



DRAGON DREAMS "I came to Komodo Island to see fire-breathing monsters in the flesh, but I did not expect to see anything like this."

STORY AND PHOTOS BY NATHAN MYERS

DRAGON LOVE.

Not as exciting as it sounds.



Mostly they just lie there. One endangered komodo atop another. The rest of us stand around taking photos. Lizard smut. In the morning they will eat their young. Ah, the romance. I've come all the way to the dusty backside of Indonesia to indulge the childhood fantasy of facing real dragons, to decide for myself whether the beasties of Komodo Island are indeed mythical stragglers or merely supersize geckos. But now I can barely look. Or look away.

The islands of Indonesia as a whole are known more for clear-cutting and trash-burning than for environmental initiatives. But when a pioneer aviator crash-landed here in 1910 and discovered these lingering dinosaurs, it prompted the country's first national park. Today, the world's only komodo dragons exist as part of a protected World Heritage Site between the larger landmasses of Sumbawa and Flores. Untouched for decades. A real-life Jurassic Park. Or is that just the brochure talking? I've traveled all this distance, with all these questions, only to end up loitering with a half-dozen Eurasian backpackers watching lizards get it on. Something had to be done. I turn to Rama, my personal white knight on this perilous quest, and slip him a 20,000-rupiah note — enough for a cup of java. I nod at Rama's forked dragon stick. "Go on," I tell him. "Give 'em a little poke." And that's when things start to get interesting.



The pace is unhurried: Rama hikes out front to guard against a dragon ambush, fishermen return to the harbor and dragon icons are carved by hand.

GROWING UP, I OFTEN DREAMED OF DRAGONS. FROM PUFF TO Smaug to Abraxas, my childhood plundered their extensive folklore. Wise ancients and fire-belching brutes. The Greeks believed dragons were the spirits of storms. The Chinese immortalized them in constellations. Me, I fantasized about slaying one, or at least seeing one for real someday. But then I got a real job. I got married. Had kids. Bills. A Bali-based freelancer with an American-based credit-card debt.

Then came an e-mail: a fairy-tale invitation to sail to Komodo aboard the luxurious 32-meter *Amanikan* cruise ship. I'd have my own personal suite. Steak and lobster dinners. Espresso martinis for breakfast. Dragons off the deck. Then my wife gave birth three weeks early. Newborn in ICU. Debts mounting. Trip canceled. How's that for a fairy-tale ending?

I gave up on dragons until home life stabilized and the idea of a makeup trip flickered. Flores was just a two-hour flight from Bali, I thought. Komodo lay just beyond. Following an exhaustive half-hour of research, I boarded

a puddle-jumper bound for Flores with no plan and every confidence I'd somehow find my way to Komodo.

AS ONE OF INDONESIA'S EMERGING TOURISM HUBS, THE town of Labuan Bajo on Flores fails to evoke words like *emerging* or *hub*. The place is raw. Broken dirt roads ring a dockside cluster of rickety dive shops hustling "I Heart Komodo" T-shirts and "See the Dragons" tour packages. Boats of every class wander the channels, from dug-out fishing canoes to five-star dive yachts. Hiring a boat driver to Komodo will be as easy as touching my wallet.

I walk past stilted patchwork huts and the day's catch drying in the harsh afternoon sun. An old man whittling dragon statues doesn't even try to sell me one when I ask about seeing the real thing. He grunts toward a young man who walks over and squeezes my hand. His name is Celli (say "Chelly"). He assures me in passable English that he can show me the dragons. "Don't worry, mister," he says. "I show you everything dragons."

The place is raw. Broken dirt roads and boats of every class.

And thus I've freestyled my way right back into a package tour. Celli's "Everything Dragons" Komodo Boat Tour and Floating Accommodations package departs at once. I'm the only customer. Our captain is deaf and mute. This isn't the *Amanikan* with surf and turf on a tablecloth. Dinner on this rickety wooden skiff is two candy-filled pancakes and tea-flavored sugar water served by a pair of chain-smoking 12-year-olds. The sun is setting. We're anchored off a mangrove-dominated island discussing the next morning's quest.

"Will we for sure see the dragons tomorrow?" I ask.

"Now is mating season," Celli quietly explains. My interest escalates. "Maybe hard to find, but I think we see dragon, yes."

As the sun disappears, the sky erupts with giant bats. Thousands of them all winging in the same ominous direction. The horizon goes black, and I am alone at sea with my new companions. With the bats and the stars and my dreams of dragons.

On the deck of the boat, I sleep like a child.

THE FIRST SETTLERS OF KOMODO WERE CONVICTS. FED TO the dragons, basically. Over generations, a crude penal colony

took shape. Clearing brush. Building on stilts. Adapting to dragons. These were the original rangers of Indonesia's first national park. These days the duties are handled by local volunteers, rookie cops and Third World frat boys. Mine is a skinny 19-year-old named Rama. And Rama misses his mama. He misses television, Facebook and greasy street food.

Rama recites our tour from a memorized script, step by step, pining for home with every wooden factoid.

"Dragons hunt by ambush," he says, twirling a forked walking stick. "Their mouths carry over 60 types of bacteria, any of which may cause sepsis and make you die."

I've done my homework. Last year a ranger was bitten on the arm and was rushed to a hospital on Bali. Lucky to be alive, he no longer has use of his arm. An 8-year-old German boy died from a bite in 2007. While exceedingly rare, every couple of years the dragons serve notice of their rank in the local food chain.

Rama looks bored. He hikes this trail up to four times a day with some of the 150 tourists who visit the islands daily. He shrugs as I point out monkeys and wild pigs, then steers the conversation toward digital photography and hiking boots.

THE GIANT LIZARD

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Where They're Found

Komodo is one of about 17,000 Indonesian islands. Some 5,000 dragons live on Komodo, Flores, Rinca and a few smaller isles.

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FT. & 300 LB. IS MAX. SIZE

Why They're Dangerous

The short legs and stout tail provide leverage and strength — top speed is only 11 mph. This power allows the dragon to take down prey and use its sharp teeth. Its bite is weak, but the saliva is full of bacteria, which might take hours to kill the dragon's victim.

ONE

KOMODO CAN EAT 80% OF ITS BODY WEIGHT IN 20 MINUTES.

What They're Eating

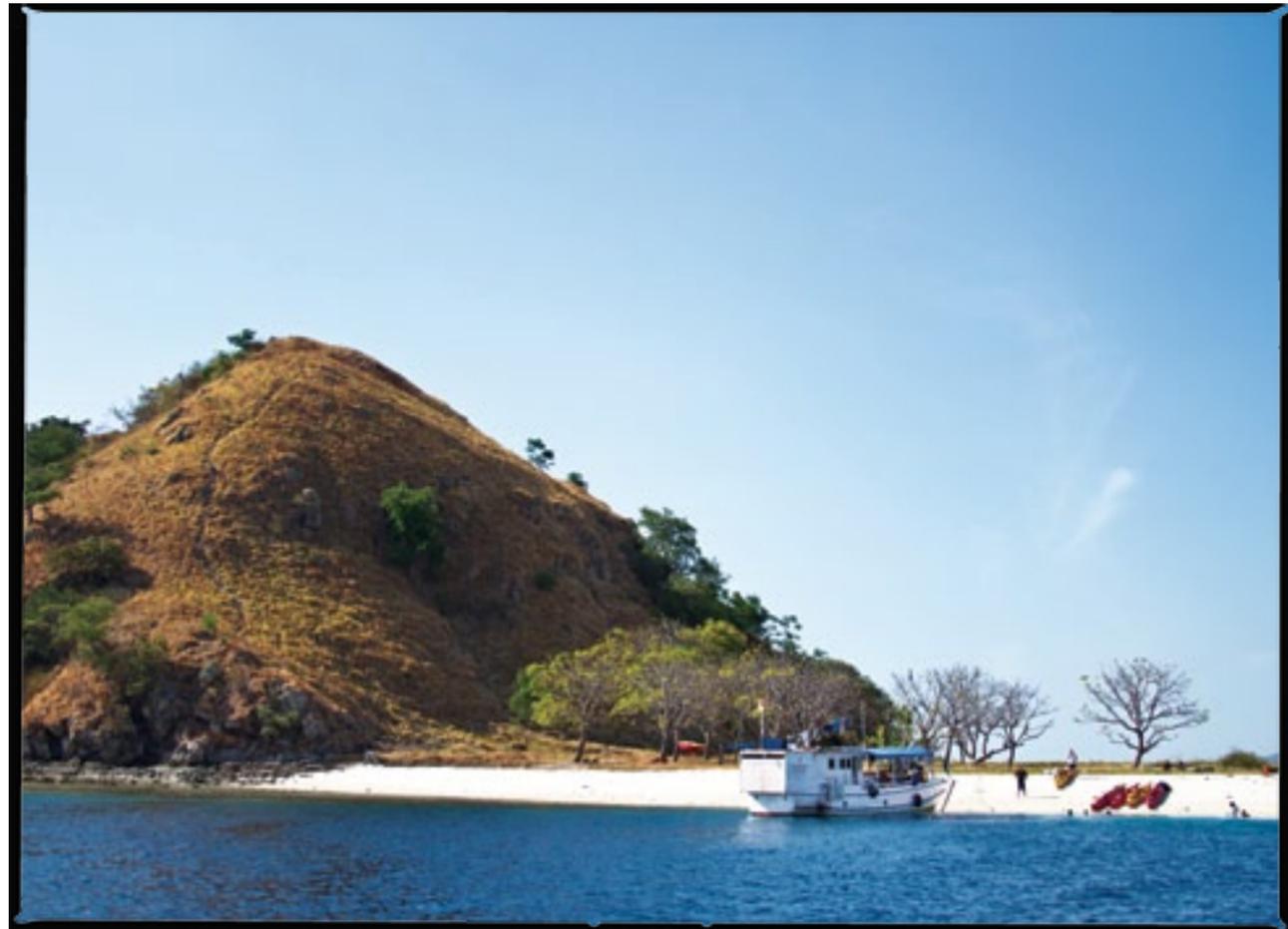
If you don't count humans, the dragons are at the top of the food chain on the few islands where they live. They can eat 100 pounds or more in a single meal, sometimes swallowing wild pigs whole with their powerful throat. The size of their food means the dragons might eat only once a month.



CORBIS FLIRT/ALAMY

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“Ten yards up the trail, a dragon saunters into frame. Slow, articulated steps. Ruthless yellow eyes. Tongue forking the air. My blood runs cold. This is my moment.”



Rama's pricing my camera lens when a water buffalo appears on our path, huffing in a panic. Ten yards up, a dragon saunters into frame.

Slow, articulated steps. Ruthless yellow eyes. Tongue forking the air. My blood runs cold. This is my moment. This is my dragon.

The creature is more than 7 feet long. Approaching 300 pounds. A giant monitor lizard by scientific definition. A mythical, village-devouring, gold-hoarding, fire-breathing dragon by gut reaction. Caught between man and monster, the buffalo crashes sidelong through the dry brambles and is gone. The dragon sinks to its belly and lowers its eyelids. And then it falls asleep.

"So lazy these animals," says Rama, leading us closer. My fantasy is crashing with the sleeping dragon. Another group of tourists arrives behind us, feverishly documenting the sleeping beast with their iPhones. One Dutchman creeps within a few feet of the serpent's tail while his guide dutifully snaps tomorrow's profile photo. Now and again, the dragon's bored eyes crack open in dreamy malaise.

We putter to a remote white-sand cove. It's protected by dragons.

the best action turns out to be right where we started. Here on the dusty doorstep of the main lodge, wildlife is getting wild. "Is this normal?" I ask, unable to look away.

Rama nods and speaks: "Mating season runs from May to June. Dragons lay eggs in the ground. Newborns live in the trees for three years so as not to be eaten by the adults."

"But ... right here in the camp?"

On cue, a ranger inside the station scrapes his unfinished lunch plate out the window and into the yard. Two dragons interrupt coitus to rush the scraps. Bits of rice and chicken bone. They take a few bites, and then they lie down again.

I wouldn't mind seeing some action. A sudden burst. A bacterial chomp. A screaming Dutchman immortalized on his own social-media page. But the dragon is snoring. Rama continues up the trail, forcing me to follow.

BACK AT THE RANGER STATION, DRAGONS ARE getting their groove on. Doing the scaly mambo. You know what I mean. After our five-mile hike,

"Come on," I order Rama, tucking that 20,000 rupiahs into his hand. "Let's see some action." Rama pokes the dragon. It does not belch flames on the nearest tourist. Instead, the dragon stands up, walks two "furious" paces, then settles back down to rest. So lazy these animals. It's time to go.

I toss a handful of potato chips toward the mythical monsters and cross "feed the dragons" off my bucket list, right under "bungee jump." Done and done. We march back to the boat. "What else you got here?" I ask Celli.

Celli looks relieved — and that's when things get interesting. He mimes some instructions to the mute captain, who in turn mimes to the smoking 12-year-olds. Minutes later, our boat is puttering into a remote white-sand cove. Pristine coral. Gentle breezes. Painted skies. Not a flip-flop in sight. Preserved and protected from everyone but us.

I swim to shore, diving over coral cathedrals teeming with tropical aliens. There must be a hundred dive spots around here. A thousand hidden beaches. All for one reason: They're guarded by dragons. The procreating dragons and their babies.

Reclining between the coarse sand and cruel sun, I ask myself one last time: mythic creatures or overgrown lizards? The semantics are moot. I wouldn't have traveled all this way to see "the world's biggest lizards." And now that I'm here, this place is perfectly mythical.

That's when the 105-foot *Amanikan* megayacht sails into my view. I recognize it from the brochures I'd studied when I thought I'd be on it. And I remember thinking, "Why does its five-day itinerary include only part of one day with the dragons?" Now I know. The passengers are busy diving reefs, exploring beaches and sipping espresso martinis. Squinting my eyes, I can almost see the mint resting on what should have been my pillow.

From the beach I climb a trail toward a bluff, seeking a better view of the yacht. Call it voyeurism or masochism, I just need to see it. Halfway up the hill, there's a scramble in the dry leaves. Ambush! Sixty types of mouth bacteria and death by sepsis. I'm measuring a leap off the cliff to evade the attack. And then I spot the dangerous "dragon" in the bush. It's easily 4 inches long. ■ TRAVEL GUIDE AT ISLANDS.COM/KOMODO

Lessons Learned
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