Wakatobi’s Coral Kingdom

What is Wakatobi? Some know it as a luxury dive resort, others refer to it as a region. In fact, it is both, but that wasn’t always the case.
A Swiss national named Lorenz Mäder spent years searching the Indo-Pacific for just the right place to build his dream resort. When he came across a small island in the Tukang Besi archipelago of Indonesia’s Banda Sea, he knew he’d found the place.

The surrounding reefs were among the most dramatic and fecund he’d ever seen, and just inshore, there was a white-sand beach fronting a coconut palm grove. It was here in 1995 that Lorenz built his dive lodge in the style of a local Indonesian longhouse.

He named his dive outpost Wakatobi, a word created by taking the first two letters of the four largest islands in the archipelago: Wangi-Wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia, and Binongko.

And even as construction began, he was working on a plan that would ensure the future health of the reefs he’d come to love. At the time, areas of the Indian Ocean were falling victim to destructive fishing practices such as netting and dynamiting. Rather than just quietly sitting by and hoping the local fishermen didn’t damage the reefs, Lorenz negotiated an agreement designating a six kilometer section of the reefs as a no-fishing zone, in exchange for lease payments made directly to 17 local villages.

This was the beginning of the Collaborative Reef Conservation Program, which has since been expanded to cover 20 kilometers of reef, won numerous awards, and become a model for proactive private sector conservation.

As word of the Wakatobi Dive Resort spread through the diving and underwater photography communities, a growing number of adventurous travelers began to make their way to this remote location. Originally, the trip took more than 36 hours from Bali,
Dive the Globe

Wakatobi

Photo: Walt Stearns

By Walt Stearns
and involved a combination of local flights, land transfers and boat rides. Over time, faster connections were created, and in 2001, a private airstrip, the Wakatobi Maranggo Runway, was constructed, and direct charter flights were established to bring guests comfortably and smoothly from Bali to Wakatobi in just two and a half hours.

Garuda Indonesia Airline now serves the resort with twice-weekly flights aboard a 70-seat aircraft that provides generous baggage allowances for gear and photo equipment.

The resort has undergone a litany of other enhancements and expansions over the years. From the original longhouse, the property has grown to include a collection of 24 private Bungalows set in a beachfront coconut grove, along with 4 luxury Villas that sit right on the shoreline, with decks that provide magnificent sunset views. Guests now enjoy five-star service and gourmet-level dining, along with amenities such as personal dive guides, private boat charters, spa services, private beachfront dinners and a range of water sports and land-based activities.

A fleet of custom (21m/70ft) dive boats make daily departures to more than 40 premier sites within the resort’s private marine preserve.

Here, underwater landscapes range from shallow reef tops to dramatic walls and pinnacles covered in luxuriant growths of sponges, and hard and soft corals.

These sites are home to thousands of species of fish and invertebrates. In fact, this region is known as the most bio-diverse marine environment on the planet.

Divers and snorkelers can also experience this rich diversity right off the resort’s beach. Wakatobi’s House
Reef has been named the world’s best shore dive, and it can be accessed day and night. This reef line transitions from grass beds to a coral wall just 80 meters from shore, and stretches for more than a kilometer east and west.

Many guests have spent entire days exploring the House Reef, making treasured finds such as ghost pipefish, leaf scorpionfish, broadclub cuttlefish, six species of clownfish and a plethora of other unique marine creatures mere yards from the resort jetty.

Lorenz’s vision for Wakatobi not only set a precedent for private sector conservation initiatives, it set broader plans in motion, and actually changed the map. In 2002, the Indonesian government expanded the area created by the resort’s conservation program to create the Wakatobi National Park.

The park encompasses an expansive 1,390,000 hectares of the Tukang Besi island group. Then, less than a year later, these islands became an autonomous region, and in the process decided to go for a new name: Wakatobi.

In 2005, UNESCO listed the Wakatobi National Park as a tentative World Heritage Site, which was eventually added to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves in 2012.

Many see Lorenz as a visionary and forward thinker who initiated one of the world’s largest privately-funded and managed marine protected areas. But he often attributes his motives to a more pragmatic goal.

As he tells it, “You can’t pack up and move your resort when the diving is no longer good. So it’s better to do what you can to protect it to enjoy it now and in the future.”

For more visit www.wakatobi.com.
Contact: email office@wakatobi.com

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