



Beauty and the Beast

by *Ir. Chin Mee Poon*

THE Komodo National Park is a world heritage site for nature. It encompasses the tiny island of Komodo and the surrounding sea.

And where in the world is Komodo Island? If you look at a map of Indonesia, you will find a string of islands stretching eastwards from Java over a distance of about 1200km to Timur, and Komodo is about midway there, sandwiched between Sumbawa Island and Flores Island.

What attracted me and my diving buddies to Komodo National Park at the end of 2004 were two things: its underwater world and the wildlife on Komodo Island. The seven of us had a live-aboard package to do scuba diving at various dive sites around the island, and we had a great time appreciating the pelagics as well as the colourful fishes and tiny critters among the coral reefs. Because of the unpredictable current that we often encountered, a good amount of skill and experience were required to really enjoy the diving there.

Among other things, I saw two 30cm long “Spanish dancer” nudibranchs during one of the night dives. Nudibranchs are snail-like creatures crawling around coral reefs looking for food. They do not have a shell though. They also do not have eyes. But they have a pair of feelers on one end of their body and a tuft of breathing gills on the other. They are usually very brightly coloured - nature’s way of warning would-be predators: “Do not even think about it! I am poisonous or I am extremely distasteful.”

The so-called “Spanish dancer” nudibranch is considered large in the nudibranch world. Specimens 20cm long are quite commonly encountered. It can reach a maximum length of 45cm. The two specimens that I saw that night, each about 30cm long, were the largest I had ever seen.

This nudibranch is nocturnal in nature and is only active at night and rarely seen during the day. When it is dislodged from the coral reefs and made to swim, its peripheral membrane opens up and it wriggles its body quite gracefully, somewhat like a Spanish flamenco dancer, hence the nickname.

It is not easy to spot a “Spanish dancer” nudibranch though. Some divers have been diving for years and have yet to see one. So I consider the sighting of two such large “Spanish dancers” as one of the highlights of the trip.

Another highlight was our rendezvous with the Komodo dragon. We did a land tour on Komodo Island in between dives. Of the wildlife found on the island, the Komodo dragon is the most well known. The dragon is of course not really a dragon but is actually a monitor lizard. It is the largest monitor lizard in the world and can reach a maximum length of 3m.

It is only found on Komodo Island, Rinca Island and Gigi Motang within the National Park, and part of Flores Island. It is named after Komodo Island. It is a powerful reptile and can run quite fast. A group of Komodo dragons can pull down a buffalo. Its prey in the wild includes wild boar and deer. Its saliva is highly infectious.

Park authorities used to feed the Komodo dragons in front of an observation platform for the entertainment of tourists, but stopped this practice some years ago after receiving many protests from environmentalists and scientists. ■

