

# INDONESIA: HOME OF THE KOMODO DRAGON

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

**KOMODO ISLAND---I'm on a speedboat in central Indonesia heading for a tiny group of islands that are the only place on earth where you can find the legendary Komodo dragon in the wild.**

Tourists at Pink Beach



In fact, an estimated 5000 of these carnivores who will kill and eat just about anything, including each other, and you and me. free here---and they are gluttonous

After a 90-minute speedboat ride from the nearby island of Flores, our ranger-guide, Alexander, greeted us as we touched shore on Komodo Island and promptly gave us a few ground rules.

"We may see no dragons, and we may see many," he began. "Stay behind me and do not approach them within ten meters. They can strike very quickly."

He motioned towards me. "Do not let your camera dangle loose like that. They will think it's meat. Cup it in your hand."

Prior to coming here, my

knowledge of the Komodo dragon was miniscule: they were dangerous, rare and looked like a three-way cross between a lizard, crocodile and dinosaur.

But as we began our walk along a jungle path, Alexander filled in the blanks with some statistics and a few startling details.

A full-grown dragon grows to three meters (10-feet) long and weighs up to 130 kilos (300 lbs). They have oversized heads with shark-like teeth and can kill with one bite, injecting a combination of 50 strains of bacteria and venom



Author (right) with guide



Author Dominick Merle on speedboat



into their victims.

Small prey die quickly. Larger animals, like water buffaloes, can live for a week, the Komodo patiently following behind for his big meal.

And huge it is; the Komodo can consume up to 80 percent of his body weight in one meal! His belly swells to triple the size after a feast like that and the creature may not eat again for a month.

Put into perspective, the average person would have to eat 600 quarter-pounders in a row to match the Komodo's appetite.

"Look...there is a young one,"

Alexander said, pointing his long wooden pole with a forked end. We would later learn that in addition to the pole, he also carried a concealed weapon in case a Komodo became aggressive and attacked.

The dragon, looking much like an oversized lizard or iguana, was darting about and turning his head in different directions.

"He's sniffing for blood," Alexander said. "They can smell blood a kilometer away."

About 20 minutes later in our walk, Alexander stopped and pointed towards

one of the ranger shacks. "That one has just eaten. He may stay in one position like a statue, not even blinking an eye, for 24 hours."

From that distance, the dragon looked like a log, but as we approached we could see the grotesquely bloated belly. We remained there for 15 minutes or so and the creature never flinched, even as Alexander approached it with his forked pole.

Now we heard some loud squeals up ahead followed by a flurry of footsteps. "Wild pigs," Alexander said. "You will rarely see them, they run away from humans.

"They hunt in packs and often kill

and eat the Komodos. But if a pig is alone, the Komodo wins."

The third and final dragon we would see during our walk was full grown and hungry for meat, sniffing the air in all directions. Alexander cautioned us against going any closer and brought us to a ranger observation hut to observe the creature in safety.

"As soon as he picks up the scent of blood he will head in that direction and a hungry dragon can run up to 20 kilometers (13 miles) an hour. About the same speed as a wild dog.

"That is why we warn anyone who is recovering from an open

Bloated Komodo after huge meal



Head of Komodo



wound, even women during their menstruation period, to never set foot on the island."

There are about 1500 natives living on Komodo Island, and occasionally one is killed by a Komodo bite. The closest hospital where antidotes and treatment can be administered is in Bali, an hour away by plane and flights are few and far between.

Alexander said the dragons can be found on two neighboring tiny islands as well, Rinca and Padar, but escorted tours are only conducted here.

Komodo dragons can live in excess of 30 years. Yet, despite their deadly aggressiveness, they have become an endangered species because of poaching, the dearth of egg-laying females, natural disasters and the wild pig packs.

They are truly one of nature's strangest creatures. Yet, as we left the island, one silly statistic kept dancing around in my head--- 600 quarter-pounders?

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food





Pink Beach on  
Komodo Island

Approaching Komodo  
Island



& Travel Writers Assn. and resides in Montreal).

**If you go**

Indonesia has more than 1,750 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 70 to 90 F. 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 from North America each way depending on your origin.

We found our best rates and service by using Air Canada ([www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)) on the long leg from Montreal to Hong Kong, connecting with Cathay Pacific for the short hop to Jakarta.

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

For further information try [www.indonesia.travel](http://www.indonesia.travel).



Komodo guide with forked stick