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WAKATOBI

SETTING THE STANDARD

➤ AS THE WORLD BECOMES INCREASINGLY SMALL AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL BECOMES MORE AFFORDABLE, IT'S HARDER TO FIND REMOTE AND UNSPOILED REEFS. DIVING PIONEERS SUCH AS COUSTEAU WOULD HAVE SEEN REEFS LIKE THESE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD'S TROPICS, BUT TODAY LIVEBOARDS ARE OFTEN THE ONLY WAY TO REACH THESE PRISTINE LOCATIONS. BUT THERE REMAIN A COUPLE OF OASIS DOTTED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD'S OCEANS WHERE YOU CAN SLEEP WITHOUT ROCKING, WANDER DESERTED BEACHES AND DIVE TO YOUR HEART'S CONTENT ON STUNNING LOCAL REEFS FROM DAILY BOAT EXCURSIONS. WAKATOBI IS ONE SUCH OASIS.

Due to its location in the centre of the Indonesian archipelago, Wakatobi's reefs are among the most diverse in the world. Local environmental conditions dictate the composition of corals, both hard and soft, on any reef. Wakatobi is blessed with nutrient-rich waters that favour brightly coloured soft corals, whip corals and gorgonians over hard corals. Hard corals are limited to the shallows, creating vivid reefscapes from the surface right down to the depths.

From small beginnings in 1996 with a capacity of 12 guests and a horrendous multi-day journey from Bali, the resort now accommodates 50 guests with delicious international cuisine. The resort now has a private airstrip which reduced the trip to a two-hour direct flight, a spa for pampering, whilst still maintaining the relaxed feel and excellent diving for which it became renowned. The resort was the dream of Lorenz Mader, who travelled the region in search of stunning reefs with world-class diving and topside

landscapes to match. He found this in the Tukang Besi Islands in southeast Sulawesi, also known as the Wakatobi region. The unusual name comes from the first two letters of the main islands in the chain: Wangi Wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia and Binongko. The resort is on the small island of Onemobaa just off Tomia towards the end of the chain.

Home Sweet Home

The house reef beyond the reef flat is world-renowned and where I spent many hours pottering around looking for bizarre, flamboyant and cryptic creatures. The reef flat is also a great dive on its own, and where I've seen creatures such as seahorse, blue-ringed octopus, snake eels and unusual nudibranchs. At high tide it's easy to pop over the reef crest directly onto the house reef. There are two gullies in the reef wall which enable you to shelter from current or simply use as visual cues so you don't travel too far along the wall. The house reef is a macro photography heaven. All manner of crustaceans and small reef fish exploit every available niche. Gorgonian corals

abound with Denise's and Bargibant's pygmy seahorses, whilst the wall harbours their free-living cousins Severn's and Pontoh's pygmies.

It is only when you spend some time in one spot that you begin to appreciate the full extent of the species diversity of these reefs. One evening at dusk, whilst diving just below the jetty bar, a movement on the rubble caught my eye. It was the beginning of the evening show for two small dragonets, which were following each other around in preparation for their mating display. At dusk the pair began to move off the bottom and swam together into the water column, reaching around 50cm from the reef, before releasing their gametes into the water and quickly returned to safety on the rubble. I was surprised to see the larger of the two, the male, swim away to court and mate with another two females before retiring, exhausted by 6pm.

The Bigger Boys! Large reef creatures aren't as common as some places outside



Main: A pink anemonefish seeks protection from the stinging tentacles of its host

Left: The recently described Pontoh's pygmy seahorse is found quite commonly on the reefs around Wakatobi resort

Below: Halimeda ghost pipefish are generally very rare but can be seen more frequently on Wakatobi's reefs

Left to right: A blue spotted grouper waiting for a fish to ambush; A little blenny hiding away from predators; A stunning little soft coral cowrie found on the house reef; Exploring the stunning and vibrant reefs; A Spanish dancer nudibranch with an imperial shrimp hitchhiker; Wakatobi's reefs are a kaleidoscope of colour loaded with soft corals and gorgonians

Below: Green turtles are commonly seen on the House Reef; The red morph of an unusual crab that lives on nocturnal crinoids



“NIGHT DIVES ON THE HOUSE REEF ARE TRULY EXCELLENT... THE REEF SUDDENLY BECOMES ALIVE”

of Asia, but turtles are often seen and schooling snappers, bumphead parrotfish and big eye trevally are regulars at several sites. During my stay an unexpected visitor was a small saltwater crocodile seen sitting on the beach at night and passing by the sunset jetty bar. I didn't see it myself but saw pictures, and

thankfully it looked only about five feet long! This was the first of its kind seen in the area – even some of the village elders had never seen one. Other big animal encounters I've had at Wakatobi include swimming with pilot whales and spinner dolphins on the trip out to Blade Reef. They were kind of skittish, but even catching a glimpse of these magnificent cetaceans underwater is an incredible experience.

Nocturnal Pursuits The house reef night dives are excellent and actually differ from the night dives at local sites offered

by boat. Huge Spanish dancers are common, along with large imperial shrimps *Periclimenes imperator* often found in pairs hitching a ride on the nudibranchs. By night the reef suddenly becomes alive with small crabs that cover themselves with stinging hydroids and parts of soft corals. I also discovered another fruitful place for searching out little crustaceans – in the base of feather stars (also known as crinoids). Squat lobsters and crinoid shrimp frequently inhabit these echinoderms but on the house reef I found an unusual spikey crab in both black and red morphs. When I

Conservation As a marine biologist I'm always keen to hear how dive operators are acting to minimise their impact on the local environment. Wakatobi's founder Lorenz Mader has been extremely proactive in protecting the area's reefs and this is evident when diving. Working with the local community, which is often key in creating successful schemes, he has safeguarded 20 kilometres of reef in Marine Protected Areas. These areas are not fished and therefore have reduced anchor damage; the resort ties boats to permanent moorings to prevent its own boats from causing unnecessary damage. Hopefully these efforts can provide a template for other resorts to reduce their own impact on the reefs.

Lamanggau The resort shares the island with a small village called Lamanggau, which is an easy half hour walk. Many of the resort staff live in the village with their families and 'commute' to work each morning. A village visit is offered as a tour by boat on the last, de-gas, day of your stay but can equally be visited if you decide to take an afternoon off diving. Some of the traditional wooden homes are now being replaced with brick structures, but there are also several homes on stilts over the water. The village is well worth a visit.

went to show one of the dive guides, Yann one of these, I was shocked to find a completely different species of crab with a smooth, cream-coloured body and long arms. Neither species were in any books!

Maya's Critters Most dives in the area are steeply sloping reefs or walls, all covered in dense soft coral growth and enormous gorgonian seafans. One notable exception is Teluk Maya, which is an inlet of the reef wall with a sandy bay about the size of a football pitch. The protection from currents in this bay allows a different set of creatures to flourish. They're mostly muck critters such as ghost pipefish, pegasus seamoths, solar powered nudibranch *Phyllodesmuim longicirrum*, and frogfish. This site also hosts newly-discovered Pontoh's pygmy seahorses living in halimeda algae as well as *Kyonemichthys rumengani*. We named this latter animal the pygmy pipedragon since at the time it was found here it was yet to receive a scientific name. This species is now commonly found on several of the resort's dive sites and with the eagle eyes of the Wakatobi guides, is likely to be a regular in dive briefings.

Between Dives Accommodation is in private bungalows equipped with airconditioning, a private balcony, Internet access and a mini bar. The level of opulence escalates through four types of bungalow to the ultimate villas. These walled oases have between them an

infinity pool, 'love shack' and the best sunset views on the island – apart from the jetty bar that is! If you manage to drag yourself away from the luxury of your bungalow it must be either dive time or dinner time. Meals are served in a communal dining area with buffet-style international cuisine. Given the range and quality of the food it's easy to forget how far you are away from civilisation!

As well as the land based operation, the resort also owns a magnificent liveaboard boat the *Pelagian*. *Pelagian's* guests fly in from Bali with resort guests but head straight off for seven to 10 day cruises around the greater Wakatobi region. The guests have their last evening meal of the trip in the resort so there's a chance





*A yellowtail damselfish
gets a going over
The slopes around
Wakatobi*

to see what the resort has to offer. On those evenings I've heard ecstatic reports of the *Pelagian's* itinerary and particularly the site Cheeky Beach on the island of Buton just off mainland Sulawesi. It's a true muck diving paradise where it's vital to move slowly and double check that small logs and leaves don't have eyes staring back at you! The pièce de résistance here is the blue-ringed octopuses seen virtually every trip.

Wakatobi was one of the pioneers in Indonesian diving, but has continued to evolve with the changing scuba industry and constantly upgrading its facilities. Reefs in the area, unlike many others in Indonesia, show no signs of damage, primarily

thanks to Lorenz's conservation ethos which he established early in the venture. The addition of the liveaboard *Pelagian* enables avid divers to reach even more remote reefs, Wakatobi is sure to remain a must-visit destination.

I would love to thank all the staff of Wakatobi Dive Resort individually, but unfortunately space doesn't allow. You know who you are! Special thanks must go to Lorenz, whose vision and commitment has created an amazing world-class resort in the most remote of locations as well as supporting studies, such as my own into the ecology of pygmy seahorses, to ensure the reefs are well looked after in the future.

