



Komodo dragon

INDONESIA'S REMARKABLE

KOMODO ISLAND

By Ted Cookson



National park sign



Official at park entrance



Map of park walking trails



Visitors on park trail



Komodo dragon head



Forest in park

I visited Indonesia's Komodo Island, home to the largest living species of lizard, by ship during a cruise from Sydney to Singapore. The huge Komodo dragon, weighing up to 70 kg (150 pounds) and two to three metres (7 to 10 feet) in length, is probably the remnant of a population of large lizards, which once existed in Australia and Indonesia. Now native to four Indonesian islands including Komodo, the animals became isolated there after sea levels rose some 900,000 years ago.

One of the Republic of Indonesia's 17,500 islands, Komodo, with an area of 390 square km (150 square miles), has more than 4,000 human inhabitants, many of whom are descended from convicts exiled to the island who intermingled with tribes from Sulawesi and elsewhere. Situated between the larger islands of Flores and Sumbawa, Komodo is visited not only by those wishing to view the largest living lizard but also by scuba divers.

As our ship approached to Komodo, anticipation ran high among the passengers. The scenery in the bay where we anchored was dramatic as the island had a green forest cover, which contrasted with the deep blue surrounding waters. During my shore

excursion I visited Komodo National Park, established in 1980. Designated in 1986 as both a World Heritage Site and a Man and Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO, the park harbours not only the iconic Komodo dragon but also such mammals as the Timor deer and an endemic rat. The marine environment, hosting, among other creatures, over 1,000 fish species, constitutes two-thirds of the national park.

After proceeding ashore by tender, I walked with a group accompanied by a ranger along a well-marked mile-long forest trail. During that walk, we encountered dragons in four locations. I observed that the tail of the Komodo dragon is nearly as long as its body and that the animal has a long, yellow-forked tongue. I had read that the animal has about 60 serrated teeth up to 2.5 cm (one inch) long. The lizard is capable of running up to 20 km/hour (12.4 miles/hour) for brief periods. When young it can even use its claws to climb trees. The dragon has also been known to stand on its hind legs, using its tail for support in order to reach its prey.

First recorded by Western scientists in 1910, the Komodo dragon, classified as a vulnerable species, eats mostly carrion. However, the dragon will also attempt



Dragon head and feet



Dragon eye



Dragon foot with claws



Dragon showing powerful trail

western islands of Indonesia. Thus it is that the Komodo dragon inhabits one of Indonesia's driest areas, on islands with few permanent sources of fresh water. The dragon is most active when there is less rain and when humidity is at a minimum. October is the least humid month, with a figure of 75%, while February is the month with the highest humidity, at 86%.

A visit to Komodo National Park begins in Denpasar, Bali. The cheapest round trip airfare from Cairo to Denpasar is approximately EGP 4,330 on Singapore Airlines via Singapore. There are connecting flights from Denpasar to the gateway cities of Labuan Bajo in the

western part of Flores Island and Bima in eastern Sumbawa. While it is also possible to take a ferry from Denpasar to these gateway cities, travel time by ferry is approximately 36 hours each way. In addition, live-aboard dive boats visit Komodo regularly.



Komodo Island pier

to ambush invertebrates, birds and mammals. In the 1990s a Swiss tourist was eaten by a dragon after wandering off on his own. Over the years a number of islanders have also been attacked. In fact, since the feeding of goat carcasses to dragons was finally outlawed, attacks on humans have increased. In 2007 an 8-year-old boy was killed, and in 2009 a fisherman was mauled and later died. Because the human population of Komodo has increased exponentially from 30 people in 1928 to over 4,000 today, there has been much more interaction between men and lizards, to the detriment of the latter. It is thought that there remain no more than 5,000 Komodo dragons in the wild.

The annual rainfall of less than 800 mm (31 inches) falls mostly between December and March. There are dry southeast trade winds from Australia between April and October. On the other hand, the northwest monsoon blowing down from Asia in January and February only benefits Komodo slightly as the majority of the precipitation is lost to the



Komodo Island beach

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