some unwanted interlopers

Quick Shooting Tips for Komodo

- Bring every lens you have. In fact, bring more than one camera on every dive with you. I'm serious. The hardest decisions you will have to make on the *WAOW* is what lens to use (and maybe whether red or white wine with dinner).
- Komodo is biodiversity overload, and when you're shooting wide angle, you can almost guarantee you will see a nudibranch you've never encountered before. Or when you're shooting macro, a megamouth shark might just swim by. At almost every dive site, you can't go wrong with either, and no matter what you choose, there will be plenty to shoot.
- Sometimes shooting conditions are difficult in Komodo. Visibility can vary with incoming and outgoing currents as well as the warm and cold currents that frequently change throughout the dive. Ask the cruise director and dive guides their recommendations, as they can usually predict current conditions.
- If there's a strong current, macro can be difficult. If there's a dive site that often has strong current but the tides aren't correct for a current dive, the large animals are less likely to show up, so shooting macro may be the best option.



© Brandi Mueller

Costasiella sp., otherwise known as the sheep nudi



© Brandi Mueller

A tiny juvenile filefish nosing around the muck

Throughout the trip, we did several night dives, which I highly recommend. A nice change from the current we usually experienced during the day, the night dives were in protected bays and made for great muck diving. As well as numerous species of flatworms and nudibranchs, we saw squid in the water column, flamboyant cuttlefish, and countless other weird and wonderful critters.

The WAOW also has kayaks and stand-up paddle boards for those looking for something else to do—not that there was much free time between the diving, the land expeditions, the on-board massage service, and just general chilling out around the boat and taking in all the beauty.



© Brandi Mueller

The twinkling eggs of the golden damselfish



© Brandi Mueller

A squid poses for a perfect portrait on a night dive

In Komodo, strong currents that change drastically during a dive are common and that can make the diving a bit challenging—as can taking photos in such conditions. But I was constantly impressed by how easy the crew made it for us. Yes, the current was ripping, and we had some rough seas and wind, but you wouldn't have even known the conditions weren't easy and perfect by the way the crew handled everything.

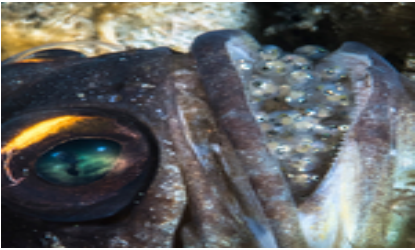
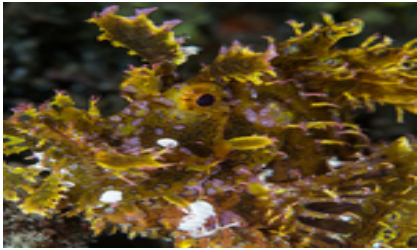
Rest assured, you will be thoroughly spoiled aboard the *WAOW*. The indulgence of every aspect of the trip—from the exquisite ship, the incredible food, and the excellent crew, to some of the best diving Indonesia has to offer—will make you want to move right into your cabin for an extended trip and not leave until you've seen every corner of Indonesia. Can I sign up for that please?



© Brandi Mueller

Komodo's iconic dragon

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