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#### A) North of Labuan Bajo

North of Labuan Bajo but outside of the Komodo National Park are three islands which are also good diving and snorkelling spots. This whole area is easily reached on day trips starting from Labuan Bajo.

**1. Sabolon kecil:** This is a great dive site where you swim out to a seamount which tops at about 22 meters. While crossing the sand area between the slope and the sea mount look out for barracudas, large groups of batfishes and sharks. On the sand there is a colony of garden eels and the seamount is very nicely covered with sea fans and corals. On this site I always want to stay longer on the sea mount, but my dive computer tells me to swim back over to the main reef slope... Nice area with corals on top to make your safety stop.

**2. Sabolon besar:** This dive site is mainly used for check-out dives and refresher courses on the sandy area in the southeast. If you like macro you can also hunt around for small critters on the sand and in the coral reef nearby.

**3. Seraya kecil:** This island lies only about 8 kilometres from Labuan Bajo and is a popular snorkelling spot. The dive site is quite nice, especially if you go to the small seamount on 30m which lies in the channel. You can also spend the whole dive in shallow water among the corals.

## **B) Central Komodo National Park (islands east of Komodo and North of Rinca)**

In the center of the Komodo National Park is a group of very nice dive sites, two islands (Tatawa kecil and Tatawa besar), the sea mount Batu Bolong (Current City) and Karang Makassar (Manta point). They lie about an hour to an hour and a half by boat from Labuan Bajo so they are easily reached by day boats.

**4. Sebayur:** This dive site is a very good place to start getting used to the diving conditions in the Komodo National Park, because you can start on a gentle slope and then continue to a ridge where there is more current. Since I like small critters I also sometimes only dive on the slope and sandy area (15 to 17m) where there are several coral blocks with cleaner shrimps, leaffish, bubble coral shrimps, anemones with porcelain crabs and in the sandy area jawfish and sand eels. Schools of fusiliers often sweep by and groups of bumphead parrotfishes visit the area. Nearly always there are one or two cuttlefishes on the reef, laying eggs into the staghorn corals. This reef area continues towards a long underwater ridge, the sand continues, but deeper and the slope becomes a miniwall with lots of crannies. When the ridge ends there is often some current, large schools of redtooth triggerfishes gather and jacks come by hunting.

**5. Tatawa besar:** This is the larger island of the two (besar = big / kecil = small). The best way to dive is to drift with the current along the northeastern side and end up on the corner for the safety stop. You can tell from the coral cover that there can be quite a lot of current here, everything is hugging the ground. Look to the deep, there are always large groupers and sweetlips, often sharks and groups of jacks. Towards the corner the coral get bigger and lots of angelfishes, butterflyfishes flit around. Groups of batfish and sweetlips gather to get cleaned and sometimes you see a turtle or a group of bumphead parrot fishes.

**6. Tatawa kecil:** This is a small rocky island lying in a north-south direction so there is always some currents on the longer sides of the island. There are a series of very large boulders and rocks to the west, all covered with Orange Cup Corals (*Tubastrea coccinea*). Then from about 17 to 20 meters a slope begins. Among the boulders a lot of fish gather, some hidden in between or under the huge boulders, batfishes, snappers, sweetlips, the shy barramundi cod, more eels and sharks. Over the slope huge groups of grey snappers (*Macolor niger*) and humpback snappers (*Lutjanus gibbus*) gather and jacks, trevallies and tunas hunt here. A great dive site, but mostly it is dived in slack tide and even then you might have to change directions because of the currents against you. On the top there is some recent damage, probably from dynamite fishing which is forbidden in Indonesia.

**7. Current City (Batu Bolong):** This is a large sea mount with only a few rocks emerging above the surface. You always dive in the current shadow, so depending on the current you dive either the northern or southern side while the other side is inaccessible. If the currents are strong the area where you can dive gets smaller and smaller since the water presses in from the east and west. Look up to the surface and you will see the disturbance of the current, whirls and eddies forming two bands like rivers to the right and left of the rock.

On this dive site it is very important to turn back when your dive guide does and swim relatively close to the ground. On one of my dives one of our group overtook the dive guide, got too close to the edge and got sucked down from 27 to 48 meter while going head over heels in the whirl. He lost one fin and the other was ripped badly at the strap. His BCD was nearly lifted off his body (!) by the current and he surfaced out in the blue. There was no way we could (or wanted!) to follow him, we lost sight of him immediately. Only on very rare occasions when the slack tide is very pronounced (when the tide turns and there no appreciable tidal current flows) you can swim all the way around the rock - actually in the many dives I have done here I have done it twice!

**The North side:** This side of Batu Bolong is wider than the southern part. On the eastern side there are several steep rocks jutting nearly to the surface with canyons between. This area can only be reached during slack tide, most times you have to turn back before you can see all the rocks, because fierce currents start to tug at you. On the western side there is a long slope, but again there is a point where you have to turn back because the currents are too strong. Between lies a fantastic reef area with thousands of fish schooling around you – damselfishes, surgeonfishes, redtooth triggerfishes and anthias. In the current swept areas on both sides you often see mackerels, trevallies, large tunas and rainbow runners. White tip reef sharks and Napoleon wrasses are seen in the deeper areas and there is always a large group of sweetlips getting cleaned on the upper east side.

**The South side:** This area is smaller than the north side and with currents pressing in from both sides and several dive groups it sometimes can get a bit crowded. I always see several large turtles here, resting in the deeper parts and occasionally swimming up to the surface for air. The upper part here is especially nice with large clouds of damselfish, colorful angelfishes and anthias and hunting jacks and trevallies.

**8. Karang Makassar (Manta Point):** Karang means “reef” in Bahasa Indonesia, but actually this is more like a long area of gravel and broken coral pieces with small coral blocks. You dive with the current, preferably from north to south, so you end up in the nice coral reef lying in the south. This is not a deep dive, just about 15 to 17m, but the loose gravel makes it difficult to stop anywhere for longer. I prefer to dive here rather a bit overweighed, so I easily go to ground if I see a manta. So basically you just go with the current and look out for manta rays, either close to some of the coral blocks (getting cleaned) or up at the surface (feeding). Of course there are also other animals living here – sharks, eagle rays, large thorny ray (*Urogymnus asperrimus*), but also small fish like special dartfishes, gobies, flasher wrasses and more eels.

**9. Mawan:** This dive site is good for a second or third dive, because the good stuff is found between 15 and 3 meters. It is amazing how diverse coral cover can be in a small area. First you dive on very ground hugging corals and leaflike sponges, obviously an area where there is often a strong current. Then you continue to an area of mixed corals and white sand, five minutes later it changes to an area covered entirely with a certain type of bubble corals (*Euphyllia* sp.) and soft corals. Then a beautiful reef starts with anemones and anemone fishes everywhere.

**10. Siaba kecil:** This dive site usually has a lot of strong current, since it lies in a channel between two islands. You best dive north to south in a fast drift dive, starting on a steep slope with ridges, funnels and channels. Everything seems to be smoothed down by the currents, coral cover is low and gravel shows between. To slow down you shelter in the overhangs and behind the outcrops – look out, sometimes there are also sharks hiding here. Beautiful sea fans grow under the overhangs, but usually you don't have time to linger, because the current sweeps you on. I remember several dives where I couldn't shoot a single photo, because the ride was so wild, but once I actually had no current at all and had to fin the whole distance – a new experience! Once you reach the corner where there is a field with gravel and sand the coral cover changes, there are larger blocks and sponges. You finish the dive on a huge field of staghorn corals. Every time I dived here I saw at least one turtle, sometimes more. Approach them slowly and you might see how they feed on sponges, when they do that they are not shy at all and don't flee from the divers.

**11. Siaba besar:** You start the dive in the north and drift along beautiful corals, gorgonian sea fans, black coral bushes and sponges. The dive ends in a coral garden where you can also find Mandarin fishes (*Synchiropus splendidus*). They live under and in between the branches of staghorn corals and during the day they are very well hidden. But around 5 o'clock (dusk) they start to forage among the corals and it is more easy to find them. When it gets darker you might also see their courtship dance where the male (larger) displays his dorsal fins to attract the female. Then they rise together from their lair, side by side, and head for open water to release spawn and eggs.

**12. Pengah (Tengah):** This rocky island lies north of Rinca island, relatively close to the narrow bay leading to the ranger station there. Underwater one corner of the island has a plateau covered with hard corals, the other corner is a steep wall with rocks jutting out. Depending on the current you either dive the northern or southern side. The wall with the rocks is really very colorful, with sea fans, special blue tunicates and covered with many feather stars. Actually this type of covering is similar to what you find more south where the water temperatures are lower. The current here can be very strong at times and you are lucky if you can round the corner and don't have to turn back. The plateau has nice staghorn corals and table corals and sometimes large groups of bumphead parrotfishes.

**13. Wainilu:** On my fifth trip to the Komodos I didn't feel like going on land to see the Komodo dragons at the Rinca Park station, so I went diving in Wainilu. First it didn't look very promising - lots of dead corals, sand and rubble and low visibility, but then we started to discover things - nudibranchs, some of them only a centimeter long, three types of mantis shrimps, banded pipefishes and to top it off several Mandarin dragonets hiding under the large black sea urchins! So this is more like a muck dive where you take your time, look under corals and among the rubble and discover hidden critters.

**14. One-Tree (Chinese mound)** lies in the north of Rinca and the coral cover is similar to other northern dive sites. This is a small island with one mangrove tree growing on top. You dive on a slope with overhangs and small caves and bowls. We saw up to seven Napoleon wrasses together and also two sharks. There were a lot of angelfishes around and under the overhangs were several of their colorful juveniles.

**15. Batu Tiga (three rocks)** lies in the Linta strait and the currents can be quite fierce, so it is not always possible to dive here. This is a very nice dive on three underwater rocks and terraces. Several Napoleon wrasses accompanied us on our dive. We saw three blacktip reef sharks and really large groupers as well as bumphead parrotfishes.

**16. Pink beach (Pantai Mera):** This dive site lies very close to the Komodo ranger station and many boats come here for snorkelling because the beach has a special pink color from red coral fragments mixed with white sand. It is a slope with a sandy bottom. The water temperature is already lower, sometimes down to 25 degrees and you also find some of the animals which normally live in the south like the small yellow sea cucumbers and lots of feather stars. Look around the rocks and under the corals, there are frogfishes and leaffishes and several cleaning stations. A nice dive to do after you have visited the dragons or for a **night dive**, especially since you can find Mandarin fishes in the shallow part.

### **C) Northeast Komodo island**

The dive site on north Komodo and Banta are some of the best, but also really not for beginners! The currents here are very strong and unpredictable, because the Indonesian throughflow hits the islands straight on from the North, then either sweeps east and west along the islands or falls (downcurrent) or rises (upcurrent). Depending on the tides the current also shifts and comes from the South, but generally less strong.

Dives have to be planned, so you hit a certain dive site on rising tide, falling tide or slack tide. This makes for shifting currents and eddies but also attracts large fish in quantity! The procedure how to dive here (and some Banta dive sites) is as follows – these are underwater mounds and rocks just barely reaching the surface, so the important thing is to hit the rock when you descend and not get swept by with the currents and miss it. Sometimes you even have to hit the rock exactly at a certain more sheltered place to dive a certain dive profile! The trick is to jump upcurrent from the rock, jump in fast and as a group, then submerge immediately so the surface currents can't sweep you away, then descend as fast as you can until you reach the rock, so the current doesn't sweep you past, then stay put until the whole group gathers. Then you might have to swim for part of the dive against the current so you can reach a particular area or you might hit eddies and whirls where the current hits and rebounds from the sides of the rock. To surface you have to swim out from the shelter and might hit down currents, so always start to surface when you still have enough air and that's 70bars and not 50!! That is why these dive sites are not for beginners!!!

**17. Toko-Toko:** This is a small rocky island which lies just outside of the Komodo National Park, although close to Gili Lawa Laut. Lying exposed fully to the Indonesian Throughflow coming from the north, currents are usually very strong and also bring a lot of pelagic fish, but there is also a large plateau with nice table corals and hard corals. (2013 – I heard part of the plateau is damaged)

**18. Castle rock (Batu Toko-Toko):** This is an underwater mound (top 6-7m) and one of the best places is a long flat plateau on 20m which then starts to slope down. There are several large coral blocks and there you just stay (preferably with the current coming against you and with a reef hook ready) and wait for the sharks. We had at a time from 10 to 20 white tip reef sharks and a few greys cruising by, jacks, trevallies and dog tooth tuna among them, then a huge school of blue-black fusiliers – just great!! If the sharks are not here, they are also sometimes on one or the other side, but then more scattered and swimming in the blue water. You can also see Napoleon wrasses, midnight snappers and sometimes barracudas. There is a hollow at about 15m where sometimes huge schools of mackerels, doctor fishes and jacks are gathering, rising in a long band, forming whirls and walls. Just beautiful! At this place you might even see dolphins underwater, if you are very lucky. To make your safety stop you go back to the main pyramid shaped rock where depending on the direction of the current you hide in the current shadow and then surface (with enough air - 70bars - downcurrents possible!) from there.

**19. Cristal rock (Batu Gili Lawa Laut):** This is a rock that is submerged at high tide. The trick is to stay at a place where there is some current so you can see big fish, but not so much current, that you must hold on for dear life. On one side of the rock there is a small plateau where you can easily descend and ascend with broken corals (used to be a nice area with staghorn corals and table corals), only that is not always accessible due to the currents. Further down (ca. 15 to 22m) there is a small valley with several huge coral blocks, where a large group of yellow Oriental sweetlips and a pair of barramundi cods reside. If there is a lot of current this is the place for jacks and trevallies and large schools of fusiliers and sometimes sharks! On one of our dives an eagle ray stayed with us very close, then lazily flickered the fins just a bit and was off into the blue. We saw Napoleon wrasses, large groupers and mackerels and we even saw a few pygmy seahorses living on Muricella sea fans - they were also holding on with their tiny tails because of the current!

**20. Lighthouse:** On the northeastern point of Gili Lawa Laut, just below the lighthouse lies a nice protected area for diving, a gentle slope covered with beautiful blocks of table corals and other hard corals mixed with black coral bushes and soft coral and white sand. Here on the sand or under the large table corals there are several sharks sleeping, approach them slowly and they will stay put for a good look. A great dive site for a third, shallower dive.

**21. Cauldron Passage (Gili Lawa Laut Passage):** There are two narrow passages cut through the Lawa Laut islands and especially the Cauldron Passage in the north should only be dived by divers who know how to manage currents, because they sweep you through at a very fast pace and once you have started the dive you can't stop! There is a part where you have to go from about 25 meters up to 14 meters with your dive computer going crazy and then down again to about 22 meters into a large sand bowl – the cauldron. Most times you can then go along the right edge where there are some nice coral formations, but sometimes you have to cross the sand depression and go to the left. This can be very difficult because on some stretches you might be swimming against the current and there is nothing you can hold on to in the sand. On left side there are some canyons and you finish the dive on a nice coral reef. This dive site can also be dived during slack tide and in reverse direction and then is not such a wild ride.

**22. Golden Passage (Gili Lawa Darat Passage):** Diving through this passage is a bit less wild, more like a fast drift dive but you have to be careful not to get too close to the southern edge where the currents can sweep you down and out. The ground here is covered with gravel and small reef patches. A good place for barracudas, also sometimes mantas and eagle rays. If you dive west to east you end up in a very nice coral area with schools of fish, jacks and trevallies and coral boulders covered with glass fish.

