

# Wakatobi's Macro Magic

Discovering small treasures and unique marine life is one of life's greatest pleasures. Dive in with Karen Stearns as she takes you on an enchanting journey into the intriguing waters surrounding Wakatobi Resort in SE Sulawesi, Indonesia  
By: **Karen Stearns**

For divers and snorkelers, the benefits of Wakatobi's ongoing commitment to conservation are plain to see. Delve into the waters of the private marine preserve that surrounds the resort and you will find pristine coral formations and thriving fish life. But perhaps even more impressive are the things the big picture doesn't reveal. Take a closer look, and you will discover dive sites rich in macro life, including hard-to-find and rare treasures that will delight fish watchers and photographers alike.

At Wakatobi, you don't have to go far to find the small stuff. Prime hunting grounds are as close as the resort's famed House Reef, which starts right off the beach with a drop off just 80 yards (73 m) out, encompassing hundreds of acres of coral slopes and shallows. The search for macro treasures can begin right at the resort pier. In addition to providing shelter 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



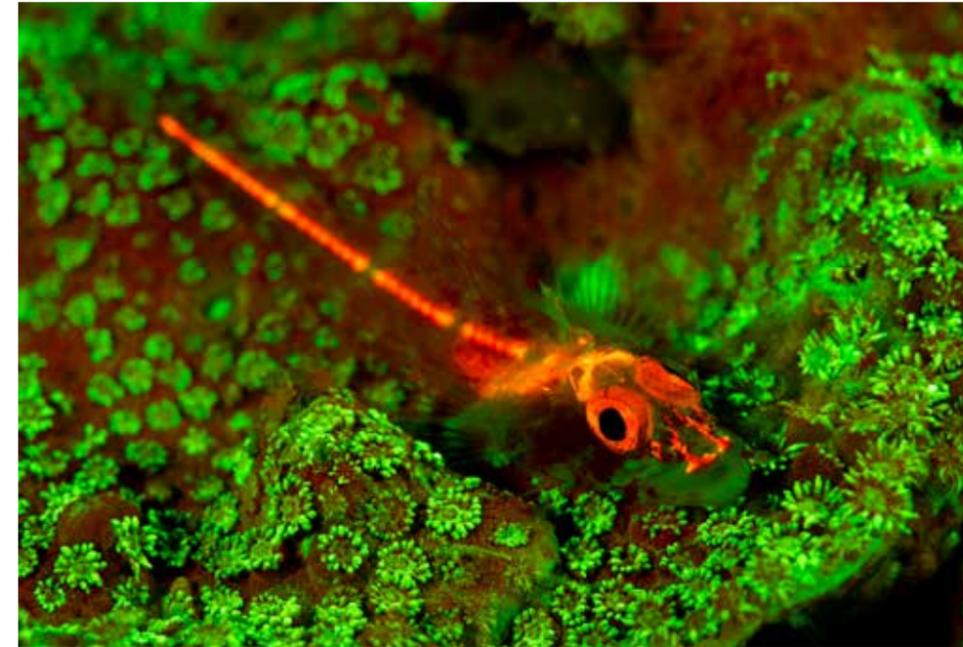
Nearly all of the 40-plus dive sites within the Wakatobi marine reserve offers a chance for small finds

in this area is seemingly innumerable, with the list running from the more expected such as anemonefish to special finds such as frogfish, juvenile cuttlefish, octopus and pairs of leaf scorpionfish.

The upper shelf of the House Reef extends from shallow grass beds to a coral lip less than two metres below the surface. Along this edge, ample ambient sunlight makes it easy to locate invertebrates such as imperial, bubble, and crinoid shrimp, or to penetrate the camouflage of a frogfish. The light also brings out the full colouration of the numerous species of nudibranchs that move among the corals. Just beyond the lip, the reef drops away sharply, with slopes and walls that are riddled with crevices and ledges where numerous species of invertebrates make their home. Among the more intriguing finds on the House Reef are the compensate pairs of shrimp gobies and pistol shrimp, which share a burrow and divvy up the tasks of housekeeping and watch keeping. The shallow seagrass beds between the reef and beach are also excellent macro hunting grounds. It is here that keen observers may find cryptic species such as ornate and halimeda ghost pipefish hiding in plain sight.

Almost every dive site in the Wakatobi marine reserve offers a chance for small finds, with favorites such as Cornucopia, Magnifica, Teluk Maya or Zoo delivering thousands of species. Sites with minimal currents and shallow depths allow for relaxed hunting and long bottom times. This is the case at the site known as Dunia Baru, where snake eels slither among the corals, Spanish dancers flit about, and mantis shrimp stalk their prey. A closer examination of the bottom will reveal saron shrimp and an abundance of flatworms and pleurobranchs. Dunia Baru is also a favourite for night dives, and one of the best sites to find the polka dot-adorned Pajama cardinalfish.

For a different macro diving experience, Wakatobi guests can book a cabin on the dive yacht *Pelagian*, which departs the resort weekly for cruises to more remote areas of the Wakatobi archipelago, and to the Southeastern coast of Buton Island. Here, the focus is on the near-shore shallows, where



divers engage in underwater treasure hunts for the small and often highly cryptic critters that burrow into the seafloor silt, lurk in debris fields or hide among the supporting columns of village piers. This is muck diving, which is all about moving slowly and looking closely to discover hidden sea life.

OPPOSITE PAGE: On some dives you just get the crabs

IMAGE: Marco Fierli

RIGHT: Triplefin goby under fluo lighting (dive site Zoo)

BELOW: Pair of pajama cardinalfish strike a pose at Dunia Baru

IMAGES: Walt Stearns

*Pelagian* visits a number of top-notch sites where divers can hover over seagrass and rubble terrain in search of unique finds. This type of close-quarter manoeuvring can be challenging for even experienced divers, but it becomes easier when you borrow a little trick that underwater macro photographers have used for years. Rather than attempting to use fins and body language to hold position above a tiny and fragile subject, they deploy what is known as a muck stick into an appropriate piece of bottom, and use it as an anchor point to control their distance from the sea floor.

Cheeky Beach is a favourite site visited by the *Pelagian*. The beauty of this and most surrounding muck sites is that it can be dived repetitively, rendering unique and different finds every time. The big news at Cheeky Beach is the small stuff, as it is



**Often found in pairs, these exquisite shrimps live exclusively on fire urchins, taking up residence in the middle of the urchin's toxic spines**

ABOVE: Mated pair of Coleman shrimp on a fire urchin at Cheeky Beach  
BELOW: Emperor takes a ride on the nose of a large nembrotha nudibranch  
IMAGES: Walt Stearns



a shrimp breeding ground for several of the more exotic species found in the Wakatobi region. Found here in abundance are class favourites like the Coleman shrimp. Often found in pairs, these exquisite shrimps live exclusively on fire urchins, taking up residence in the middle of the urchin's toxic spines. The host urchin's spines do not harm the shrimp, but they usually clear an area on the urchin where they perch, making for a compelling macro subject.

Several varieties of mantis shrimp also take up residence at Cheeky Beach, including the enigmatic peacock mantis, as well as a host of smaller species that can require a bit of visual detective work to locate. Find a blue starfish and there's a good chance there will be a few harlequin shrimp nipping away at its flanks, as starfish are this species' favorite food. A closer look at a seemingly unimpressive find such as a sea cucumber may yield a pair of imperial shrimp. For a more colourful composition, photographers look for this same species attached to a colourful nudibranch such as a Spanish dancer. Divers with keen eyesight can scan algae-covered rocks in search of the tiny hairy shrimp, or check among the spines of an urchin for a chance at locating the colourful bumblebee shrimp.

The same soft substrate that shrimp prefer is also home to a number of



RIGHT: Mandarinfish (*Synchiropus splendidus*) a member of the dragonet family, can be seen at Magic Pier, a *Pelagian* signature dive  
IMAGE: Walt Stearns

animals that burrow into the bottom. Stake out a promising hole in the sea floor and you might witness the ambush attack of a bobbit worm, which lunges from cover to capture passing victims. Cuttlefish, blue-ringed and wonderpus octopus are all known to burrow for shelter, but can also be encountered out and about, especially in the evening or during night dives. One of the area's most comical species of cephalopods doesn't dig in, and instead takes up residence in discarded coconut shells. Should you see a coconut husk drifting or rolling across the bottom, take a second look, there might be a coconut octopus inside.

The dive site known as Magic Pier is famous for the courtship displays

staged by amorous mandarinfish each evening, and that alone is reason enough to visit this otherwise unremarkable bit of sea floor. But there's more. As dusk turns to full darkness, dive lights are switched on to reveal a nocturnal cast of characters. White-eyed, moray and Napoleon snake eels slither through gaps in the coral rubble, bizarre mantis shrimp emerge from their burrows, their eerie, chromium-tinged eyes reflecting in the beam of your light. A pile of sediment seems to move, then reveals itself as a perfectly-camouflaged blue-ringed octopus. Schooling razorfish flash silver, then scatter as a trio of pulsating cuttlefish appear.

On any given reef a close-up search around outcrops of coral, algae, sponges or sandy slopes can reveal the tiny form of an ornate ghost pipefish. Additionally, four of the seven known species of pygmies are found on the reefs of Wakatobi: Bargibant, Denise's, Pontoh's and Severn's pygmy seahorses, plus the recently described pygmy pipehorse. Ask a Wakatobi guide and they will set out on a mission to locate these tiny, delicate residents of the numerous large seafans found on most sites including the House Reef.

Plan a visit to Wakatobi Resort or *Pelagian* liveaboard and you're sure to discover a plentitude of small treasures and unique marine life. **AD**