



Written by **Wade and Robyn Hughes**, Photographed by **Wade**, except where credited.

WAKATOBI

*Beauty is in the
Eye of the
... Goby*



A goby darts back and forth in the current, snapping up drifting planktonic crustacea.

It's an exercise in patience. Hours spent watching out-of-focus pink orbs flit back and forth across the view-finder screen. Oblivious to anything else except the chill creeping in under the wetsuit and stiffness in the neck and shoulders from holding the camera housing stationary in an awkward position.

Pink-eyed gobies are also known as hovering gobies. Never more than two centimetres long, they cluster in small groups, usually in or near the branches of *Acropora* coral, and flit about in the current like tiny fireflies, snapping up

planktonic specks of food. In constant, erratic motion, they test photographers' reflexes, and frequently bamboozle the best auto-focus that DSLR manufacturers can offer.

I'd spent five entire dives at 21 metres with this particular group at Wakatobi. The first session yielded some nice profiles, striking enough with the vivid pink eye as the centre of attention, but a couple of glimpses of the fish head-on convinced me that there was more yet to be done. And so began the multi-dive vigil.

A half-metre or so beyond the *Acropora* that these gobies called home, stood a small red finger-sponge. It had cropped up in the background of a couple of the opportunistic shots from the first dive. Totally out of focus because of the shallow depth of field of the extended macro lens, it glowed under the light from the strobes. This offered a better backdrop for displaying the gossamer-thin transparent fins of the goby than plain black. So hours were spent with the camera held as steadily as possible, sponge positioned as the backdrop, hoping that, eventually, one of these little blighters would flit into



Determinedly shy and private despite their flamboyant outfits, pajama cardinalfish emerge at dusk.



Trumpet fish are fierce predators of smaller reef fish.



Noodle-thin & about 2cm long, a skeleton shrimp contemplates planktonic motes.

frame and strike an appropriate pose. One did. Once. For less than a second. Buoyed by that happenstance, and uncertain about whether I'd actually captured that fleeting, decisive moment, I stayed longer, desperate for a second chance. But none came.

Such selective diving spent focused on a single subject of interest, where the only constraints on available time are those imposed by depth and availability of air supply, is only possible when an individual diver has exclusive control of the agenda. Being freed from the anxiety of knowing that others are waiting to move on down the reef, or take their turn to look at or photograph the same creature, opens the door to prolonged observation and more detailed appreciation of the rhythms of life in the sea. It also brings the ability to reflect on shots already taken in a particular spot, visualise ideas for improvement, and then go back to the same spot as often as necessary to craft those ideas into usable images.

Wakatobi Resort's private boat is the ideal platform for this kind of diving. It's the closest you can get to diving out of your own boat at home, with the added advantage of having a friendly crew to do all the work, and an expert private guide on-hand to provide detailed local knowledge and locate hard-to-find species.

A day on *Wakatobi 1* begins, literally, with a couple of questions: "Where do you want to go and what do you want to see?" Your answers then become the agenda for the day.

Passage times to more distant dive sites, and surface intervals, can be spent lolling about on sun-beds. Lunch and snacks are served whenever you ask for them, and the programme for the day is completely flexible. On our most recent visit, we took the opportunity of exploring outlying sites, such as the atoll at Nda'a, which is not on the routine list for the Wakatobi resort fleet boats. While it was good to get out to these remote locations, their remoteness makes them more exposed to illicit fishing, so the diving is generally better at the more frequently visited sites closer to the

Resort itself. The private boat makes it possible to plan dives at these sites when the crew are not on the roster for the fleet boats. This includes night-diving sites, which can get crowded on the fleet-boat roster. We opted for dusk/night dives, which had us in the water very late in the afternoon and emerging after dark. This enabled us to easily fit in four dives per day, and still be back at the Resort before the night-diving fleet boats.

The addition of this private boat option is another step in the evolution of Wakatobi as a destination. The Resort is becoming popular with increasing numbers of social divers, individuals and families – seemingly as intent on relaxing in the sun, or having fun in the boats, as getting out and exploring the reefs. By adding the private boat, the resort is able to cater for the increase in these guests, and still provide world-class coral reef diving for those who want to spend time in focused pursuit of particular subjects, or even just enjoy the quietude of being at sea without interruption.

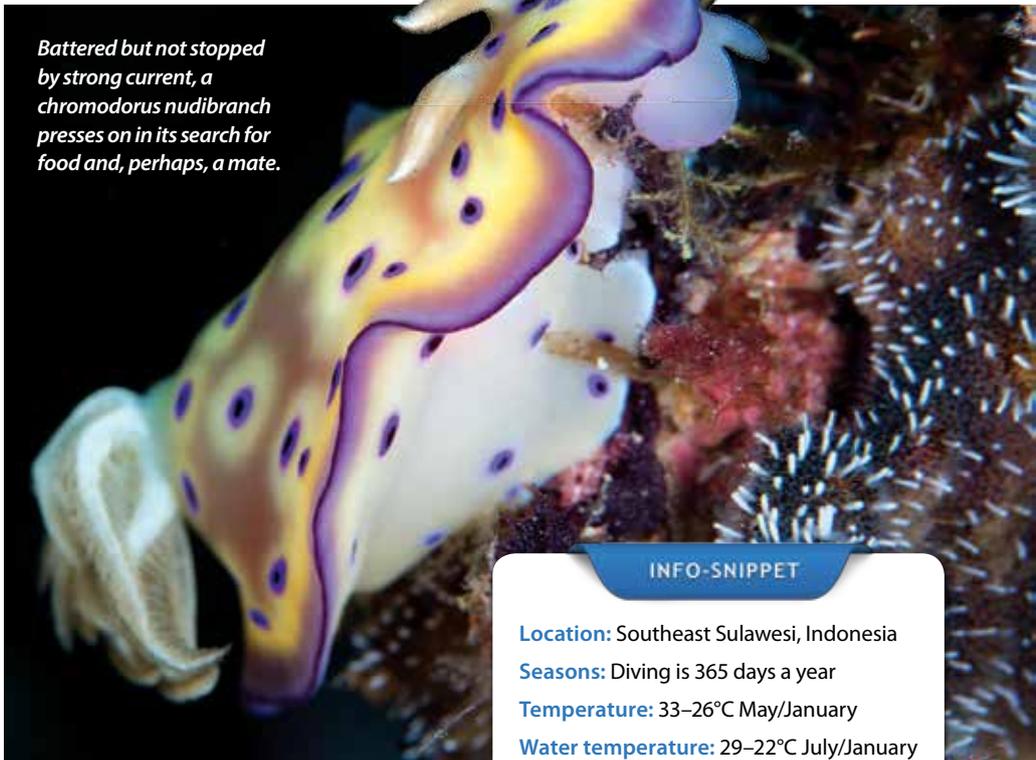
Everybody wins with this evolution. More people get to see and experience the reef-scapes of south-east Sulawesi, and, perhaps gain a greater appreciation for what it takes to conserve ecosystems such as these.

a more detailed appreciation of the rhythms of life in the sea

These are reefs that have been fished and exploited for centuries, so they are not pristine. Increasingly large numbers of people live in the vicinity and, in one way or another, depend on the reefs for their livelihood and to feed their kids. But, thanks to Wakatobi Resort's conservation programme, they are still spectacular reefs. This is conservation based on sound economics, and not



Dusk settles over the Banda Sea: time for a dusk-into-night dive to finish the day. Photo by Robyn Hughes.



Battered but not stopped by strong current, a chromodoros nudibranch presses on in its search for food and, perhaps, a mate.

INFO-SNIPPET

- Location:** Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia
- Seasons:** Diving is 365 days a year
- Temperature:** 33–26°C May/January
- Water temperature:** 29–22°C July/January
- Language:** Bahasa Indonesian
- Currency:** Indonesian Rupiah

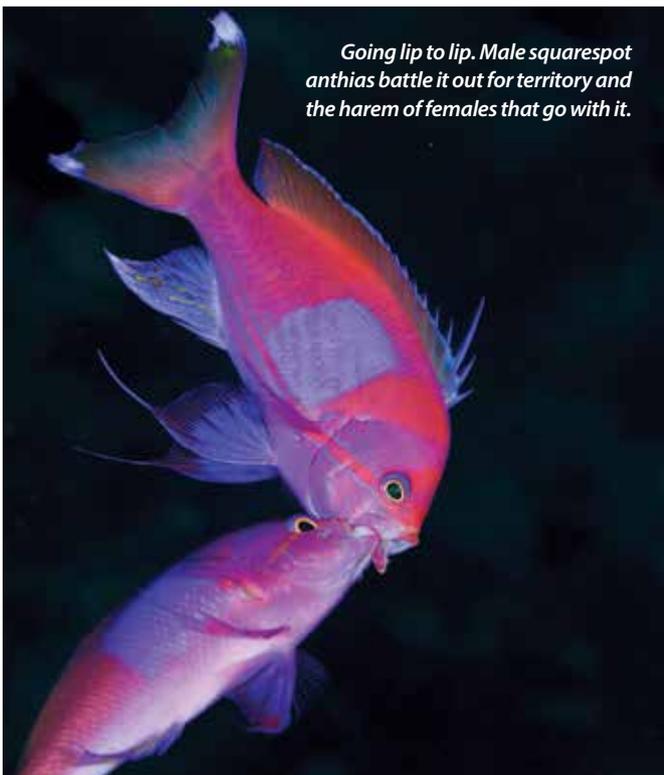
Indonesia is connected to the rest of the world by numerous airlines. Ngurah Rai Airport in Bali will take you the closest to Wakatobi, with direct flights from several Australian cities; travelling from elsewhere you'll stopover in Australia or elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

altruism alone. Revenues flowing in to the Resort are creating education and employment opportunities for many locals. These opportunities, in turn, create choice for the local communities: they can choose between unmanaged exploitation of their reefs or sustainable management of them.

So economic growth of the Resort, through its appeal to wider ranges of guests, translates as more opportunity

and choice for more local people. In turn, that translates into higher levels of protection for the core assets – the reefs themselves. And that creates more opportunity for divers like you and me to go and stare, if only for a moment, into the hypnotically beautiful pink eyes of the hovering goby. 🐠

Visit the Wakatobi website to find out more: www.wakatobi.com



Going lip to lip. Male square-spot anthias battle it out for territory and the harem of females that go with it.



Venomous little fish, fangtooth blennies circle each other warily.