

OUT OF TIME

Wakatobi is famed for its diving but southeast Sulawesi's standout resort has plenty more to offer when you come up for air

Story by Eric Vohr



PHOTO: JASON WOLCOTT

WHAT THE TROPICS ARE FOR
Paddle into the sunset every
day if you like – just remember
to come back at some point.



NEXT GEN FLIERS
Amateur birdwatchers will enjoy
stalking their quarry through
the forest; while the more active
will want to be working the
winds and waves themselves.

SOUTHEAST SULAWESI FEELS LIKE ONE OF THOSE left-behind locations, a place time has simply . . . misplaced. Some 1,000 kilometres to the east-northeast of Bali and perhaps 100 years behind it, the archipelago of Wakatobi sits bathed in improbably blue water. Each island is fringed with blinding beaches, backed by classically stooping palms. Best of all, these postcard-worthy scenes remain unblighted by the concrete sprawl of mass tourism.

Instead, there are a smattering of fishing villages and just one resort, founded by keen diver Lorenz Mäder, from Switzerland. ‘Discovering’ Sulawesi in the 1990s, he recognised it was surely among the world’s top dive locations with its remoteness and prolific marine life. Luckily, Mäder was not of the mega-hotel mindset, opting to go exclusive and eco-friendly in his approach.

Mäder chose a small island, Pulau Tolandona, for his project and called it Wakatobi Dive Resort, adding a small airstrip on nearby Pulau Tomia to shrink the journey in from Bali down from two days to a more manageable three hours or so.

The resort’s name leaves no doubt as to the main draw. But with deep blue water in every direction, there’s a wealth of opportunity for other watersports too, the pick of which is the kitesurfing. For this we can thank Lorenz’s brother, Valentin Mäder, an avid kiter. Like his brother, Valentin has an eye for business but is also passionate about protecting the environment. “Wakatobi provides a rare opportunity to align value creation with the protection of endangered marine resources,” he says.

Kiting comes into its own here with the arrival of the easterly

trades in May, and continues through September, with the peak of the season – June, July, and August – seeing steady winds in the 12- to 24-knot range. Conditions and ‘terrain’ at Wakatobi offer something for everyone, from long down-winders and island hopping, to flat-water lagoon cruising and wave riding.

The resort’s main beach sits inside a sheltered reef line that wraps around a west-facing point. To the east, there is a three-kilometre lagoon ideal for flat-water speed runs. Just around the point, the resort’s main west-facing beach provides easy conditions for shore launches, with plenty of flat water for cross-wind boarding.

This west-facing beach is an ideal location for novice and improving riders looking to master the basics, so it’s no surprise to find it’s also home to Wakatobi’s kiteboarding centre. Certified staff are on hand to assist with instruction or just local tidbits of advice such as launch and land areas, and tide times. They also have board racks, equipment storage and some gear for rent.

Experienced riders can move outside the reef into the blue-water channel that runs between the island and the offshore coral plateau. Conditions here range from near-shore chop to waist-high waves farther out.

According to North-sponsored pro rider, Tom Court, Sulawesi is a “wave riders dream”, with waves in the unprotected main channel generally averaging about waist- to shoulder-high and even bigger when the wind is kicking up.

He cautions that while the wind can rip here, it’s generally on the lighter side so if you can only pack one kite, he recommends

PHOTOS: WAKATOBI RESORT *2, JASON WALCOTT (KITERS)





THE SKY'S THE LIMIT
Kite surfers have a huge swath of ocean as their playground with no traffic save the occasional fishing boat.



bringing along a light-wind setup. That being said: “If you like small wave riding, freestyling, foiling or just general exploring, you’ll love it here,” says Court.

If you’re tempted to push the envelope, it’s reassuring to know that the resort has a fleet of chase boats dedicated to supporting kite surfers. Whether you need picking up after becoming stranded downwind, or a quick transfer upwind, these boats are always at your service and can even ferry out across to nearby islands. This opens up the opportunity for long downwind runs and all-day hops between islands – just take along a radio or satellite phone to call for a ride if you need it.

Boarders can check out the neighbouring island of Tomia, or take a boat to the local village at the tip of Tolandona and launch from there. The resort can pack you off with a hearty lunch for the village launch spot, and from there you can spend the afternoon island hopping all the way back to the resort.

According to another pro, Toby Braeuer, who recently visited, the resort’s biggest draws are its steady winds and the remote beautiful natural location.

“It’s just you and nature, flying over this beautiful water of all different colours. Beneath you are stingrays, dolphins, turtles, and along the shore it’s all white sand and palm trees. I even saw blue starfish . . . I’ve never seen a blue starfish before.”

Braeuer likes how Wakatobi is built, “within nature . . . I like the philosophy of the resort; what they did [t]here is amazing. They keep it as it is; they did not destroy anything, they only made it better.”

He is referring to the Mäder’s dedication to looking after the environment. In 1997, the resort created the Wakatobi Collaborative Reef Conservation Program, turning almost six kilometres of reef into an effective no-fishing sanctuary. They back this up by educating locals about the fragility of the ecosystem and how protection can ultimately increase fishing yields. In compensation for forgone

PHOTOS: WAKATOBI RESORT X2

revenues, the resort provides free electricity and other forms of support to villagers, including training in alternative ways to make a living. For some that has meant working directly with the resort in tourism.

As the project showed success, the protected zone was extended and today the resort works with 17 local communities protecting around 20km of reef, forming one of the world’s largest privately funded Marine Protected Areas. Now called the Wakatobi Marine Reserve, it is designated as a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve.

“We believe in a solid integration of conservation into our business model and accept that keeping intact the marine environment as the foundation of our business and for the enjoyment of our guests is an integral part of a sustainable dive operation,” says Lorenz.

In addition to its marine conservation efforts, resort staff clean a one-mile (1.6km) stretch of beach every day; reduce, separate and recycle waste; and use local traditional skills to maintain the resort. In all, this provides full-time employment to about 100 locals.

If diving and kiting are not enough, there are other ways to get out and enjoy the area too. The resort can supply kayaks and paddleboards to allow you to explore calm lagoon waters inside the reef north or south of the resort. The more adventurous can even make the kilometre crossing to Sawa Island.

Besides the boats used by staff to drop off and retrieve day-trippers, the resort also has some boats with larger twin outboards that can be used for waterskiing, wakeboarding, or fishing trips for mahi-mahi and other abundant game fish.

Then there are land-based activities including Pulau Tolandona’s own Onemobaa Nature Trail that draws you deeper into the green places of the island. Don’t be shocked if a metre-long monitor lizard sways lazily across your path – a smaller, far less sinister relative of the Komodo dragon – or you spy a cat-sized fruitbat hanging from a tree by one foot gnawing at a tasty mango.

END OF A PERFECT DAY
Muscles worked, you feel that contented glow that says ‘a day well spent’.





MEET THE NEIGHBOURS
Don't forget to save some time to hang with the locals.



Today the resort works with 17 local communities protecting around 20km of reef, forming one of the world's largest privately funded Marine Protected Areas.

One must-do is the two-kilometre hike, or perhaps jog, over to Lammangau, the village on the other side of the island. Its inhabitants are Bajau – a people often referred to as sea gypsies – and the village is built on stilts over the water because the Bajau believe that harmful spirits live on land.

A charming mix of old and new, you'll notice the odd satellite dish here and there, but otherwise it's a small fishing village whose inhabitants live in much the same way as their ancestors did. Colourful, handcrafted boats line the beach and the traditional stilt homes are surrounded by flowers.

Wakatobi has a very close relationship with this community, so you'll be well received and most likely followed around by a gang of playful kids only too happy to star in your holiday snaps. Take some money with you, as the villagers sell beautiful hand-woven sarongs for about US\$15-20.

The village is a good illustration of how this corner of Sulawesi has escaped the worst ravages of technology and development, taking up a few modern conveniences but mostly content to let life drift along in a rhythm that would have been familiar to many of their forebears.

Toby Braeuer calls it a "Robinson Crusoe" experience. Tom Court has more specific advice: "Some of the world's most beautiful islands are at your fingertips – so kite, dive, and relax". Do what feels right in other words – and let time take care of itself. **AA**

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

Kiting season runs from May through September with June, July and August the prime months. There are water conditions for all levels of ability including for kids.

How to get there

The resort operates a private air charter to and from Bali's international airport on Mondays and Fridays. The flight takes just under three hours and costs \$675 return for guests and \$1,135 for non-guests.

Further info

Wakatobi has a full service kitesurfing center manned by certified professionals and stocked with all the necessary gear. They also provide lessons, support boats and satellite phones. The resort's kite surfing instructor is available from mid-May to mid-September.

Contacts

Wakatobi Dive Resort, www.wakatobi.com

PHOTOS: WAKATOBI RESORT *3



FITTING RIGHT IN
Wakatobi Resort is laid out in low-impact fashion, mimicking the organic growth of a local village.