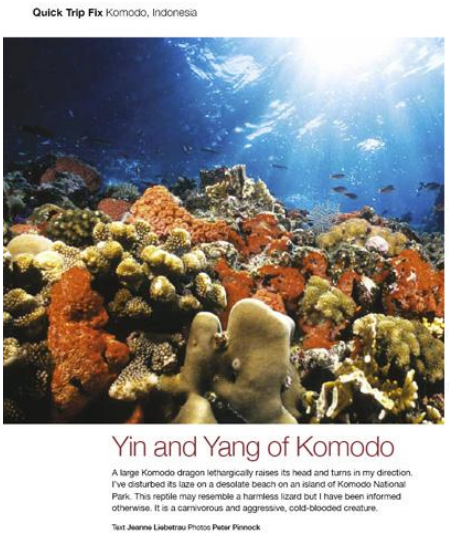
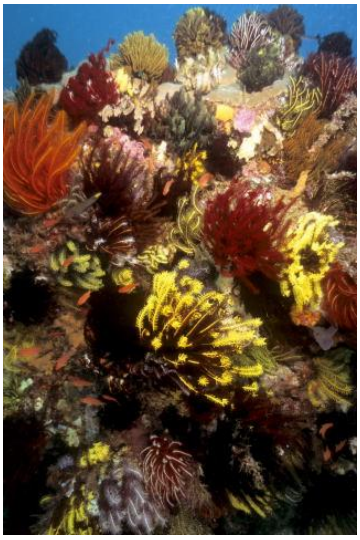


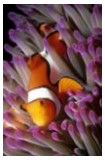
Yin and Yang of Komodo

By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock

A large Komodo dragon lethargically raises its head and turns in my direction. I've disturbed its laze on a desolate beach on an island of Komodo National Park. This reptile may resemble a harmless lizard but I have been informed otherwise. It is a carnivorous and aggressive cold blooded creature. This description seems fitting considering the surrounding landscape is stark, dry, savannah scrub .The ruthless sun glares off barren rock faces. This is a hostile environment. The dragon lunges towards me and a park guide threatens the dragon with a long stick. The dragon slouches back on its hind legs. It drools as it stares at me. Another dragon emerges from the shrub. It lopes slowly along the beach, tail dragging behind. It stops a short distance away and it too, assumes a fixed stare.

Komodo National Park consists of the islands of Komodo, Rinca, Padar, Gili Moto, Nusa Kode and some smaller islands. There is very little habitation in the park and transport infrastructure is non-existent. It is best visited by liveaboard boat such as the comfortable and luxurious traditional bugis boat, MV Seven Seas. Komodo is situated in the heart of Wallacea, a region resulting from the collision of Australia and the Asian continents forming a set of volcanic islands with a mix of animals from both continents. Contrasting temperatures on land vary from 17 to 43 degrees while underwater there are also large variations from 20 – 28 degrees. In the north of the park the Pacific Ocean pushes in warm water with excellent visibility while in the south the Indian Ocean brings a cold plankton enriched soup of nutrients. The islands of Komodo and Rinca form a bottleneck passage between the Indian and Pacific Ocean currents. During tidal changes vast amounts of water move from south to north during rising tide and vice versa at falling tide. Limited

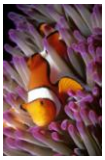




numbers of passages exist resulting in peculiar currents with whirlpools, downwellings and upwellings and absolute calmness between tides. All types of currents can be experienced here, some all in one dive.

Dive sites, such as Cannibal Rock, in the nutrient enriched south are covered with lavish marine life. Hard and soft corals compete with anemones, squirts, sponges and tunicates for a foothold on the reef. It is an explosion of riotous colour; hundreds of sea apples sport psychedelic colours from the 60's - crimson and purples mixed with oranges and greens; brightly coloured crinoids cling to the pink and purple seafans; orange and yellow seawhips corkscrew into the current and white, green and yellow bushy hard corals sway gently in the underwater breeze. Even the fire urchins are vivid colours of lilacs, cerise, magenta and cobalt blues. A pair of resident zebra striped urchin crabs contrast yet blend with their jazzy host. Sunshine yellow tubastrea cup corals cover the reef walls. A yellow rhinopias scorpionfish is so confident of its camouflage within the yellow fields that is sits out on an open slope. Many of the thousands of crinoids are host to tiny crinoid shrimps, each matching the colouration of their hosts. Frogfish are aplenty ranging from the funky coloured clown frogfish to the drab grey giant frogfish. Then there are the goldies, glassies, wrasse and other colourful reef fish, all feasting off the reef. Cannibal Rock is certainly the richest reef for miles around.

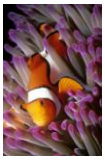
Also in the south is Manta Alley, a manta cleaning station run by hundreds of butterflyfish. Three small rocky islands funnel turning tides through narrow gaps forming currents with sufficient strength to provide the manta rays with the lift they require to be stationary yet still have water flowing over their gills. As the gentle giants hover at the



cleaning station, butterflyfish dart into action preening their expansive wings and bodies. Mantas with white bellies, black bellies and dotted bellies materialize as if from nowhere, are preened and cleaned, then tilt their vast wings and melt into the distance.

Further north, at the dive site Fish Bowl, we see large schools of giant kingfish, jacks, surgeons and snappers congregating at a V-section in the reef. As the current rushes into the gap it is pushed over the top of the reef and forced into a narrow channel before bursting like an exploding champagne cork into the open sea. A few grey reef sharks patrol the wide entrance. The walls on either side of the gap are festooned with soft corals all vying for nourishment. Schools of purple and orange goldies swim in synchronization among the soft corals. The current pulls hard and we are forced to leave the gap. As we pelt over the top into the channel we are met by manta rays filter feeding the large volumes of water. Unlike us these graceful creatures exert no effort in opposing and riding the current. The minute we let go of the reef we are shot cannon-like into blue water. The vigilant skiff drivers are expecting us in this turbulent water.

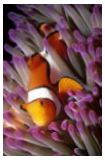
The volcano Gunung Sangean last erupted in 1996 giving birth to black sandy beaches. Streams of bubbles trickle from beneath the sands which is hot in patches, indicating the volcano hasn't finished its business yet. The marine life is oblivious to any impending doom from another eruption. Hundreds of seapens stick out of the sand like old fashioned writers quills. I find one with a reddish goby fish looking distinctive on its green stem. Flat sea anemones resembling dinner plates provide sanctity for a mixed population of critters; porcelain crabs lurk under the folds of the anemone; see-through glass shrimps roam boldly amongst the tentacles revealing only their internal organs and diminutive polka dotted squat shrimps dance on the sands near



the rim of the anemone. Goatfish rummage in the black sand for tidbits and the occasional seahorse twirls its tail around seagrass blades in the shallows. On some extremely long whipcorals I find extended family of gobies. Usually only found in pairs, these whipcorals host up to 5 gobies each.

Often night dive sites are dived on the underwater extension of island beaches, sometimes on pure white sand, sometimes on black volcanic sand. On a white sandy slope I spot a globular shaped stargazer rapidly reversing tail first into the sands. Within seconds only bulbous eyes and an arc of menacing teeth are exposed with a worm-like appendage used to attract prey. My roving torch light strikes mobile glowing pinpoints. These turn out to be pea sized bob-tail squid that simply blend in with the sand. Some have dark marbled colouring and others resemble white sand grains. An octopus skittishly jet propels away from my torch light. It stops momentarily splaying its tentacles, then shoots away into the distance and dives deep into the sand.

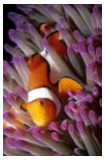
On a black sand dive we find bushy black corals. Perfectly camouflaged within the branches are rare Tozeuma armatum commensal shrimps whose Pinocchio type nose is one third their total length. An ugly Caledonian devilfish resembling drifting debris, crawls across the sand in front of one of the bushes. I avoid the Caledonian devilfish as it has the potential of inflicting a painful sting. A blue ribbon eel peeks out from a sandy tunnel but retreats quickly as a cold thermocline pushes up the slope. At the entrance to another tunnel a day-glo orange spearing-mantis shrimp rotates its stalk-like eyes independently periscoping the surroundings. The mantis has the most powerful legs underwater. With one kick this mantis can spear fish or prawns from below with an incredible speed of less than 3 milliseconds. Luckily I don't



fall into its food chain.

Before the days of GPS one dive site was found, lost and found again. For this reason it is called 'Hard to find rock'! This huge submerged rock is located a little off shore. Underwater it is the noisiest site in Komodo – the noise being generated by fish swimming at an almighty speed to kill other fish and those fish swimming even faster to get away. A huge school of giant kingfish and hundreds of bluefin kingfish use the rock as a garrison from which to launch their attack on thousands of snappers, fusiliers and surgeons. A distinctive crunching sound is heard as a fish is caught. This sends the harmless plankton feeders fleeing in blind panic. Similar conditions exist on Crystal Rock, which is so named because it is crystal clear to find! These are hunting grounds for the big pelagics including the formidable looking dogtooth tuna. At the precise point where the current hits the rock face, schools of oriental sweetlips congregate in small huddles. These nocturnal fish are not oblivious to the surrounding activity but luckily their larger size is not preferred by the pelagics.

We continue to experience the contrasts in Komodo on Batu Balong, an island looming up from the depths and appearing as a small uninhabitable rocky outcrop on the surface. On the lee side of the island the reef is calm and quiet – too quiet, almost dead. We head against the current until we reach the other side of the island. The current is a consommé of plankton causing all the small fish to feed frenetically. Thousands of goldies swoop en masse into the current grabbing food particles before dashing back to the sanctity of the reef. Constant waves of fish pulsate in the current. As the current gains strength the small fish venture shorter distances. All the hard coral polyps are out feeding and the soft corals are pumped with water. The action is mesmerizing but all good things must



come to an end. As we head to the surface we are swept over the top of the island in a wild current. I feel like superwoman soaring over the reef. Then suddenly the reef is gone and the current is no longer obstructed forcing downwellings, whirlpools and major turbulence taking us along with it. Komodo throws all its peculiar currents into one dive for us.

Back on the beach the Komodo dragons are inching their way closer. Apparently one bite has sufficient toxins to cause a slow death. It is incredulous to see these hostile carnivores on a barren landscape knowing that a few meters away is paradise underwater. This is the Yin and Yang of Komodo – contrasts of nature living in harmony.

How to get there:
Fly to Singapore and then on to Bali. There are daily flights to Komodo.

Minimum requirements:
Because of the strong currents, Komodo is considered an advanced diving destination.
Average Depth 10 – 25 Metres

Travel Advice:
The remote areas of Komodo are best explored from a live aboard.

Travel Contact details:- http://www.thesevenseas.net

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