



2

AMAZING ENCOUNTERS

Pelagian journeys throughout the Wakatobi National Park at the heart of the Coral Triangle. Here the reefs are packed with life and covered in abundant kaleidoscopic coral growth. It was three years since my last visit so I didn't expect to see many familiar faces, but there were in fact many smiling faces to welcome me back. Ben and Kaori, the cruise directors for my Pelagian trip, had been at the resort when I was last there so it was fantastic to have them in charge of our dive experience. Ben is originally from Tasmania and with a degree in marine biology we have plenty to talk about and a pleasure to dive with. His Japanese wife Kaori is excellent at spotting small critters and the couple lead a brilliant full-time crew of 12. Muji, barman turned

dive guide, was aboard. When I last saw him he was creating amazing cocktails at the resort's jetty bar but has joined the dive team and now spends much of his time on Pelagian.

After settling in and unpacking, we sailed overnight to the satellite islands of Wangi Wangi. Our first dive was on the reefs of Kanpenaune, a small island off Wangi Wangi. Diving is conducted from two tenders; on our trip the guides to guests ratio was 1:4, as we were only eight guests. The daily routine comfortably fits in four 70 minute dives including a night dive. Each day felt unique, as once we arrived in a general area for the day we tended to move relatively short distances between

sites. Our first day consisted of colourful walls covered in soft corals, gorgonians and sponges harbouring a huge diversity of smaller creatures. The eagle-eyed guides found rare psychedelic *Halgerda* and *Thecacera nudibranchs*. As always, the term slug didn't do them justice.

In my Element One of the aspects I really enjoyed about diving with Wakatobi's guides is the great care they take of the reef. Through my research I found that pygmy seahorses are extremely sensitive to certain actions carried out by divers, such as poking the animal and touching their gorgonian coral home. Like their resort-based counterparts, Pelagian's guides are extremely careful not to harm any marine

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1



3



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1. Diver, gorgonians and soft corals
2. Small dottedback emerging from inside a sea squirt
3. Soft coral crab
4. A rare example of a Denise's pygmy seahorse living on a whip coral





5

life, whilst still making sure their guests get a good view or shot of each creature they find.

Characteristically for Wakatobi, it wasn't long before we came across one of the stars of the reef: a group of pygmy seahorses. This area is one of the richest in terms of diversity and abundance of these tiny fish. One of the specialities of Wakatobi for me is the Pontoh's species: in my experience, nowhere else are they so reliably encountered as here. Searching their favoured habitat amongst the Halimeda algae often results in finding one. On only my second dive aboard Pelagian I found a group of four, including a heavily pregnant male, all living within a square metre of reef.

There are also plenty of pygmy surprises on these reefs. For only the second time ever, I found a pair of Denise's pygmies living on a whip coral. They were extremely difficult to photograph due to a stubborn current, which moved the individual whips around, constantly obscuring the seahorses within. On the reefs around Wakatobi I've seen this species of pygmy seahorse living on at least five kinds of gorgonians, with each perfectly matching its surroundings, making a broad palette of different colour forms.

Magnificent Muck One of the areas I was most excited about visiting on the trip was Pasar Wajo on Buton Island, where a host of muck dives are located. Muck diving, if you haven't heard of it before, is basically a treasure hunt searching for small and often extremely well camouflaged critters hiding on the sandy bottom or among copious debris. Whilst based at the resort I heard wonderful stories of this area and had always wanted to check it out myself. Finally, as part of the Pelagian itinerary my dream came true and the area lived up to my high expectations.

The morning's dives were typical muck diving fare – sandy rubble slopes punctuated with sponges and algae. Descending on our first dive at Cheeky Beach, I found an unusual and striking pure white snout ghost pipefish. Usually these highly-camouflaged fish are much less beautiful in colour, and as a bonus the female I found was a pretty huge specimen well adorned with the diagnostic filaments beneath the chin. There were many other great sightings during our day dives in this area including frogfish, seahorses, cowfish and plenty of interesting gobies.

- 5. Basket star shrimp (*Periclimenes lanipes*) on basket star, this shrimp is only found in association with basket stars
- 6. Diver investigating a rich soft coral covered bommie
- 7. Ménage a trois of mating mandarinfish
- 8. Pontoh's pygmy seahorse, usually rare, is commonly encountered at Wakatobi
- 9. Heavily pregnant male Denise's pygmy seahorse
- 10. Bargibant's pygmy seahorse
- 11. Pyjama cardinalfish is one of the reef's most spectacularly coloured residents



6



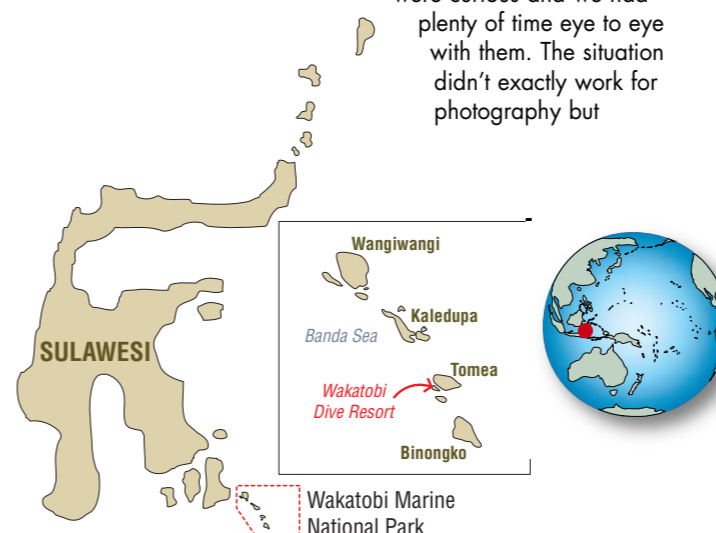
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Fantastic By Night We did both traditional reef night dives as well as a dusk dive in search of mandarinfish. On one reef dive I was very fortunate to find a tiny Xenia crab which had just shed its skin and was hiding among the soft coral polyps. All crustaceans have a hard exoskeleton that restricts them from growing day by day as we do, so they occasionally shed this shell and before the new skin below hardens then expands slightly in order to grow. Xenia soft corals are actually a great place to look for nocturnal creatures. They're beige in colour and resemble small flowers that open and close in a pulsating, rhythmic fashion. The smorgasbord of other organisms they accommodate tend to have amazing camouflage resembling their home. There are nudibranchs with cerata (the finger-like processes on their back) that resemble the polyps, shrimp that have a stripey beige colouration and even filefish that are almost indistinguishable from this habitat.

The dusk dive in search of mandarinfish was a highlight. Mandarinfish aren't usually high on my wishlist but there were so many huge individuals spread out over such a large area that it was a great encounter. There were so many fish competing for mates that I saw my first-ever mandarinfish *ménage a trois*! They weren't the only notable residents of Magic Pier: several ghost pipefish, cockatoo waspfish, cuttlefish, snake eels and many octopus were living amongst the rubble and jetty pylons.

Stunning Reefscapes During our final full day of diving we reached the most remote part of our itinerary. We were 20 miles from the nearest land and these untouched reefs, much like those protected in conjunction with local communities nearer to the resort, are bursting with life. On all the dives the soft corals were beautiful and hard corals competed for space in the clear shallow water. One dive, however, sticks in my mind as the quiet of the reef was constantly punctuated by the sounds of dolphins. I was completely distracted looking around for them but never even caught a glimpse of one. Then, after surfacing, the other tender was some distance away and we joined them to spend the next hour or so swimming with melon-headed whales. They were moving quite fast so we decided to bow ride with them by hanging on to the front of the tender whilst it drove along. They

were curious and we had plenty of time eye to eye with them. The situation didn't exactly work for photography but



8



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12. Unusual white coloured rough snout ghost pipefish

13. *Chromodoris leopardus* nudibranch flaring its oral veil

13



memorable experiences are often just as precious as photos!

Ruminating

Pelagian is one of the premier liveaboards in the region and the small number of guests on each charter means the ratio of staff to guests favours the guests. The diving perfectly complements that of its land-based counterpart and would make an excellent add-on if you have the time. Having done a five day trip I'd like to do a longer itinerary taking in the walls of Binongko and the other extremely biodiverse reefs in the area.

Pelagian has evolved from a Norwegian built world-ranging motor yacht into a floating boutique hotel. She was taken on by the resort in 2005 and has undergone several refits and renovations since.

10



Whilst other dive boats these days are squeezing more guests on per charter, Pelagian bucks the trend and has been reconfigured to reduce the number of guest

cabins to five. The maximum of 10 guests are treated to shockingly spacious



surroundings for a liveaboard, which measures 35 metres in length. The cabins are incredible and will help convince a non-diving partner to join a cruise. The pièce de résistance, the master cabin, spans the entire bow and boasts a large flat screen television, blue-ray DVD player, sofa and huge bathroom.

Joining Pelagian has never been easier: with more frequent flights from Bali and itineraries of five, six or seven days, it is perfect if time is limited or you want to extend your trip to the resort for a little longer. Wakatobi privately charters the plane so you don't even have to worry

excess baggage isn't a problem – something that always bothers me due to having so much camera gear.

The name Wakatobi is actually derived from the first two letters of the four main islands in the chain. Wangi Wangi donates its first two letters WA, and during our dive safari we also visited Kaledupa, KA, and Tomia, TO, missing only Binongko, which is included on longer charters. For more information on Wakatobi and Pelagian, dive into www.Wakatobi.com


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"The beauty above land is matched or exceeded by the beauty of the dive sites. Every single dive site we visited was an award winning adventure in itself."
 - DUNCAN ZILLMAN, SYDNEY

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