

# SULAWESI ODYSSEY

RICHARD SMITH  
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1 The *Walea* soft coral pygmy seahorse *Hippocampus waleananus* is known only from the reefs around Walea Resort in the Togian Islands  
2 A coral ridge and abundant sessile invertebrates in the Wakatobi area  
3 Camouflaged creatures abound in Lembeh such as this amazing nudibranch, *Phyllodesmium rudmani*, which mimics a soft coral

The sprawling shape of Sulawesi, formerly Celebes, resembles a squashed spider, stretching yoga instructor or windblown orchid, depending on your perspective. Its diving opportunities are equally diverse: in the north are the black sandy slopes of the Lembeh Strait brimming with the weirdest critters in the shallow seas, central Sulawesi's Togian islands boast a coral Eden with some of the best hard corals in Indonesia and Wakatobi in the southeast hosts vibrant reefs covered in dense and diverse soft coral, sponges and gorgonian corals. Sulawesi has some of the best diving in Asia – if not the world.

Indonesia is an extremely geologically active place and has been shifted, buffeted and moulded by millions of years of tectonic plate activity. Sulawesi's unusual shape is a direct result of this activity and formed around three million years ago when the north and south peninsulas broke off Borneo and collided with today's eastern and southeastern peninsulas, which originated from the same land-mass as Australia. With origins in both Asia and Australia, Sulawesi has a diverse array of terrestrial animals, which have

subsequently evolved in isolation into a multitude of unique species, in a similar manner to those of the Galapagos islands. Despite its relatively small size the island accommodates four unique species of macaque monkeys, the Babirusa (an unusual tusked pig-deer), nearly 90 endemic bird species and the tarsier, a forbear of modern monkeys and the likes of which were the inspiration for Yoda and the cuddly Mogwai of *Gremlins!*

The island's unusual history also helps explain some of the diversity it has below the waves. The northern critter-packed black sands originate from volcanic activity, the coral abundance of the Togian islands is due to the area's warm clear waters and in the remote southeast nutrient-rich waters nourish colourful soft corals. A voyage from north to south on this fascinating island, whilst only 800 km, offers a huge diversity of diving opportunities for every taste.

#### Northern Sulawesi Lembeh Strait – First Stop Muck Town!

In northern Sulawesi you're more likely to recognise the names Manado, Bangka or

Bunaken than Lembeh. Lembeh is the undoubted muck diving capital of the world where gaudy, monstrous and amazingly well camouflaged creatures abound. Black volcanic sand, for some reason, attracts these creatures but it is the combination of the black sand and nutrient rich water that flows through the strait that make it so bountiful.

Lembeh really is unrivalled as the best place to find the rare critters which have been eluding you your whole dive career: Blue ringed, mimic and wunderpus octopus, hairy and clown frogfish, ribbon eels, stargazers, harlequin shrimp, Ambon scorpionfish, flamboyant cuttlefish and even the very rare and beautiful weedy and paddle flap scorpionfish (*Rhinopias* to their mates!). Thanks to the eagle-eyed guides this wish list of creatures really is attainable in five days diving. Granted, you'll see garbage and trash on your dives, and the large port Bitung midway down the strait doesn't help with this, but so far the critters appear not to mind. In fact they seem to relish this rubbish; I've seen a shoe acting as a surrogate home for an anemonefish, a chip packet an alternative to a feather star for a ghost



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pipefish and a wine bottle housing an octopus!

Lembeh is one of the more accessible dive areas in Sulawesi and only a couple of hours from Manado international airport. There's a huge range of resorts to suit all budgets and tastes from simple chalets to 5 star resorts. The close proximity to the better-known walls and reefs of Bunaken allows for a multi-location trip taking in all that the region has to offer. Personally I'd happily spend two weeks mucking around, so to speak, but this might not be for everybody! Whichever you chose you'll need a de-gas day and northern Sulawesi has some great wildlife spotting opportunities within the Tangkoko National Park. This is only a couple of hours from Lembeh and contains many of Sulawesi's unique animals such as hornbills, black macaques and tarsiers and is well worth the trip.

A word of warning: the guides are really keen to show you as many of the critters as possible and will track down any special requests. Unfortunately they

- 4 *The Lembeh Strait in northern Sulawesi*
- 5 *Small schooling fish in Wakatobi shallow waters*
- 6 *Wakatobi's reefs are a kaleidoscope of colour*
- 7 *Yawning paddle-flap scorpionfish*  
*Rhinopias eschmeyeri*

often have quite a 'hands on' approach and will handle and manipulate the animal once it's found and can even cause a fair amount of damage just seeking it out. I strongly believe it's the responsibility of guests to discourage this as the stress to the animal is sure to be detrimental and with the volume of divers visiting the area many creatures will disappear.

**Regional Highlights:**  
Rhinopias, Hairy Frogfish, Mimic Octopus, Banggai Cardinalfish.

**Central Sulawesi**  
**Togian Islands – A Coral Eden**

The Togian islands are found within the huge Gulf of Tomini, bordered to the north and west by Sulawesi's meandering northern peninsula with the central part of the island to the south. The waters here

- 8 *Walea Resort in central Sulawesi*
- 9 *Wakatobi Dive Resort in southern Sulawesi*
- 10 *Occasionally huge sponges can be seen on the reef in central Sulawesi*
- 11 *Beautiful spotfin lionfish in Lembeh*

are crystal clear and have some of the best hard coral gardens I've seen in Indonesia. The movement of water and underwater topography of the gulf means that a warm clear layer of water sits above the cooler nutrient rich waters below. The shallows are the domain of hard corals, since these conditions suit them ideally. Clear water allows the tiny algae residing within the coral's tissues to get plenty of sunlight, with the energy they gather then nourishing the coral animal. Clear water means low nutrient levels so without the coral-algal symbiosis the tropical shallows would be much poorer in life. For this reason the soft corals and gorgonians that don't have these algal food factories within their tissues are only found in the deeper waters where they can filter feed.

Walea resort is at the very tip of

Waleabahi island, which has a stunning white sand point. It was founded by a trio of intrepid Italians in the late 1990s and not long after their arrival they found a new species of pygmy seahorse, which to this day has only been found on their reefs. It was named in 2009 as *Hippocampus waleananus* or the Walea soft coral pygmy. Like its cousins that are limited to life on only specific gorgonian corals this species exists only on certain beige soft corals. It is much more active than the other species and apart from habitat can also be distinguished by the constellation of tiny white spots that cover the body and an exceedingly long tail that allows it to grasp the relatively thick soft coral stems. The area also gets occasional larger visitors; I saw whitetip, blacktip and grey reef sharks on one action-packed dive! These larger species are generally found where currents hit the reef forcing the nutrient rich water upwards. Here huge schools of fish such as trevally aggregate as well as their predators, dog tooth tuna and sharks.

The journey to Walea takes you through Manado in the north followed by a short internal flight to Luwuk in central Sulawesi,

a couple of hours by car to Pagimana and then just over an hour by speed boat to the resort. Luckily the transfer is handled by the resort and passes pretty quickly as you're entertained by the changing scenery and the occasional cow that ambles onto the road. After this trip you'll quickly settle into the resort's beautifully designed individual cottages and surely some of the best Italian cuisine outside of Italy!

**Regional Highlights:** Walea Soft Coral Pygmy Seahorse, Interesting Crustaceans, Hard Coral Gardens, Sharks.

**Southern Sulawesi**  
**Wakatobi Region – Spectacular Reefs**

Wakatobi Dive Resort is a true oasis in the Tukang Besi islands. The name Wakatobi derives from the first two letters of the four islands making up the group: Wangiwangi, Kaledupa, Tomia and Binongko. Only a few years ago the journey from Bali took three full and arduous days of plane, ferry and car travel but the resort has now constructed a runway on a neighbouring island cutting the journey time to two hours! It's easy to

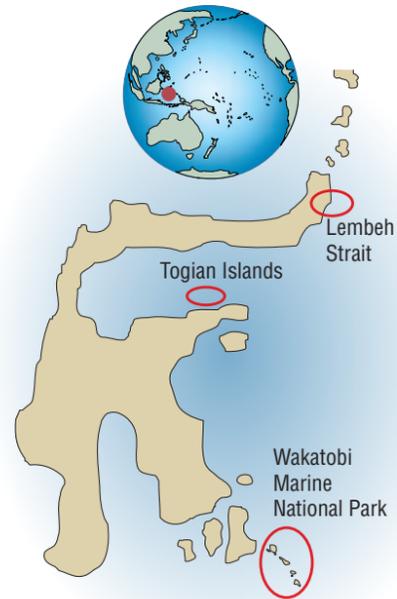


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12 Rainforest, white sand beaches and vibrant coral reefs are typical of the islands in the Togians  
13 Lembeh Strait contains an economically important port and is a boasts a rich fishery



classified as Pontoh's species and the brown one as Severn's. In many areas pygmy seahorses are found so deep that only a fleeting visit is possible before your computer becomes upset, but at Wakatobi I've seen all these species shallower than 10 metres, allowing for much more leisurely viewing.

**Regional Highlights:** Abundant Pygmy Seahorses, Halimeda Ghost Pipefish, Vibrant Soft Coral Reefs, Blue-Ringed Octopus (primarily on the resort's live aboard the Pelagian).

**Becoming Hooked on Sulawesi!**

Sulawesi is barely known outside of diving circles but it is a great location to suit all tastes and budgets. Some of its most pristine underwater areas are a little out of the way and require some dedication to reach but it is exactly that which keeps them in such perfect condition. Sulawesi is a great location to visit either on a 'Sulawesi Safari' or to visit a specific location. There's no doubt that one visit to Sulawesi is never enough!

forget how remote you are but you'll quickly remember as soon as you hit the water. 20 kms of reefs have been protected through a reef lease program created by the resort and in conjunction with surrounding villages, which has kept the area completely pristine. Every luxury can be found at the resort, which has grown from strength to strength under the watchful eye of founder Lorenz Mader who discovered the site by travelling the region extensively until he found paradise.

The reefs of Wakatobi are something to behold, especially when a little current is running causing the soft corals to swell and open their polyps making the walls a rainbow of colour. Whilst the dive boats will take you out three times a day, the house reef (easily be accessed from shore) must not be missed; a school of big-eye trevally eagerly greets divers taking their turn to have a look at you; the same dive

can also yield half a dozen green turtles and you never know what other smaller gems you might come across! I've seen mating dragonets, halimeda ghost pipefish, frogfish and at night a Spanish dancer nudibranch with a stunning pair of imperial shrimp.

According to Constantinos Petrinou's book Lembeh is the 'Realm of the Pygmy Seahorse', if this is so then Wakatobi must be the kingdom of the pygmy seahorse with four species commonly seen on the reef. Both Denise's (*Hippocampus denise*) and Bargibant's pygmies (*H. bargibanti*) can be found living on their gorgonian coral hosts whilst the newly described Pontoh's (*H. pontohi*) and Severn's (*H. severnsi*) species hide amongst halimeda algae and hydroids. The two new pygmies had been seen at the resort for many years but remained nameless until the end of 2008 when the white pygmy was