When I first read the specs on Canon’s new 50.6 MP EOS 5DS R DSLR, I knew it begged to be taken underwater. What better place to put it to the test than Sulawesi’s famed Wakatobi Dive Resort?

Disappointment followed Canon’s marketing hype as the camera was not to be released until June (2015) and Pam and I were off to Wakatobi in April. Our trusty Canon EOS 5D Mark IIs (5D3s) were given a reprieve. By July our brand new 5DS Rs had a worthy terrestrial work out in the choking dust of Namibia and we couldn’t wait to get them wet.

Wakatobi’s Juliette Myers was most accommodating and by September we were on our way back to this crown jewel of coral triangle diving.

We had been stunned by the intrinsic beauty of the Coral Triangle region in Raja Ampat several years ago and had been thinking about our next destination.
Well-travelled divers spoke about Wakatobi in such revered tones it immediately went on our must-do list. Five visits and 263 dives later, the promise and allure has not dimmed.

Wakatobi’s extensive coral reef complex offers an unparalleled array of reef, wall and pinnacle diving. It’s a brilliant showcase of the lush marine biodiversity of this region.

Drifting past huge gorgonian fans that may be a hundred years in the making is kind of humbling. A vertical garden of complex sponge colonies and soft corals festoon the reef walls with audacious splashes of vibrant colour. Tucked away in crevices and corners are the most exquisite of miniscule reef creatures. The most complex decision for each dive is whether to shoot wide angle or macro. Photographers are absolutely spoilt for choice.
Creative flair has been indulged in the naming of dive sites. Pastel, Black Forest, Cornucopia, Magnifica and Spiral Corner all offer high-voltage wall diving with visibility in excess of 25 metres. Current is the spice of life for coral reefs and these ebb and flow at their own whim. Relaxing and just going with the flow is the order of the day. The dive guides all carry a reel line and surface marker buoy and the dive boats keep a sharp lookout.

Water movement across the expansive reef platforms sometimes results in downdrafts and updrafts. These can be a bit disconcerting when first experienced and it pays to keep a close eye on your depth and manage your buoyancy closely.

Blade is a seamount dive offering great opportunity for wide-angle work. Don’t miss this place; it is spectacular and one of my favourites. Reef diving is well catered for with Roma, Table Coral City, Dunia Baru and Waitii Ridge amongst over 40 wall and reef dives regularly visited.

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Wakatobi’s house reef is both a platform and wall dive and ridiculously convenient with access from the beach or jetty. Pam often spends eight hours a day here freediving with her DSLR camera rig.

Night dives are another highlight not to be missed, whether on the house reef or nearby sites. The underwater action really changes as the night shift takes over. Early nightfall in the tropics means there is enough time for a 60–90 minute night dive, a shower and dinner before the restaurant closes.

Our 5DS Rs performed beyond our expectations on our last two trips to Wakatobi and have become our underwater workhorses. They delivered incredible detail particularly for macro work. You need to be spot-on with focus. Soft images are just that – 50 MP of mush. The sensors get a bit noisy beyond ISO 400 but are brilliant around ISO 100–200. Old subjects are new again.

Wakatobi’s existence is a tribute to its founder, Lorenz Mäder. He worked in conjunction with local leaders and village elders to establish the ‘Collaborative Reef Conservation Program’. This economic and environmental initiative was designed to motivate the people living in
the Wakatobi region to take an active role in protecting their marine ecosystem.

The Wakatobi National Marine Park in Southeast Sulawesi was later established and encompasses these privately-sponsored marine sanctuaries. The original 6km of reef established as a pilot no-take fishing zone in 1997 has been extended to more than 20km of reef today.

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This innovation in pioneering conservation work paid off and in 2012 the Wakatobi National Marine Park was designated as a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, and is recognised as one of the most bio-diverse marine ecosystems on earth.

The economics work hand-in-glove with protection of the fragile reef environment. Twenty local villages receive a monthly ‘reef lease’ payment. This incentivises self-management and protection of the National Marine Park. Consistently keeping to this commitment has earned the resort the broad trust of the village elders and island leaders.

The return of species to the protected areas has actually improved the fishing bordering these regions. With previously destructive fishing practices put aside, it is a win-win for everyone. Wakatobi also provides substantial employment for the locals.
There is a deeply-ingrained service ethic in all aspects of Wakatobi’s operations. I can concentrate exclusively on the art of my photography and take for granted all the support needed will be seamlessly provided. Expert dive guides and skilled boat captains ensure four dives per day are easy to achieve. Dive gear magically arrives on the boat assembled and ready to go. A robust test-and-check system works very well for the Nitrox supply.

Wakatobi puts the adventure where it should be – in the diving. You just need to get yourself to Bali and it all happens seamlessly from there. Wakatobi folk meet you at the airport for a VIP run on their private charter after customs and immigration. You will need to stay overnight as the Wakatobi flight departs early morning. Luggage is carefully labelled and respectfully handled. The weight limits are generous, taking into account the needs of diving.

Getting to the world’s best dive spots can often mean the flights and multiple stopovers are more adventurous than the diving. Some airlines also seem to take great delight in separating travellers from their precious dive and camera gear.

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Lined nembrotha nudibranch with orange egg-string, Fan Garden. 100mm macro lens.

Baba’s crinoid squat lobster clings to its host. 100mm macro lens.
ers and photographers. Just over two hours from take-off and you are landing at the resort’s purpose-built airstrip on Tomia Island in Southeast Sulawesi.

The water temperature varies a bit during the year so it’s worth checking the website in deciding what dive suit to bring. I am well insulated, so a skin suit works for me but many divers like a bit of neoprene comfort. A reef pick is a good option and helps sometimes when the current sneaks in or for a bit of stability for photography.

About the Author:
Wayne Osborn started diving in 1974 with a particular interest in shipwrecks and freshwater caves. He started out with a Nikonos II. Wayne and his wife Pam have an interest in whale conservation and work closely with researchers to provide behavioural and identification images.

In 2004, Wayne was elected a Fellow International of the New York-based Explorers Club for his work in the marine environment. One of Wayne’s dwarf minke whale images is on the cover of the new edition of *Marine Mammals of the World*. In 2012 Wayne won the Australian Geographic ANZANG Nature Photographer of the Year award.

UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve notes:
Wakatobi is an acronym for the four main islands of Wangi-Wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia, and Binongko that, together with smaller islands, comprise the Tukang Besi Archipelago at the south-eastern tip of Sulawesi. The ethnically diverse human population strives to make the area a learning laboratory in areas such as fisheries and agriculture.