

KOMODO, INDONESIA | ON BOARD THE BLUE MANTA

St. Some Times

MY DIVE TRIP CONTINUES

After 12 days aboard the Tiaré Live-A-Board, I spent a night in a hotel, then boarded the Blue Manta for another 8 day diving bonanza. Someone has to dive all the time.



Five Star Living

Live-a-Board diving is nothing short of a dream dive vacation. Once again, I had my own private cabin (Covid times?) without having to pay extra. Usually, the cost of the room is split between two divers.

The amenities on the Blue Manta are simply spacious. When you fall asleep on this vessel, there is very little movement. You cannot feel the swells of the ocean. It would have acted as a sensory deprivation unit, but I kept the track lights on most of the night. This cabin was almost as big as my apartment living room! Talk about spacious.



Private Baths

The Blue Manta is made for diving. However, comfort and space are part of the plan too. I had a hot shower and spacious bathroom all to myself. The only problem was the door frame. Like most sips, the rooms are all divided by a lip under the door to keep water from freely moving around. I reminded myself to always "step up" but one night... yes, I took a digger and fell flat on my face in the bedroom at 3am.



Camera Room

Many divers have a LOT of camera equipment. Trent was the boy scout on this trip. He had an entire suitcase of photo gear for both him and Cathy, his wife. Cathy was lucky. Trent spent hours setting up and getting the equipment ready for dives. He would spread out the gear over three desk sections. But, if anyone ever needed something, the dude provides.



Briefing Lounge

It was mandatory to attend the dive briefing before every dive. No briefing, no dive. The cruise director, Egoi, would choose a song to play over the speaker system and make gentle announcements for dives or meals. Egoi would then give a detailed briefing with google maps, a huge TV screen, and a few 3D models. Komodo has a lot of dangerous currents. Briefings are vital for diver safety.

A Precision Diving Team

The dive operation on the blue manta can be summed up with three words: safety and precision. The entire team, perhaps twelve guys under the supervision of Egoi, would systematically get five groups of four fun divers out to the dive sites and back. Smooth as a baby's butt. With the precision of a Swiss clock. I'm not sugar coating it. For example, the minute we got on board, the dive team numbered our fins and BCDs according to our assigned "cubby".

"By the time I get out of the zodiac and to the shower on the stern, someone has already helped me out of my wetsuit," said one of the other divers. It's true. As guests, we did virtually nothing. The team took care of everything.

Egoi is one of those team leaders that is always on the front line. There was nothing the team members did that he wouldn't do. In addition to organizing it all and checking in on each diver throughout the trip, Egoi was part of the team. The zodiac drivers would get the three boats ready. One by one, they'd park broadside to the stern platform for loading or unloading. All of the dive gear was already set out on the platform for the rotated dive group. I suspect one of the team was the designated platform captain to keep the rhythm of loading and unloading. Magic. Everyone except the kitchen crew and the captain were working together to get divers to and from the dive sites. That's a lot of work. Precision. Timing. Safety.

Two of the zodiacs were hardbody, slower, but wider and more stable. The third, faster zodiac was the main tender. He'd make faster runs or stay at the dive site while we were under. For that matter, all three tenders were watching our bubbles whenever we were down on dives.

There are a lot of dangerous currents so any one of the 25 divers could be swept out to the deep blue ocean at any point.

Meet Vickli (left). He was my team's guide. Of all the guides, Vickli turned out to be the best. Maybe he was chosen for us because our group was more experienced, stayed under for maximum times.

Follow Vickli !!

Once in the zodiac, fins on. Once at the site, Vickli and the zodiac captain help us into our BCDs and give us our cameras. Five divers ready for backroll entry. On three - five divers one splash. Well, Cathy... that one time. Hah. Mostly positive entry. Once in a while we did negative. Then, for safety and reliance on Vickli...

- **Follow his profile/depth**
- **Don't go in front of him, he is gauging outgoing currents**
- **Beware of up and down currents - surprise!**
- **No stopping on drift dives!**
- **Vickli knows where the creatures are!**





Safety First. Egoi (above) briefings.



Night Dives almost every night? The dive team doesn't stop. The zodiacs, filled with tanks, and personal dive gear are all ready four times a day!



5 Groups, 3 Zodiacs? The Blue Manta operation has five dive groups down to a scientific method. It works so well because of their teamwork and communication.

Four Dives a Day? Yes, including Night Dives!

Not everyone likes to night dive. I understand that fact, but I just don't see it. Night dives are my "happy place". I rarely miss a night dive. I encourage everyone to night dive. Your attention is on your torch rather than all over the place. Most people demonstrate better air consumption.



Indonesia is part of the famous “Coral Triangle”. From Papua New Guinea, to the Philippines, to Borneo, the Coral Triangle is known for more species of sea creatures than the rest of the oceans put together. We witnessed so many different creatures that some were not even in the published fish books. Others, like many of the nudie branches I saw, were listed simply as “unidentified” or “unnamed”.

Sweat the Small Stuff

I really loved following Vickli. He could spot a 2cm nudie branch while we sped past a coral head on a drift dive at mach speed. I was very lucky to have both Vickli on this ship and Anto on the Tiaré. Since I don't dive here often enough, I would never spot the smaller creatures or even know what I

was looking at, even if I did spot something that looked like an alien. There are a more pictures of critters in the previous SST volume. Take a look. If I included all the creatures, this newsletter would be twice as long. Here are some of the favorites.



Demon Scorpion Fish.



Decorator Crab



“Strawberry” nudie branch



Mantis Shrimp



Tiny Octopus night hunting



“Picachu” nudie branch



Amazing Frogfish

Frogfish are terrible swimmers but they have adapted their front fins to act like little feet to crawl. They are "angler" predators. Staying still for hours, camouflaged, it waits and fishes.



Crab Ingenuity

This decorator crab (2cm) uses stinging polyps from nearby corals to keep prey away. It places the polyps on its body or holds them in its claws like waving a flame at a predator.

What is an Average Day like On Board the Blue Manta?

The Blue Manta is all about diving. Eat dive sleep repeat. That being said, there are days where the plan is disrupted by the weather or a land trip - to see the Komodo dragons - might be planned instead of a dive. Yet, the overall day goes a little something like the following:

06:00	Wake up
06:45	Dive briefing
07:00	First dive
08:15	Full, hot breakfast
10:00	Dive Briefing
10:30	Second Dive
12:00	Lunch

14:00	Dive Briefing
14:30	Dive three
15:45	Snacky Snacks
17:30	Night Dive Briefing
18:00	Night Dive
19:30	Dinner is on
20:30	Daily Debrief & Plan for Tomorrow

18 GUESTS ON THIS TRIP

	Andre & Alex	California	
	Anna		South Africa
		Cathy	Colorado
	Trent		Colorado
	Ruth	Netherlands	
	Frank		UK Lives in Thailand
		Gary	U.K.
	Guess		Green Bay Wisconsin U.S.A.
	Melissa	Canada	
	Paul		Thailand Lives in Singapore
		Ricky	Chinese Lives in Singapore
	Scott		Chinese Lives in Singapore
	Shine	Korea	
	Hyo		Korea
		Cheaon	Korea
	Soojin		Korea



FrogFish

One of my all-time favorite critters. This purple guy is a master of disguise. Even though I am experienced in spotting these amazing fish, I was looking right at it for two minutes before I actually "saw" it and knew what I was looking at.

They hardly move. Masters of camouflage and sneak attack, this is an angler. It is difficult to see the angler appendage here, but attached to its forehead is a hair-thin spine. At the end of the spine is a feathery "lure" it can move. Small fish are attracted to the movement of the lure and with lightning speed, the frogfish opens its massive jaw and sucks in the fish and the surrounding water. The frogfish dissolves the prey in its stomach while it waits for the next foolish victim. Truly amazing.



Questions Everyone Asks about LiveABoard Trips

Did You Go Alone?

Absolutely. I cannot find someone else to commit the time and money I do to diving - at least on live-a-board trips I go on. The best part is...I am not exactly shy. I make friends on every trip I go on. Imagine, everyone on board a dive ship is there for one main reason: diving. We are all there for the same passion: diving.

Isn't it Expensive?

Definitely. Break it down to cost per day and it might be anywhere from \$200 - \$400 per day. Yes, \$200 a day for (usually) a five star floating hotel, three or four dives daily, and three to four excellent meals. Take all of those into account and it doesn't seem real. Of course, it's the travel costs I haven't included there. I'll travel anyway, so I don't consider that part of the cost.

I may spend \$1,000 on a roundtrip plane ticket to XYZ country. Why stay in a series of hotels or BnB's, rent a car, pay event fees, and then add meals on top of that. That doesn't even include diving.

Where is the Best Place to Dive?

That's an impossible answer. It's like asking someone what their favorite movie of all time is. The answer will be long winded and ultimately be multiple movies. I just love to dive.

Why Don't You Just Join a Dive Club

Obviously, I have in the past. Wherever I have lived, I have been a member of some local dive club. Here not so much. I've been out diving a few times, but dive days are so much more stressful for just a dive or two on some weekend.

A normal dive day here, locally, involves: getting up super early to drive to a marina, waiting around for everyone, loading all of your own gear, paperwork/visa/identification to get out of the port (including wait time in the boat while all of the stamping and verification is done in some coast guard office), a 45 minute boat ride out to the dive site, mediocre topography and sea life, an hour surface interval in the boat while we might munch on snacks, and then everything in reverse order. I might leave at 5 or 6am and finally return with wet gear at 9pm.

Is it Worth it?

For me it is a no brainer. 50 dives over a few weeks on board a Live-a-Board is enough to stave my dive crave for a few months.



Quick Komodo Facts

- **Indonesia boasts 17,500 islands - many uninhabited**
- **Komodo has a human population of 2000**
- **Dragons are on only 3 islands (3,000 on Komodo and 300-350 on the others)**
- **Komodo dragons are endemic to Komodo**
- **Dragons eat anything dead or alive**
- **Their bite is deadly**



Dragons

Elementary students, especially boys, love to learn about the Komodo dragons. Why? Because they have a deadly bite and can even kill humans. Yep. Anything gross or dangerous will always stir the curiosity of elementary boys (and some girls, of course).

It turns out, the dragon venom is the main reason prey die after a dragon bite. According to national geographic, the venom is an anticoagulant. Together with the nasty bacteria from the dragon teeth, small animals just wander off and die after being bitten. Then the dragons track their smell from 4-5 miles away.

If you are interested, there is a short two minute video online from one of the NG authors that visited Komodo to study the dragons for her article.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/reptiles/facts/komodo-dragon>

I stayed onboard while the dive group went to see the dragons.

There was little reason to go see the dragons a second time. The cruise director planned the event for a late afternoon. I just sat and had tea while I went through my dive photos. The group came back an hour later because the park had closed for the day.

Second Chance

I stayed on board the next morning while the group tried again. There was no way I wanted to go hiking for an hour with 25 other people. It was plenty eventful with just five of us from the Tiaré last week.

Everyone returned to the ship two hours later with a lot of smiles and stories of seeing dragons. Someone shared the above photo with me. I lost the photo with the dragon sticking its tongue out! Damn.

Overall, seeing the dragons is a 45 minute walk along an island pathway. The vegetation is partial. The walk is relatively easy and just up a small hill. There is also a two hour trek or a quick 15 minute trek. At the end, you can walk through the souvenir village full of local hawkers.



Pulau Koaba (Fruit Bat Island)

Also known as Kalong (Flying Foxes) Island, this is a small 500 meter diameter island in Komodo, Indonesia made up primarily of mangroves.

At sunset, the nightly event starts out with a few fruit bats circling over the central part of the island, directly over the tree canopy. As the sun finally goes down, the entire canopy comes alive and thousands upon thousands of fruit bats take to the air.

The evening sky is full of hungry bats for almost an hour. The bats leave their mangrove nests for the surrounding islands in search of food.

Nightfall Brings Out the Bats. Thousands of them!

The Blue Manta has designed a Komodo trip like none other. It is mostly about diving, but the dragon visit is an absolute standard for visitors to Komodo. The final bonus on a Blue Manta trip is the bat event.

The penultimate day of the dive trip is an early dive day. No one dives after the two morning dives. Why? Safety precaution. The next day everyone is leaving around or after 12:00 noon. If we stop diving at noon the day before, that leaves a conservative 24 hours to off-gas any nitrogen in our bodies after days of multiple dives. Most live-a-boards just offer this as a resting and packing period for their divers. Not in Komodo.

The captain started the return to port after we finished our dives and lunch was served. Instead of going all the way back to port, he steered us towards Pulau Koaba, a little mangrove island. At dusk, I made my way up to the upper decks with a few other divers. With drink in hand, we waited for the bats. I watched flying bats fill the entire night sky. Thousands and thousands of bats flying over us for almost an hour. Each bat was headed out to the other islands to find fruits. Imagine how many bats must live in each of the mangroves!

Recommendations?

I absolutely recommend the Blue Manta or the White Manta for a live-a-board experience in Indonesia. If you prefer the smaller creatures or are not comfortable diving in strong currents, I'd recommend going to Indonesia between November and February to dive in Raj Ampat. That's the information I have heard firsthand. That's my next plan. No matter what, if you have a chance to go on Tiaré, Blue Manta, or White Manta, jump on it!



Bye Bye DEGAS!



Saudi EndTimes

As David prepared to leave, his final meals would include a great feast at the Butcher Shop with Hank and Olive. I argued for paying the bill but this was the final hurrah for Hank and Olive. I was fortunate to be included. Great steaks, stories, memories, and laughter! Hank and Olive played a huge piece in the Saudi experience for David and Roseanna's family. You will be hearing a lot more about Hank and Olive in the future.

Goodbye Stuff!

Dave filled up two convex containers and countless suitcases over the past months. Saying goodbye to the smoker was a heavy hit for me. I was invited over to the Haiglers countless times over the past four years for smokey recipes - even smoked bread. Not only did David pack up his entire family home, he had to arrange for their nanny/maid/fourth child, Rachel to make it back to Ethiopia. You'll hear more in the future about Rachel and her restaurant!

Don't Ring

This place is like no other! Once word gets out that you are moving, the dumpster divers and deal hunters come ringing the doorbell. While the movers were packing up the Haigler house, random people were trying to walk through the house and claim items David might be "getting rid of". Those poor bastards got the wrath of a fed up David. So many people went through his dumpster, he started smashing stuff. The idea was: leave nothing worth digging in the dumpster for.

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الى خارج أرامكو السعودية

Exiting Saudi Aramco

A New Chapter

After over a dozen years in Saudi spread out over different stages, David is packed and leaving. It's about time he is his own boss.

I have just about a calendar year to prepare for seeing David again. Why, because of training. He'll know if I have followed through and maintained my Pau Sheng training that he has guided me through for the past two years. I look forward to the commitment. Godspeed Sifu!

Make the symphony come alive for the world to taste and experience.

I'll just go out to restaurants.
Thanks for being you.

"I know."

