

All life is here

Wakatobi, in southeastern Sulawesi, lies in some of the most biodiverse waters anywhere and basing yourself at the archipelago's only luxury resort gives you unparalleled access to them

Story by Richard Smith



PHOTO: WALT STEARNS



I COULD HEAR THEM BEFORE I SAW THEM. LOUD RASPY crunching sounds overwhelmed the usually discreet clicks and cracks generated by the reef's inhabitants. I came round a corner, carried by the gentle current, and was suddenly in the midst of a thirty-strong school of enormous bumphead parrotfish. I stayed as still as possible, suppressing my excitement, so my movements wouldn't disturb the impressive mossy-green fish. I instantly understood where the nickname 'buffalo of the sea' came from. I watched the herd slowly drift along the reef, grazing the top few centimetres off of globular stony corals with their huge beaks. It was a

thrilling encounter for the first day of a 10-day trip: I couldn't wait to see what would come next.

REEFTOP RENOIR

I was in the remote Wakatobi region of Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, an archipelago that stretches in a southeasterly direction from the tip of the Sulawesi mainland. Starting at Wangi-Wangi Island, it extends to Kaledupa, Tomia and finally Binongko, the first two letters of each island lending themselves to the encompassing acronym WA-KA-TO-BI.

Asia has many great reefs and dive sites but I had come here for that rarest of combinations: an epicentre of marine biodiversity that also has a luxurious base from which to experience that diversity: a resort of the same name as the archipelago.

Wakatobi lies within the 'Coral Triangle', the name given to the (very roughly) triangular area that includes part or all of the countries of Indonesia, Philippines, East Timor, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. This area possesses the planet's greatest marine biodiversity, with Wakatobi boasting a mindbogglingly high species richness: accommodating almost 2,000 fish species and 450 reef-building coral species. On one reef in Wakatobi you could easily encounter more species of fish than are found in the entire Caribbean.

FIRST RESORT
Views of Wakatobi Dive Resort, the archipelago's only luxury accommodation.

PHOTOS: RICHARD SMITH (TOP); DIDI LOTZE



With that sort of opportunity at hand, on arrival at Wakatobi I headed straight for the water. Snorkelling gear on, I crossed the white-sand beach and waded into a sea both calm and calming. I felt the stresses of travel lighten, along with the pull of gravity on my body. As I plunged my face underwater the familiar – yet so alien – sight of a reef swarming with marine creatures dazzled like an impressionist painting come alive. I finned over the reef crest towards the deeper bluewater and caught a glimpse of a huge green turtle cruising along the wall. It was tempting to stay and meet more of the locals, but I had to get back. I had some diving to organise.

UNDER COMPRESSION

My dive guide Guja's enthusiasm was tangible even underwater – Italians talk with their hands after all. I immediately had one thing in common with her: a love of one of the smallest and most enigmatic of Wakatobi's residents, the pygmy seahorse. For me this tiny creature, a matter of a centimetre-

or-so long was reason enough to travel halfway across the world. Happily, Guja explained that finding three of the area's four pygmy species was a realistic goal. The fourth though, Severn's pygmy seahorse, was a much more elusive quarry. It would take some eagle-eyed spotting and a great deal of luck besides.

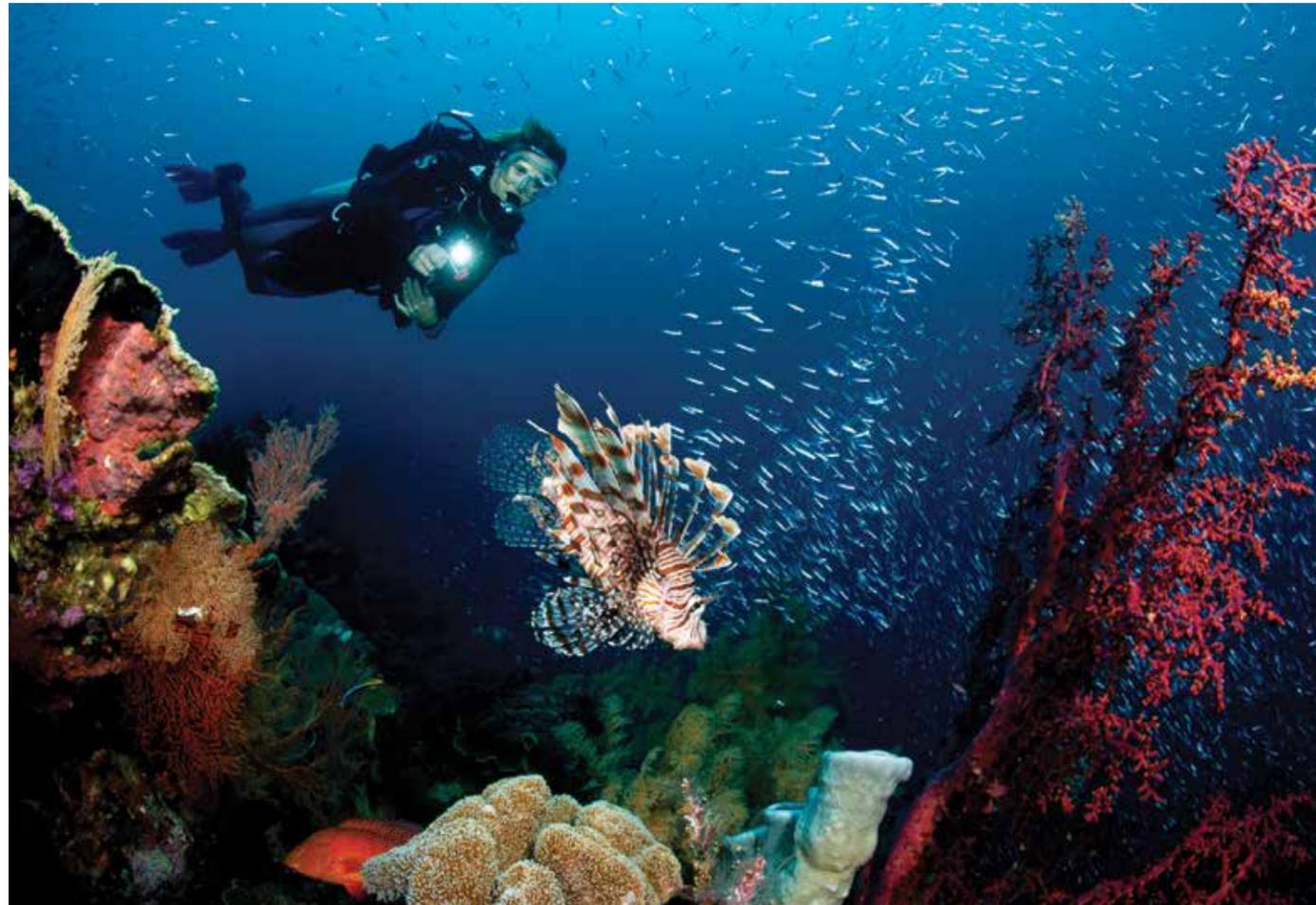
BLIZZARDS OF COLOUR

Below: A diver observes a lionfish hunting a school of silversides.
Right: A typically vivid scene of a reef, adorned with orange and green cup corals and sponges.

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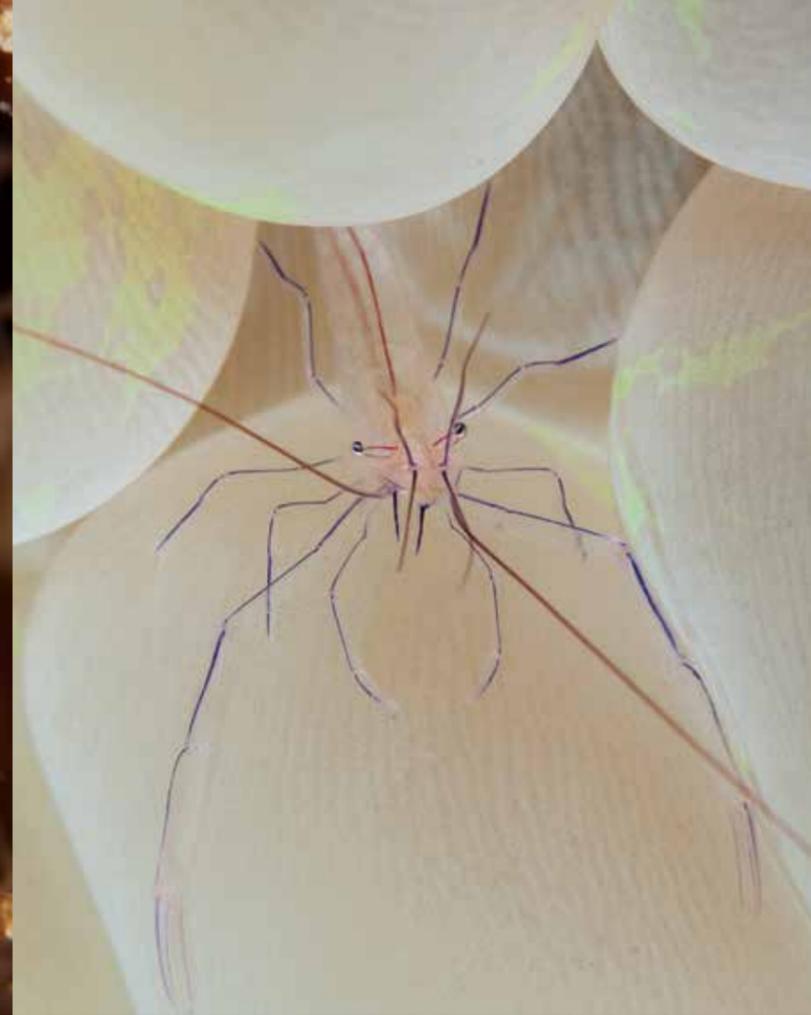
Our first dive was on the House Reef which I had snorkelled the day before, a coral wall that stretches in front of the resort for four kilometres. Stepping off the dive boat, a tank now on my back, I joined Guja and the three other divers who would be my buddy team for the duration of the trip: Craig, a fellow Brit, and Philip and Francine from South Africa. Each had dived elsewhere around the world, but for all of them this was their first foray into Indonesian waters.

Pottering along the uneven wall full of overhangs and clefts, Guja pointed out many of the interesting inhabitants. Several species of anemonefish – universally recognisable as Nemo these days – danced among the fronds of their tentacled homes, and an inquisitive school of bigeye trevally streamed past us. Hovering just above a patch of algae, Guja discovered a pair of ghost pipefish. Sharing the little red filamentous growths



PHOTOS: KEVIN DEACON (LEFT); STEVE MILLER





of their home, the five-centimetre fish were almost invisible until they moved in the current.

At one point, transfixed by the pulsing colours and mutating textures of a cuttlefish, I sensed something overhead and saw another 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. A reef isn't drawn from a palette of complementary colours like the pages of a fashion magazine. It is riotous profusion of life, an assault on the senses and here there was barely a square centimetre of vacant space to be seen.

We were sharing our boat with a family of non-divers who had come purely to snorkel. The mother and father, Denise and Paul, had been divers before having children. Now their daughters, Arianne and Rachel, were old enough, they were being introduced to their parents' passion for the underwater world. Here, most of the corals were shallow enough that they saw just as much as we did. What they saw thrilled them. At one point I asked the girls what their favourite sea creature was. After some deliberation, Arianne settled upon 'all of them'.

When corals benefit from both ample light and nourishment, the resulting diversity and growth takes some beating. At Wakatobi there is plenty of sun plus frequent influxes of nutrient-rich waters from the deep

meaning that you can always stay in shallow water since the coral growth continues almost to the surface.

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

I swam slowly over the mesmerising reef, trying desperately to identify the perfect pygmy hiding place among the clamour of creatures. Up ahead, Guja beckoned me over and pointed to a small protuberance on a rose pink seafan. The motionless fish was the spitting image of its larger cousins, but a mere fraction of their size. I spent several minutes peering at the tiny beast with an incongruous mix of features borrowed from across the animal kingdom: horse's head, chameleon's eyes, kangaroo's pouch and monkey's tail. Denise's pygmy seahorse is now known to be relatively common in the area, but it's no surprise they remained undiscovered until the early years of this millennium.

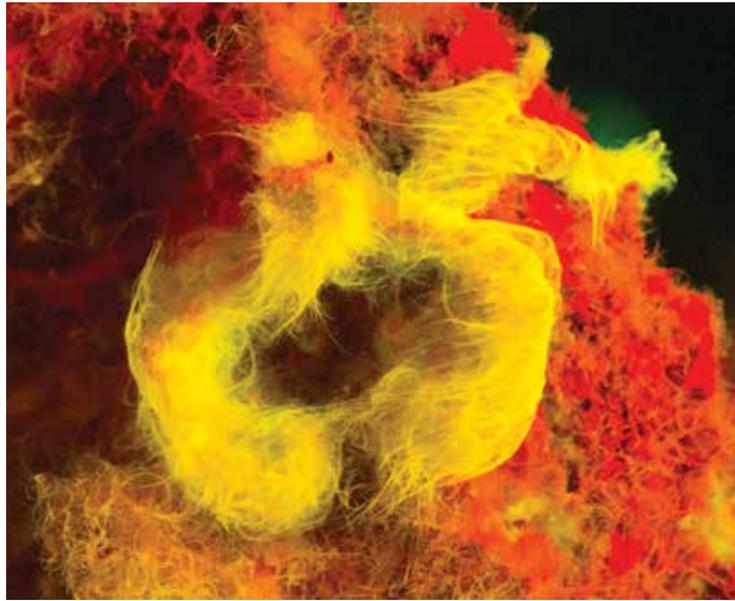
With two days left of my trip, though we'd seen the other three species of pygmy seahorse, there had been no news of the Severn's that I so desperately wanted to see. Guja had asked the resort's other guides to keep their eyes peeled for the 1.5-centimetre creature, but they'd had no success. That

LIFE IN MINIATURE
Clockwise from above:
The elusive Severn's pygmy seahorse; a bubble coral shrimp; a ghost pipefish; an imperial shrimp hides among the gill plumes of a large sea slug.



PHOTOS: RICHARD SMITH

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PHOTOS: WAYNE MACWILLIAMS (SQUID); DIDI LOTZE (TURTLES); WALT STEARNS x2

evening though, Guja came running to my table at dinner with the news that a pair of the miniature red, orange and brown seahorses had been spotted at a dive site called Kollo Soha. Our last dive day would give us a chance to go look for them.

Still, next day as I stepped off the side of the dive boat and descended after Guja, I knew the chances of us finding this diminutive needle in the proverbial haystack were almost vanishingly small. I also knew that Guja hadn't let us down yet, and she was now equipped with a mental map imagined by one of the other guides.

I followed her as she scoured the reef for the right arrangement of sponges, soft corals and tunicates that would indicate we were in the pygmy's territory. Suddenly she started mumbling emphatically, and there they were. They made an engaging couple: the impossibly small male visibly pregnant with a swollen belly, while the female hopped from frond to frond, feeding on imperceptible crustaceans. I watched as long as my air supply permitted; my goofy grin lasted much longer. **AA**

CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL
Clockwise from far left: An aptly named orangutan crab; pygmy squid hiding among the branches of a sea fan; soft corals can grow to enormous size in these nutrient-laden waters.



PRACTICALITIES

When to go

Southeast Sulawesi is a tropical destination with no marked seasonal changes. Average air temperature is 30°C, with sunshine on most days and humidity in the range of 65-75%. Water temperatures range between 26 and 28°C.

How to get there

Denpasar, Bali is the gateway to Wakatobi Resort, with guests escorted through immigration and customs by staff and onto a direct charter flight to the resort's own airstrip. From there, the resort is just a short boat ride away.

Where to stay

For more information on Wakatobi Resort, go to www.wakatobi.com. There is one other dive resort in the archipelago, a more rustic option on Wangi-Wangi.

Further info

You'll need one totally blank page in your passport for use by Indonesian customs and immigration. The visa costs US\$35 for most nationalities.

A high-factor sunscreen is important, and insect repellent for use during any rainy period. There are no malaria or dengue risks.

The nearest decompression chamber is in Bali and requires a daytime sea-level flight. Should it be needed, the resort has access to a medical evacuation service in Bali.

Other activities

Standup paddleboards provide a relaxing way to glide over the shallows, while on days with at least some breeze you can try kiteboarding, with equipment and instruction provided by resort staff. Those wishing to range farther afield can kayak along the shore or to a nearby mangrove lagoon that provides a habitat for a host of birds, invertebrates and colourful fish life.

Other activities include hiking the Onemobaa Nature Trail, cultural workshops and tours, and cooking classes.

Turtle nursery

Wakatobi maintains a nursery program to enhance the survival rate of turtle hatchlings. Guests can witness nesting activities on the resort's beach and visit the hatchlings at the nursery.

