

Deep

WORDS BY
RICHARD SMITH

Joy

The pristine reefs of the Wakatobi archipelago in Indonesia teem with colourful marine life, and a stay at the dive resort offers easy encounters in the underwater world, even if one particular tiny creature takes some finding



A diver has a close encounter with a cuttlefish

Stirred by the sound of waves lapping on the beach outside and the excitement of diving on one of the world's most biodiverse coral reefs, my first morning at Wakatobi Dive Resort started ridiculously early. As if I was at home, I put the kettle on and made a cup of tea, but the shrill chirping of sunbirds told me **this wasn't London.**

I found a quiet spot at the end of the jetty, where the dawn chorus of insects was too far away to hear and so the only sound punctuating the silence was the occasional fish leaping for its life from the still waters.

I watched the sun's rays energise the reef beneath me, as I had my first taster of the remarkable underwater realm I would experience over the next 10 days in this remote utopia.

The road to paradise isn't always easy, but getting to the Wakatobi region of southeast Sulawesi in Indonesia was surprisingly so. I soon began to forget the 15 hour flight from London to Bali when a representative of the resort greeted me almost as soon as I disembarked the plane. He ushered me through passport control, baggage claim and customs, past the long-lines of holidaymakers, towards the check-in for a private plane transfer and the final leg of my journey.

For the next two and a half hours, I gazed out the window as we flew over countless coral atolls and pinnacles until we landed on the resort's little private airstrip. Prior to its construction a decade ago, this trip had taken several days of arduous travel.

Times have changed but, importantly, the reefs haven't, and I was able to have the same magical experience but with the promise of the maximum amount of time underwater during my 10-day adventure.

The pristine and remote Wakatobi archipelago stretches in a south-easterly direction from the tip of the Sulawesi mainland, starting at

PHOTO: LOTZE; STEVE MILLER, JAMES WATT



Clockwise from top: bird's-eye view of Wakatobi resort; a villa at Wakatobi; master cabin on Pelagian yacht; a school of anthias on the reef; amberjacks surround a diver at the site Teluk Maya



A dive boat anchored beside the reef

Wangi-Wangi, along to Kaledupa, Tomia and finally Binongko Island. The first two letters of each island create the acronym after which the area and resort get their names.

If you were to follow my path from England to this tiny speck in the Banda Sea, you might wonder why I'd bypassed so many other coral reef nations on the way. The answer is simply that this is the world's epicentre for marine biodiversity and there is no more relaxed and luxurious way to experience it.

WAKATOBI SITS AT THE HEART of the Coral Triangle, which is the name given to a roughly triangular area that includes the countries of Indonesia, Philippines, East Timor, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, that possess the planet's greatest marine biodiversity. The further you go from this coral triangle the fewer the number

of reef fishes, corals and invertebrates you find. Wakatobi boasts mind-bogglingly high species richness, accommodating almost 2,000 fish and 450 reef-building corals. On one dive site here you could easily encounter more species of fish than are found in the entire Caribbean.

My dive guide (known as a Dive Experience Manager) for the trip was Guja, whose enthusiasm was tangible even when he was underwater; Italians do tend to talk with their hands after all.

We immediately had one thing in common, which was a love of one of the smallest and most enigmatic of Wakatobi's residents, the pygmy seahorse. Now it might seem crazy to have a wish list of animals, every one of which is so diminutive it comfortably fits on a five pence piece, but these are by no means common creatures. Guja explained that finding three of the area's four pygmy species was a realistic goal, but the fourth, Severn's pygmy seahorse, was a much more elusive quarry indeed. We would need a great deal of luck and some eagle eyes on our side.

Our first dive was on the house reef, which is a coral wall that stretches for 4km in front of the resort. The reef can be accessed directly from shore or by 'taxi boat' whenever you like, but for the sake of orientation and ease it is usually dived from one of the large dive boats on the first day. Everything at Wakatobi is intended to make diving as relaxing as possible, so after the first dive your gear will always be set up and ready ➤

Pygmy seahorses

One of the highlights of a diving holiday at Wakatobi is the chance to see the world's smallest seahorses

Pygmy seahorses are a fascinating group of miniature seahorses. They measure just 1.4 – 2.7cm as adults, which equates to the diameter of a five to 50 pence piece, depending on the species. The group is relatively new to science, with six of the seven known species described in the first decade of the 21st century. Although they belong to the genus *Hippocampus*, along with all other seahorses, they have several adaptations for their small size, which distinguish them from their larger cousins.

Like all seahorses they share the reproductive quirk of male pregnancy. The female transfers her unfertilised eggs into the male's brood pouch, where they are fertilised and spend the next two weeks developing before emerging into the water.

Four species of pygmy seahorse are found at Wakatobi, which is one of the best places in the world to find these diminutive fishes.

Bargibant's - The first pygmy seahorse to be named was an accidental discovery in 1969, when a museum curator in New Caledonia gathered a gorgonian seafan for the museum's collection. Clinging to the seafan was a pair of these tiny pink, spotted seahorses.

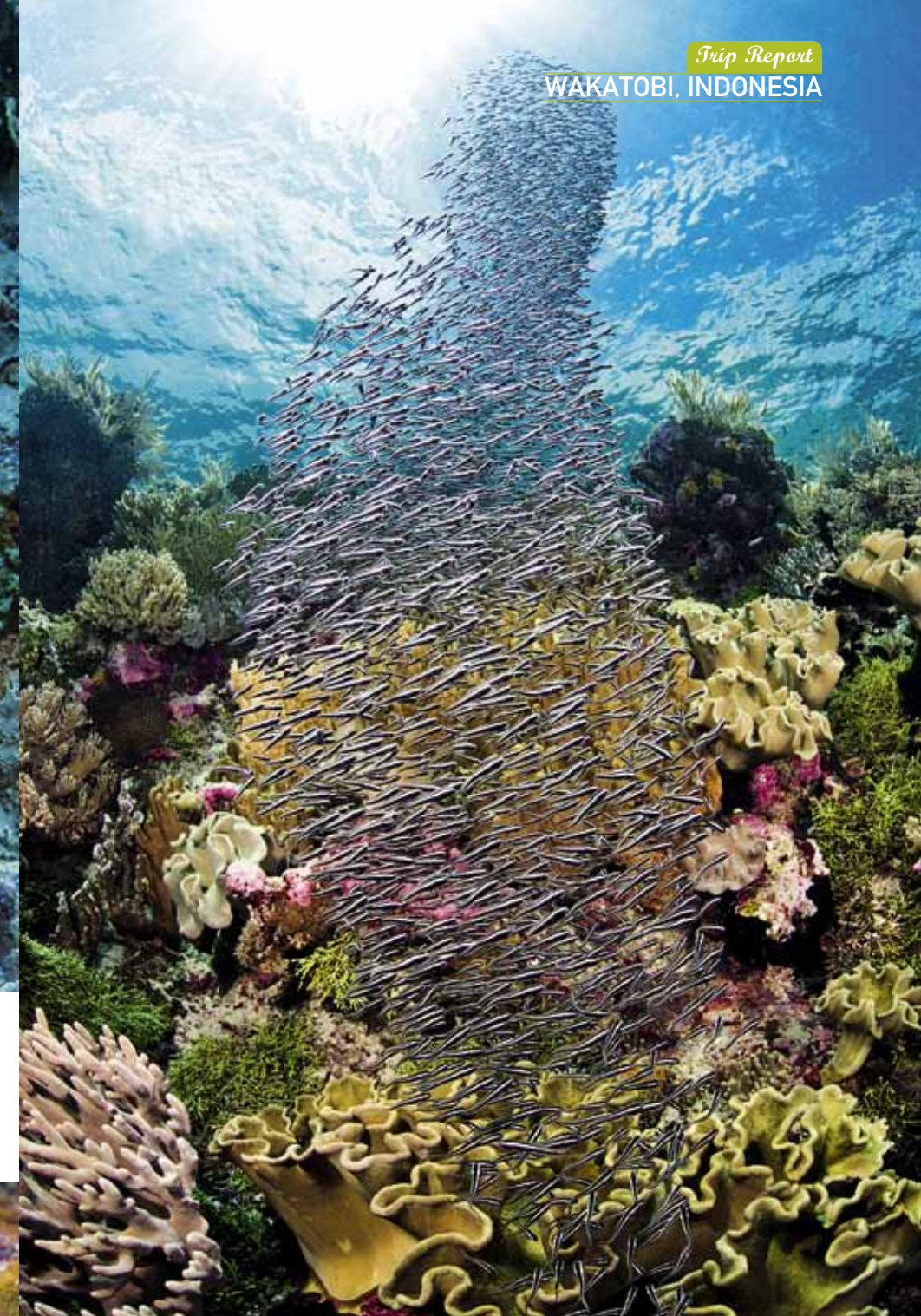
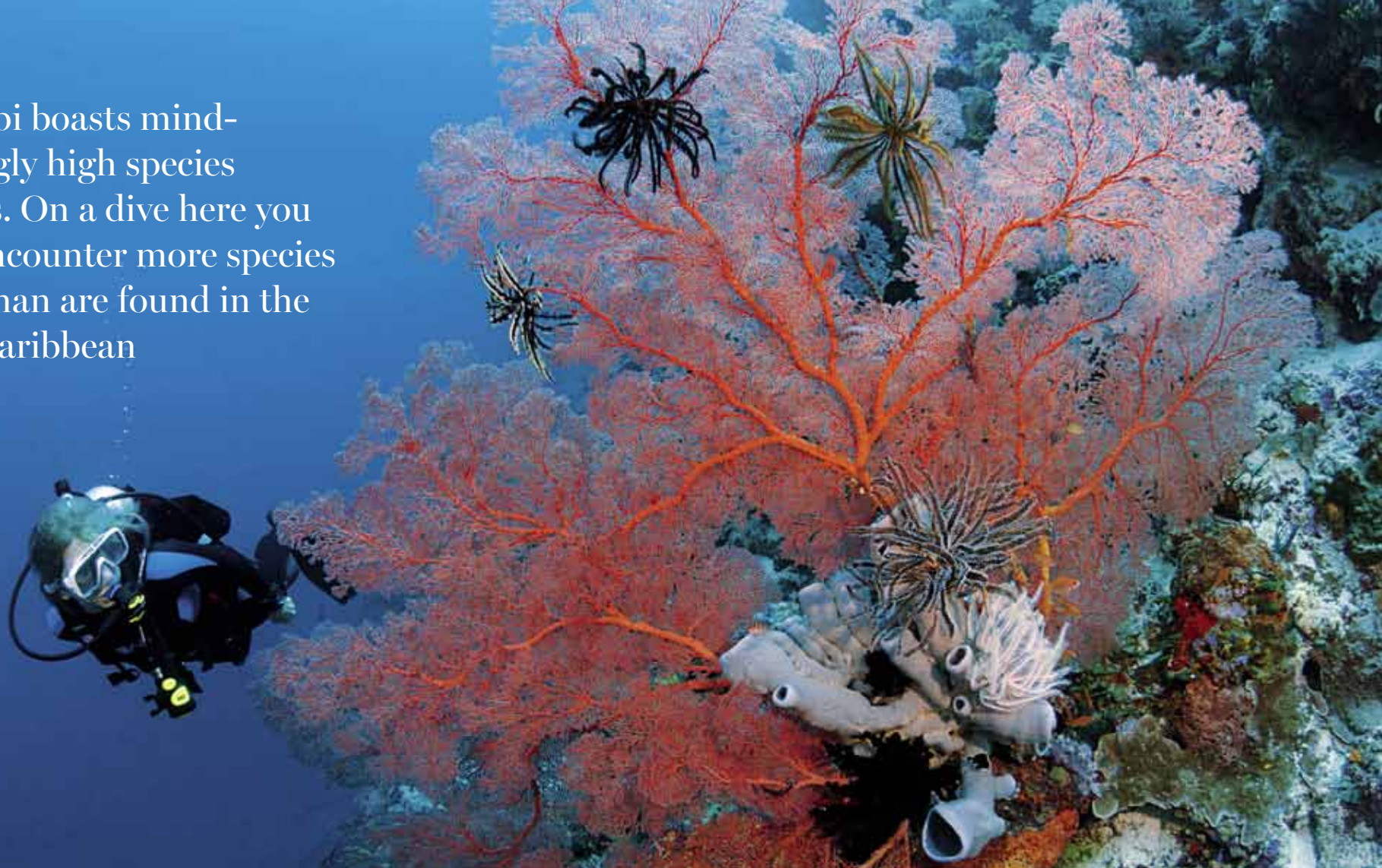
Denise's - For a long time, Denise's pygmy was thought to be a juvenile Bargibant's. In 2003 they were officially confirmed to be a distinct species. Both live exclusively on the surface of seafans, for which they have perfect camouflage.



Pontoh's - The predominantly white seahorse (left) often lives near clumps of certain kinds of algae, where its colour mimics dead patches. These fish were only scientifically described in 2008 and Wakatobi is certainly one of their global strongholds.

Severn's - Also described in 2008, this little brown seahorse is the hardest to find due to its colouration and lack of habitat specificity. There has been very little research done on most of the species of pygmy seahorses, and so their population status remains unknown.

Wakatobi boasts mind-bogglingly high species richness. On a dive here you could encounter more species of fish than are found in the entire Caribbean



to go, requiring minimal pre-dive adjustment. When the time came for the dive I simply stepped off the boat into the water where I joined Guja and the three other divers who would be my little buddy team for the trip.

On certain tides there can be quite strong currents on the house reef, but they just carry you along and their speed dictates the duration of your dive. A gentle current also brings out the polyps on the rainbow of soft corals that cover the wall, making for a real kaleidoscope of colour.

As I descended on that first dive, I passed turquoise vase sponges, bushes of crimson soft corals, verdant thickets of Halimeda algae, and a busy cluster of black and yellow sea squirts. The reef wasn't a world of complementary colour palettes from the pages of a fashion magazine, it was an assault on the senses and there wasn't a square inch of vacant space to be seen.

Pottering along the uneven wall full of overhangs and clefts, Guja pointed out many of the reef's interesting inhabitants. Several species of anemonefish, the classic Nemo of Disney fame, danced among the fronds of their tentacular homes as an inquisitive school of bigeye trevally, a kind of tuna, streamed past us. At one point, transfixed by the undulating colours and mutating skin textures of a cuttlefish, I sensed something overhead and saw a huge green turtle soar over me.

As we naturally moved into shallower water towards the end of the dive the life became ever more intense. At Wakatobi you can always stay in shallow water, since the coral growth

continues almost to the surface, and so the snorkelling is outstanding. The sunlight fuels so much growth in the 10m below the surface, there would be easily enough to keep you occupied for many hours.

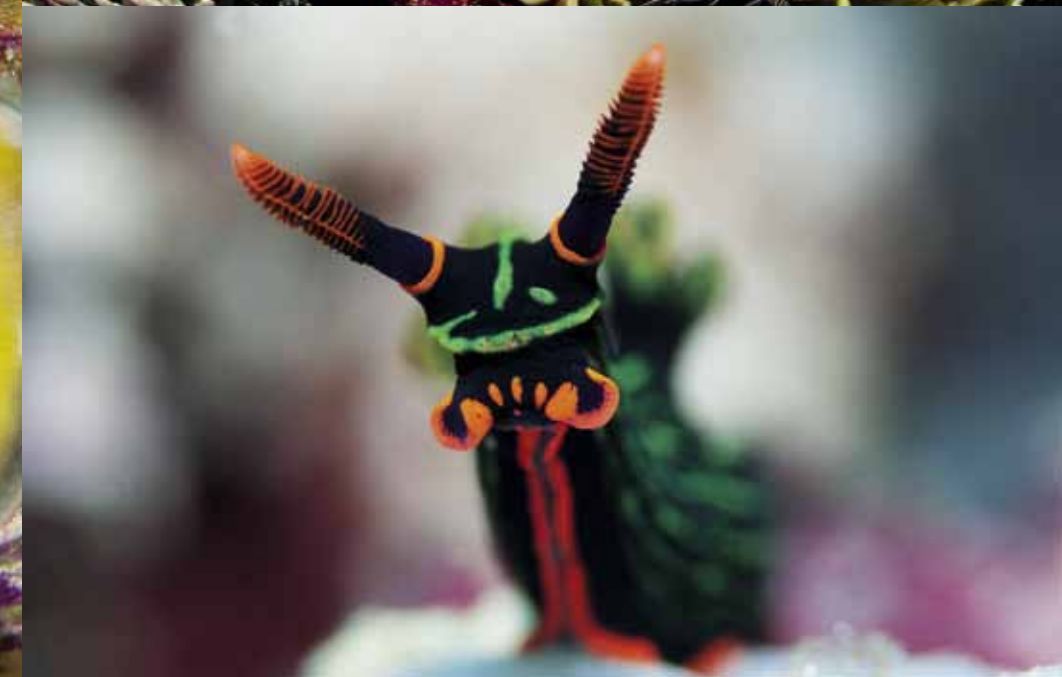
One aspect of Wakatobi Dive Resort that stands it apart from others in the area is the extremely high level of service, accommodation and food. My bungalow had a porch affording stunning views out across the flat tropical waters to the palm strewn islands in the distance. Cool breezes rolled in from the sea. The buffet-style international cuisine was delicious and served in an open-air dining room that overlooked the ocean. It's very easy to forget how remote Wakatobi actually is when you have such fresh food served daily, delivered from Bali by plane.

IT WAS TWO DAYS BEFORE the end of the trip and although we'd seen three species of pygmy seahorse, there was no news of the Severn's species that I so desperately wanted to see. Guja had asked the other guides to keep their eyes peeled for the 1.5cm long fish, but they'd had no success.

That evening Guja came running to my table at dinner with fantastic news: a pair of the miniature red, orange and brown seahorses had been spotted at a dive site called Kollo Soho. The next day was our last dive day but we were able to schedule a trip to the site.

Armed with just a mental map painted by one of the other guides, Guja took me almost directly to the little outcrop, just ➤

Clockwise from above: diver with sea fan at Lorenz's Delight; convict blennies at Teluk Maya; marine slugs are akin to the butterflies of the sea; a dotted back weaves in and out of the rich reef growth



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above an orange sponge to the left of a purple sea fan. There they were, the two tiny fish gripping onto hydroids with their tails and swaying in the current. If a minuscule seahorse doesn't already sound cute enough, the pug-like snout and big puppy dog eyes certainly seal the deal. The impossibly small male was visibly pregnant with a great swollen belly and both animals hopped from one frond to another, feeding on invisible crustaceans. After watching the couple for as long as I could, I eventually surfaced with an unquenchable grin that lasted until well after my return to England.

With the last remaining wilderness being inexorably encroached upon by man, it becomes increasingly hard to find remote places on the globe to dive. There is mobile phone signal in even the most far-flung areas and daily flights to locations that only a decade ago were considered extraordinarily remote. It is reassuring that, at least for now, some places do remain pristine and unsullied. This remote corner of southeast Sulawesi is most definitely one such place.

*Above: Severn's pygmy seahorse are exceedingly hard to find on the busy reef
Below: a view of the dive resort as seen from the water*



TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★★★★☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: A sample 10-night resort adventure booked through Wakatobi's guest relations staff costs approximately £3,556 per person, based on two-share in an Oceanfront bungalow. The trip includes round trip flights between Bali and Wakatobi, eight full days of diving, all meals and snacks. Wakatobi also provides early payment and extended stay reductions.

GETTING THERE: Entry to Indonesia is via Denpasar, Bali. From Bali, you take a charter flight (arranged by Wakatobi guest relations staff) to the resort's private airstrip. From there you are taken directly to the resort via a short boat ride. Round trip flights from UK to Denpasar, Bali average £800 with Singapore Airlines, £900 with Emirates, £950 with Cathay Pacific and £500 with Etihad Airways.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: Visitors must have a valid passport of six months past arrival date and at least one totally clear page for customs and immigration. There are USD \$35 visa fees for most nationalities collected upon entry, and an international departure tax of 150,000 Indonesian rupiah payable on exit. Check permits and costs with your local Indonesian embassy or consulate before travel.

TIPS & WARNINGS: A high-factor sunscreen is essential, and insect repellent for use during any rainy periods. There are no malaria or dengue risks. If you're planning a trip to other parts of Indonesia, please consult a good traveller's health resource for the latest information on medicine recommendations.

The nearest recompression chamber is in Bali and requires a daytime sea-level flight. In case of a serious medical incident, the resort has access to a medical evacuation plane service in Bali and has worked out clearly defined procedures.

All rooms are fitted with three-square-pin sockets (UK standard) and the electricity is 220v 50 cycles. Wakatobi provides ample plug socket adapters and voltage converters (for 110v supplies) to lend to all guests. There is no need for guests to bring their own.

Just about any special dietary needs, restrictions, or requests can be met by the resort's team of chefs with advance notice.

WHEN TO GO: Wakatobi is located in a remote archipelago and is a year-round, tropical destination with no marked seasons. Average air temperature is 30°C and water temperatures range between 26-28°C. Marine life encounters remain consistent throughout the year.

TOUR OPERATORS

ROBERT PARRINGTON, Wakatobi Guest Relations,
Tel: 020 8393 8511; www.wakatobi.com

ORIGINAL DIVING,
Tel: 020 7978 0505; www.originaldiving.com

DIVE WORLDWIDE,
Tel: 0845 130 6980; www.diveworldwide.com

For more detailed information go to www.wakatobi.com