

# HERE BE DRAGONS

HOME TO ALL MANNER OF NATURAL WONDERS, INCLUDING THE GIANT REPTILE THAT SHARES ITS NAME, THE ALLURE OF KOMODO NATIONAL PARK HAS BEEN HEIGHTENED BY THE OPENING OF ITS FIRST LUXURY HOTEL, WRITES PAUL KAY



**T**here's an eerie stillness in the air as we make our way slowly through the forest, each of us intently scanning the undergrowth for signs of life in the early morning light. Suddenly, our guide halts abruptly and hisses, "Stop!", causing us to freeze in our tracks and focus our gaze in the direction he's pointing his forked staff. For a moment, it seems like we're looking at nothing but trees, but then we see it: the unmistakable shape of a fully grown Komodo dragon making its way purposefully towards us.

In the 24 hours that have passed since I landed at Labuan Bajo – the gateway to Komodo National Park – I've seen enough pictures and statues of Komodo dragons to write a book, but nothing can prepare you for encountering one of these fearsome beasts in the wild. Stretching some three metres from nose to tail, and with a bulk that must easily top 80kg, the specimen making its way in our direction is a monster even by Komodo dragon standards, its long, snake-like tongue and powerful jaws dripping with thick strands of viscous saliva making it look every inch the cold-blooded prehistoric predator.

Given its surprising speed, razor-sharp teeth and venomous bite, we're right to be cautious, but mercifully our fears are unfounded on this occasion as the world's largest lizard strides past with barely a look in our direction before disappearing back into the forest.

It's experiences such as this that have lured increasing numbers of visitors to this ruggedly beautiful corner of Indonesia during the past decade. Established in 1980 and declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1991, Komodo National Park spans more than 1,700 square kilometres and encompasses the islands of Komodo, Pasar and Rinca, as well as 26 smaller isles. In addition to being home to the only five islands to which Komodo dragons are endemic, the park also contains some of the richest marine biodiversity on Earth – a characteristic that led to it being voted one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature by a global poll in 2011. Since then, tourism has skyrocketed, with visitor numbers predicted to top half a million in 2019, an increase of more than tenfold since 2010. (Those planning to visit during 2020 should note that, to help revitalise dragon numbers as well as the wildlife they feed on, the island of Komodo itself will be closed to tourism for the entire year.)



**THE AYANA RESORT REALLY COMES INTO ITS OWN AS A JUMPING-OFF POINT FOR EXPLORING THE PARK**

With activities such as paddle boarding, kayaking, snorkelling, scuba diving and SUP yoga, there's lots to keep guests busy here, but the resort really comes into its own as a jumping-off point for exploring Komodo National Park. Ferrying tourists to and from the area's most notable landmarks is an ever-growing armada of pleasure cruisers, speedboats and converted fishing craft, but the quintessential mode of transport in these waters is the phinisi, a traditional Indonesian two-masted sailing ship.

Handily, the Ayana has its own luxurious version. In fact, at 54 metres long, the *Lako Di'a* is the world's largest specially built phinisi, featuring nine cabins inspired by the golden age of travel (including a vast master suite with private balcony), as well as a plush dining room/lounge and a sundeck. Translating as "safe journey" in the local dialect, the *Lako Di'a* takes up to 18 passengers on two-night odysseys around the national park's best wildlife-spotting, scuba-diving and scenic trekking sites, while the crew ensures guests want for nothing along the way.

The Ayana also has a 12-person speedboat, a catamaran that can hold up to 80 passengers and a whale-shaped glass-bottomed boat – and it's on a voyage aboard the latter of these vessels, accompanied by the resort's resident marine biologist, that I come face-to-face with a Komodo dragon for the first – but not the last – time, on the island of Rinca. Lying roughly halfway between Labuan Bajo and Komodo, Rinca is the most dependable spot for encountering these giant lizards, making it the ideal stop for those looking to minimise their time at sea.

The island is also home to Timor deer, water buffalo, wild pigs, crab-eating macaques, spitting cobras and two species of viper, as well as the occasional salt-water crocodile. Since Komodo dragons, too, are capable of swimming to hunt prey, it's highly inadvisable to swim in the waters around Rinca, but fortunately there's no shortage of snorkelling and scuba diving sites elsewhere in the park. The coral gardens off nearby Menjerite Island, for example, are replete with tropical fish and even the odd turtle, while those who make it the extra few miles to Komodo itself will be rewarded with splendid dive sites, including some frequented by groups of giant manta rays.

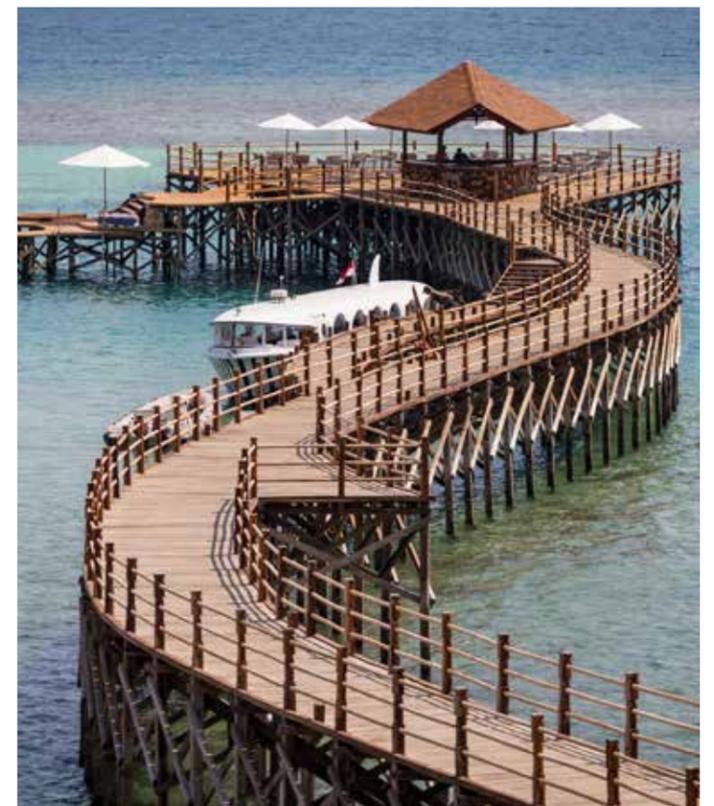
Of all the animal encounters Komodo National Park has to offer, however, none is more spectacular than that which I experience at sunset off Kalong Island. Home to a large colony of Sunda flying foxes (large fruit bats with wingspans of up to one metre), this uninhabited islet bursts into life at dusk, when the nocturnal creatures awake from their daily slumber and make their way in their thousands to a neighbouring island to feed, silhouetted all the way by a sky ablaze with orange, pink and purple. It's a truly breathtaking sight and one that seems to belong – like the Komodo dragons themselves – to a land that time forgot. ■



And yet despite its growing popularity, Komodo has been slow to cater to the luxury traveller, with private yacht charters and small-ship cruises hitherto the only choices for those unwilling to sacrifice creature comforts to meet the dragons. This all changed, however, with the opening last September of the Ayana Komodo Resort, Waecicu Beach, the first five-star base on terra firma from which to explore the archipelago's natural wonders.

Situated on the western tip of Flores island, the Ayana is an ambitious symbol of the growing allure of the Komodo region. Occupying its own private stretch of beach on a sheltered bay north of Labuan Bajo, the hotel is a striking addition to the coastline, featuring a distinctive geometric design that gives it a futuristic look and a long wooden pier that snakes seaward before culminating in a daytime bar and sundeck. Each of the 205 rooms and suites takes full advantage of the resort's enviable setting, with uninterrupted views of the island-dotted horizon, while two sizeable free-form pools provide ample opportunities for lounging.

In addition to six bars and restaurants, including the Japanese HonZEN, the beachside seafood grill Kisik and the Unique rooftop bar, the Ayana Komodo also features a secluded spa, an ocean-facing gym and a colourful kids club complete with model ship. Crucially, it manages to retain a boutique feel, partly thanks to the welcoming staff who mostly come from the nearby area and unfailingly greet guests with a gracious bow of the head and a sincere hand-across-the-heart gesture.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: KOMODO ISLAND'S RANGKO CAVE; THE LOBBY AT AYANA KOMODO; PINK BEACH ON KOMODO ISLAND; AYANA KOMODO PIER