



There's a dragon on my doorstep!

Komodo Island has been described as a giant Jurassic Park where time has stood still. The chance to view dangerous prehistoric monsters has attracted growing numbers of visitors. Story and photos by **Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer**

There was a faint rustling in the undergrowth. "Be careful of snakes," warned our guide. Safety-conscious, we were already wearing boots, long trousers and long-sleeved safari shirts.

We were on the remote island of Komodo in the Indonesian Archipelago, seeking the fabled *ora*, the native name for the world's largest lizard. Ahead of us our guide, an

Indonesian ranger, wielded a two-metre forked stick to clear the way as we struggled through lush vegetation. In an hour's walk we spotted deer, wild pigs and a couple of water buffaloes. Screeching white cockatoos flapped into the highest branches at our approach. But no matter how quietly we moved there was not a glimpse of the *ora*.

Stories of huge fire-breathing dragons which could swallow a man in one

The Komodo dragon, *Varanus komodoensis*, is the world's largest lizard

gulp were surely exaggerated by the early travellers who had visited Komodo. Even recent reports of the giant size and lightning speed of the dragons have been conflicting. Sightings of three-metre-long monitor lizards that can smell blood up to three kilometres away and outrun any human being have been vividly described by herpetologist Walter Auffenberg and zoologist David Attenborough.

The whole island, which was declared a national park in 1980, is home to more than 2500 of these prehistoric monsters, *Varanus komodoensis*.

As we crossed a dry river-bed our guide pointed to fresh tracks in the sand made by an adult dragon. "Maybe two and half metres, maybe more," he said.

We left the shady canopy of the forest and walked into the open grassy hills dotted with tall lontar palms. Thick savannah grasses up to our



Komodo dragons (top) roam freely in the wild on Komodo Island, Indonesia; The cross (right) marks the spot where Baron von Reding vanished in 1974, presumably eaten alive

waist could easily harbour dozens of dangerous dragons ready for attack.

Suddenly, five or six metres in front of us, appeared the massive head of a dragon, rising well above the grasses with its yellow forked tongue nervously flickering, trying to size us up. But I only managed to catch its tail as I pressed the button of the camcorder.

Exhausted from climbing the steep hills we rested and discovered that my wife had scratched her arm on thorny bushes and the blood had soaked through her white shirt-sleeve.

"The *ora* can smell blood for many miles," cautioned our guide. "You must be careful."

A further 100 metres up we had our first glimpses of Komodo Bay. We made it nearly to the top but decided to stop at the white cross, the spot where in 1974 Swiss Baron von Reding vanished, presumably eaten alive by one or more Komodo dragons.

In the late afternoon I had spotted a small motionless dragon on the grass-thatched roof of our simple bungalow-style hut. Although the beast was only a metre and a bit long, we fetched the park ranger. Dressed in a neat, khaki uniform, he arrived holding a forked stick.

He seemed amused by our concern. "It's OK, only baby dragon catching rats," he explained. "Big dragon too heavy to climb."

As he left, he pointed to the one-



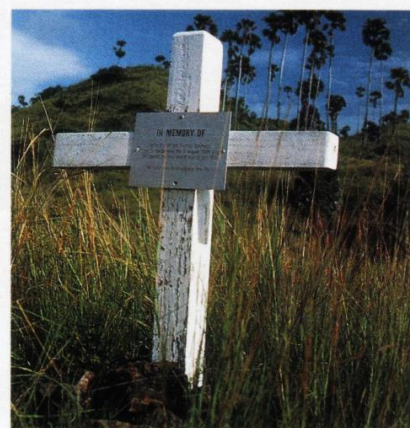
metre wooden gate at the entrance of the bungalow with the warning: "Be careful and close the gate at night so the big dragon cannot enter house."

That night I felt I had done everything possible for our safety. The windows were locked and the latches tied down with pieces of string. The back

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of the only chair in the room was wedged under the door handle with a few empty tin cans balanced on top.

At last we felt safe from possible robbers and Komodo dragons, and the two burning coils of insect repellent would choke any mosquitoes and guarantee us a good night's rest. We could just dream of giant dragons. As



soon as the first tinge of light appeared in the sky we decided to go to the beach to watch the sunrise, but first we had to overcome one big obstacle.

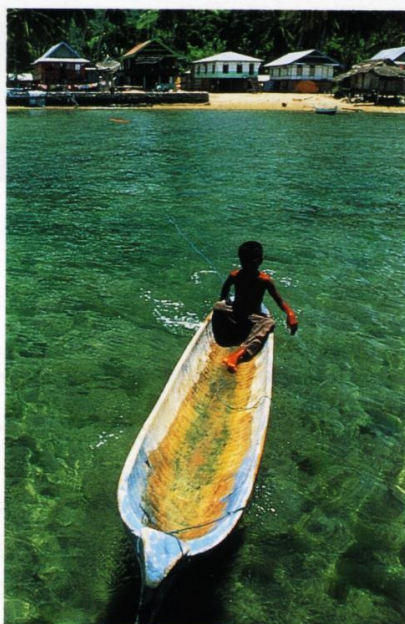
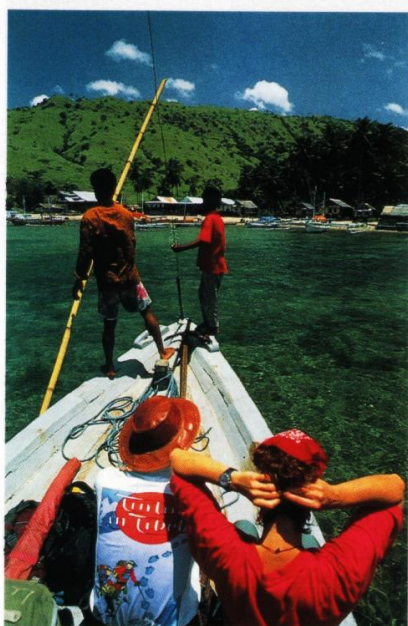
Just outside the entrance of our bungalow, blocking our exit, slept a fully grown dragon. There was no other way out unless we jumped from our 3-metre-high balcony. Having read about dragon behaviour we hoped this specimen would not wake up and start moving before sunrise.

With a giant step we cleared its wrinkly body and walked down to the beach. Our guide had agreed to take us out one hour before the official guided tour started so we could take some close-up pictures of the dragons.

We headed for Banu Nggulung, a safe observation post about 40 minutes from our camp, where wild dragons often gather.

Until 1994 domestic goats were fed to the dragons, a gruesome spectacle for visitors.

Today, however, the dragons have to fend for themselves and catch their own deer, wild pigs or even a water buffalo. In the morning and late after-



Clockwise from above: Komodo village; dugout canoe on the crystal clear waters at Komodo Island; the only way to get to Komodo is by boat

noon they wait motionless near a waterhole for their prey.

Stalking through the high grasses we discovered three dragons soaking up the sun. These giant cold-blooded monitor lizards need to raise their body temperature before they can move at any speed. I decided to take a chance before they warmed up too much and moved in closer with my camcorder. From a distance of four metres I could fill the viewfinder with the mean-looking profile of a Komodo dragon. I edged a metre or two closer.

A sudden angry tail-swipe of the reptile made me realise that I was too close. Suddenly they lifted their bodies off the ground, raised their heads, hissed furiously and flicked their forked tongues at us.

Two infuriated dragons charged me and other photographers. My video coverage of this potentially dangerous incident was more than disappointing as I only captured eight seconds of my own running feet. We retired behind the dragon-proof fence. Komodo Island has been de-

scribed as a giant Jurassic Park where time has stood still. The chance to view dangerous, prehistoric monsters in the wild has attracted growing numbers of visitors. Everyone who comes to Komodo will get a good look at the dragons because of the abundant numbers. Last year almost 20,000 guests visited Komodo National Park. G

How to get there:

Since there is no airport on Komodo Island, fly from Denpasar, Bali to Labuhanbajo, Flores.

Charter boats taking 4-10 passengers leave from Labuhanbajo to Komodo or Rinca Island. Prices vary from US\$35-100 per charter a day.

The regular ferry from Sape or Labuhanbajo passes Komodo Island and you're off-loaded to an 'African Queen'-style shuttle boat which lands at the island's jetty.

The cruise ship *Bali Sea Dancer* also makes regular trips to Komodo between March and August.

Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer are Sydney based photojournalists who travel to Indonesia regularly