

A MECCA FOR DIVERS & SNORKELLERS



For many underwater adventurers, satisfaction comes from exploring biodiversity in their natural habitats, and a highly biodiverse place never fails to excite. Of all the ocean's ecosystems, none are more fascinating than the coral reefs in the Indo-Pacific region known as the Coral Triangle — famed for being the most biodiverse marine habitat in the world. Wakatobi Resort, where a privately-funded marine reserve showcases the best of the Coral Triangle, is the perfect base to explore the pristine reefs and diverse populations of marine life in the region's warm and clear waters.

"These are some of the healthiest reef systems that I have ever had the pleasure of seeing first-hand," says Simon Bowen who has logged more than 3,000 dives in some of the world's most celebrated destinations. He considers Wakatobi a favourite destination because "the most incredible biodiversity and experienced guides who know the sites well are a perfect and rare combination". Simon has made Wakatobi the base for his underwater adventures three times in the past two years. "It is one of the very few places where I always know what I will be getting," he says, "and even then, my expectations are always exceeded. I'll be back again soon to enjoy this very special and rare corner of the earth."

Wade Hughes and his wife Robyn — who have travelled to 55 countries together and dived in sites from the Arctic Circle to the tropics — echo Simon's delight of seeing the incredibly healthy and biodiverse coral reefs in Wakatobi. Wade has logged nearly 400 dives in Wakatobi, and Robyn has spent hundreds of hours snorkelling among its reefs. Between the extensive seagrass beds close to shore

and the upper portions of most reefs, there are near endless possibilities for discovery. Her personal favourite is the house reef, which begins directly in front of the resort beach and stretches for more than two kilometres to encompass thousands of hectares of protected habitat. This site has been named the world's best shore dive and many divers and snorkellers consider it a personal favourite.

The couple has already visited Wakatobi eight times and are planning for their ninth visit early next year. "We come to Wakatobi repeatedly for numerous reasons," Robyn says. "We appreciate that the money we spend here not only gets us great service, comfort and superb diving but also helps directly support the local economy and protection of the coral reefs."

More than two decades ago, the founders of Wakatobi Resort created the Collaborative Reef Conservation Programme. The first of its kind, this innovative initiative uses lease payments made directly to local fishermen and villagers to promote the cessation of destructive fishing practices and encourage local participation in creating a marine reserve that now stretches across 20 kilometres of prime coral habitat. This programme has transformed the surrounding community into stewards of the reefs and demonstrated the economic value of protecting this unique ecosystem. Because the programme is funded by a portion of resort revenue, all guests of Wakatobi Dive Resort become part of the solution.

The promise of pristine, impressive coral formations, abundant marine life and an idyllic beachside resort setting makes Wakatobi a dream destination for many and a Mecca for divers. After all, legendary Jacques Cousteau said the place offers "possibly the finest diving in the world". And as many who have discovered this destination can attest, it is a place that entices them back for more.

