



## Cruising the remote paradise of Indonesia's Komodo Islands

CHRISTINE MIDDAP

It's early morning and the sky is lowering a grey curtain over the peaks of Rinca Island as our tender boat bumps across the bay towards a deserted beach. There are no other vessels to be seen, no winking lights of habitation on the shore. A lone raptor patrols overhead but there is no birdsong. It feels wild and unexplored in this corner of the eastern Indonesian archipelago and who knows what the clouds are concealing in those forested hills.

We approach the beach and its invitingly warm shallows but we won't be landing this morning and within a few moments it's clear why. Komodo dragons rule this island, and, on cue, two prehistoric creatures emerge from the jungle, long clawed feet leaving signatures in the sand, darting forked tongues sampling the air. They seem to have breakfast on their minds as they lumber to the water's edge and peer at us expectantly, like dogs waiting for a bone.

High on a rocky outcrop jutting from the sand, like a scene from Jurassic Park, we spy a third lizard, its head raised like a particularly observant sentry. I'm sure I'm not the only one who snaps a look at the skipper as our boat bobs closer to shore.

These venomous 70kg giants, the world's largest lizards, can smell meat up to 4km away and while they look ungainly, they can hit speeds of 20km/h and swim when necessary. Their preferred hunting trick, though, is to bite and poison their prey and then simply wait for it to die. Rarely, they've attacked and

killed humans. The locals call them land crocodiles and there is something familiar in their silent, watchful bearing. These islands in the Lesser Sunda archipelago are the last places on Earth to see these beasts in the wild; there are only about 3000 left.

So why, I wonder, did these two show so much interest in our presence? Turns out it's no great mystery. Horseshoe Bay, where our ship has anchored for the night, has some of the world's best diving and over the years people on liveboards have thrown food to the lizards on this beach.

It seems they were looking at us more in hope than hunger.

Even so, we give the island's edge a wide berth as we snorkel nearby while the divers in our party explore legendary Cannibal Rock (so named by a photographer who spotted the reef while watching one Komodo dragon feast on another).

It's been an enthralling day – dragons by morning, fish and corals, in colourful abundance, by afternoon. And still our party hasn't seen another human, not even a fishing boat. As the sun breaks through the clouds, turning the water bright turquoise and fully revealing the forested folds of green that embrace this bay, you could just about believe you've found the world's last undiscovered paradise.

It's not the first time on this seven-night expedition from Labuan Bajo on the island of Flores, through the Komodo Islands to Bali, that the thought will cross my mind.



Our 60m ship is called Aqua Blu, and it's fitting that it used to be a British Royal Navy explorer named HMS Beagle in honour of the vessel that carried Charles Darwin. Our guiding light this trip is not Darwin but English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace who identified the Wallace Line – an imaginary boundary running through the Lombok Strait to the Philippine Sea that divides Asian and Australian fauna. He arrived at the theory of evolution independently of Darwin.

Books on Wallace form part of the carefully curated library on board the five-deck, 15-suite superyacht converted into a luxury carrier by English and Italian families before it was acquired in 2019 by Francesco Galli Zugaro to add to his Aqua Expeditions



# THERE BE GIANTS AND DRAGONS



fleet that operates small ship voyages in the Amazon, Mekong, Indonesia and, as of last year, the Galapagos.

Francesco's wife, Birgit, and Bangkok-based Australian designer David Cole then got to work on a more pared-back look for Aqua Blu, with polished timber surfaces matched with muted golds, greys and blues.

White leather outdoor lounges and sunbeds call for sunset cocktails and afternoon naps. The weather is too warm to be tempted by the outdoor jacuzzi but the early morning exercise space gets a workout from the more devoted of the 30 guests who can be lured out of their roomy suites. Accommodation comes in a number of configurations across three price points, and my lower-deck pad has a separate lounge with a sofa-bed option for a third guest, a comfortable king bed and full-size ensuite. The thick carpet, quality linen and made-in-Bali crockery and bathroom products give it the feel of a high-end hotel. Natural light filters in via four portholes.

A mix of five-star comforts with intimate nature-focused adventures are the hallmarks of the operation. Two snorkelling or diving trips are offered most days along with kayak-

ing, stand-up paddle-boarding and, on one afternoon, the simple joy of diving and jumping from the upper decks of the ship.

It's barefoot luxury, literally, as we hand over our shoes at the beginning of the trip only to have them reappear for island-hopping shore expeditions that include a visit to a village on remote Moyo Island for a cultural performance and school tour. Then it's back to nature with a swim in the multi-tiered Mata Jitu waterfall deep in a forest inhabited by monkeys, or kayaking on a large saltwater lake on Satonda Island.

Rarely do we see signs of humanity but on Padar Island we're suddenly thrust back into the world as we join a line of tourists to negotiate a cobblestone path for the impossibly beautiful view of a jagged green landmass engraved with three bays decorated with pink, white and black sandy beaches.

As Aqua Blu threads its way east to west, with visions of uninhabited islands and volcano peaks disappearing into the crimson sunset, we learn how Indonesia straddles the Pacific Ring of Fire, with all its disruptive seismic activity, while also forming part of the Coral Triangle, said to have the richest mar-



Clockwise from top left: pink sands on Padar Island; snorkelling with whale sharks; Komodo dragon; Mata Jitu waterfall on Moyo Island; lounge on board Aqua Blu; one of the ship's well-appointed cabins; al fresco dining; Mata Jitu waterfall on Moyo Island

display that is so toxic nothing will eat it, is memorable.

It's rich pickings for snorkelling and diving – more than 1000 species of tropical fish and 260 species of coral live here. And while some of our party are experienced underwater adventurers, a couple are snorkelling for the first time, growing in confidence each trip with the gentle encouragement of the Indonesian guides.

The waters are mostly calm this week in May, with excellent visibility but then, just to mix things up, we head to the ominously named Shotgun, a powerful current that shoots us through the channel between two islands, Gili Lawa Laut and Gili Lawa Darat, in Komodo National Park. We spot blacktip reef sharks and giant trevally as we speed past, then hop back on to the tender to do it all over again.

Another morning it's still dark, 5.30am, when we head out hunting for the whale sharks that patrol the waters under fishing boats hauling in their catch. As the sun rises over the ocean we float and dive with two glorious creatures amid a party of pink jellyfish. It's like swimming in a giant lava lamp.

Our routine follows an easy pattern of breakfast, morning water activities, a long lunch, then afternoon excursions followed by sundowners on the top deck and dinner. The enthusiastic bankers on board raid the cellar and play poker deep into the night, providing a form of unscheduled entertainment for the rest of us. It's a busy but not packed schedule and each day comes studded with fine dining around communal tables where friendships are forged and contact details swapped over steamed fresh fish, barbecued boneless chicken or wagyu rib-eye.

On our last night, I quickly survey my fellow guests, asking them to nominate their most memorable experience. The whale sharks, the dragons, and the underwater world rate highly. One couple say it's the people they've met. For me, a chronic sufferer of motion sickness, it's the fact I'm even here.

As someone who avoids Sydney's Manly ferry, I never thought I could spend days at sea, even with the help of medication and kind weather. And yet seven days in, not a minute has been lost to seasickness.

Now I've found my sea legs, a new world awaits.

Christine Middap was a guest of Aqua Expeditions.



**We float and dive with two glorious creatures amid a party of pink jellyfish. It's like swimming in a giant lava lamp**

**IN THE KNOW**

Aqua Blu operates year-round in Indonesia: Bali-Komodo National Park from May to September; Ambon and the Spice Islands from September to November; and Raja Ampat, December to March. The seven-night all-inclusive expedition from Bali to Labuan Bajo and reverse starts from \$US8960 (\$13,206) a person, twin-share.  
[aquaexpeditions.com](http://aquaexpeditions.com)

ine biodiversity in the world. And it's underwater where the greatest adventures of this trip are to be found.



"Look, come look, over here!" Our snorkelling guide Djamaal is pointing under the water but there is so much going on down here I'm not sure where to look. Is it the mass of finger coral, like bleached hands of the dead reaching up, or the vivid array of purple corals that wave like lavender fields in a breeze? Is it the bright yellow table coral that might be hiding a trigger fish or cleaning station, or has he spotted something else among the hundreds of fish that flash by in a fluorescent colour wheel?

And then I see it, a deep solid red "flower" stuck to a hard coral, shaped like a large rose in full bloom. It's the eggs of a Spanish dancer nudibranch, and of all the things we've seen this day – the stingrays and parrotfish, the angelfish and turtles – the idea of a slug-like creature offering her eggs in such a pretty

