

REEF FISH DINE
OUT ON THE EGGS
OF A SPAWNING
SURGEONFISH

**DIVE, EAT,
SLEEP, REPEAT.
THERE ARE FEW THINGS
MORE INDULGENT
THAN A
DIVE LIVEBOARD**

Aaron Gekoski (@AaronGekoski)
sets sail to Komodo National Park
to experience scuba
at its best

“IF I COULD DO ANY TRIP BEFORE I DIE, THIS WOULD BE IT,” says Neill Ghosh of Original Diving as he hands me my chunky schedule. Neill’s commissioned me to create a series of short destination videos on Indonesia’s top diving spots.

I flick through the glossy manual, trying to look cool as I discreetly wipe drool from my chops. But it’s my first stop that makes Neill particularly animated: a two-week dive liveboard to Komodo.

Not all dive liveboards (a type of excursion where guests stay on the boat, rather than on land) are equal. First off, the diving should be special. Located in the centre of the Indonesian archipelago and consisting of three larger islands and 26 smaller ones, KNP is considered to be one of the top diving destinations on earth.

There are kaleidoscopic coral reefs, bundles of those magic flying carpets, manta rays, as well as intriguing miniature critters and beaches straight out of Bounty adverts. For those interested in land-based activities, there are also trips to see the archipelago’s most famous residents: Komodo dragons.

Next up, the boat – and I’m on board one of the best. Built in the style of a traditional Indonesian *phinisi* (sailing vessel), the *Arenui* is essentially a floating boutique hotel dressed like a pirate ship. Neill’s parting words before I depart? “This is going to be epic.”

I leave the UK laden with lenses, bound for Bali. Due to a four-hour delay, I arrive late at my hotel, Jimbaran Puri, with just enough time for a short soak in my private swimming pool before a well-deserved sleep. Not a bad start.

The following morning I board a flight to Labuan Bajo, at the western end of Flores in the Nusa Tenggara region of eastern Indonesia. This small fishing town is my springboard to Komodo.

However, a trip to paradise wouldn’t be complete without a little last-minute drama. Twenty minutes before the flight’s due to land, our pilot makes an announcement: “Unfortunately, Labuan Bajo is closed for renovations. We’re turning around and going back to Bali.” It transpires that the airport’s staff go home every day at 4pm. Our flight took off a little late, so they’d simply shut up shop when we were in mid-air.

After a night in a sterile airport hotel, I’m back on a flight which the carrier (to its credit) laid on specially. On the plus side, the delay gives me the chance to bond with other *Arenui*-bound passengers, including a property developer and his wife from Hawaii, an Italian anaesthetist living in New York and other, predominantly affluent, Americans.



BELOW: MANTIS SHRIMP, WITH THEIR PSYCHEDELIC COLOURS, MAKE GREAT PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECTS

COOLING OFF ISLAND-STYLE

followed by bouts of star-gazing. The *Arenui* is usually booked up years in advance, but a few last-minute cancellations mean I end up with a well-appointed cabin to myself. I feel like flying back to the UK and kissing Neill, but there's diving to be done, delicious grub to be consumed, photos to be taken and massages to be had.

UNDERWATER WONDERLAND

We spend the next week exploring Komodo's top dive sites. Rinca Island's Horseshoe Bay gives an insight into why Indonesian diving is held in such high regard: bizarre sea apples replete with frilly tentacles, a frogfish the size of a rugby ball and zebra crabs on sea urchins all go about their business against a backdrop of luminous yellow sea cucumbers. These are some of the most outrageous creatures I've ever clapped eyes on and



CRUISE DIRECTOR NICOLE GETS READY TO PHOTOGRAPH A CUTTLEFISH

to our presence and tries to whack us with its meaty tail, while another one licks my camera, leaving a smear of toxic saliva: these lizards secrete an anti-coagulant, causing their prey to bleed to death. Komodo dragons are angry, intimidating beasts and I'm pleased to see the back of them.

My favourite dives in Komodo are at Castle Rock (a seamount frequented by huge schools of giant trevally), Manta Alley (where up to 10 mantas

STYLISH SAILING

"This will be the liveboard by which you judge all others," claim cruise directors Edu Espinel and Nicole Veltman in their welcome speech to 11 guests. The *Arenui*, on the other hand, has 22 staff on board, all of whom know our names as soon as we embark.

Everything about the boat oozes quality. Primarily built with recycled, polished teak, small touches like bronze portholes, brass lamps and intricate hand carvings add a touch of class. The top deck includes a sky lounge – replete with day beds for post-dive lolling – and a sky restaurant for eating classic Indonesian dishes,



THE ARENUI: SAILING DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER



KOMODO DRAGONS ROAM THE BEACH AT RINCA

the colours are incredible. It's like diving on acid.

Afterwards we visit a beach patrolled by truly wild Komodo dragons. Edu and I head for a closer look, while the rest of the group remain in the safety of our tender. The largest lizards in the world, Komodo dragons can grow up to 3m and weigh in excess of 70kg.

The chunkiest one takes exception

have parasites nibbled off them at "cleaning stations") and Batu Balong (a small island around which we swim, seeing fish in a feeding frenzy, octopus, gigantic pufferfish, sharks and zillions of reef fish).

Night "muck" dives to the silty sea floor, on the other hand, produce rarer, colourfully named species such as bobtail squid, broadclub cuttlefish, ghost pipefish and even the Machiavellian bobbit worm, which looks like something from the film *Aliens*. In between dives the food is delicious, the conversations stimulating and the service impeccable. You can't even take your wetsuit off without staff helping.

NIGHT DIVES TO THE SEA FLOOR REVEAL BOBTAIL SQUID, BROADCLUB CUTTLEFISH, GHOST PIPEFISH AND THE MACHIAVELLIAN BOBBIT WORM, WHICH LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF ALIENS.



DINNER TIME ON THE ARENUI IS A LAVISH AFFAIR



EDU AND NIC HELP KEEP KOMODO'S BEACHES CLEAN

We make our way to Alor via Komba Island, home to an active volcano and spend hours watching Batu Tara explode at 18-minute intervals. The optical display is cranked up a notch as night falls and the air blackens; iridescent lava trails become visible as they tumble into the sea below.

ALOR, ALOR

With less tourist traffic than Komodo, Alor is a small island north of West Timor. At neighbouring Pura Island, we dive in Pantar Strait, where a disheartening amount of plastic bottles and garbage awaits us.

Litter isn't just an eyesore: it also creates ecological mayhem. Toxins are consumed by fish, which then pass these on to humans at the top of the food chain. The *Arenui* runs regular beach clean-ups in which we all participate.

Among the plastic, our guide



ABOVE: A ZEBRA CRAB ON A FIRE URCHIN

Ungke spots a rare weedy scorpionfish – an exciting find for any diver – plus an aesthetically challenged warty frogfish. After surfacing, I take some over/under photographs of children playing in the water – my favourite image so far. The following day, Anemone City turns out to be the most unique dive of the trip: mile upon mile of anemones carpet the seabed.

I get ready to leave the *Arenui*, with packed memory cards in my camera and head. Over the past fortnight, my daily schedule has gone something like this: wake up, drink espresso and eat homemade pastries, go diving, eat bacon and eggs, dive again, eat yummy seafood, have a nap, dive once more, enjoy a post-dive snack, consider a night dive, cram in a lavish three-course dinner, crawl to bed and get rocked to sleep. It's been shamelessly decadent, but it hasn't half been fun. 🌈

- For information on any of these destinations, visit: www.originaldiving.com, email: info@originaldiving.com or tel: +44 (0) 207 978 0505.
- To see the finished videos, visit: www.youtube.com/originaldiving
- For more of Aaron's photos and videos, visit: www.aarongekoski.com
- Aaron is sponsored by Cameras Underwater: www.camerasunderwater.co.uk

THE REST OF THE BEST OF INDONESIA



Forming one corner of the Coral Triangle – a vast area of tropical waters in the western Pacific Ocean – Indonesia's at the epicentre of marine biodiversity.

Divers clamour here to spend quality underwater time with over 3 000 species of fish and 600 species of coral.

From coral reefs to muck diving, unusual miniature life to whales, dolphins and sharks, Indonesia's 17 000 islands have it all.

During my seven-week trip I was fortunate enough to sample some of the country's most famous diving destinations.

Along with Komodo and Alor, I explored volcanic muck in Lembah Strait, northern Sulawesi. The emphasis here is on unearthing the weird and the wonderful: hairy frogfish, blue-ringed octopus, wunderpus, stargazers and more.

Following this, I made the short trip to Siladen Resort & Spa to explore the vast underwater walls of Bunaken Marine Park, before wallowing in fish soup at Raja Ampat, arguably the jewel in Indonesia's illustrious marine crown. My final stop was Lembongan, where researchers at local NGO, Aquatic Alliance, have identified over 500 resident manta rays.

During this period I packed in 25 flights, racked up nearly 100 dives, witnessed fascinating animal behaviour and met people working tirelessly for conservation.

It was perhaps the most stimulating, richest experience of a life spent seeking stimulating, rich experiences.

Sorry, Neill – "epic" doesn't come close to doing it justice!