

Chasing Dragons by the Sea

Komodo National Park draws wildlife enthusiasts, and aboard the seven-cabin Mutiara Laut, each day unveils a new facet of the archipelago, elevated by personalised service and unforgettable experiences.



Time takes on a fluid quality aboard the Mutiara Laut, with lazy mornings blending into languid afternoons and elaborate sit-down meals following frenzied diving (or in my case, snorkelling) excursions. It's the kind of unhurried rhythm only a plush seven-cabin yacht can inspire while drifting through the islands of Indonesia's Komodo National Park.

Mutiara Laut—meaning “pearl of the sea”—is a North Atlantic style two-mast schooner infused with traditional Indonesian décor accents. Think pristine whites and warm woods spread across two levels: the sun deck and communal dining space up top, with a cosy lounge and guest cabins below.

The first thing I do upon embarkation is check out my cabin. At first glance, it seems tiny. But it is furnished with everything I could

ABOVE: The yacht boasts seven cabins.

OPPOSITE: Mutiara Laut translates to ‘pearl of the sea.’

possibly need over the next few days, including a daybed and a shower with running hot and cold water. As it turns out, the only time I spend in the cabin is my sleep hours. Why would I want to be cooped up inside, when entire reefs of sparkly corals are waiting to be admired, and pods of curious dolphins keep turning up to swim in synchronous beauty alongside the boat?

Labuan Bajo is the starting point for exploring the 29 islands that make up the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Komodo National Park. I remember it as a small and sleepy town from my earlier visit a decade ago. In these 10 years though, the world has discovered the rich marine life thriving in these seas, and the giant monitor lizards known (rather fancifully) as Komodo dragons crawling within the protected reserves.

But the moment I step on this



luxury yacht, the dust and din of the tourist crowds fade into the background, and I find myself ensconced in a pleasurable silence. The stillness stays with me through the next five days, as we sail to the three big islands of Komodo, Rinca and Padar, and numerous smaller ones along the way. There are eight other guests with me on this trip, almost all of them experienced and expert divers. I team up with the cruise manager Arie, who doubles as a snorkelling guide, and opt for the easier way to explore these choppy waters.

My rudimentary swimming skills are put to test by the strong

currents in the Komodo channel, caused by its location right at the meeting point of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. But this also means the waters are rich in nutrients and support a dizzying biodiversity of plant and animal life. And Arie is always at hand—sometimes literally holding my hand—as I try to stay calm and focus on the marvellous tableau of marine life unfolding beneath my snorkelling mask.

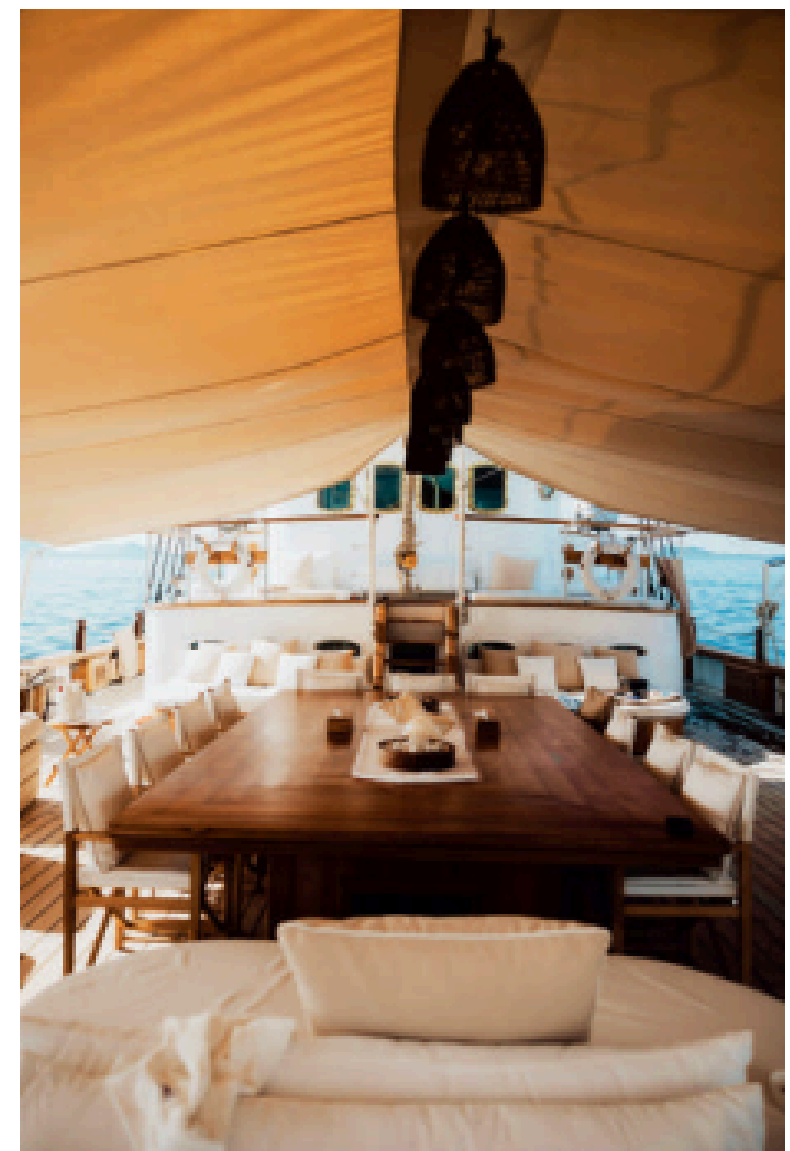
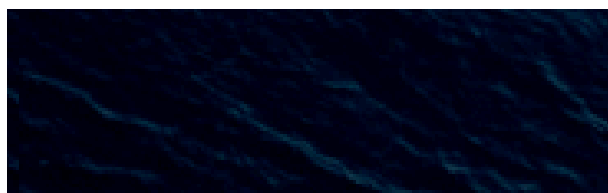
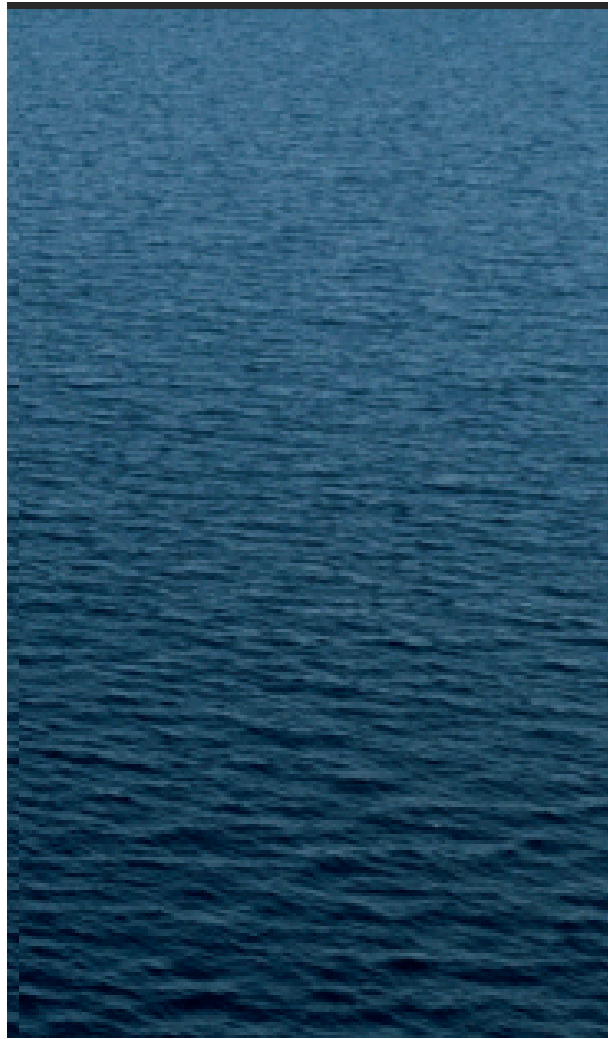
Snorkelling gives me close access to a veritable underwater aquarium, with hundreds of bright parrotfish, clownfish, butterflyfish, damselfish and more; the occasional stingrays and

manta rays; a few black and white tipped reef sharks; and massive green turtles swimming with a grace that belies their bulk. And then there are corals in rainbow shades, alive and flourishing, seemingly untouched by the real threats of climate change and other human damage.

If snorkelling in these balmy waters feels like an adventure, then returning to Mutiara Laut after each escapade feels like homecoming. The crew is always waiting with a loud welcome, and more importantly, cold towels and hot drinks. The service is attentive and friendly, every request is met with a ready smile and prompt

FROM LEFT: The yacht is a North Atlantic style two-mast schooner; Komodo National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MUTIARA LAUT



resolution. Mealtimes are for socialising and cooing over GoPro photos of the underwater world we witness as a small, tight-knit group of strangers united by a common passion. And in the downtimes between the snorkelling jaunts and the leisurely meals, I find myself a shaded corner of the sundeck to curl up with a book.

My first evening on board, I wonder if five days of this would feel monotonous, even boring. How wrong I am! Every day brings with it a new and different excitement: exploring the trails inside Komodo National Park in search of the sleepy dragons,

hiking up Padar hill to see the picture postcard view of the turquoise bays, chilling on Rinca's famous pink beach and on our last night, an unexpected barbecue dinner on a secluded beach, ending with a costumed dance by the effervescent crew.

For a few days after I return from this liveaboard trip, I feel

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The waters of the Komodo Channel are rich in aquatic life; the décor infuses distinctive Indonesian touches; the vessel is staffed by a team of over 15 skilled Indonesian crew members.

myself gently swaying in the middle of mundane activities. And I'm instantly transported to the time I spent chasing dragons and dolphins on an island paradise.

Charukesi Ramadurai •

Mutiara Laut has year-round excursions to Komodo Island, Spice Island and Raja Ampat.