

Wakatobi Island combines superlative diving and snorkelling with an idyllic island experience

By Melissa Rimac

I jump off the traditionally styled timber boat to find myself oggling gorgonian fans, whip corals, deep purple pipe corals and barrel sponges. Dense curtains of orange, yellow and electric blue fish pulse in time to the gentle current and a turtle, then an eagle ray glides into view.

My first few minutes in the water near Wakatobi Dive Resort underscore the fact that I'm at the heart of the Asia Pacific 'coral triangle', home to the highest levels of coral diversity in the world.

I've experienced many amazing underwater scene-scapes, but usually, there'll be a singular

highpoint, soft corals perhaps or macro life forms.

Which is where Wakatobi stands apart; hard corals, soft corals and a massive variety and profusion of fish all figure with equal prominence. The effect is mindboggling – typically, it's hard to decide where to focus.

The owners of the resort have set up a private marine sanctuary whereby local villages are paid an allowance not to fish in certain areas. The effect is as obvious as it is fantastic – the most fish I've seen for a long time. Or, more scientifically: 942 fish species call the surrounding waters home, with 750 out of worlds counted 850 reef species.

Experiencing extraordinary

underwater havens such as the Wakatobi islands used to involve days of arduous travel and basic facilities. Now, reaching this marine-ecology hotspot involves a gasp-inducing direct flight from Bali, peering into volcanoes and over tiny islands rimmed by royal blue lagoons to reach the southern reaches of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi in time to explore the house reef on my first day.

My home here – the only accommodation in the region – is the eco-luxe Wakatobi Dive Resort, a sensual treat involving bungalows made from dark hardwoods with big daybeds out the front and an outdoor bathroom enclosed by nougat coloured stone. On the coffee table are 2 beautifully illustrated fish identification books. Pandanus palms fringe my private, ocean front yard and the scattered daybeds and hammock are perfect for post-dive naps.

With time to spare before lunch, I grabbed my snorkel mask and walked along the beach to the jetty.

A posse of curious batfish and angelfish greeted me at the bottom of the steps. The house reef has a drop off of about 40

metres and forms a hang-out for several giant wrasses and large schools of blue trigger fish with pitchforks for tails as well as lionfish, electric blue damselfish and even moray eels peering out of nooks. Several types of blazing yellow butterflyfish hovered amidst a carpet of thriving hard and soft corals.

Under the jetty, thousands of eyes glared at me. Out of a dense wall of fish the sweetlips, groupers, parrotfish and angelfish broke ranks to check me out.

I emerged from the water awed, my appetite piqued for lunch. Just as well, for the food here is varied, delicious and downright irresistible – none of the painfully restrained 'haute cuisine' typically associated with luxury resorts. And hooray for that! Each meal at Wakatobi consists of a large smorgasbord of inventive, lovingly prepared treats – including yummy whole grain freshly baked bread and homemade ice-cream – and bespoke meals are happily arranged for people with special diets.

After lunch and a lie down in my hammock, I take advantage of the taxi boats to explore further stretches of house reef.

The next day, a relaxed diving and snorkelling routine sets in. Everything is organised to the finest detail, but it doesn't feel even vaguely regimented. A homely 'whatever/ whenever' attitude prevails with the service at the resort and aquatic experiences.

There's three trips each day – visiting 2 dive locations before lunch and one afterwards – and sometimes night dives and snorkelling is offered also. Trips are personalised, so that you always go to a new location, with guides discussing ways to tailor the underwater experience and providing pre-dive briefings.

Wakatobi Dive Resort has exclusive use of nearby reefs and there's a large diversity of underwater terrain; walls, fringing reefs, overhangs, atolls, caves, for starters. There's 40-odd dive locations situated within a 15 minute boat ride from the resort, visiting 25 nearby reefs.

Snorkellers are treated with as much reverence as divers, with specialist guides explaining the highlights of each location and pointing out features you might otherwise miss.

Back on board, hot peppermint perfumed towels, hot drinks made the way you like them and baked goodies await. Staff even wash camera gear and specialist underwater photography and film-making tuition can be provided.

After each boat trip, I catch up with other divers at the homely 'longhouse' lounge area, where snacks and drinks are set up and there's fish and bird identification books at the ready. A dedicated camera room is located nearby.

Unusually for a tropical idyll, Wakatobi holds equal appeal to couples, singles and families, with

shared passions and abundant lounging space ensuring you can be as convivial or as private as you please. I travelled by myself and thanks to the way that the resort and the boat trips are set up, I experienced none of the awkwardness that's typical of visiting a beautiful island on your own.

Happily, on the morning of my departure, there's time to snorkel on the house-reef. This time the clownfish enchanted me to the point that I had to keep reminding myself that I had a flight to catch. ... Bummer.

