

THE DIVE CENTRE AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

(towels provided)

Eric Vohr takes a private jet
to explore Indonesia's Eden



Sometimes, you have to travel to the end of the world to find spectacular diving; Wakatobi Dive Resort is one of those places. The name Wakatobi is a portmanteau of the four main Tukangbesi Islands in the southeastern corner of Sulawesi, Indonesia: Wangi-Wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia, and Binongko. Roughly 10 miles (16km) off the east coast of Borneo in the Indian Ocean, it takes two-and-one-half-hours to get here on a private chartered flight from Bali. This might seem like a bit of a haul, but it's actually brief, compared to the three days it took founder Lorenz Mäder to get here by boat in the late 1990s. The excitement builds as you fly on a special charter plane with the

rest of Wakatobi's guests over the remote islands and pristine reefs that make up this part of the world. Truly in the middle of nowhere, Wakatobi Dive Resort lies on the white-sand shores of a tiny island in southeast Sulawesi called Pulau Tolandona, adjacent to its better-known and bigger brother, Tomia. As you climb down from the plane onto the tarmac of the tiny airstrip on Tomia, the gentle tropical breeze welcomes you to a land that time forgot. Imagine what Bali looked like a hundred years ago, and you get the idea: small fishing villages, crystal cerulean water, and miles and miles of empty tropical beaches fringed with swaying palm trees. A short boat takes you across a narrow channel to the resort, which blends naturally and seamlessly with the unspoiled natural beauty here.

Wakatobi's reefs are some of the few worldwide that are actually growing... recently designated as a reserve

Wakatobi is located at the world's epicentre of coral reef biodiversity and offers unlimited diving for guests. We like the sound of that!

Reef biodiversity

For divers, however, this is much more than just a tropical paradise. Eighty-five percent of the world's coral reefs are located in the Indo-Pacific "Coral Triangle", and Wakatobi Dive Resort is in the very epicenter of this coral reef biodiversity. As such, the waters around the resort boast more than 400 species of coral and 700 species of fish. One of the factors that add significantly to the abundance of sea life here is the lack of damaging run-off from large rivers or urban

centers, which can destroy reefs via siltation and pollution. The region also has a perfect temperature for coral growth (77-84°F/25-29°C), and an optimal average depth of 66 feet (20m). (Shallow waters have too much temperature fluctuation and disruptive wave/surge action and deep waters diminish the light, which decreases diversity.) In addition to perfect natural conditions for healthy marine life, Mäder and his team have gone to great lengths to preserve the waters and reefs around the resort. As any visitor to Asia knows, over-fishing is an ever-present threat here. On a recent sailing trip to a remote archipelago in Myanmar, we encountered an army of squid boats illuminating the night horizon in all directions with their powerful lights. To help protect the flora and fauna

at Wakatobi, Mäder made a deal with the local fishermen. In return for providing running water, electricity, job opportunities, and community financial support, locals have agreed to curtail damaging fishing practices and safeguard the reefs. This conservation effort has been such a great success, Wakatobi's reefs are some of the few worldwide that are actually growing; in fact, UNESCO recently designated the region as a Marine Biosphere Reserve. **Abundant life** Wakatobi Dive Resort's staff take guests to more than fifty mapped and named dive sites, all within a short distance of the dive center. Of course, this represents only a fraction of the wealth of great dive locations here. Many of these dive sites include

Wakatobi say they've only had to skip 4 days of diving in the last ten years, so no time is a bad time to dive in over your head

shallow reefs that are easily accessible for snorkeling, so those who are not avid divers can also join in the fun. The resort also provides extensive courses for guests who want to learn how to dive or expand their existing knowledge and skills. Wakatobi's extensive biodiversity means you'll see a lot of critters of all shapes and sizes, including my favourite, nudibranchs. These other-worldly, space-ship-like critters never fail to amaze me with their insane shapes and colours. I counted at least twenty different species over my five days of diving here. In addition, I saw multitudes of flatworms, tiny shrimps, and pipefish. Wakatobi is known for its abundance of another special little creature, pigmy sea horses.

Photo: Marco Fierri

Photo: Walt Stearns

