

HOUSE REEF *Wakatobi*

New monthly series in which we will focus on a particular **HOUSE REEF**, kicking off with the world-famous dive site in Wakatobi

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Arriving guests receive a preview of what awaits on Wakatobi's House Reef when their shuttle boat arrives at the resort's jetty. Right below, cobalt blue waters transition abruptly to lighter shades of turquoise, amber and green as a vertical coral rampart rises from the depths to within scant metres from the surface. In between this deep blue boundary line and the gleam of the white sand on the beach lies a shallow realm of coral heads and seagrass flats, all remarkably healthy and quite dense in places. **It's something you wouldn't expect so close to a resort.**

At the outer end of the shelf, the House Reef takes a near-vertical plunge some 75m before bottoming out. Along its face, a thriving array of sponges, hard and soft corals shelter a diverse population of invertebrates and fish, with the mixture of species changing as depth increases. Water clarity in the 30-metre-plus range allows ample ambient light to filter down, adding to the visual drama of the walls and undercut slopes.

Passing by the outer end of the Jetty, on the way to the drop-off, it's hard to not pause and have a peek under the structure to see what's there. In addition to providing shade for schools of fish, the pier's large concrete columns and beams are home to an assortment of shrimps and crabs. The wealth of macro subjects I have found nearby is seemingly innumerable. I've documented everything from the more-expected, like anemonefish -seven different species inside a 30-metre circle of the resort's jetty - to the sublime, like leaf scorpionfish and pipehorses.

With reef contours of this nature, it's easy to perform multi-level dives with bottom times of 70 to 80 minutes without going into decompression. And time spent off-gassing in the shallows can often be the most-interesting part of the dive. Searching around the seagrass beds and branching coral colonies in the sunlit shallows have rendered subjects ranging from pyjama cardinalfish to robust, halimeda and ornate ghost pipefish.

Then there are of course the invertebrates, which include a bevy of nudibranch species. And when the sun goes down, the life on the bottom becomes a carnival of colour and small creatures of the weird and wonderful.

Though it is easy for photographers to get caught up in their quest to capture many of the reef's smaller residents, I often favour wide-angle photography. Unlike many near-shore sites, the coral formations on the shallows of Wakatobi's House Reef are quite beautiful.

Plus, not all of the House Reef's marine life is small, and you are likely to encounter one or more of the resident adult-size green turtles cruising the reef by day, or sleeping beneath an overhang by night.

While the pier makes a great entry point, the further you get away from it, the better the scenics get. The one thing you factor into your plan is the current, as it is generated by tide changes. For a few hours of the day currents flow north to south following the reef's outer edge. Slack high or low tide provides an hour of no current, then conditions reverse as the flow turns to run south to north. During these tidal flows, the currents can be anywhere from mild to robust. The stronger flows can take place in the middle of each phase.

Divers and snorkellers need not fight the current's ebb and flow. In addition to the 'pool' being always open (the dive centre personnel have a watch between 6am and 10pm), Wakatobi also provides a taxi boat drop-off service for guests exploring the House Reef. On request, the dive centre's staff will take you and a buddy to an up-current section on the reef aboard one of the resort's skiffs for an incredible drift along the wall back to the resort's jetty.

With more than 40-plus named sites within easy access by the resort's day boats, and the opportunity for dives of up to 70-minutes each, it would be easy to think of the House Reef as just an optional add-on for the afternoon. But don't rule out the idea of making the House Reef an all-day adventure because, as house reefs go, this one is a cut above the rest. ■

