

## DAY TRIP TO KOMODO ISLAND

**I**N EARLY JUNE of this year, my sister Stephanie and I flew to Jakarta in Indonesia and spent two months travelling through the islands of Java, Bali, Lombok, Flores and Timor. All in all it was quite a trip with many memorable experiences of both the sublime and the ridiculous variety. However, no experience was more memorable than the day we took a boat trip from Flores to the island of Komodo, to see the infamous "Komodo Dragons".

The day started at 4.00 am when we stumbled in the dark through the village of Labuhanbajo, to rendezvous with 3 other travellers – Danes, Kurt and Keld and an Indonesian girl called Danni. Also coming along, on an educational assignment was an Indonesian student of Tourism called Alfons. Despite rising at such an early hour there were compensations. This was one morning at least when the 4.30am amplified wailing of the mullahs, calling their faithful to prayer, could not disturb us!

At the harbour we met up with the crew of the boat – a middle-aged fisherman and his seven year old son. In the absence of a jetty the only way to board the vessel was to wade out from the shore and scramble up a rope ladder. Equally basic were the facilities. The "seats" consisted of a flat deck and the lavatory was only to be used by the exceedingly brave or suicidal. Although we were perfectly familiar with "a hole in the ground", a hole cut in a plank of wood hanging off the back of a boat, was another matter entirely!

In keeping with the rest of the boat

was the engine; not only loud enough to wake the dead but also seriously underpowered. As we chugged slowly out of Labuhanbajo Harbour, the sea was as calm as the proverbial mill-pond and watching dawn break over the barren hills of the surrounding islands was eerily beautiful. After a couple of hours the island of Komodo finally came into view.

With no visible vegetation and earth of a burnt orange hue, the landscape seemed a very fitting place for a giant lizard. Equally fitting was the water surrounding Komodo itself, for as we started to negotiate the passage between Rinca Island and Komodo the sea began to boil. With no outriggers to provide stability our simple fishing boat was at the mercy of the crashing waves and began to rock wildly from side to side. Soaked by the waves we clung desperately to the flat deck, becoming increasingly frightened.

A bad situation was soon made worse when we realized that the wooden side railings were rotten. With no life jackets we knew that if we fell overboard there would be little hope of survival. Unfortunately, one hour later, matters took a definite turn for the worse. Right in the middle of the roughest waves, when we were already rigid with fear, the engine suddenly packed in.

However, although we may have been suffering from white knuckle terror our skipper certainly wasn't. Leaving his son at the wheel, he hoisted a makeshift sail and then disappeared over the side of the boat, wearing nothing but his underpants



and clutching a hammer! At this Alfons, whose first time it was on a boat, let himself go. Weeping quietly he moaned pitifully into my ear, "I'm such a long way from home. It's 92 kms to Ruteng!" I didn't have the heart to tell him how far away from home I was!

Stranded engineless in the Komodo Sea was one of the most frightening experiences in my life. Soaking wet and with the boat rocking like a cradle we clung on as best we could and prayed for deliverance. After what seemed like an absolute age but was probably less than an hour, the engine miraculously spluttered back into life and we continued thankfully on our way.

Even then, with Komodo in sight, it took the best part of an hour before we rounded a headland into calmer water and by the time we arrived in

the harbour, we had been at sea for five and a quarter hours. All to travel a distance of 43 miles! The worst thing of all was knowing that within a couple of hours we'd have to go all the way back again!

Walking the short distance to the headquarters of the Loh Liang Nature Reserve, we signed in with names and passport numbers. This was necessary as the Komodo Dragons are extremely dangerous and are known to be partial to the odd tourist! Accompanied by an Indonesian guide, armed only with a forked stick, we set off on foot for Banu Nggulung, a dried-up river and a favourite haunt of the dragons.

Forewarned by our guidebook of the dragons' preferred hunting method, we found the 2 km walk along a well-trodden path, through dense shrub, rather disconcerting. Apparently dragons lie in wait beside

well-trodden paths and grab the leg of a passing victim or knock it over with a swing of the tail, then rip out its intestines. Not surprisingly we all felt rather apprehensive!

On arrival at Banu Nggulung we passed a large sign emphasising the dangers and were ushered into a small wire-enclosed viewing area. Considering we had spent the last half hour tramping through the dragons hunting ground, without any sort of protection at all, this seemed rather ironic! Sunning themselves on the dry river bed beneath us lay sixteen Komodo Dragons, some of the most unpleasant creatures I had ever seen. Up to 3 metres in length, each was equipped with powerful claws, a strong tail, a thickset body and a forked yellow tongue. The sense of coiled energy ready to spring was overwhelming.

In reality a huge monitor lizard, over 2000 Komodos roam wild on Komodo and Rinca, preying on deer, pigs, buffalo and even eating their own dead. Not surprisingly after spending half an hour viewing the dreadful creatures the walk back, this time passing their night time lairs was even more nerve wracking.

Once back at Loh Liang, we had 15 minutes to eat breakfast (or was it lunch?) as the boat was set to leave at noon. However, on trooping into the solitary Warung, we were naturally rather disappointed to find that all the edible items on the menu were "off" until 3 pm. When it became clear that no amount of pleading or shouting was going to produce anything more nourishing than a soft drink, we admitted defeat, gulped down a coke and headed back to the boat.

The trip back to Labuhanbajo took another five and a quarter hours. At first we were lulled into a false sense of security as the roughest areas during the morning crossing were noticeably calmer during the return journey. However, this was simply the result of the shifting tides and between Rinca and the tiny island Pulau Siaba Besar, the mountainous waves were the worst we had encountered anywhere. As a desperate safety measure Stephanie, Kurt and I retreated to the back of the boat where it was more enclosed. At least here we were less likely to fall overboard.

Eventually the sea calmed and we all slumped onto the deck to watch Labuhanbajo creep back into view. Low tide in Labuhanbajo Harbour meant we had to drop anchor some distance from the shore. The skipper's son immediately jumped into the water, waded ashore and returned pushing a small canoe hollowed from a log. He then proceeded to ferry us back to dry land in groups of two. Unfortunately, nestling in the bottom of the canoe was three inches of water and so we all emerged with huge salty tidemarks on our bottoms. But at least we were back on terra firma!

Staggering back to the Hotel Wisata we had just enough strength left to order a Bintang beer before finally collapsing in an exhausted heap. Still, all's well that ends well and the whole experience was in fact only the start of what was to prove a very eventful stay in Flores. Within a week we had experienced two earthquakes, a death defying bus ride and a horrifying buffalo sacrifice. But that's another story!

Marguerite and Stephanie Reynolds.