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YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH

AUTUMN 2014

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SAILING THE KOMODO ISLANDS

EASTERN STAR

VIETNAM'S RESURGENCE

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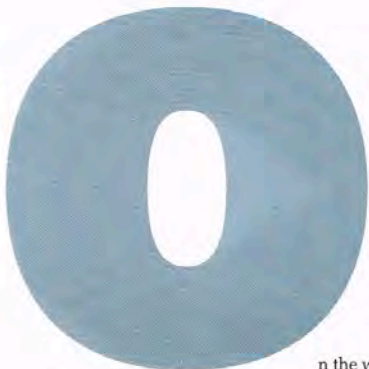
ULTRA
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A&K SPECIAL

BEAUTY & THE BEASTS

The Komodo Islands in Indonesia are renowned for their terrifying giant lizards, but their volcanic landscapes and underwater wildlife are as fascinating and strange as any real-life 'dragon'. **Lisa Grainger** travels by luxury phinisi around islands that remain in prehistory



There be dragons Si Dattu Bui, a traditional Indonesian yacht, sailing in the waters around the Komodo Islands



On the walls of the admissions office in Loh Buaya, on Rinca Island, splatters of blood on a wall attest to the ferocity of the creatures that have put Komodo and its neighbouring Indonesian islands on the map.

"Dragons can smell blood from three miles away," says our guide Suleiman Oman, a disconcertingly delicate man armed only with a forked stick that he claims will repel a charging carnivorous creature.

"Not so long ago, a big dragon came into our office and attacked our warden's leg. He managed to climb up to the window and escape, but it was a very bad bite. He was lucky; a few years ago a nine-year-old boy from our village was killed. The dragons took his guts out."

Looking at five of the prehistoric-looking beasts basking just inside the entrance to the national park, their scaled faces lifting occasionally to eyeball us as we cluster nervously behind Suleiman, none of us doubts the ferocity of the Komodo dragon. The world's largest lizard can grow as long as 10ft, from its prominent nostrils to the end of its long muscular tail, and weigh up to 150lb. Its leathery skin is made up of grey chainmail-like scales. From each of its toes extends a long curved claw. And its tongue is the stuff of horror stories: long, pink and yellow, forked and extended vigorously every few minutes to test the air for blood. Watching them, it becomes perfectly understandable why Steven Spielberg came to these islands to find inspiration for his film *Jurassic Park*, or why the story of King Kong has its origins here. These beasts are a living link with the Jurassic age, the very embodiment of fear.

But then nothing in this strange environment is like anywhere else on earth. Komodo is one of Indonesia's 17,508 islands that spread from west to east over 700,000sq miles: an extensive necklace of land-blobs that separate the Indian Ocean in the south to the Pacific in the north. Geologically, the country is extraordinary, too. It's here, miles below the earth's surface, that three of the planet's eight tectonic plates meet, their collision creating seabed fissures more than four miles deep, as well as causing extreme volcanic activity. The area's 167 active volcanoes often spew hot lava into the air, filling the equatorial skies with clouds of grey ash; once, apparently, in 1815, the clouds from the biggest eruption known to man, of Mount Tambora, caused red skies all over the world and in Europe the legendary "year without summer".

Flying east from Indonesia's capital Jakarta (a destination that, this month, will be much easier to reach thanks to Garuda's new non-stop flights from London) to the island of Flores, the scenery is almost as spectacular from the skies as it is on the ground. Looking down, emerald forests stretch to the horizon. Tiny islands dot the seas – little blobs of green surrounded by white sand and turquoise seas. Volcanoes spew smoke into the skies, or lie dormant like brown corpuscles on a skin of grey, ash-



Dragon boat

A menacing Komodo dragon on the prowl for meat, top. Far left: the sumptuous deck of Si Datu Bua, and left, Gede, the ship's ever-smiling butler, with a tray of fresh juices

strewn earth. And as we head east, the drier savannah islands appear: their once-molten, smooth surfaces now carpeted with a layer of dry golden grass.

In the waters surrounding the island of Flores, just off the little fishing town of Labuan Bajo, my friends and I join the boat that is to be our home, and our transport, for the next four nights. Si Datu Bua – or "Beloved Princess" – is a wooden phinisi: one of the traditional south-east Asian schooners that for centuries carried spices between Africa, India, the Middle East and China.

Except, unlike those workhorse cargo ships, Si Datu Bua is a luxury vessel, built locally two years ago by Patti Seery, an American textiles enthusiast who fell in love not just with the Indonesian islands, but also with their people, and wanted to help resuscitate their boat-building industry by constructing one of the most beautiful vessels the country had ever seen.

Having spent four nights on it, and sailed alongside its larger, older sister ship, Silolona, I cannot believe there is

another phinisi anywhere that is as elegant or comfortable. There certainly isn't one whose creation can have been conceived with such love. Seery has chartered boats most of her adult life, and studied their make-up, so she knew precisely what she wanted from this sailing princess: a wide girth to ensure a comfortable voyage, a strong body made from Indonesia's most beautiful trees, and décor and comforts that couldn't fail to seduce.

The 130ft-long boat is crafted from the finest local hardwoods, from dark ironwood to golden teak, polished like fine furniture and embedded in her prow and stern with gold and diamonds. ("She's a woman and in these islands that's what female ships demand," Seery explains.) The guest accommodation consists of three capacious, air-conditioned double cabins, with proper bathrooms, king-sized beds made up with super-soft cotton-bamboo sheets and walls hung with exquisite antique fabrics, maps and indigenous objects.

Up on deck, loungers and banquettes are strewn with cushions for sunbathing, while shaded sofas and dining tables are ideal for poring over Seery's collection of books and antique maps (including one showing Sir Francis Drake's voyages into this area). And in smart uniforms are 13 crew – more than two per passenger – who are always there, smiling and ready the minute you need them, and otherwise invisible, off creating lobster feasts and beach barbecues, preparing cold lemongrass-infused towels and fresh-pressed tropical juices, washing your dive gear and preparing the double-masted schooner to set sail on its seven rust-coloured sails or its 450hp engine.

The beauty of this ship – and Seery's other phinisi

*IT IS NO SURPRISE
STEVEN SPIELBERG
CAME HERE TO FIND
INSPIRATION FOR
JURASSIC PARK*

Silolona, which sleeps 12, and has hosted guests such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Tony Blair and a Saudi princess who left the crew a \$30,000 tip – is that they can go pretty much where you want, when you want, for as long as you want. Many guests, apparently, come for 19 days; some taking the small ship, some the large, others both, to sail around Thailand, Malaysia, the Andaman Islands or Raja Ampat Islands in West Papua from October to March; the rest of the year, they cruise around Komodo where, particularly in March, April, September and October, seas and winds are relatively calm.

What we wanted was both an underwater and an over-water safari that would allow us not only to understand why great 19th-century naturalists such as Alfred Wallace had sailed to these islands, but also to explore the richest marine environment on earth: waters that hold more than a third of the world's sea life. This area forms part of the "Wallace Line", where cool currents from the south meet the warmer ones from the north, resulting in species from both Australasia and Melanesia, from manta rays and whale sharks below the water to cockatoos and Komodo dragons above it. "Just when you think you've seen the most incredible creature you've ever imagined," says Seery, "another one comes along. We've had all sorts of marine experts on these ships who've found things no one's ever seen before."

Sailing for four days around the protected islands and seas of the Komodo National Park, stopping to anchor at night in sheltered bays, we saw extraordinary creatures in abundance.

It made perfect sense why Sir David Attenborough came here so early in his career – in 1956 – for his *Zoo Quest* series. In fact, having seen smoking volcanoes oozing molten lava, dinosaur-like lizards and swirling flocks of bats flooding the skies at night, it was hard not to believe we, too, were on a film set or had been transported into a Joseph Conrad book. If we were on earth, it was not the planet we knew, but some place more exotic, more ancient, and infinitely more primeval.

Everywhere we stopped there was something strange and wonderful to see. One morning, kayaking beside mangroves in a calm bay just off Komodo Island, clouds of flying foxes suddenly erupted into the air, screeching and soaring on their rust-coloured wings before coming to hang from branches just above our heads. Another day, walking in a rare forested area, we spotted cockatoos, golden orioles and luminescent emerald doves. We saw a pair of sea eagles hunting for fish in the evening light, "hopping" sea fish that could both lie on rocks and then leap into the water, and pods of dozens of dolphins that played in the boat's wake as we sailed.

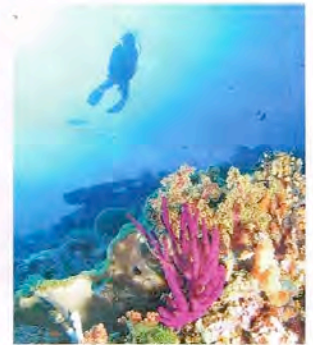
If, on our over-water safari, the creatures appeared to be remnants of a prehistoric age, on our underwater expeditions they were like circus performers – clad in striped, spotted and frilled costumes, painted in the most lurid iridescent shades imaginable, and given ludicrously inventive masks, some with oversized eyes or lips, others with fringes of tentacles.

Wherever we looked in this great sea of creativity, a performance was taking place. Above our heads, balletic manta rays flitted in the sunlight like giant acrobats, alongside a corps de ballet of thousands of synchronised yellow-striped fish. Below, weird performers – the transparent ghost pipefish; the fluttering but deadly lionfish; the frilled yellow-and-purple nudibranch; the terrifyingly over-familiar blue sea snake – flittered and fluttered by. And on seafloors and rock walls, fan-shapes and brain-shapes and mushrooms of luminous, multicoloured coral gleamed and glowed in the clear water, as yet untouched by global warming or the devastating hand of man.

Having to ascend when our air ran out was always a disappointment – apart from the fact that we knew that the minute we stepped on board there would be a smiling man waiting, with fresh towels and hot chocolate, and the promise of yet another surprise. One night it was



Beautiful creatures Swimming with whale sharks, above, and below, from left, clown fish, a comatula starfish on coral, and diving in clear water



WHEREVER WE LOOKED IN THIS SEA OF CREATIVITY, A PERFORMANCE WAS TAKING PLACE

cocktails on a sandbank; on another a beach barbecue with a guitarist; the final night the whole crew serenaded us on board under the moon.

There were tears from guests on several occasions on this trip, all of joy. It wasn't just the islands' beauty that overwhelmed us, or the sweet nature of the people, but the warmth of Seery, who has spent 10 years creating these ships and dreaming up bespoke journeys for travellers of all kinds, from families to serious divers.

Having spent decades exploring the islands herself, she knows all the best spots: the most sheltered beaches for barbecues (Banta Island, where we stopped to roast lobsters in the moonlight); waters where manta rays come to be cleaned (near Bugis); beaches where the sand is pink with shredded coral and littered with head-sized shells (Padar Island). As a textiles expert, she knows which tribes make the most exquisite batik and ikat fabrics, and which island is particularly well-known for its beautiful women (Savu). She's known on these islands as "Ibu", or mother, welcomed wherever she goes, and clearly adored by her crew. Sailing with her on her dream ships, it's not hard to see why.



Original Diving (020 7978 0505; originaldiving.com) offers tailor-made sailing and scuba-diving trips to the Komodo National Park from £6,600 per person, including six nights on Si Data Bua in a shared cabin; one night stop-over in Bali staying at Karma Kandara; international and domestic flights with Garuda Indonesia and transfers. For private charter, Si Datu Bua accommodates up to six guests in three cabins from £7,800 per day, fully inclusive, excluding alcohol.

TOP: SHARON NEILL; BOTTOM: GETTY IMAGES