

..... CELEBRATING REFINED LUXURY .....

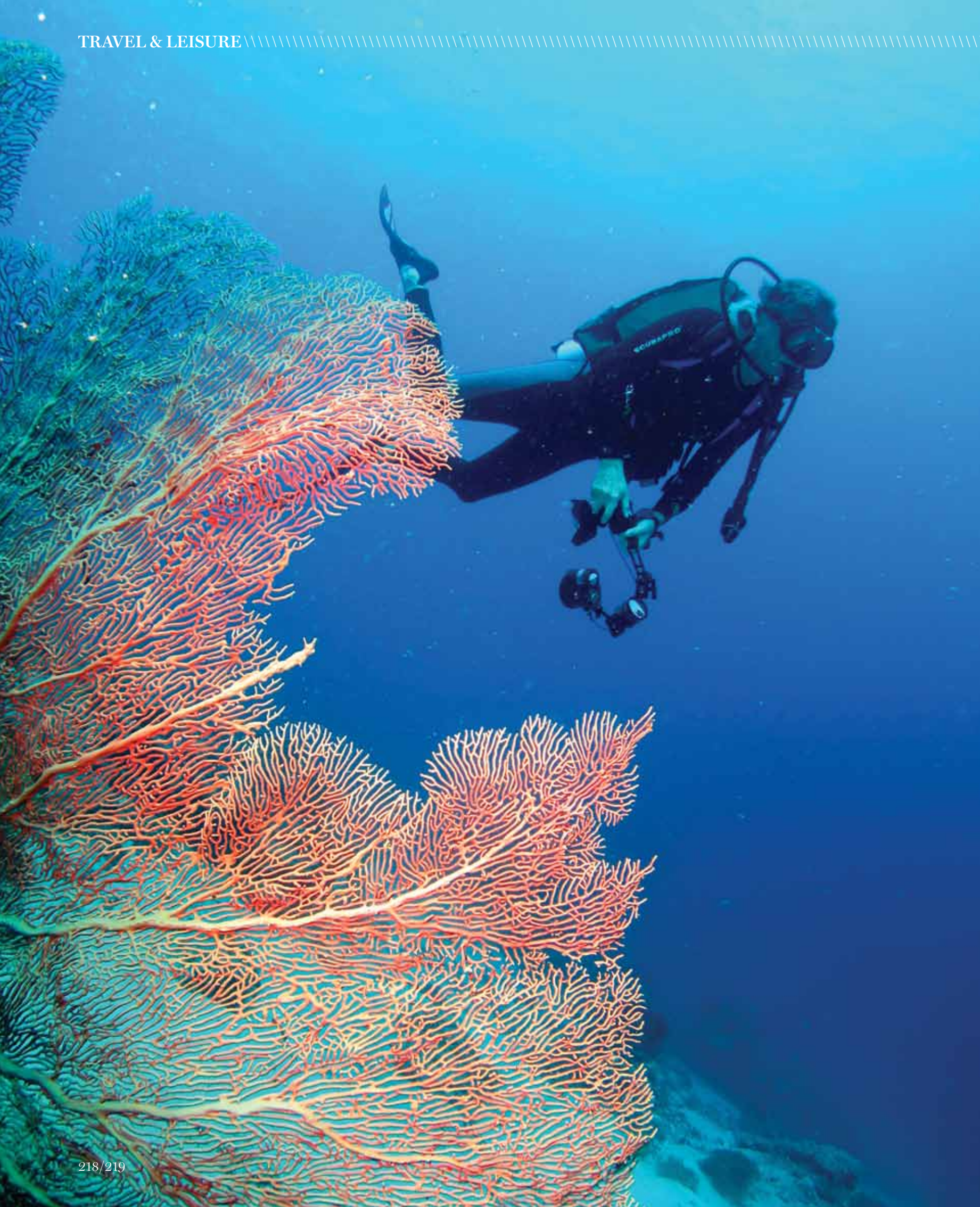
# ALTO



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*HAUTE COUTURE CAPTURED IN POLAROID - THE MAGICAL PHOTOGRAPHY OF CATHLEEN NAUNDORF  
REMARKABLE HOMES IN MONACO, SINGAPORE, PARIS AND LONDON / THE TIMELESS BEAUTY OF NEOCLASSICISM  
PABLO COPPOLA'S VISION FOR BALLY / A POP ICON YACHT / CARTIER'S WORLD OF ART / EVER-GLAMOROUS CAPRI  
A 21ST-CENTURY GRAND TOUR / MATTHEW WILLIAMSON, A LIFE IN DESIGN / DIVING IN FARAWAY KOMODO*

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Komodo's giant lizards may be the Indonesian island's most famous residents, but it's the marine life that divers prize: as one expert puts it, "literally anything could turn up". A stay on a traditional sailing boat makes for a slow-paced yet invigorating trip / By Morag Bruce

## Deep and meaningful

**Fish mingle**, too caught up in their underwater soap opera to notice me, the alien in their midst. Moorish idols the size of dinner plates glide past groupers, angelfish and trumpetfish; clownfish patrol their anemone homes. Electric-blue and neon-pink minnows dart nervously; turtles amble among psychedelic coral forests.

A rebel against the dress code, a giant in monochrome appears. Three-metre-wide black fins waft the manta ray straight towards me. She pulls up at the last second, gliding into a spin and settling into a hover just above the seabed, where little fish set to work cleaning her. It's an otherworldly experience for me, but just another day on the reef in Komodo National Park.

Rewind 36 hours and I'm in London, waiting at Gatwick and sharing diving stories with Neill Ghosh of bespoke diving

holiday company, Original Diving. We're heading to Komodo, Indonesia, a place mythical for its marine life and dive sites as well as its dragons. My tales detail the waters off the northwest of Scotland, and involve a dry suit, seals and the odd otter. "But you were hooked?" he asks. "Being underwater is so liberating; just floating while the vast ocean opens up in front of you." Tim Simond, also of Original Diving and author of the book *Dive In Style*, adds: "Diving is like being in a zoo without bars or glass. It's a total escape. And Komodo has some of the greatest marine biodiversity on the planet. Anything, literally anything, can and will turn up."

The Komodo National Park is part of the necklace of islands that divide the Pacific and Indian oceans. From the north-west tip of Sumatra to the south-eastern >

ABOVE: *Silolona* (left) and *Si Datu Bua* (right), sister ships built using traditional methods

OPPOSITE: Originally established to protect its land inhabitants - the iconic dragons - Komodo National Park also offers exceptional diving



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: A manta ray, soaring over the sea bed; fish create a painterly blur of colour as they dart over the reef; a magnificent lionfish

corner of Irian Jaya, the Indonesian archipelago stretches over 3,000 miles and consists of more than 13,000 islands. The channels between the islands rush with converging warm and cold currents, creating exceptionally rich waters, hence the variety of fauna.

The promise of such adventure means the 7,500-mile trip passes easily, particularly as Garuda now operates direct flights from London to Jakarta. From there it's a 90-minute flight to Bali, then another 60-minute flight to Labuan Bajo airport and its new, spaceship-like terminal building. Despite very comfortable flights, by the time we've hopped into a car from the airport to the nearby port, I'm very ready to get in the water. Stepping down from the jetty and into the tender – smiling

faces all round – we pull out into the sea and catch a first sight of our magnificent homes, anchored in the bay.

Original Diving's contention is that the best way to experience the islands is by living at sea – and in our case that means a stay on board one of two charters, Silolona and Si Datu Bua. The force behind these luxury sailing yachts is Patti Seery, an American who has lived in Indonesia for 20 years. Her gentleness hides determination: for two years she lived in a tiny hut in the muddy mangroves of Sulawesi, an island near Borneo, while managing the building of the 150-foot Silolona. The boat was built by the Konjo Boat Builders of Ara using traditional hand tools and methods. The construction was modelled on a *phinisi*, the traditional Indonesian cargo ship that

ploughed the historic spice routes.

The craftsmanship of the boat builders is clear to see, with teak and ironwood on deck and soaring mast, rigging and sails. All boats are female, as Seery says, and Silolona (named after the legend of the most beautiful woman in Tanimbar) has gold and diamonds embedded in the base of her keel as a gift to her spirit. My suite, one of five on board, was wonderfully quiet and luxurious, with cool bamboo bed linen, beautiful Indonesian textiles and carved antique panels collected by Seery. Silolona's sister ship Si Datu Bua ('beloved princess') is slightly smaller, but still a collaboration between eastern and western techniques, traditional craftsmanship and 21st-century technology. Both are built to German Lloyds specifications.

Back on the tender, whizzing towards Silolona and Si Datu Bua, we see the crew waving. Climbing up Silolona's steps for the first time and on to deck, I'm handed an ice-cold towel, scented with fresh lemongrass, and a delicious fruit cocktail, a ritual repeated each time we return to the boat. There are 17 crew for up to 10 guests on Silolona, and service is impeccable and understated; your wishes are anticipated and more than exceeded.

Having toured the inner workings of the boat, it was hard to believe what was coming out of the compact galley kitchen. Four Seasons-trained chef Yudha Dimur serves the best tuna sashimi I've ever tasted, cool watermelon and feta salads, piles of lobsters, and twists on searing Javanese fruit curries and spicy soups.

Evenings on Silolona and Si Datu Bua are spent eating and sometimes being entertained by the accomplished crew band, or just relaxing on the bow's cushioned platform, the full moon making us look like stars of the silver screen. Seery says that when there's no moon, the Milky Way is like fireworks filling the sky.

After my third of three dives, we wade out of the water on to a spit of a sandbank for a sundowner, as delicate black-naped terns take flight, and everyone gathers to hear what we'd seen. Mantas yes, sharks no. And you? Sharks, yes. Amazing. I also saw colourful fish, sea snakes and turtles while snorkeling, so non-divers won't feel left out. More seasoned divers in my group ventured into the depths at night, or sank way down deep and hooked on to

a seamount as jet-engine currents swept fiercely past them.

At a relaxing, sun-lit depth of seven metres below the surface, no current to pull me, no sound except my breath, I was aware of a long-lost feeling – the present. The marine life was so engrossing, I was not, for the first time in a long time, thinking about what I would be doing later, tomorrow or next year. This is what Ghosh was talking about, back in Gatwick.

Above the surface, life is just as extraordinary. The landscape is jagged and dramatic, and the islands' edges are fringed with mangroves and pink-sand beaches. The land is also home to some iconic inhabitants. Walking along the path on Rinca, Komodo's island neighbour, I pass a billboard with a dragon, warning "Danger >



ABOVE: *Living on board gets you close to the diving action, and also offers a unique perspective on the dramatic landscape (from the comfort of a lounge)*

BELOW: *Chef Yudha Dimur's menu makes the most of fresh seafood and Indonesia's varied cuisines*

is my business"; next to the billboard is a pile of animal skulls. The boardwalk takes you through mangroves, where the giant red claws of little crabs protrude from their muddy holes, offering scant protection from the herds of wild boar that come down from the savannahs, apparently in search of iodine, in crab form.

The pigs have their own concerns, however; along with deer and water buffalo, they form a major part of the Komodo dragon diet. These giants are best observed in the morning when they're too cold to move quickly. The dragons we encountered were indeed sun-worshippers, but mounds of white powder reminded us not to be lulled into a false sense of security: this was Komodo dragon dung – all that's left is bone.

The dragons are a well-known symbol of this part of the world, but with decades' experience, Seery can open the doors on cultural or natural experiences in the



region that most visitors won't even know exist. She suggests a mini adventure for me: kayaking over to Komodo at dawn to see gigantic bats returning from their nightly sortie. With gentle currents pushing us in the right direction, we paddle into the mangroves, hold on to tangled branches and look up in silence. Thousands of bats arrive to roost, sea eagles drift on thermals above them, and suddenly the world feels much younger. Eventually, aware that perhaps the bats' screeching annoyance was not directed at the eagles, but at us clumsy kayakers, we head back to Silolona in time for breakfast.

Later on, we were looking forward to an evening beach party on the island of Banta, which faces the Sangeang Api volcano, smouldering following its eruption in May and whose coastline is still dusted in silky grey ash. The crew had gone ahead and built a beautiful pergola from driftwood and woven decorations >



ABOVE: *Silolona*, moored at Padar Island  
 BELOW: *King of the lizards*, a Komodo dragon

from palm leaves. We feast on fish, lobster and shellfish, salads and bamboo-steamed rice. A fire is lit, the crew band play and everyone dances unselfconsciously in the sand. A luminous trail of lava snakes down the side of Sangeang Api. The evening ends in releasing sky lanterns and, while no one shares their wishes, I'm sure mostly involve time slowing down, so we can live in the present a little longer. **A**

*Original Diving* ([www.originaldiving.com](http://www.originaldiving.com)), creates bespoke sailing and scuba-diving trips to Indonesia and beyond. A similar trip would cost from £6,600 per person, including six nights in a shared cabin on *Silolona*; one night stop-over in Bali at Karma Kandara; international and domestic flights from the UK with Garuda and private transfers. Garuda Indonesia ([www.garuda-indonesia.com](http://www.garuda-indonesia.com)) is the only single-aircraft connection between the UK (Gatwick) and Jakarta, travelling five times per week in its new Boeing 777-300ER



TIM SIMOND