

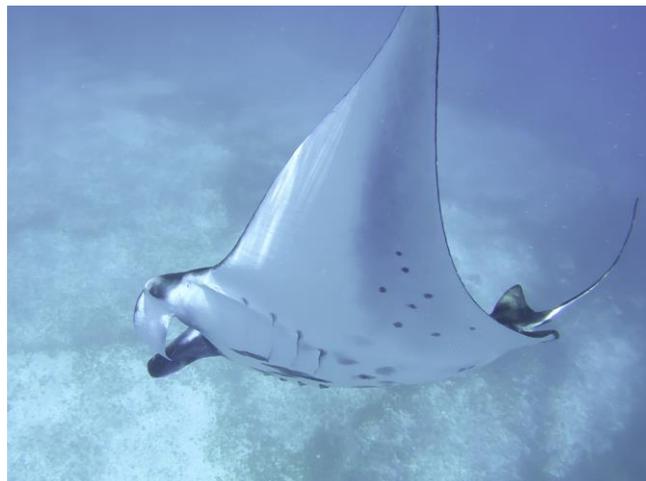
Bali to Komodo – In Search of the Dragon!

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 30 September 2017



Komodo Dragon



Manta Ray



Melon-headed Whales



Underwater life

Report by Nick Acheson, Images by Sara Frost



Naturetrek Mingle-down Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Nick Acheson & Chas Anderson (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients

Day 1/2

Monday 18th /Tuesday 19th September

For most of us these two days were spent in transit from the UK, though some came from other parts of the world and others had wisely arrived in Bali a day or two early in order to acclimatise. The majority of us, however, arrived on the evening of 19th September and were welcomed to our hotel by the other members of the group and by singing Savannah Nightjars.

Day 3

Wednesday 20th September

This morning we mooched around our lovely hotel in Sanur, Bali, most of us catching up from the previous two days' journey, watching Yellow-vented Bulbuls, Pacific Swallows and Cave Swiftlets as we did so.

In the early afternoon we moved to Benoa docks where we boarded the Mermaid 1 and were met — exactly as we would be treated for the next ten days — with smiles, efficiency, attentiveness, clear instructions and an embarrassment of delicious food. As soon as our charming host Nico had given us a safety briefing we set sail. At this point the keenest members of the group took up their permanent perches on the dolphin deck, scanning the distant horizon for signs of cetaceans. There were no marine mammals today but we contented ourselves with terns: Greater Crested, Common and Little. We sailed eastwards all night towards Moyo Island.

Day 4

Thursday 21st September

As we approached Moyo this morning we saw our first cetaceans: more than 50 Fraser's Dolphins. Though we saw them very well, they didn't seem keen to get to know us, so we soon left them and moored off Moyo for our first snorkel of the tour. It's hard to write a report about snorkelling as each person is enclosed in her or his own mask and engaged with the amazing fish and corals which she or he alone is seeing. Suffice it to say that this was the first of many stunning reefs we visited where the corals were beautiful and varied, the fish enthralling and, largely, the water crystal clear and welcoming.

Post-snorkel we began sailing east along Sumbawa, passing the famous Tambora volcano as we did so. Reaching Satonda Island we were met by the first of innumerable Red-necked Phalaropes of our tour. On Satonda we walked the short distance to the marine lake which fills its volcanic crater, while some went up a steep, dusty slope to a viewpoint over the bay in which the Mermaid was at anchor. Birds of interest here included Red-chested Flowerpeckers and Yellow-spectacled White-Eyes. Rejoining Mermaid we sailed a short distance and moored overnight under the path of a vast roost of Sunda Flying Foxes, which nightly leave the safety of Satonda to feed on fruit on the large island of Sumbawa.

Day 5

Friday 22nd September

Early this morning we went for a lovely snorkel off Satonda Island, setting sail just after nine. Those of us who skipped second breakfast to watch for cetaceans saw the tour's first Spinner Dolphins, but the cetacean action moved up several gears at 10.30am when we encountered a huge, and extremely obliging, group of Melon-headed Whales, Fraser's Dolphins and Pantropical Spotted Dolphins. The MHWs in particular put on a thrilling display, bow-riding and cavorting all around us in flat calm water.

Shortly thereafter we snuck up on three bobbing Dwarf Sperm Whales. No sooner had they detected us than, in the manner of their kind, they dived. However, still needing air before their next deep dive, they resurfaced not long afterwards, sadly rather far away (again, in the manner of their kind).

After lunch, which had been delayed by the Dwarf Sperm Whales (as almost every lunch on the tour was delayed by some thoughtless cetacean or other) we encountered some very active Spinner Dolphins, bringing the number of cetacean species seen today to five. Reflecting our success, in the evening Chas gave a talk on the dolphin species to be found in the Indo-Pacific.

Before this, however, we had leapt into the water again and explored a beautiful reef off Sumbawa.

Day 6

Saturday 23rd September

This morning we sailed to Sangeang Island but, on account of strong swell, we were unable to snorkel at the exposed site known as Hot Rocks. So we sailed on to Gili Banta and snorkelled on a gorgeous soft coral reef.

Sailing on, at lunchtime we spotted some distant dolphins which turned out to be supremely obliging Common Bottlenose and Spinner Dolphins (both species bow-riding with all the enthusiasm of yesterday's Melon-headed Whales) accompanied by some much less friendly Pantropical Spotted Dolphins. Another marvellous spell of dolphin-watching on what had already become, at this early stage, a dolphin-laden cruise.

And more was still to come on the mammal front. As we reached our snorkelling site at Gili Lawa Darat we met a group of Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins. On the beach here were our first Rusa (also known as Javan or Timor Deer, which gives a clue to the species' wide distribution across Indonesia and beyond). After a gorgeous, warm snorkel here we went up to a viewpoint to watch an equally gorgeous sunset.

In the evening, prior to meeting them on Rinca the following day, we watched a documentary on Komodo Dragons and subsequently debated the arguments that they kill exclusively with their venom (the thesis of the scientist in the documentary) or that the rather fruity bacterial flora in their saliva also has a role (widely considered the case prior to the recent discovery). Either way we resolved not to be bitten the following day.

Day 7

Sunday 24th September

Early this morning we visited Rinca Island at Loh Buaya. We were greeted at the dock by a Long-tailed Macaque and slightly further along the boardwalk by a Komodo Dragon having a morning stroll. Grazing nearby were half

a dozen male Rusa in a bachelor posse. Among the houses inhabited by the rangers, attracted by the scent of their food, were several large Komodo Dragons and on distant hills we could see feral Asian Water Buffalo.

While some opted for a gentle stroll in the flatter area of Rinca, others chose to take a walk up the steeper hills. Both walks saw plenty of Dragons and plenty of other wildlife, including Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, Zitting Cisticolas, Paddyfield Pipits, and the artists formerly known as Olive-backed Sunbirds (which, according to the giant split-fest of the brand new Birds of Indonesia, are now Ornate Sunbirds).

Following our visit to Rinca the day got even better when we snorkelled with spectacular Reef Mantas in crystal clear water at Takat Makassar, these giant fish swimming right past our noses as they fed. Even those for whom the current here was too strong to snorkel were able to see the Mantas from zodiacs. All in all a wonderful experience for everyone.

As we sailed south from here we were slowed by a strong wind so we altered our plans and pulled in for the night to Horseshoe Bay on the south of Rinca. We arrived with enough time to visit the Komodo Dragons who lurk on a beach here. As they are fed by less scrupulous visitors they are always very keen to see zodiacs approaching their beach and some of them even swam out to meet us. A marvellous end to a marvellous day of Indonesian wildlife.

Day 8

Monday 25th September

Early this morning we snorkelled in Horseshoe Bay where cold currents from the Indian Ocean make snorkelling a chilly affair. Nonetheless it was thoroughly enjoyable and very different from any other reef we visited.

From here we sailed south to explore the open ocean in the hoping of finding cetaceans. We emphatically found cetaceans, including a group of very obliging Risso's Dolphins (one of them almost pure white and several engaging in the species' characteristic headstand). We also saw Fraser's Dolphins, some shy Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphins and plenty of Spinner Dolphins. There were seabirds here too (as all along our route) including Bulwer's Petrels, Brown Boobies, Wilson's Storm-Petrels and abundant Red-necked Phalaropes.

In the afternoon we snorkelled at Manta Alley on the south of Komodo. There were indeed a few Mantas here but the strong swell and murky water made it hard for us to see much; indeed at times it made it hard for us to swim. So we headed back to the Mermaid and, leaving Manta Alley, met a group of Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins, three of which bow-rode joyfully far out into open water.

As we reached Pink Beach in evening there were Spinner Dolphins away in the distance and, landing here, we walked up the hill to a viewpoint over another spectacular sunset. In the evening Chas gave a fascinating talk on Alfred Russel Wallace, in whose region — Wallacea — we were enjoying so many remarkable encounters with wildlife.

Day 9

Tuesday 26th September

This morning we visited Loh Liang on Komodo Island. Once again the group split into two parties, one staying on relatively flat ground and the other taking to the hills. There were eponymous Dragons (of course), there were Rusa, there were Rusty-breasted Whistlers (or things similar to Rusty-breasted Whistlers if you're inclined to indulge in the latest split frenzy), there were splendid Green Junglefowl, there were Orange-footed Scrubfowl, there were Helmeted Friarbirds and there were extremely rare Yellow-crested Cockatoos.

We left Komodo early, before the heat became too crushing, and set sail, passing more Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins and Spinner Dolphins, some of them spinning (albeit at some distance from Mermaid).

Later we snorkelled at Tatawa Besar (just before which we saw yet more Indo-Pacific Bottlenose and Spinner Dolphins). The highlights of this reef were at least two Hawksbill Turtles which allowed a very close approach and came up for air right among us. Our afternoon snorkel was at Sabayor, before which, true to form, we saw yet more Spinner Dolphins.

Day 10

Wednesday 27th September

During our brief sail this morning we saw... dolphins: some Bottlenose unidentified to species (but which we suspected of being Indo-Pacific) and some very distant Spinners. We then snorkelled at Sebolan Kecil where highlights included a number of Black-tipped Reef Sharks.

With a long journey back to Maumere ahead, we spent the rest of the day sailing. The journey was made slower and probably longer by the excellent haul of cetaceans we observed. It began with Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins (which on this trip greatly outnumbered Common Bottlenose). These were followed not long afterwards by a logging whale spotted by Nico, which turned out to be none other than a log with a remarkably whale-fin-like snag on it. Logs, after all, can log better than anything else in the sea. Thereafter we returned to genuine cetaceans when we met a group of Risso's Dolphins.

Chas' highlight of the day was the midday visit to Mermaid's top deck by a Globe Skimmer dragonfly, a species whose truly epic migrations (no hyperbole whatsoever) he studies from his base in the Maldives. Excitement was greater, however, for the more than 200 Melon-headed Whales we met at lunchtime, and for the mixed group of Melons, Spinners and Fraser's which followed shortly thereafter.

In the early afternoon we had tantalising views of two Beaked Whales, which (as is the case with so many Beaked Whales) did not reveal their specific identity. Later though we met yet another group of Risso's Dolphins. Given our sighting of Beaked Whales today, Chas' talk this evening was on this elusive and little understood group of cetaceans, including the two species which he has helped rediscover in the Indo-Pacific.

Day 11

Thursday 28th September

We cruised through the night, to bring us close to our final port of Maumere, reaching Pulau Raja in the early morning, where a last snorkel was taken.

The rest of the day we spent watching cetaceans, a remarkable eight species of them (though not everyone saw some of the more distant). First up were Risso's Dolphins which we saw as soon as we set sail. These were followed almost immediately by four Dwarf Sperm Whales and then a further seven DSWs, including two youngsters, which Marcelo gallantly attempted to find and film with his drone.

At eleven o'clock we saw the characteristic towering blow of a Blue Whale and, after a tense fifteen minutes of scanning, located the beast once more. It surfaced several times before we left (or before some of you were lured to lunch by the smell of yet more delicious Mermaid food), sometimes quite close. During this encounter some of us saw two more very distant cetaceans: a Sperm Whale and an unidentified Beaked Whale.

By early afternoon the wind was too strong in our faces and the sea too rough, so Chas and Nick abandoned their nine-day vigil on the dolphin deck and accepted we would see no more whales.

We reached the port of Maumere, on the island of Flores, in the afternoon and moored for the night. In the evening we watched Marcelo's video of our trip and reflected on ten beautiful days spent together on Mermaid, watching birds, dolphins, whales, giant lizards and dazzling fish in the Indo-Pacific.

Day 12

Friday 29th September

This morning we disembarked for the last time and began our long journey home. Seeing us off the Mermaid were her wonderful crew, all smiling, all helpful, all friendly, all fascinated by our whale-watching antics, all constantly attentive to our safety and enjoyment. We owe them enormous thanks for the great success of a superb trip.

Day 13

Saturday 30th September

Those returning to the UK arrived back safely and another Naturetrek adventure came to an end

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species Lists

Reptiles & Amphibians (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September											
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28		
1	Komodo Dragon	<i>Varanus komodoensis</i>												
2	Banded Sea-snake	<i>Colubrina laticauda</i>							✓	✓	✓			
3	Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>						✓						
4	Hawksbill Turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>							✓					
5	House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus sp.</i>							✓		✓			

Birds (h = heard only)

1	Orange-footed Scrubfowl	<i>Megapodius reinwardt</i>							✓					
2	Green Junglefowl	<i>Gallus varius</i>							✓		✓			
3	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>				✓			✓		✓			
4	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>							✓	✓	✓			
5	Streaked Shearwater	<i>Calonectris leucomelas</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Eastern Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus coromandus</i>											✓	
7	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	✓											
8	Pacific Reef Heron	<i>Egretta sacra</i>		✓										
9	Great Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>						✓	✓		✓	✓		
10	White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>		✓										
11	Great Frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>										✓		
12	Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>									✓			
13	Red-footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>				✓			✓					
14	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>				✓	✓						✓	✓
15	Sparrowhawk sp.	<i>Accipiter sp.</i>			✓	✓			✓	✓			✓	
16	Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>			✓									
17	White-bellied Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			
18	White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓					
19	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		✓					✓	✓				
20	Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
21	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Bridled Tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>		✓									✓	
23	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				✓						✓	✓	
24	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		✓		✓								
25	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>				✓								
26	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>											✓	
27	Spotted Dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>								✓		✓	✓	✓
28	Barred Dove	<i>Geopelia maugeus</i>	✓	✓										
29	Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>							✓			✓		
30	Edible-nest Swiftlet	<i>Aerodramus fuciphagus</i>			✓							✓		
31	Cave Swiftlet	<i>Collocalia linchi</i>			✓									
32	Collared Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus chloris</i>	✓	✓										
33	Blue-tailed Bee-Eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>		✓	✓	✓								
34	Yellow-crested Cockatoo	<i>Cacatua sulphurea</i>				✓	✓					✓		
35	Helmeted Friarbird	<i>Philemon buceroides</i>											✓	
36	Black-naped Oriole	<i>Oriolus chinensis</i>											✓	
37	Wallacean (Flores) Drongo	<i>Dicrurus densus</i>											✓	
38	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>			h							✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	September										
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	
39	Yellow-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus goiavier</i>							✓		✓		
40	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓									
41	Pacific Swallow	<i>Hirundo tahitica</i>							✓				
42	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		✓					✓				
43	Yellow-spectacled White-Eye	<i>Heleia (Zosterops) wallacei</i>									✓		
44	Pied Bush Chat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>			✓								
45	Olive-backed (Ornate) Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris jugularis</i>							✓				
46	Flame-breasted Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris solaris</i>		✓					✓				
47	Red-chested Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum mauegi</i>							✓				
48	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			✓								
49	Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>	✓	✓									
50	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>							✓				
51	Rusty-breasted Whistler	<i>Pachycephala fulvotincta</i>							✓				

Cetaceans

1	Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
2	Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
3	Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>						✓	✓			
4	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			✓						✓	
5	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>				✓						
6	Fraser's Dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>			✓						✓	✓
7	Melon-headed Whale	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>			✓						✓	✓
8	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>					✓					
9	False Killer Whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>				✓						
10	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>									✓	
11	Beaked Whale sp.	<i>Ziphiidae sp.</i>				✓					✓	
12	Timor (=Javan) Deer	<i>Rusa timorensis</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓		
13	Feral Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>						✓	✓			
14	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>					✓		✓	✓		
15	Long-tailed (=Crab-eating) Macaque	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
16	Plantain Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus notates</i>		✓								
17	Sunda Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus sp.</i>			✓	✓						

Other Taxa

Ghost Crab species, *Ocyrodinae sp.*

Swimming Crab species, *Portunidae sp.*