

The Definitive Guide to Live-Aboard Diving

Hang around divers, and you're sure to hear one-upping about oceans visited and animals seen. Hear enough tales, and you'll soon learn that nothing earns more bragging rights than being able to chime in with stories of live-aboard adventures.

"Eat, sleep, dive" is the motto of live-aboard life. But it's more than that: You'll make friends from all over the world with a shared passion, fill your hard drive with



incredible photos, and adapt to the magical rhythm of living every waking (and sleeping) moment on or in the ocean.

Of course, prepping for the experience and deciding where to go for the dive trip of a lifetime require some reflecting. In this guide, we've compiled expert tips and tempting tales of some of the best live-aboard experiences out there to help set your planning in motion.

-----+ INTRODUCTORY TEXT BY TERRY WARD +-----

SCOTT JOHNSON

There Be Dragons

Komodo National Park in Indonesia is home to dragons on land and some of the planet's most diverse diving below the waves

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY SCOTT JOHNSON

Hours spent on airplanes make you wonder if you're traveling to another galaxy rather than to Indonesia's Komodo National Park, one of the world's most precious biospheres. Even after arrival, a lingering "Are we there yet?" feeling remains — until you glimpse the prehistoric legends of this remote archipelago: the Komodo dragons.

"Even the hard-core divers repeatedly ask about the dragons," says Michael

Ishak, cruise director of the *Komodo Dancer*. "No matter what we show them on the dives, they look forward to seeing the Komodos."

And there's the rub. KNP, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, offers unparalleled diving, and yet the famous dragons garner most of the glory.

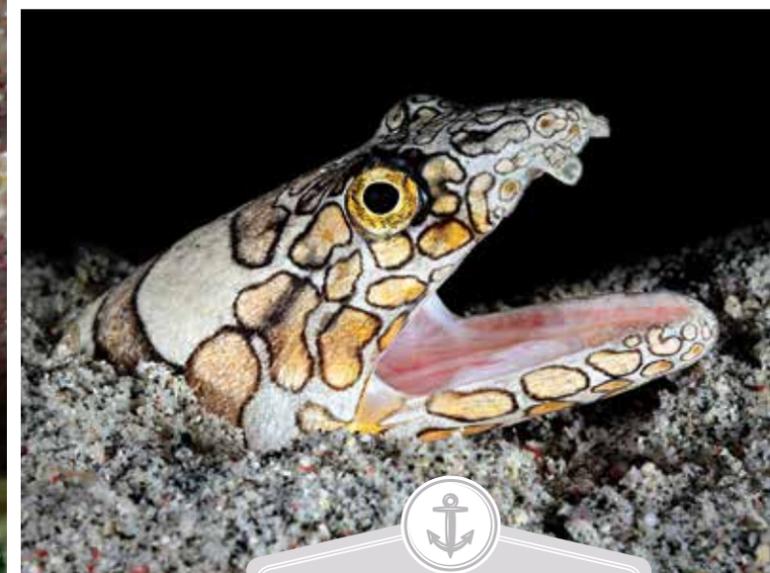
I confess that I too am under the dragon's spell during the first five days on the *Dancer*. Dives in the warm waters of the

Flores Sea feature stops at Sangeang Island's Hot Rocks and Gili Lawa Laut's Castle Rock. Diving at Hot Rocks is like splashing into a flute of champagne, as steady streams of bubbles emanate from subterranean steam vents all around us. The busy seamount at Castle Rock serves as a playground for bottlenose dolphins and dense schools of blue-stripe fusiliers and blackspot snappers. Yet I can't scratch the dragon itch that keeps me looking to the south.

The second half of the trip is a chilly change of pace. The Antarctic-enriched waters of the Indian Ocean replace the balmy conditions in the park's north. Though we have traveled only 30 miles south from Castle Rock, our 3 mm wetsuits are no match for water temps that have fallen by 10 degrees.

It is in Rinca Island's Horseshoe Bay

The prehistoric dragons are a highlight; (opposite, clockwise from left) emperor shrimp on a nudibranch; frogfish; snake eel.



that we finally see the Komodos. But the much-anticipated dragon sightings are not the highlight of the trip after all — that distinction belongs to an amazing manta ray parade at Langkoi Island's Manta Alley.

My group descends and slowly makes its way to the Alley. I spot a manta below me at around 65 feet, and realize that if I want an up-close view, I'll have to use rocky handholds to make my way to the massive ray in the strong current.

My efforts are rewarded with a panoramic view of more than 20 mantas, also struggling to advance into the swift current. The graceful mantas seem to be otherworldly mimes, swimming in place,



and slowly, but surely, they pass through the channel.

My long trip home provides time to ponder where to place Komodo among my favorite destinations — a spot in the top five, surely. The chance to see the

Komodo Dancer
 WEBSITE: aggressor.com/komodo.php LENGTH: 124 feet
 CABINS: 8 MAX GUESTS: 16
 SEASON: Year-round
 SPECIAL: Service is excellent — 16 to 18 attentive crew members tend to only 16 guests. *Komodo Dancer* is an elegant, Indonesian *pinisi*-styled, twin-masted, wooden sailing yacht; all meals are taken outside on the deck, weather permitting.

dragons is a factor, but those impressive scaly marvels are the proverbial icing on the cake. It's the diving in KNP that will prompt a return to the *Komodo Dancer* — even if the journey there is epic.



“Replace your dive computer's battery before the trip.”

— Bob DeFeo, divemaster on Rocio del Mar