

WAKATOBİ

By Karen Stearns, Wakatobi

Wakatobi National Park encompasses an expansive 13,900 square kilometres of the Tukang Besi island group. Thanks to the positive results of Wakatobi Resort's Collaborative Reef Conservation Program, the Indonesian government expanded the area managed by the resort to what we see today. UNESCO has not only listed the park as a World Heritage Site, but also added it to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves.

Over the past 20 years, observers have documented significant improvements in the quality of the reefs and seagrass beds surrounding Wakatobi Resort. Fish counts are up, and turtle populations have increased. Among the tiny treasures that hide in plain sight are pygmy seahorses. Four of the seven known species of pygmies can be found right on the resort's house reef. It takes a keen eye to spot these tiny creatures, which can range from the length of a fingernail down to a size of a mere grain of rice. To make the game of hide-and-seek even more challenging, pygmies often adapt textures and colours that match that of the gorgonian corals where they find shelter. Fortunately, Wakatobi's dive guides are expert seahorse spotters, and they are usually able to guide guests to just the right sea fan, and point out the well-hidden residents.



- **WHEN**
1996
- **WHERE**
Indonesia
- **WHAT**
National Park, UNESCO
World Heritage Site



MUST-SEE

ROMA – A visit to dive sites such as Roma showcase the broader benefits of Wakatobi's conservation efforts. Upon descent, divers are often immersed in large schools of blackfin and bigeye barracuda, or clouds of snapper and jack crevalle. A ride line leads downward. Around the 18-metre mark, the site's prolific coral colonies share space with a grove of large barrel sponges. At 25 metres, Roma's signature feature comes into view. Spreading over the slope is a large, circular colony of turbinaria coral, some six metres across. When seen from above, the sculpted leaf-like folds of the formation combine to create the impression of a giant rose flower.

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Other dive sites yield equally inspiring rewards. There are walls covered in dense growths of multi-hued sea fans, pinnacles surrounded by kaleidoscopic swarms of anthias, and hard-coral gardens that cascade over the edge of precipitous walls. It is scenes like these that truly emphasise the benefits of Wakatobi's commitment to protecting one of the world's most spectacular underwater environments.

ABOVE

The tiny Bargibant's seahorse is a classic Wakatobi resident

LEFT

A large, circular colony of turbinaria coral at the Roma dive site