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## EAST INDONESIA – WAKATOBI DIVE RESORT, SOUTHEAST SULAWESI

On the small island of Onemobaa in the South Sulawesi Sea, a luxurious eco resort overlooks one of the finest white sand beaches in the region. But as appealing as the surroundings are, it is what lies beneath the nearby waters that have earned Wakatobi Dive Resort world-wide recognition among diving and snorkeling enthusiasts, and the accolades of conservationists for the innovative conservation practices that were an integral cornerstone of the resort's founding.



Wakatobi is situated within the famed 'Coral Triangle,' an area between Indonesia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea that harbors the world's greatest coral reef bio-diversity. These waters are home to more than 500 species of reef building corals and in excess of 2,000 species of reef fish. The Wakatobi archipelago takes its name from a compilation of the first two letters of four major islands in the group—Wangi-wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia and Binongko. The reefs surrounding these islands have long been recognized as some of the finest in Indonesia, if not the world. In 2012 the area was designated a UNESCO Marine Biosphere Reserve.

Years before any such international recognition, or the founding of the Wakatobi National Park, the founders of Wakatobi Dive Resort realized the unique beauty of this then little-known destination, and also the importance of protecting this natural resource. Soon after locating the beachfront property that would become the resort, they began negotiations with local fishermen and villagers, which led to the creation of a conservation program that invested the community in continued health and protection of the

reefs. In exchange for the cessation of certain destructive fishing practices, and the recognition of certain portions of reef as no-take marine sanctuaries, the resort agreed use a portion of resort revenue to provide lease payments to area villagers.

From modest beginnings as a single long house-style lodge opened in 1996, the resort has now grown to include a collection of upscale garden and waterfront bungalows and villas, and additional amenities such as a beachfront restaurant and patio, and on-site spa. By combining local building materials and techniques with the modern principles of sustainable tropical architecture, the resort's guest facilities strike an ideal balance of modern luxury and harmony with local traditions and natural surroundings. One of the major milestones of the resort's growth was the completion of a private runway on the adjacent island of Tomia. Prior to that, because of the island's remote location, travel times from Bali took upwards of 24 hours via a combination of small aircraft, boat and land transport. Now, guests enjoy a 2.5-hour private charter flight from Denpasar International, followed by a short boat transfer around to the resort.



The resort's premier accommodations are the four Villas that are cloistered in greenery at the northern end of the beach, elevated on a small rocky rise that provides commanding views of the reef and the ocean beyond. Each villa offers immediate water access from private decks. The largest villa has a private pool and two full bedrooms, each with its own luxurious shower room. All bungalows overlook or are just steps away from the beach, and within a short walk through the landscaped grounds to the central facilities.

The setting is magnificent, and is a luxury beach escape even for those who do little more than dip their toes in the clear water, the primary focus at Wakatobi remains snorkeling and scuba diving. There are a plethora of dive sites off and around the resort that can be reached by the resort's fleet of custom-built dive boats, while one of the most famous and expansive sites of all, Wakatobi's storied House Reef, can be discovered right off the beach of the resort. Smaller taxi boats carry divers to more distant areas of the House Reef, which stretches some three miles in all, while custom 18-metre boats take small groups which means low impact diving, doubly so as Wakatobi is the only resort in the area. All dives are hosted by professional guides, typically in a ratio of one for each four divers or snorkelers. In addition to ensuring diver safety, they are available to assist in locating and interacting with the many rare and fragile species hidden within the coral growth.



There are more than 40 mapped dive sites to explore around the nearby islands, each fitted with a mooring buoy to eliminate anchor damage. Among the more spectacular are Blade, which is actually named after a series of rock outcrops that spring up from the seabed like serrated knives to create a dramatic underwater vista. Marine life is plentiful in the surrounding waters and the structures are overgrown in giant sea sponges, with vibrant red whip corals and sea fans wafting in the current. Flamboyant fish dart about and small colorful crinoids are perched around, creating abundant underwater photographic opportunities.

The site known as Magnifica seems to be aptly named due to the sheer magnificence and richness of the underwater flora and fauna it holds. Sites such as this are suitable for everyone from snorkelers to deep divers, as they begin just metres from the surface, and include slopes and walls that plunge propitiously to depths beyond 40 metres. Magnifica is covered in blooming table coral and swarmed with snapper, barracuda, and the odd amorous pairs of cuttlefish, as well as plenty of macro marine life too. Equally captivating is site known as The Zoo, which is an

absolute dream for those who love the smaller inhabitants of reefs. Some of these species include frogfish, ghost pipefish, mantis shrimp, leaf fish, hairy squat lobster, different species of pygmy seahorses and the rarer mushroom pipefish which, with its triangular head, looking a lot like a sub aqua viper.

Dedicated and ongoing effort goes into preserving this pristine paradise for the enjoyment of guests and generations to come. The owners of Wakatobi Dive Resort oversee the Collaborative Reef Conservation Program, which maintains the symbiotic partnership with neighboring communities for the future of this outstanding area. Over the years the agreement has been amicably maintained to ensure the conservation of this area with villages in the immediate vicinity and outlying areas. Locals in the villages have come to value the importance of protecting the house reef and the surrounding habitat; they have stopped fishing and now exercise more sustainable fishing practices.



The resort provides the local communities with economic incentives, such as employment, electricity and retainers to maintain the agreement. When originally established, the Collaborative Reef Conservation Program covered six kilometers of the House Reef and one next-door fishing village. Today it extends over twenty kilometers and includes all 17 communities in the surrounding area. This has been pivotal to the protection of unique and endangered species, such as Denise's pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus denise*), a recent scientific discovery. Unbelievably four of the seven known species were discovered near Wakatobi in the last ten years. At one and a half centimeters or less they are also able to adapt their colouring and physical appearance to more closely resemble their habitat. This tiny chameleon of the underwater world is very difficult to spot but once witnessed they are hard to forget.



Many guests choose to continue their Waaktobi adventure with a cruise aboard the Pelagian, one of the most luxurious diving liveaboards in the world. At 36 meters in length, but carrying a maximum of just ten guests, Pelagian has more the feel of a private yacht, with a warmly minimal décor and understated elegance. Though not obvious from the luxurious upgrades that now grace the interior and exterior, the vessel has a fascinating history as a Norwegian war vessel; it is equipped with bullet proof glass, although you are more likely to come across pods of breaching dolphins rather than marauding pirates. Pelagian cruises more distant portions of the Wakatobi archipelago, as well as the southern coast of Buton island, which is home to some of the finest shallow-water muck diving sites in the region.

Wakatobi really is paradise for lovers of luxurious wilderness and wonders of the natural world. Magical days of exploring the splendors of the underwater realm are followed by unforgettable sunsets, balmy nights, gourmet meals by the ocean, and contemplating another day of adventure in one of the world's great natural wonders. Wakatobi Dive Resort is an idyllic escape in an area of remote tropical utopia.

Learn more at [www.wakatobi.com](http://www.wakatobi.com)

Visit the blog Wakatobi Flow to read a series of articles about this destination.

*Photos Courtesy of Wakatobi Dive Resort, Didi Lotze, Walt Stearns, Richard Smith & Mark Snyder*

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