

> EXCITEMENT WAS BUILDING – IMAGES OF CORAL REEFS, CLEAR TURQUOISE WATER, MYRIADS OF TROPICAL FISH, SUMPTUOUS NUDIBRANCHS, AND EXOTIC MARINE LIFE CAME TO MIND AS WE APPROACHED BALI. NEXT MORNING WE TOOK A TWO HOUR PRIVATE CHARTER FLIGHT TO WAKATOBI DIVE RESORT IN REMOTE SOUTHEAST SULAWESI, INDONESIA. SOON AFTER LANDING WE WERE WHISKED ON BOARD MV PELAGIAN – IT WAS INTO SHORTS AND BARE FEET TO UNPACK DIVE GEAR, ASSEMBLE CAMERAS, AND CATCH UP WITH DIVE BUDDIES NOT SEEN SINCE LAST YEAR'S TRIP TO KOMODO.



# SULAWESI TENGGARA



: DR ROGER WELCH

- 1 Reef scorpionfish - Geoff Skennar  
 2 Blue spotted ray *Taeniura lymma* - Andrew Baldey  
 3 Randall's Shrimpgoby *Amblyeleotis randalli* - Roger Welch  
 4 Cleaner shrimp *Stenopus hispidus* - Roger Welch

We steamed north overnight, lulled to sleep by the gentle swish of the sea against the hull. Pre-dawn we reached our first site Neptune's Garden and splashed in at 0730. After months of preparation, there's nothing as invigorating as the first reef dive in these fabulous waters. The Garden delivered a taste of the diverse encounters ahead: hairy squat lobster *Galathea* sp., banded sea snake *Laticauda colubrina*, popcorn shrimp *Periclimenes kororensis*, pennant bannerfish *Heniochus chrysostomus*, crocodile fish *Cymbacephalus beauforti*; the first of the nudibranchs *Chromodoris diana*; and several magnificent tropical angelfish including the blue-faced *Pomacanthus xanthometopon* and the majestic angelfish *Pomacanthus navarchus*.

Our next two dives were the Inner and Outer Pinnacles with depths to 40m. We enjoyed leaf scorpionfish *Taenionotus triacanthus*, hairy orangutan crab *Achaeus japonicus*, carpet anemone and its anemone shrimp *Periclimenes brevicarpalis*, and on a different anemone: the translucent anemone shrimp *Periclimenes holthuisi*. In the still afternoon

waters the seafans were stunning, all colours of the rainbow. Bubble coral shrimp *Vir. philippiensis* fascinated us with its transparent body and wire-like purple lines. There were more nudibranchs *Chromodoris willani* and *Phyllidia varicosa*.

At Hoga Island tenders took us for a night dive in tangled cascading soft corals. The sponge crab *Dromidiopsis edwardsi* resembling a skull with legs with a thick overhanging sponge mantle, scuttled away from our lights. Crayfish were out strutting their stuff – painted rock lobster *Panulirus versicolor*, vivid orange reef lobster *Palinurella wieneckii*, and shy slipper lobster *Parribacis caledonicus*. Polyclad flatworms slithered about, one with fine gold dots, *Thysanozoon* sp., another the *Pseudobiceros bedfordi*. There's a blue and orange one that lights up like a neon light, *Pseudoceros bifurcus* (I've also seen it at North Solitary Islands off Woolli, New South Wales). At night the nudibranch *Phyllidiella pustulosa* appeared to have miniature boils on its surface and is probably highly toxic to the unwary. The surface confuses the auto focus setting on my camera and might also confuse would-be predators.

Day two brought calm seas, drizzly rain, and a double rainbow as we geared up for the first dive at the Metropolis. It was 30m plus vis gently sloping across coral gardens towards a deep dropoff. Whitetips *Triaenodon obesus* were seen deeper, with schooling chevronned barracuda *Sphyræna qenie*, spotted eagle ray *Aetobatus narinari* and schooling bluefin trevally *Caranx melampygus*. A feature of *Pelagian* diving is you never know quite what you'll encounter, and right there amongst the corals sat a large

scorpionfish blended with the coral, consuming passing prey with lightning fast speed. That night was beautiful and still with phosphorescence in the water, and the dive delivered a parade of new life, particularly boxer shrimp, Saron (sp) shrimp, hinge beak shrimp *Rhynchocinetes reticulatus*, even a 5mm long *Periclimenes soror* on the underside of a starfish.

Overnight we moved on to Gone with the Wind and Escape, both rich habitats where for the first time we saw



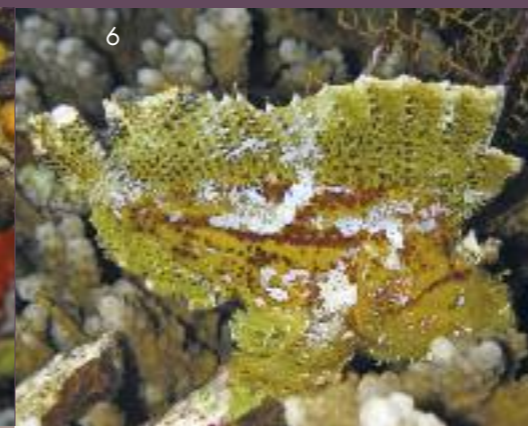
green nudibranch *Phyllidia elegans*. At that moment a school of brightly coloured rainbow runner *Elagatis bipinnulata* raced by. Our sharp-eyed Japanese dive guide Kaori-san pointed out the devil scorpionfish *Scorpaenopsis diabolus* which blended perfectly with the coral, and the orange *Amphiprion sandaracinos*.

Off Kanpenamne, we dived Tumbleweed Passage, a value-for-money long drift with the current expertly judged by our guides. *Solenostomus cyanopterus* the well camouflaged robust ghost pipefish was found in leafy debris, the first I'd seen. The Willans chromodoris with white flecked rhinophores is one of the more distinctive Wakatobi nudibranchs. We finished with an exquisite garden of pastel *Sarcophyton* soft corals.

The afternoon dive was at North East Kapota Atoll, an enclave of purple hard and soft corals. A newly-discovered nudibranch with blue toenails proved to be a regrowing starfish leg! There were ghost pipefish, yellow shrimp gobi *Cryptocentrus cinctus*, and a lovely *Neopetrolisthes* sp. porcelain crab hiding out at the margin of its host anemone. Two motionless devil

yellowbared jawfish *Opistognathus* carrying eggs in its mouth. Perhaps the most photogenic of the Sulawesi nudibranchs is the red and green dusky nembrotha *Nembrotha kebaryana*. A close second for vivid colours were a pair of juvenile *Pentacta lutea* sea cucumbers in bright yellow; juvenile emperor angelfish *Pomacanthus imperator* attracted much interest. A totally new experience was the flame fire clam *Ctenoides ales*, with its electric current arcing along the mantle.

Late afternoon we did a muck dive at Cheeky Beach, named for the antics of the local boys in their wooden dugout canoes. The best muck dives are close to the shore where there's freshwater runoff. A muck dive skeptic, I was blown away by the treasure trove of the weird and



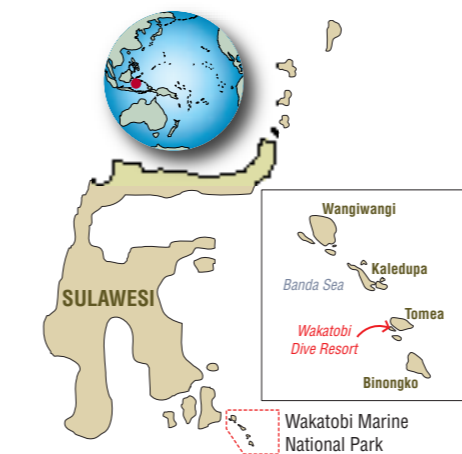
wonderful. My first seahorse, the thorny seahorse *Hippocampus hystrix*! The place crawled with fire urchins, which hosted *Periclimenes colemani*. Mantis shrimp *Odontodactylus scyllarus* reared up aggressively with claws ready to strike at the camera lens. Spiny devilfish *Inimicur didactylus* laid camouflaged in the mud with the fearsome looking snake eel *Ophichthus polyophthalmus* and its cousin the Napoleon eel. Almost invisible in the brackish debris was the angular bristle-tailed filefish *Acreichthys tomentosus*.

Magic Pier is a must-do night dive; expect to be intimidated by what you see, and be careful not to touch anything! Early evening the mandarin fish *Pterosynchiropus splendidus* rise from their rocky lairs in convoluted mating rituals. Dead fish parts lie around, even a severed marlin head with a ghoulish looking large eye surveying the carnage. Peacock flounders *Bothus* sp. slithered along, striped eel catfish *Plotosus lineatus* writhed in a mass. Moray eels – the giant *Gymnothorax javanicus*, the peppered *Gymnothorax pictus*, and fimbriated *Gymnothorax fimbriatus* – exercised their jaws. The ringed pipefish *Doryrhamphus dactyliophorus* was exquisite, along with

ornate ghost pipefish; the black male and red female had made a home on a discarded pink bra. Our crusty old undertaker, the sponge crab, decided it was all too busy and lurched away on its ataxic sideward gait. A bazaar of the bizarre.

Next came two dives at the Fish Market Pinnacle with masses of varied large sponges, seafans, and corals. It was an extravagance of shape and colour. Tube sponges *Testudinaria*, and barrel sponges *Xestospongia*; even one ejecting a spume of smoke-like spawn. We encountered a banded sea snake with a suspicious bulge – signs of a good meal. Local corals included brain coral *Platygyria*, cabbage coral *Echinopora pacificus*, bubble coral *Pterogyra sinuosa*, green hard coral *Tubastraea micrantha*, and a coral with orange stalks *Tubastraea faulkneri*. This was the best site for finding pygmy seahorse; two types depending on the host seafan. The moricella fan in red had *Hippocampus bangibanti*; the echinogorga fan in yellow hosts *Hippocampus denisi* (see cover of Sport Diving magazine, issue 142). The knobby protrusions on their bodies have something to do with the ingestion of the host coral and may add to their defence and camouflage. Exquisite.

From here, we turned back to Wakatobi Bay for our final two days. Along the way, we did two dives at Waiti Ridge with still more goodies... giant frogfish in black phase *Antennarius commersoni*, a winged pipefish *Halicampus macrorhynchus*, bignosed unicorn fish *Naso vlamingii*. The coral gardens hid the ever-shy two-spine angelfish *Centropyge bispinosus*. Late afternoon we dived Magnifica, a lovely wall, one of our best. By the last day, we



- 1 Diane's chromodoris *Chromodoris diana* - Roger Welch
- 2 Hairy orangutan crab *Achaeus japonicus* - Roger Welch
- 3 Leaf Scorpion Fish *Taenianotus tricanthus* - Roger Welch
- 4 Large juvenile orbicular baifish *Platax orbicularis* - Geoff Skennar
- 5 Undulated moray *Gymnothorax undulatus* - Roger Welch
- 6 Leaf scorpionfish *Taenianotus tricanthus* - Andrew Baldey
- 7 Yellowbared jawfish *Opistognathidae* - Andrew Baldey
- 8 Humphead parrotfish *Bolbometopon muricatum* - Geoff Skennar
- 9 Blue toenailed nudibranch - Roger Welch





1 Hingebeak shrimp *Rhynchocinetes hiatti* - Roger Welch  
2 Juvenile surgeonfish *Acanthurus* sp. - Andrew Baldey

anchored near Wakatobi to enjoy dives at Roma and Kollo Soha Beach with new finds of leaf scorpionfish *Taenianotus tricanthus* in both yellow and pale pink. If you looked carefully you glimpsed the disjointed looking arrow head crab *Huenia heraldica* sometimes found in and around feather stars, of which there were several extremely colourful species. An odd one was a gray drummer *Kyphosus bigibbus* with a parasitic isopod (*Cymathoidae*) attached to its gill covers. At Roma we were tantalized with tang, brush tail *Zebrasoma scopas*, blue *Paracanthurus hepatus*, and sailfin *Zebrasoma xanthurum*. Tritan triggerfish *Balistoides veridescens* were muscling up pre-mating and warned us off; schools of prehistoric-looking crocodile needlefish *Tylosurus crocodilus* cruised past. After a busy last day in the water we'd hoped to do the unique new fluoro night dive offered by the resort. It's very popular, so book ahead.

After sundowner cocktails at the Jetty Bar and a spectacular tropical sunset our group had a sumptuous smorgasbord at Wakatobi Resort on our final night and compared notes with an international group who dived from the resort. We all had a fabulous time, a varied and busy dive program with many new and exciting finds, and were amazed by the fabulous marine life in the rich seas of Sulawesi. *Pelagian*, we'll be back!

#### Useful texts:

- *Indo-Pacific Coral Reef Field Guide*; Gerald R Allen and Roger Steene; Tropical Reef Research, 2002.
- *Reef Fish Identification Tropical Pacific*; Gerald R Allen, Roger Steene, Paul Numann and Ned DeLoach; Star Standard Industries Pty Ltd., 2003.

#### My Dive Travel Professional:

Allways Dive Expeditions, Melbourne, Australia.

**MV Pelagian** was built at the Batservice Verft A/S Shipyard in Mandal, Norway, as a world-ranging motor yacht. Her most recent and most extensive re-fit occurred in 2009. Construction was to Lloyd's +100A1 yacht and +LMC classification. Pelagian cruises at 9 knots and has a range of over 8,000 nautical miles. Onboard water-makers plus over 20 tons of tanked freshwater give unlimited water on board.



Measuring 35 metres (115 feet) overall in length, her beam is 7.5 metres (24 feet) and draft is 3.4 metres (11 feet). At 245 metric tons, she provides a secure base for aquatic exploration.

Pelagian is airconditioned throughout and the five cabins, ranging from Standard to the Master Suite, have private bathrooms. Pelagian's two custom-made 18ft rigid hull inflatable (RIB) dive tenders have double 60HP outboard engines, tank racks and secure stainless steel ladders for easy entry and exit. The tenders take divers directly to dive sites more accurately. Tanks are

quickly filled using whips from Pelagian so gear stays on the tenders.

Onboard facilities:

- Camera workshop & charging facilities
- Email access (not broadband)
- All ensuite cabins
- Large flatpanel TV and DVD player in the salon
- Extensive DVD collection
- Music CD's and book library
- Hot showers and fresh hot-dried towels on dive deck
- 24/7 coffee/tea/sodas
- All indoor areas airconditioned

- New upper deck shaded seating area
- Hot and cold running water throughout
- 3 Bauer K-14 compressors
- Nitrox Technologies@ NO2 system
- Standard 2-prong || 220v/50Hz electrical outlets
- Ample 110 volt adapters and power rails in the photo room
- Radar, GPS navigation system, depth sounder,

VHF radio, auto pilot

• Sat-Com communications, life rafts, beacons + a complete inventory of safety equipment.

Pelagian cruises through the islands of Tomia, Kaledupa, Binongko, Hoga, Wanci and Buton – offering both reefs and muck diving in one cruise.

Managed and operated by Wakatobi Dive Resort, Pelagian offers the same high standards of guest services as their land-based operations. The Wakatobi region offers towering pinnacles, steep walls, coral gardens, drift dives, caverns, caves, or mesmerizing muck diving.

**LINK>** [www.wakatobi.com](http://www.wakatobi.com)