

INDONESIA— ASIA'S INCREDIBLE JEWEL

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

KOMODO ISLAND, Indonesia---It's exciting to play Indiana Jones in Indonesia because there are adventures galore lurking on its thousands of islands splashed across the South Pacific.

Agressive Komodo under ranger shack. (Indonesia Tourism photo)



The story so far:

After arriving in Jakarta, we flew to Kalimantan on Borneo to visit with members of the Dayak tribe, once the most ferocious headhunters on earth.

On Sulawesi island, we took part in a strange funeral feast that can last as long as a year, featuring sacrificial beheadings, mummies... and much more!

On Flores, we found ourselves in

the center of a mammoth cave faced with an extremely difficult choice between two exits, each one a potential deathtrap.

And today, we are searching for one of nature's weirdest creatures--the infamous, dangerous, carnivorous and gluttonous Komodo dragon.

But first, back to the headhunters.

Kalimantan occupies more than two-thirds of Borneo and we touched down at the east coast city of Balikpapan, then drove three hours north to Saraminda on the edge of the jungle. The Dayak village was a tough 15 miles away

along a dirt road that had turned to mud following a heavy rain.

After going as far as we could in our minivan, we transferred to a four-wheel-drive pickup and when that gave up in a mudhole, walked the rest of the way in blistering heat.

The village was quite small, perhaps less than 100 residents; the older members dressed in sarongs and the younger in jeans and T-shirts. Not so long ago, the Dayaks were avid headhunters. We were shown one home containing a few shrunken heads, looking much like coconuts, hanging from the ceiling.

Author Dominick Merle heading for Komodo Island



Makassar morning market



Dayak long-eared women



"Don't worry," said our smiling guide, Majang, "just for show."

However, we would later learn that there were the odd headhunter or two still wandering around the interior, carrying out that tradition as a display of bravery for their brides-to-be.

Also back in the prime headhunter days, most Dayak women had elongated earlobes that dipped below their shoulders, lowered

there by extremely heavy earrings. The day we visited, there were only four women still sporting that look.

Our visit ended with the village witch doctor (wearing a Rolex) giving demonstrations of blowpipe darts, spear throwing and ritual dance healings.

I called our Dayak visit: INDIANA JONES AND THE HOUSE OF SKULLS!

The next morning we flew to the Sulawesi capital of Makassar and headed north for an eight-hour drive to Tana Toraja, a hill country first inhabited by boat people from China several centuries ago.

Consequently, homes of some of the wealthier members of the Toraja tribe are built in the shape of boats, suspended a few feet above ground by tree trunks and always facing north, in honor of the first inhabitants.

But the bizarre and ritualistic funeral "feasts," which last anywhere from four to ten days---and take place months and

sometimes as long as a year after death---are the big attraction, the showstopper of Sulawesi.

Bodies are embalmed, wrapped like mummies and remain in the home during the waiting period between death and burial. Until the actual funeral, relatives and friends pretend the deceased is merely ill, even bringing plates of food to the body three times a day.

Months pass this way as relatives and friends throughout vast Indonesia save enough money to make the journey to Tana Toraja. When all are there, the feast begins.

Dayak witchdoctor (note the Rolex)





Head of Komodo
contains shark-
like teeth.
(Indonesia
Tourism photo)

A sacrificial beheading of from five to twenty water buffaloes takes place with the heads forming a semi-circle in the middle of the ceremony grounds.

We arrived shortly after the beheadings and visited the home containing the mummified body. Relatives were no longer pretending the deceased was ill.

The feast takes place during the next few days, including the consumption of the buffalo meat, and the bodies are then taken to a nearby mountain and buried in cliffside tombs, with the noblest

class the higher up on the mountains.

We visited this cliffside cemetery before leaving Tana Toraja. Wooden statues of gods were in front of many tombs to protect the deceased from any evil influences.

I called this episode: **INDIANA JONES AND THE LIVING MUMMIES!**

Our five-stop tour took place in the central area of the Indonesian island chain and we headed south now to Flores and its capital city of Labuan Bajo. Our first stop was Batu Cermin, a series of caves

where the islanders have hid from invaders over the years

It was a dicey climb along jagged rock to reach the center of the cave (Indiana needed a little help here). After our guide, Anton, explained the history he handed each of us a flashlight and pointed to a cave tunnel less than five-feet high.

"There are two exits," he said. "We go this way. You must walk like a duck because of the low ceiling. But be sure to shine the

light on the walls because poisonous black spiders make their nests there."

We promptly gave him back the flashlights. Next exit, please.

It was a much larger tunnel where we could simply walk out. The downside, Anton explained, was that it also was a favorite rest stop for deadly vipers. We chose to stand tall with the vipers rather than duck-walk with poisonous spiders.

We drove to the Kelimutu volcano





area which contains three crater lakes that change color irregularly (red, green, blue) depending on the oxidation level of the waters. Today was a green day.

I titled our Flores episode: **INDIANA JONES AND THE CAVE OF TWO DEATHS!**

The next morning we took a 90-minute speedboat ride to Komodo Island in search of the Komodo dragon. This island, and two neighboring smaller islands, are the only places in the world

where you can see these amazing creatures in the wild.

Our ranger guide carried a long wooden stick with a forked end and promised we would see anywhere "from none to many" dragons. We saw three during our walk---a baby, one full grown but motionless like a statue and a third walking on a hill sniffing the air for prey. We were able to get as close as 10 meters.

There are an estimated 1500 Komodo dragons on this island

and as many residents. Full grown, they reach three meters (10-feet) long and weigh up to 130 kilograms (300 lbs). They kill and eat anything---including other dragons---and can consume up to 80 percent of their body weight in one meal!

To put that into perspective, the average person would have to eat about 600 quarter-pounders in a row to compete with the gluttonous dragons.

The Komodos can kill with one

bite from their shark-like teeth which inject a combination of bacteria and venom into the victim. Small prey die quickly. Larger ones, like water buffaloes, can live for a week, the Komodo patiently following for his big meal.

The dragon's belly swells to an enormous size after he has had his fill, and he may not eat again for a month. This is when they become statue-like.

"They can stay in one spot without blinking for 24 hours," the

Port of Makassar



Toraja cliff graves (Indonesia Tourism photo)



ranger said. "And once in awhile, they eat one of the native residents."

A person can survive a Komodo bite, but only if prompt treatment and antidotes are administered and the closest hospital is in Bali, which would be our final stop.

This episode wrote its own title: INDIANA JONES AND THE KOMODO DRAGONS!

We flew from Labuan Bajo to Bali the next morning and that in itself was a mini-adventure. There were no arrival/departure boards at the tiny airport, so I asked the man

sitting next to me how we'd know if our flight was on time.

"No problem," he said, "you just look out the window for the plane. And don't worry if you fall asleep. They blow a siren when it comes."

We arrived in Bali, one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, at mid-day and drove to our hotel in the famous Kuta Beach area. The streets were packed with party people and there were monstrous traffic jams.

The driver told us that Bali "nightlife" begins at noon and lasts until sunrise seven days a week.

This could well be our most dangerous assignment.

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food, Wine & Travel Writers Assn. and resides in Montreal Email: dmerle@videotron.ca)

QUICK FACTS AND STATS

Indonesia has more than 17,500 islands that dangle like a necklace from southern Thailand to Papua New Guinea. Only about 6,000 islands are inhabited and many have no names.

The island chain stretches for 5,120 kilometers across the equator, roughly the same distance as coast-to-coast in North America.

The climate is largely tropical with temperatures from 21 to 33 Celsius (70-90 Fahrenheit).

There are about 230 million people speaking almost 600 different languages. Cultures vary dramatically from island to island.

Figure anywhere from 20 to 36 hours travel time each way depending on your origin. We flew Air Canada from Montreal to Hong Kong, connecting with Cathay Pacific into Jakarta.

Visas can be obtained upon entry for about \$25.

For further information try www.indonesia.travel.



Toraja boat house