

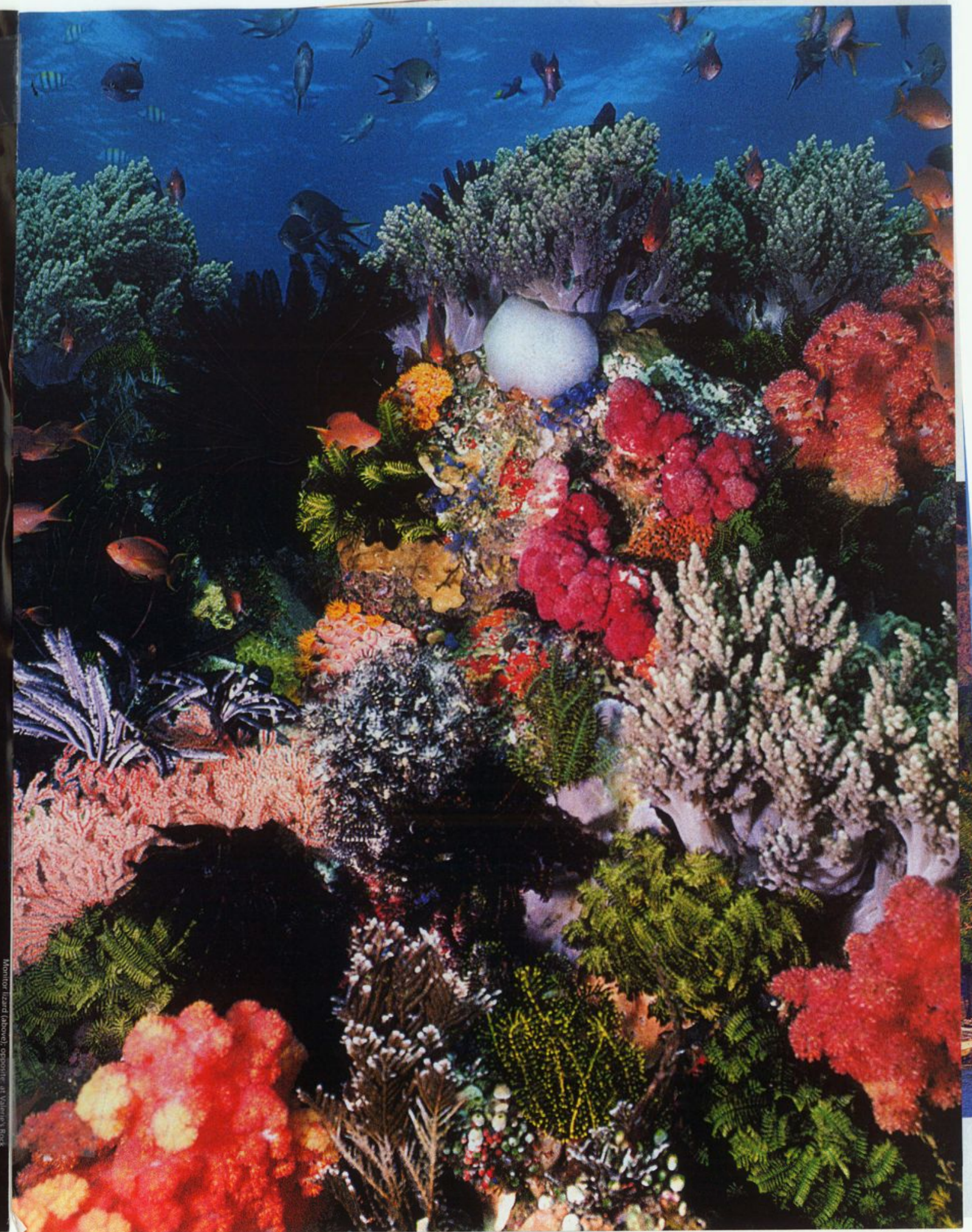
In the waters
around this
Indonesian island,
you can count
on only one thing –
the unexpected.



Komodo

Deep in
Dragonland

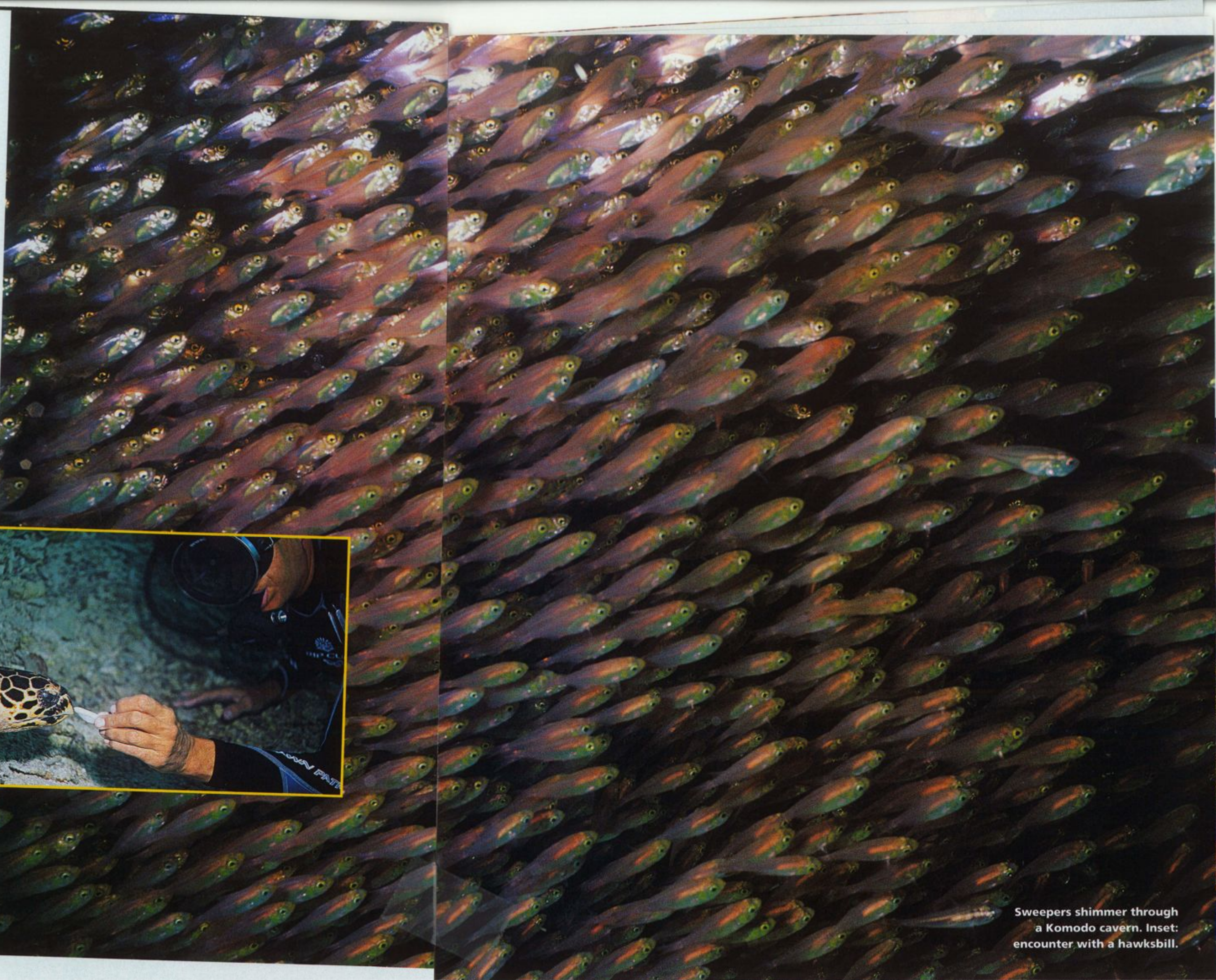
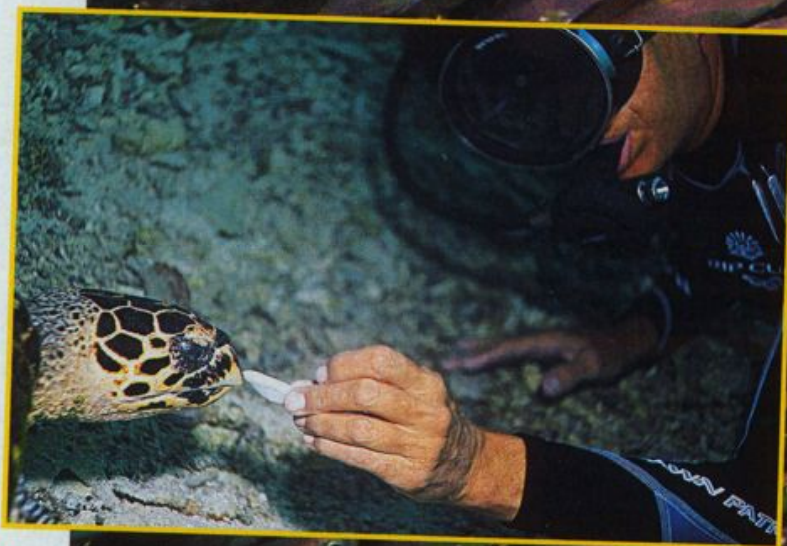
By Hillary Hauser Photographs by Valerie Taylor



Monitor Lizard (above) opposite: at Valerie's Rock



The dive had started out as unpromising as a plunge into a Michigan quarry on a bad day. We were in about 30 feet of Indonesian pea soup, on the northeast coast of Komodo island, far back in a calm inlet facing the small satellite island of Gili Lawa Darat. The water was thick with plankton, so thick that, were it not for Valerie Taylor's Crayola pink wet suit, I would have all too easily



Sweepers shimmer through a Komodo cavern. Inset: encounter with a hawksbill.

I'd dived through every underwater coffee-table book known to man.



tank, a convoluted traffic jam of yellow-and-iridescent-blue snappers, sweetlips, puffers, little bouncing damselfish, and big-eyed squirrelfish hiding in the cracks. All were swarming and swirling around basket sponges, soft corals, hydroids, crinoids, and plate corals so huge Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers could have fox-trotted on them. A cuttlefish flew by, backward, and a little yellow boxfish nearly bumped into my faceplate.

Back aboard the boat, I felt I'd just dived through every underwater coffee-table book known to man.

sian waters, who also happens to be Valerie's nephew. The *Evening Star II* was on its trial voyage and reeked of paint fumes because the guest quarters were still being upgraded as we sailed. Plus, the cook was out with malaria, and we, the 12 passengers and crew, were pulling galley duty.

We motored southwest through the Lintah Strait past Padar, and soon we drew near to a raggedy island with brown stegosaurus humps sticking out of the sea.

"There she is! Komodo!" someone shouted. We tucked in behind nearby

Punya, at the tip of Soro Lia Bay, and here, at Pantai Merah – "Red Beach" – we made our first dive.

Swimming with Ron and Valerie at 90 feet, it was as if I'd fallen into a fish



Indian Ocean, the water can do a flip-flop, and it sometimes turns green with plankton. Each day here you slip into uncharted territory, never certain if it will turn out good or bad. Lesson: You should always expect the unforeseen and hope for the miraculous.

And that is the way it was on a dive that started out so unpromising. We swam with the hawksbill for half an hour. And as our underwater ballet ended, we parted – all the better and in balance – to go our separate ways.

RON AND VALERIE Taylor are longtime friends of mine. The acclaimed shark stars of Australia, the Taylors first gained wide exposure in *Blue Water, White Death*, later filmed the live shark sequences for *Jaws*, and have since worked on dozens of films and documentaries, in addition to publishing books of their underwater photography. So when they invited me to join them on the inaugural charter voyage of the *Evening Star II* to Komodo, home of the famed Komodo dragon, I jumped at the chance.

The hour-and-a-half flight out of Bali took me over some of the 17,000 islands that make up Indonesia before landing in Labuhanbajo, a fishing village on the northwest coast of Flores. A dusty little town crowned with the gleaming silver dome of a mosque, it is the home port of the *Evening Star II*.

This sturdy wooden vessel, a 100-foot motor sailer, was built in 1983 in the Philippines out of native hardwood. Its captain is Mark Heighes, a diving pioneer in Indone-

from my hand, too.

Such is the way of diving in the waters of Indonesia. It is not unlike the *barong*, a Balinese dance where opposing forces meet and the beauty is in the balance.

Indonesia offers spectacular dives into deep blue canyons. But given frequent cold-water upwelling from the

lost sight of her.

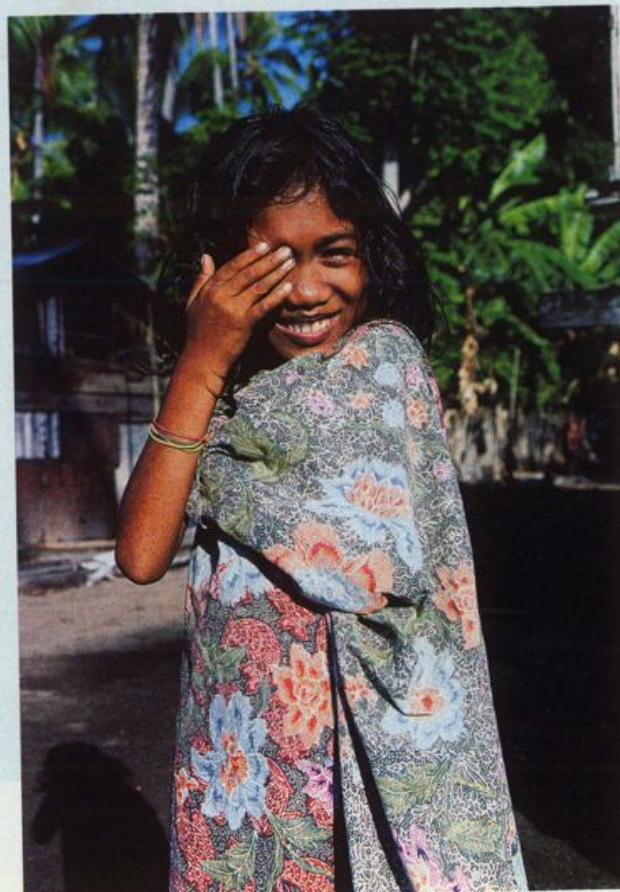
Not only that, but the sea bottom was a feathery field of stinging hydroids, a white cloud of toxic fuzz. That explained why everyone else from our boat was wearing socks and booties with their fins. My bare ankles were constantly getting stung. To heck with it, I thought. Time to abandon this dive.

That's when a huge hawksbill turtle appeared.

And that's when I saw the magic for which Valerie Taylor is known.

At first, I wasn't sure what Valerie was up to as she parted the water in front of her, using her hands like flippers. She split her legs wide and gave an exaggerated kick. Then I got it: She was acting like a turtle. And a pretty darn good imitation it was.

The hawksbill got it, too. It stopped, then circled back to check us out. Valerie looked around, found a live something-or-other on the bottom, and offered it to the turtle. Slowly, the turtle took it from her hand with its beak. Then I found a live something-or-other and the turtle accepted it



No lawn, no worries: A Komodo fishing village (above) rises on stilts. Opposite: a pretty game of peekaboo.



A coral starfish crowns the scene at Pink Sand Beach.

When a dragon raises a front leg it's getting ready to lunge.

Looking around at everything, I pictured a humorous God going crazy at an art easel, dreaming up one imaginative creature after the next and throwing the whole lot into the seas surrounding Komodo.

Mark explained it more scientifically: "There are two different environments coming together here," he said, "the Indian and Pacific Oceans. You get the good stuff from both."

IN THE OLD DAYS, TOURISTS HAD to make a half-day hike into the backcountry to see Komodo dragons. Knowing they had a moneymaking proposition on their hands, the rangers and Komodo villagers began attracting the dragons to the coast by hanging dead goats or pigs in the trees. At Komodo National Park headquarters, near Red Beach, we paid our 20,000 rupiah entry fee (about US\$2), and a guide took us straight to the reptiles; it was a walk of not more than one hundred yards.

The ever hungry dragons – actually ten-foot-long monitor lizards – simply amble into the village to see what pigs or chickens there are to eat. Valerie and I noticed not a single dog anywhere as we walked to the camp at Loh Liang, a collection of wooden cabins on stilts where visitors can stay.

Here, the dragons congregate underneath the balconies, looking for occasional handouts of fish. Valerie and I came across four of them, lolling in the shade of the houses.

They are big, scaly beasts with massive bodies, powerful legs, and hooked, horned toes that end in sharp claws. Their slit-brown eyes are accompanied by dragon snorts and awful stench, their forked ribbon tongues flicking with slime and hope. Valerie chattered away, talking to them as she shot pictures, while I nearly stepped backward on a small one I didn't see. The ranger yelled and poked his long stick at the



small dragon, which didn't move and didn't care.

We were told that when a dragon raises a front leg it is getting ready to lunge, and you'd better be out of the way. One bite and you die – maybe not from the bite but from the bacteria on those slimy teeth.

Locals call the Komodo dragon *ora*,

swimmers, and Ron and Valerie were toying with the idea of getting an underwater photograph of one. They had heard reports about local fishermen seeing them swim between the islands, and Mark said he had seen them on the beaches of nearby Rinca island. We decided to move the *Evening Star II* there.

We were approaching an anchorage at Lebok Uwada lagoon when Jack, one of the vessel's owners, saw a disturbance on the surface of the sea. He and some of the other men on board took an aluminum boat over to investigate.

They came back with a tangle of abandoned fishing net in which two turtles had been snared: a big green



Another day winds down aboard the *Evening Star II*.

and guidebooks will tell you the creatures can "snap your leg as fast as they'll cut a goat's throat." As I shot pictures of the dragons from the safety of a cabin balcony, I wondered if they could jump.

Komodo dragons *are* excellent

turtle and a small hawksbill, which we freed and released. Also in the net was a huge bohar (a red bass that, according to Ron, can cause ciguatera if eaten). It wasn't so lucky.

"Even the sharks won't eat it," he told us.

But it would make a perfect dragon lure.

The Taylors are known for their daring in photographing great white sharks, but getting an underwater shot of a dragon was more of a mystery. They debated whether to attract the attention of a dragon on the beach with the bohar, then lure the lizard into the sea while they waited underwater with cameras, or to slip it some sleeping pills and wrangle it into the water by hand.

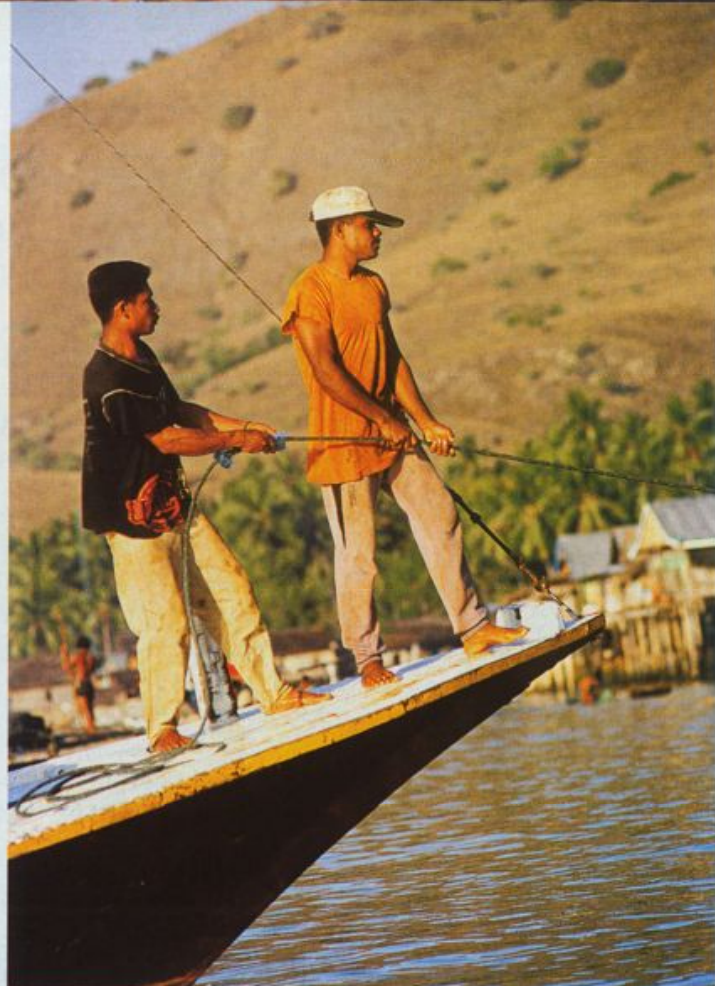
"I'm accustomed to white sharks," Ron said. "I don't know about these dragons. Especially an angry one."

Then someone spotted a dragon lumbering along the beach. Several of us got into the two small boats and headed for shore. The dragon saw us and skulked away, taking off in a run when it realized we were following it on foot. With its big tail swishing back and forth and its powerful legs in fast motion, it quickly disappeared into the woods.

Some of the men continued the chase into the woods only to run smack into another dragon. With shrieks you'd never hear from Arnold Schwarzenegger, the men came flying back out onto the beach, running for their lives.

It was bohar time, so Mick, one of the Australian crew members who possessed the best cowboy skills, lassoed the fish and hung it from a tree limb. The idea was that it would soon start to stink, and it would hang there like a red Christmas tree ornament just high enough that a dragon couldn't reach it but close enough to the ground that the smell might keep it around.

Back at the boat, we watched a dragon circle and circle underneath the fish, but it eventually grew bored



Bringing it home: A couple of Komodo fishermen set anchor.

and gave up.

"We have to get a goat, or leg of lamb," Valerie said. "I'm going to come back next spring and do this myself."

OUT IN THE CHANNEL BETWEEN Lebok Uwada and Kode, we bumped into dense swarms of copper sweepers. I called them "symphony fish" because I could flick my wrists and they all moved as if pushed by energy from my fingertips, making me feel like an underwater Zubin Mehta. During intermission, I enjoyed a performance by a magnificent batfish, the edges of its fins rimmed in bright yellow-orange, and watched a dash-dot goatfish dig up the sand bottom like a Sherman tank.

Going ashore at Kampong Komodo, a picturesque fishing village built on stilts, we were surrounded by children selling wooden Komodo dragons with red beady eyes and men selling strings of freshwater pearls. The villagers,

many of them descended from convicts who were exiled to the island in the 1800s by a sultan on Sumbawa, were friendly and curious about the pale-skinned people who were twice their size.

Valerie walked through the village like some kind of goddess, pulling from her knapsack little gifts for the children. Many of the smaller children cried when we came too near. To them, we must have looked like monsters.

In the center of the village, people congregated for a Saturday morning bath in the communal watering hole. Old men gathered under shade trees, while chickens, goats, and cats milled around, mainly under nearby houses. Just offshore, fishermen prepared their outrigger-style boats for their nighttime

hunt. Kerosene lamps, stretched across a wooden gangplank at the bow of the boats, would be lighted in the dark to attract squid.

Back aboard the *Evening Star II* we aimed for Tatawa and Batu Besar, Indonesian for "Big Stone," though English-speaking divers more commonly refer to it as "Valerie's Rock," in honor of her earlier explorations of the area. The rock is surrounded by the dubious-sounding "Current City," so-called because of the changing tides that rage around here.

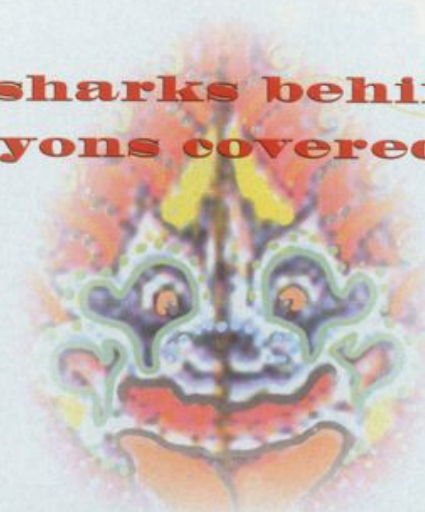
Instead of being swept off to Vietnam, however, I found myself making a gentle drop, followed by a brisk swim into a dramatic, clear blue sea that moved past a steep, rocky drop-off. There were giant boulders, big caves and grottoes, and basketlike alcyonarians so big I could have disappeared inside of one.

Swimming along a ledge at 60 feet, I looked out into the blue and saw

We left the sharks behind, winding through canyons covered with corals.

a startling sight: a giant manta ray soaring in a blissful subsea acrobatic show, executing wide back rolls and elegant wing dips. Slipping down to 80 feet, I finned into a cavern and looked up through a hole in the roof just in time to see a giant humphead wrasse glide by.

The shallow areas were glittery water gardens, with little blue damselfishes and swarms of anthias fish sparkle-dancing on top of layers and layers of plate corals. There were mul-



ticolored hydroids and crinoids stuffed between the layers, like frosting on a cake.

THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED offered equally tempting delights. On the north coast of Komodo, not far from where Valerie and I stumbled into our ballet dive with the hawksbill turtle, we stopped at a site called "Cozy Corner" and dropped almost on top of a five-foot-long blacktip reef shark. Then two dogtooth tuna zipped in, one riding atop the other and putting on quite the show.

In the channel between Komodo



The dock at Komodo National Park points the way to paradise – some of Indonesia's 17,000 islands.



A toxic fire urchin's comeliness belies its bite.

and Gili Lawa Darat, we swam above a seafloor where garden eels swayed in the current. Reaching a mound of coral, we saw a whitetip reef shark zoom into the shallow area, pectoral fins down, and attack a fish. Within moments, ten sharks were circling us, checking us out, one of them charging boldly up to us then disappearing into the gloom.

We left the sharks behind, winding through a series of steep canyons covered top to bottom with corals so brilliant that swimming through them was like floating into a fantasyland where we could hover next to the walls in suspended animation.

Rounding a corner, we were picked up by the current sweeping through the channel. Side-by-side we soared through shallow water and various thermoclines. We flew over hill, dale, and fields of staghorn corals. The free ride was exhilaration in itself, but then we looked up to see a manta ray gliding with us. We flapped our own wings and joined in a moment of synchronicity, and balance, floating on the current.

"Indonesia is the kind of place where something unexpected is always about to happen," Valerie had told me earlier in the week. "It's a bubbling pot of beauty."

I considered those words near the end of our trip, when I worked up the courage, finally, to tackle making dinner for 12. Three Indonesian crew members helped me in the galley, someone mixed drinks, and someone else put on a CD of old rock and roll. Soon everyone was dancing as (You Ain't Nothin' But a) "Hound Dog" blared through the cabin. The Indonesians helped me invent new steps as we twirled our knives and peeled and diced vegetables at the sink.

We toasted the manta rays. We toasted the great diving. We toasted our good fortune.

On the galley stove, the pot was soon bubbling. And the unexpected presented itself – our culinary creation was a big, beautiful surprise. Just like Indonesia. ♪