



WAKATOBI OR BUST

MONTY HALLS heads off on assignment to the picture-perfect Wakatobi Dive Resort, and decides to up the ante by taking his wife and two young children along for the ride

Photographs by **MONTY HALLS**



Wakatobi's clear waters are ideal for snorkelling...



...and can be enjoyed by kids and adults alike

If my life can be compared to a comedy (and I think it probably can), then the on-screen sequence just before departing our house for Wakatobi would have played out as follows:

Opening scene: Frantic packing activity, close-up shot of tickets and passports on kitchen table.

Scene 2: Small child enters kitchen and indicates they would like to have one very final go on the garden swing before getting in the car. (That'll be the swing we've had for four years by the way, without the slightest incident).

Scene 3: Tam (my wife), says: "Oh go on, one last swing then." Child toddles out of kitchen into garden.

Cut immediately to flashing blue light heading at speed to A&E.

Yep, dear old Molly bust her arm ten minutes before our long-awaited, keenly anticipated, two-week holiday to Wakatobi. That'll be the dive resort that specialises in the truly holistic vacation experience for the whole family, a trip that our contact there had said would 'create lingering memories' for both our kids. Well, that's absolutely bang on for Molly, who will remember Hillingdon Casualty Department for ever and ever (we... ahem... drove all the way to Heathrow before realising it was actually broken).

We set out from the airport hotel the next morning undaunted (in fact, that's nonsense, we were massively daunted) and duly watched Molly remove the plaster cast in its entirety in the queue to get onto the aircraft. Twenty four hours later, we arrived in Indonesia with her sporting a crazily Heath Robinson splint I'd created out of an adult wrist support, some hastily purchased tubular bandage, jam, tape, and a touch of optimism.

As you will realise by the end of this article, our experience in Wakatobi was sublime - I don't think I'm giving away too much there - but it's a bloody long way from Dartmouth. Travelling with wee ones, particu-

larly when they're recently damaged, is - quite frankly - harrowing. We arrived at the resort with our nerves and relationship a tad frayed. And then Dr Wakatobi took over, at once soothing and sympathetic in their long-standing role as a marriage guidance centre cum dive operation.

The resort prides itself in - among many other things - being a complete experience for everyone who visits. You might be a hairy-bummed technical diver, an occasional Open Water 10m bubble blower, or a boiling hot, very jet-lagged toddler with a sweaty broken wrist. Wakatobi has something for all of you.

For me, it was the rather strange sensation of handing over my darling daughters - Isla and an incandescent Molly - to a total stranger. Wakatobi provide a nanny service, using local ladies who - genuinely - care for your wee ones as if they were their own. I've always wondered how I'd feel about handing over the kids, and it turns out I've got absolutely no problem with it whatsoever. They were swept into the arms of the delightful Nono, who set about becoming their best friend for the next seven days. In turn, I set about the coffee bar in reception, and took in my surroundings.

The main building of Wakatobi is the beating heart of the operation, and sits at the head of the pier, with discreet lodges on either side, each



The sun sets on another 'sublime' day in Wakatobi

"The pier at Wakatobi represents a teeming finger of life pointing out to sea, a haven for fish large and small, for sea snakes, turtles, coral galore, and emerald sea grass beds"





Each lodge is a private retreat

"I've always wondered how I'd feel about handing over the kids, and it turns out I've got absolutely no problem with it whatsoever"

Why not leave the tank behind?



Ridding the reef of fishing line



divided from the other by a screen of trees. More lodges spread some distance back from the shoreline, creating the feeling of a small village, a community tucked into a crackling green forest of palms, interlinked by paths of white sand.

The dive centre itself is, as one would expect, thoroughly modern and impeccably staffed. I appreciate that I'm beginning to sound like a brochure here, but really it is. A measure of this was the photography room, specifically set aside for storing and maintaining your photographic gear. It's air-conditioned, which gave me the perfect opportunity nice and early on in our visit to be a smart-ass. These moments should never be overlooked, so I immediately said to our guide Gregor, who was in the throes of showing us around, "Surely if it's air conditioned, you end up with condensation issues the moment you take your housing outside?"

"Not if it's at 25 degrees Celsius," he replied, "so we make sure it's always maintained precisely at that temperature."

"Oh, okay," I said, slightly disappointed.

In short, they've thought of everything (which is no fun at all if you're trying to be picky). Wakatobi has been there for some time, so has been able to evolve at leisure, to adapt to the needs of not only divers, but also the local community. Founded by biologist and diver Lorenz Mader in 1995, the resort has become so much more than a haven for holidaymakers - it is a model for sustainable tourism, a template for effective co-operation with local people and the delicate ecosystems they have always called their home.

Speaking of delicate ecosystems, let us return to the Halls family's recent arrival. Having been reunited with a yawning and muttering Isla and Molly, we decided en masse that food was required. And here, without wishing to be too glib, we come to another of the legendary aspects of Wakatobi - lunch.

I won't dwell too much on this, what with this being a diving

Riding pillion, Wakatobi-style



article and all that, but miracles spring from the tiny kitchen that abuts the dining area. As they stepped into the waterside restaurant, the kids - already dazzled by their short time collecting flowers and making dens with Nono - were plainly thinking that this place literally couldn't get any better.

"Aha," bellowed a chap in a dazzling white jacket as they walked in. "You must be Isla and Molly. How about some ice cream?"

They're two and four, our kids, and already have a great deal to say for themselves. I have never, ever seen them speechless. But they allowed themselves to be meekly led to a table, and served ice-cream by a charming man who smiled a gleaming smile and then went off and caught them a hermit crab to look at. For them it was slightly beyond a fantasy, a mystical kingdom where you had ice cream for lunch and everyone knows your name.

It wasn't too far off for us either. The food that magically emerged from the clouds of steam and clattering pots of the kitchen was a mixture of delicate local dishes and refined western classics. I'm no Giles Coren, so words fail me at this point. But it was bloody good.

And so to the diving, and the magic of the local reefs. Which we.... ahem...



Clear skies and sunshine are a regular fixture at Wakatobi



A victorious Isla returns from the sea

didn't see a great deal of. And here's why.

The pier at Wakatobi represents a teeming finger of life pointing out to sea, a haven for fish large and small, for sea snakes, turtles, coral galore, and emerald sea grass beds. To be quite frank, we never really made it past the end of it, spending happy hours drifting through sun-dappled stanchions and shimmering buttresses. I mentioned to Wakatobi founder Lorenz one evening, as we sat and sipped a beer at

the end of the jetty, that it was probably one of the best shore dives on the planet. He smiled wanly.

"Hmmm, I often think that the fish beneath us..." he said, tapping his toe on the decking theatrically as he spoke... "are some of the most expensive in Indonesia. I have always paid local fishermen so they don't work these waters, and as such the reefs flourish in the vicinity of the resort. It's a great dive for sure, but one that's cost me a few dollars over the years."

So, that's the first reason for not venturing out on the boats too much. The second reason is - of course - that we wanted to share as much of the Wakatobi experience with Molly and Isla as we could. For the accident-prone former, that meant charging about damaging herself at every opportunity (stubbed toe, jellyfish sting, skinned knee - whenever there was a wail from the undergrowth, the staff would all look up and think "Aha, the Halls must be nearby"). And for the water-mad latter, that meant being taught to snorkel by one of the best female freedivers on Earth.

In one of life's happy co-incidences, also at the resort for our week-long visit were Kirk Krack (great name) and Mandy Rae Cruickshank, the founders of PFI (Performance Freediving International), who were running a course for a select group of guests. They were delightful people, and their daughter Kyla, and our Isla, quickly became firm friends (as kids do).

And so it came to pass that Isla - four years old and still daunted by a width of the local pool - came to be drifting over the top of a sapphire drop-off in Sulawesi, guided by a legendary freediver into a new world, her eyes wide behind her mask, and her squeals of delight amplified by her snorkel. Diving, and the marine world, have given me many great moments in my life, but this was - by some distance - the greatest of them all.

It is quite a task to attempt to encapsulate Wakatobi in a couple of thousand words. Perhaps the essence of a place is how much the memories linger, and how deeply embedded in your conscience the sights, the sounds, and the people become. As a family we will never forget the hospitality and genuine warmth of the welcome. As divers we will long recall the extraordinary ecosystem that shifts and shimmers beneath the jetty, and indeed the magic that awaits in the reefs beyond. And as a small kid, Isla will never forget that moment when the sea opened up before her, the reef dropped away, and the blue waters beckoned her for the first time. ■