



An extraordinary **KOMODO** --- adventure ---

Al Hornsby has been lucky enough to dive all over the world, but even he was blown away by his experiences on a luxury liveaboard enroute to Komodo from Bali

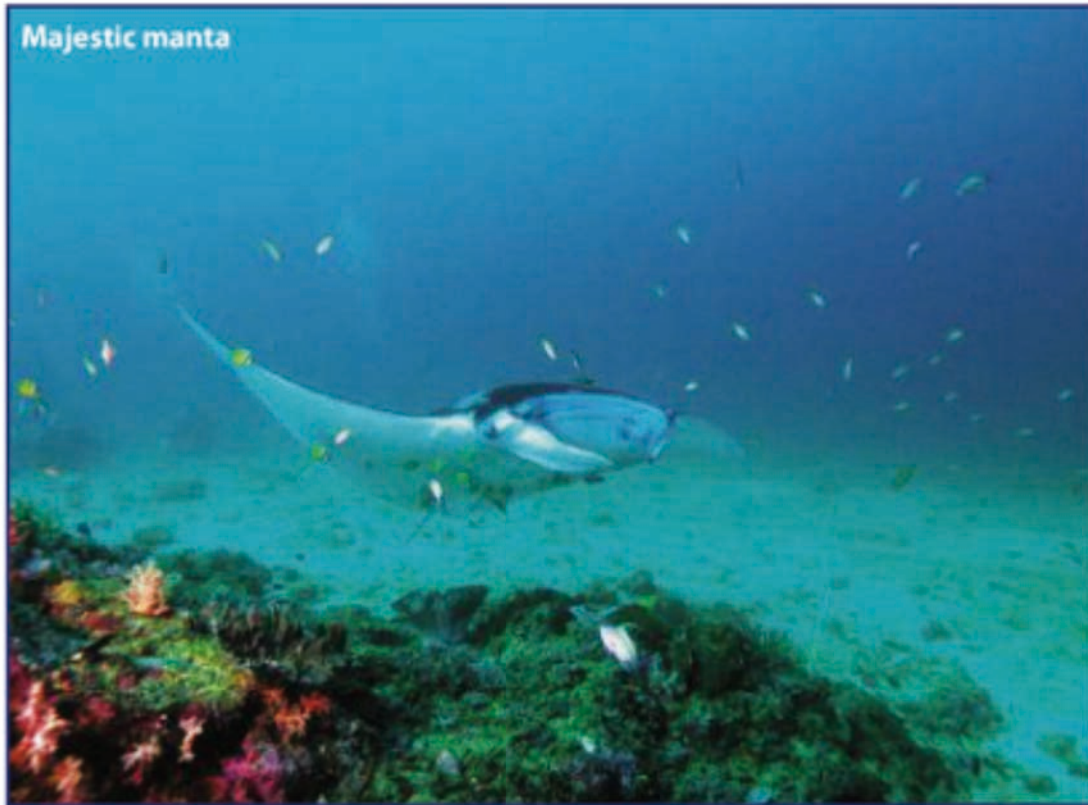
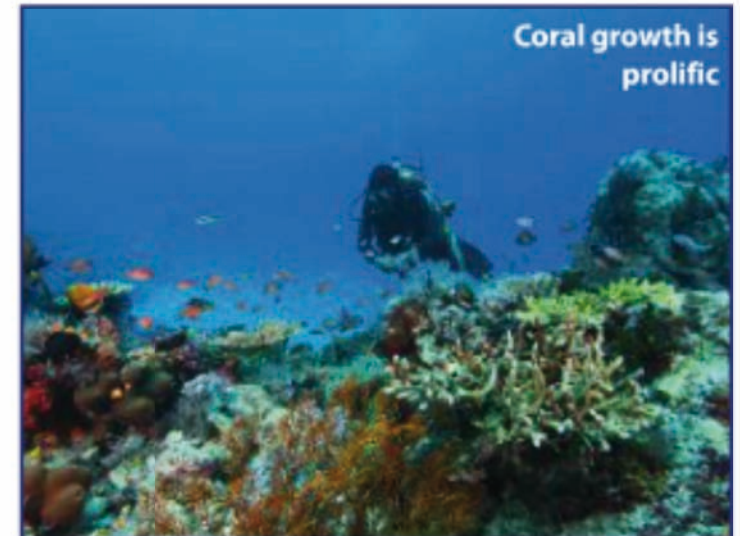
Photographs by AL HORNSBY







Majestic manta

Unspoilt coastlines
aboundFace-to-face with a
Komodo dragonCoral growth is
prolific

"They seem to like it, too - within moments, long trails of saliva begin drooling from their half-opened jaws, giving me signature shots of dragons with feeding on their minds"

We anchor in early morning at the base of Sangeang Volcano, a huge, emerald-green cone that rises out of a crystalline, blue sea north of Sumbawa Island, Indonesia. At water's edge, on a site called Hot Rocks, deep, black volcanic sand hints at the bottom's composition. The moment we slip in, we find the 'hint' woefully inadequate. We drop onto an incredible, unfathomable scene - as far as we can see, a dark, tumbling plain stretches away in every direction. Large volcanic boulders lay jumbled about, each one covered and overgrown in a riot of twisting, swaying soft corals, crinoids, gorgonians, black coral bushes and wire corals of every hue in nature's palette. Damsels, anthias, sweetlips,

angelfish and schools of yellowfin surgeonfish and golden-lined snappers swirl like sparkling motes. It's inexplicable - a surreal, grey moonscape splashed in a kaleidoscope of every brilliant colour imaginable.

Exploring, we quickly discover hidden wonders. There are frogfish, ornate ghost pipefish, huge tiger mantis shrimps, pygmy seahorses, crawling shells and a coconut octopus, and at least 12 varieties of nudibranchs are counted. At dive's end, the final surprise - in the shallows, our safety stop is spent over a burnt charcoal-and-brown sand bottom, streams of swaying jacuzzi bubbles oozing up from its surface, blue-spotted stingrays moving about in every direction. Thrusting my hand deep into the granular sand, I feel the heat of the volcano's dark, living heart...

Thus began the second dive day of an extraordinary dive voyage covering some 560 nautical miles from Bali, Indonesia, eastward to the Komodo Islands and onwards to Flores Island. Aboard the three-masted, luxury dive schooner WAOW, we had signed on for the first leg of WAOW's annual eight-month cruise from Bali to Komodo, Flores, Alor, Banda, Ambon, Raja Ampat, Sulawesi and Wakatobi, then back again to Komodo and Bali. Our ten-day run, highlighted by diving in North and South Komodo, was one of those unique, exotic dive trips that leads your imagination to run wild; what wasn't expected, however, was that even the most-fervent imagination simply could not envision the mind-blowing diving we were actually to discover. (Oh, yeah - and did I mention Komodo dragons?)

Over the course of the voyage, we experienced virtually all the types of diving for which Indonesia has become known - brilliant, clear-water coral reefs; current-fed walls, pinnacles and drop-offs covered with soft corals and swirling with schooling fish; dark-sand and 'muck' critter dives; manta feeding stations and more. And some of the diving - like at Sangeang Volcano, and in the cool (20 degrees C), almost-choked-with-life waters of South Komodo - was diving such as I had never known.

Our first intimation of what we have in store is in late afternoon of our very





Kaleidoscope of colour



Vibrant soft corals



THE WAOW

The WAOW (an acronym for Water Adventure Ocean Wide) is a 58-metre-long, three-masted sailing schooner, hand-built of ironwood by traditional maritime craftsmen in Kilamantan, Indonesia, in the ancient Indonesian style. Begun in 2009, its first dive charters began in April 2012.



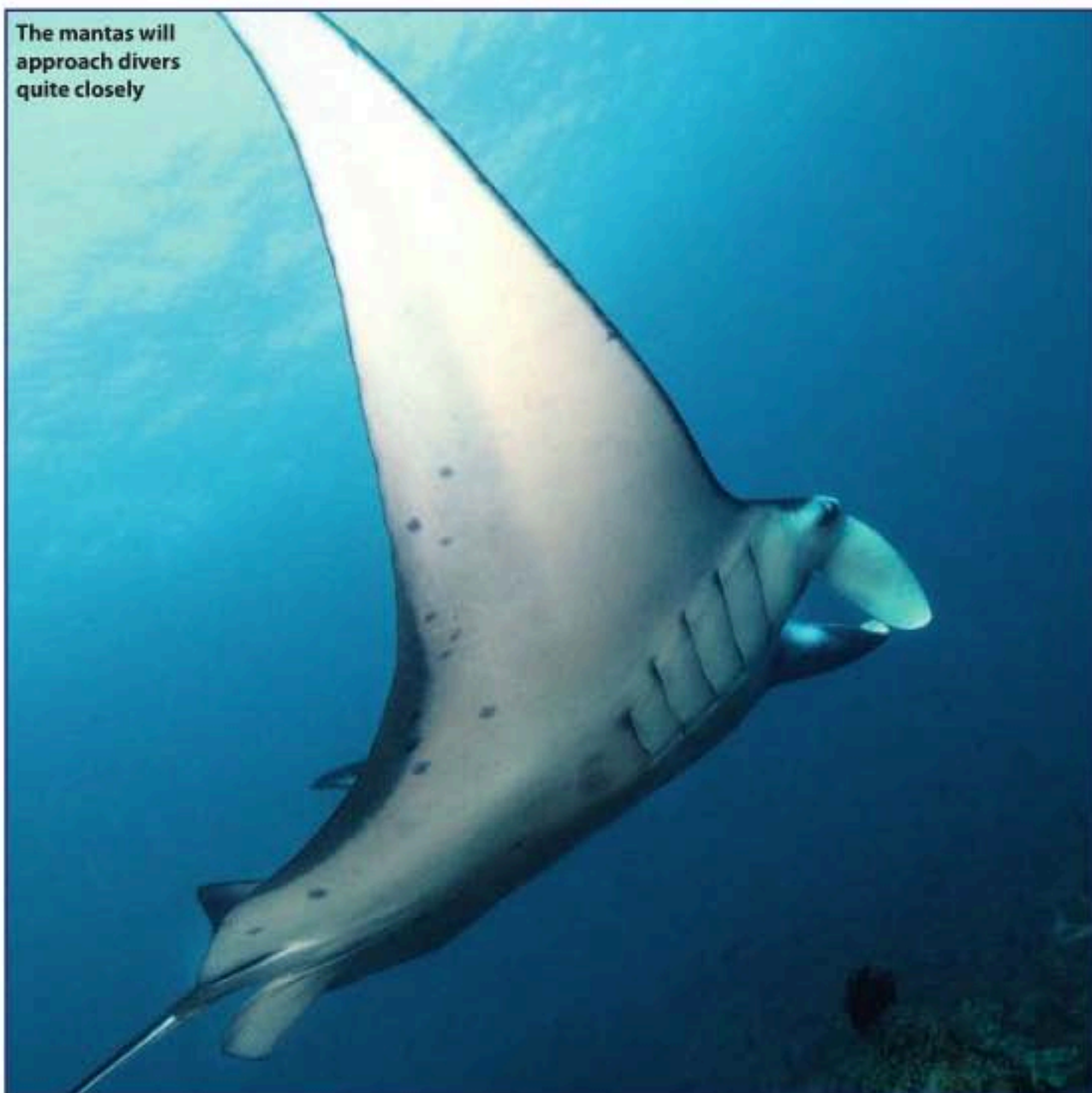
A member of the DivEncounters Alliance, it is luxuriously appointed, with special emphasis on impeccable customer services, including onboard massage. Its nine cabins all are multi-media-equipped and have private baths, individual air-conditioning and Wi-Fi, and are large enough for each to include a double plus a single bed, desk and chair. Meals are fine-dining, with a combination of European and Asian dishes.

For diving, there is a full complement of dive gear available, three dive skiffs, four experienced PADI instructor/dive guides, and a membrane-fill system providing nitrox.


For more information, check out:
www.waowcharters.com

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The mantas will approach divers quite closely



first dive day, at Sembawa Island, on the rightfully named site Sembawa Surprise. In a black-sand, sloping channel just offshore, we ride a moderate current seaward. The water is surprisingly clear, but somber in the late afternoon light. Moving down the slope to 30m, we cross through a macro-photographer's dream. We find ornate ghost pipefish, long-finned spadefish, many different nudibranchs, wire coral gobies, thorny seahorses and more. My favorite image? A pair of emerald green, robust pipefish, cuddled together on the dark bottom.

The following evening, anchored off Gili Banta Island, we have our first (of most nights during the voyage) night dive, on a true-muck site called Hawe's Crab. And, crabs there are... decorators, hermits and spiders; plus octopus; bob-tailed squid; numerous species of shrimp found on virtually every sea pen or other slight prominence rising off the silty bottom; dwarf cuttlefish, and more, including a rare, exquisitely-frilled, two-centimetre-long, juvenile batavia spadefish, suspended in the dark water. As our lights begin to attract small shrimp, the tiny predator begins to feed, voraciously plucking tasty creatures, to our cameras' 



(and our own) great delight.

After an all-night run, we arrive in South Komodo to dive much-heralded Manta Alley. Inside a large bay, just off several small, rocky islands, a prominence rising up from a 28m-deep sand bottom serves as a manta cleaning station. Before we even reach the station, huge mantas appear, sailing in from left and right. Once we settle along the bottom of the mound, a parade begins. Clouds of butterflyfish and wrasse rise up from the coral as one, two - as many as seven in sight at times - mantas wheel in. As always, their calm, curious majesty touches each diver in their presence. All too quickly at this depth, bottom time requires us to move up-slope. In shallower water, a number of blue-spotted ribbontail rays mimic their larger cousins, being cleaned here and there along the bottom.

Late that afternoon, we anchor in a channel off steep-sided Nusa Kode Island for dives on a pinnacle known as Cannibal Rock. A nutrient-driving current sweeps through, and the huge upthrust rock (I'm really only trusting that there was actually rock beneath the deep, unbroken mass of organisms) seems completely covered with life. I have never seen so many colorful soft corals, gorgonians, anemones, miniata and sea apple sea cucumbers; tunicates; tube, barrel and encrusting sponges; fire urchins and crinoids crammed together, competing for space. Moving over it all is a veritable cloud of snapper, fusiliers and butterflyfish, with tasseled scorpionfish and lionfish seemingly in every nook and cranny. And, just when I think there couldn't be anything more, there is - a pale, giant frogfish, per-

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By joining any one of the DivEncounters Alliance part-

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ner liveaboards you immediately become a member of our family, and qualify for valuable Alliance Awards by way of: discounts, free nitrox, state room upgrades, on-board credits, free hotel nights, etc, with a value of up to US\$800 per guest - please visit: www.divencounters.com and click on 'Why Dive With Us' for details. The entire worldwide team of the DivEncounters Alliance look forward to the pleasure of welcoming you aboard one of our fine liveaboard dive vessels and ensuring you have the most-memorable dive vacation experience of your life... Thanks, and as always... keep an ocean mind.



Uncrowded reefs
the entire trip

fectly matching an encrusting sponge of the same hue, wiggling its worm-shaped lure. As I watch, it strikes, suddenly sucking in a small damsel whose curiosity has drawn it too near.

Before the planned night dive on Cannibal, as a soft, late afternoon sun has begun to infuse the gorge in which we are anchored, one of the crew offhandedly mentions that there are sometimes Komodo dragons on a beach nearby. "Well," we ask, "do you think, maybe...?" Within moments, we are heading in, and soon several of the tan-coloured 'logs' on the sand rise and begin walking toward us. We stop just a few metres off the shore, and eight dragons crowd in, standing knee-deep in the quiet water. I lay in the bow of the skiff making images, with an unimaginable nose-to-nose view of golden, sun-lit Komodo dragons. They seem to like it, too - within moments, long trails of saliva begin drooling from their half-opened jaws, giving me signature shots of dragons with feeding on their minds.

Heading northward into the main group of the Komodos the following day, we see ahead of us

a demarcation line of up-churning water stretching across the entire strait through which we are passing. Incredibly, it is the edge of an immense band of six-knot current, marking the point where the Flores Sea and the Indian Ocean collide as they pour through on the changing tides. It is this river of water running back and forth between the islands that creates the breathtaking coral reefs and immense congregations of life in North Komodo's clear, warm waters.

We soon anchor off Batu Bolong, a small, picturesque islet with a large hole through its side, and enter at a site called (appropriately enough) Current City, into water with at least 35 metres of vis. The diving is in a quiet delta behind the outcrop, with dramatic current-furls marking the outer edges, where still water becomes a torrent. The sides of the isle drop away steeply, with huge schools of fish massed everywhere. It's high drama, with large grouper and Napoleon wrasse moving about, whitetip reef sharks patrolling the deeper edges, and a number of hawksbill turtles

