



Indonesia

*Komodo  
Island*

# THE DRAGONS' DEN

Sailing through Komodo National Park to see the Komodo dragon is breathtaking – especially if you do it on a luxury yacht

WORDS *Mark Daffey*



**Dive right in.** Sailing through clear waters on the luxurious superyacht Prana by Atzaro is an unforgettable way to see Komodo dragons.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK DAFNEY

# Some wildlife species are so rare, and in some cases so prehistoric, that I've made it my mission to see them in their native habitat before they're lost to this world.

I've tried to track down tigers in Nepal and India; I've searched for snow leopards in the mountains of Western Mongolia. And while I haven't yet made it to the Galapagos Islands to see giant tortoises and aquatic iguanas, I certainly plan to.

One species I've been fortunate to see in the wild on two separate occasions is the Komodo dragon. The estimated 3000 remaining dragons left in the wild are found on just four islands, all clustered together, in Indonesia – an archipelago of close to 15,000 islands. Komodo Island is the largest of those – the others are Rinca, Gili Motang and Nusa Kode – and it was there where I first saw the dragons way back in 1991.

At the time, I was backpacking from Timor to Java. From memory, it wasn't possible to stay overnight on Komodo Island then, so I found a cheap hotel in Labuan Bajo, in Western Flores, then caught a ferry out to the island for the day.

We'd all heard stories beforehand about these dragons being apex predators on these islands, and how they could take down an adult buffalo if the opportunity arose. They are, after all, the largest living lizards in the world, and can reach a whopping three metres in length and 100kg in weight.

We'd also listened to tales of villagers suffering similar fates after they'd inadvertently wandered into the realm of these savage beasts. And it sounded scary. I nevertheless cast my fears aside during a guided jungle walk in search of dragons. It went without saying that our park rangers were also our protectors, so I was aghast to discover that mine was armed with nothing more than a forked stick. This, he threatened to use when we stumbled upon a dragon cooling itself in a shallow waterhole that was way too close for my liking. Instinctively, the ranger crouched then pointed his stick towards the dragon, simultaneously instructing us not to run. We, in turn, huddled behind him, searching for escape routes and feeling as jittery as hell. But the dragon didn't budge.

My next encounter with Komodo dragons was altogether less primitive. In September 2018, I was among the first Australians to sail around the Komodo Islands on an uber-luxurious superyacht called the Prana by Atzaro. The yacht had four decks, in-house masseurs, a yoga instructor and movie screen, and sufficiently



bounteous quantities of day beds and plush cushioning to appease Elton John.

Sailing itineraries on this hand-built, 55-metre-long ironwood and teak phinisi are heavily swayed towards visiting dive spots in and around the Banda Sea. But a side excursion to see Komodo dragons also came included.

Rather than venturing back to Komodo Island though, where soaring visitor numbers

to the UNESCO World Heritage site have led to sustainability fears, and where entrance fees will rise from US\$10 to US\$1000 per person (the timing hasn't been specified), we instead sailed to a lonely beach, far from the crowds, on Nusa Kode – a tiny bolthole named after the monkeys that once presumably occupied its jungled slopes in large numbers. Here, we had the dragons all to ourselves.

Six of them were already prowling along the shoreline when we piled into the Prana's tender and pattered towards the shore. Forked tongues darted in and out, and they each seemed to strut about with the sort of exaggerated, puffed-up, chest-out preening often adopted by bodybuilders. It was like they innately knew where they ranked in the food chain.

Our boat skipper invited trouble by inching closer. One dutifully swam out to meet us, its massive tail swishing from side to side as it effortlessly glided through the water. As it drew nearer, it tilted its head upwards until it locked its sights firmly on us. I remember those beady eyes like it was yesterday. Dark and empty, they were the eyes of a creature that's programmed to kill. Though it sounds dramatic, that instinctive behaviour has allowed these dinosaurs to survive long after countless other species have vanished. They're even known to be cannibalistic. And yet, these dragons have never been more vulnerable than they are now.

With shivers running down our collective spines, we bid a hasty retreat, preferring to watch these huge monsters from a distance as they continued to skulk along the water's edge.

As wildlife experiences go, the two were very different. And you could say I've achieved my goal of seeing one of Earth's rarest, most primitive creatures in the wild. Would I do it all again though? You bet I would. ♦

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK DAFFEY, CHASE RIEF, MAX LETEK. MARK DAFFEY TRAVELLED TO INDONESIA COURTESY OF PRANA BY ATZARO.



**ESCAPE ROUTE**

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**Cruising there:** Prana by Atzaro sails year-round. Trips can be tailored to guests' needs, preferences and requested sailing durations. Starting price for a full charter is \$18,450 per night and prices for a single suite with two people sharing starts at \$2,270, including all meals and snacks, laundry and Internet, as well as water sports, diving and excursion fees.

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**A prehistoric world** Clockwise from top: The Komodo archipelago; a secluded beach; dusk at sea; Komodo dragons on the beach.