

Wakatobi - The Big Picture

by Walt Stearns

There's no denying the allure of capturing images of those more elusive varieties of marine life that hide in the recess of a reef. Yet, in my experience, some of us photographer types run the danger of getting too lost in capturing the small details to the point of missing the big picture. Panoramic reef scenes will also draw many "oohs and ahhs" from an audience. These are the shots that instill in the diver's imagination the vision of that perfect tropical retreat: a place where waters covering pristine reefs are warm and clear, and the marine life is both abundant and diverse.

Having spent some time at Wakatobi dive resort in Indonesia's Tukang Besi archipelago, I can attest to the fact that a photographer could spend weeks on their highly celebrated House Reef and surrounding reefs filling memory card after memory card with spectacular marine life portraits and macro shots, without ever once running out of unique subject material. But that is only half the story. There is also the panoramic scenic images that depict just how remarkable a place really is.

Going after the big picture - shooting wide angle

One of the best ways to show the true scope and quality of a destination is by adding wide and super-wide panoramic images to the mix.

Wakatobi is one of very few dive resorts in the world that shouldered the burden of protecting their reefs through the creation of a privately maintained marine preserve. Drop in on just about any one of their 40-plus named sites and the evidence of their proactive conservation efforts is readily apparent in the vitality of the reefs.

In addition to remaining in a near-pristine condition, Wakatobi's

Wakatobi Reefs (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/160 sec., lens set at 17mm, Aperture F9, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's set between full and half power)

Wakatobi Reefs 2 (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/200 sec., lens set at 10mm, Aperture F6.3, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's set between half and quarter power)





The Blade looking down (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/100 sec., lens set at 10mm, Aperture F6.3)

underwater terrain encompasses some dramatic topography. There are steep reef slopes and vertical walls coming to within a few feet from the surface, submerged ridges and seamounts that vault from the depths with peaks cresting in the sun dappled shallows. A memorable example of this is the site

www.uwpmag.com



The Blade_2 – fan and sponge (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/100 sec., lens set at 10mm, Aperture F6.3, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's set at half power)

known as Blade.

Seen from above, Blade's profile almost defies description. Rather than the typical submerged pinnacle, the Blade's massive formation resembles a medieval battlement, averaging just seven meters across while spanning several hundred meters in



Diver & Reef - (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/100 sec., lens set at 13mm, Aperture F6.3, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's set at half power)

length, with each side of its vertical profile dropping precipitously into the deep blue.

Rising above a vivid backdrop of chromatic blue, every facet of this grand rampart is covered in coral. Adding to Blade's unique and highly picturesque topography is a comprehensive collection of giant sponges, sea fans and soft corals, providing fantastic photo opportunities no matter which side you decide to explore.

When presented with a seemingly unspoiled reef system, I recommend dedicating some of your bottom time to shooting wide angle. When the waters are this clear, and provide ample ambient light to showcase these vistas in vibrant detail, exploit it!

No need to get into what brand/model DSLR camera and housing you have, as it is far less relevant to the subject than what you are using in terms of optics. My most preferred setup for scenics such as Blade when using an APS-C DSLR is the Tokina 10–17mm fisheye zoom behind a 200mm (8-



Hard Corals at Roma (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/125 sec., lens set at 10mm, Aperture F5.6, no strobes, available light only)

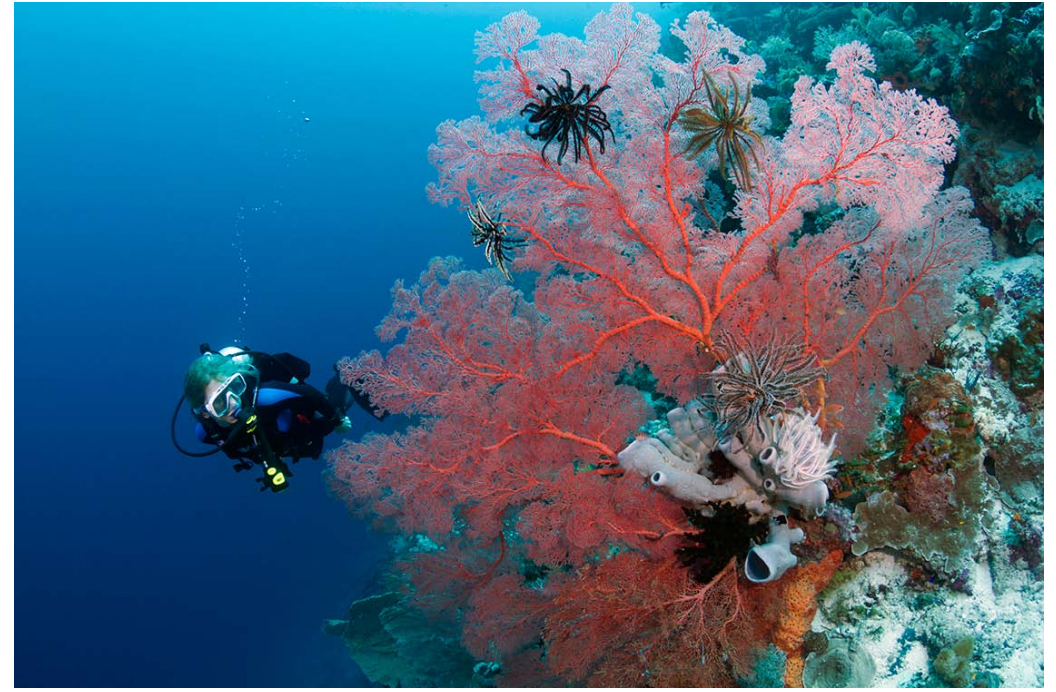
inch) dome port.

At Wakatobi's dive site Roma there is a giant scroll coral formation I have nicknamed "the rose" for its obvious shape when viewed from above. The only way I felt that I could do it the most justice was to shoot using only ambient light, as there was plenty available. Using strobes would only serve to light up the small amount of particulate in the water column between the coral and me.

Since there are no straight lines

on a reef, the barrel-like distortion created by the Fisheye's optics is seldom an issue. In fact the opposite is true, as the distortion can lend a little extra degree of drama to the subject. To convey a sense of scale, I had my model hover three feet above the coral.

Almost everyone I know uses a dual strobe setup. While essential for lighting up the subject evenly in the foreground, when shooting wide-angle, many forget to think about the



Diver & Seafan (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/80 sec., lens set at 10mm, Aperture F7.1, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's manually set with right strobe between half and quarter power, left strobe at half power.)

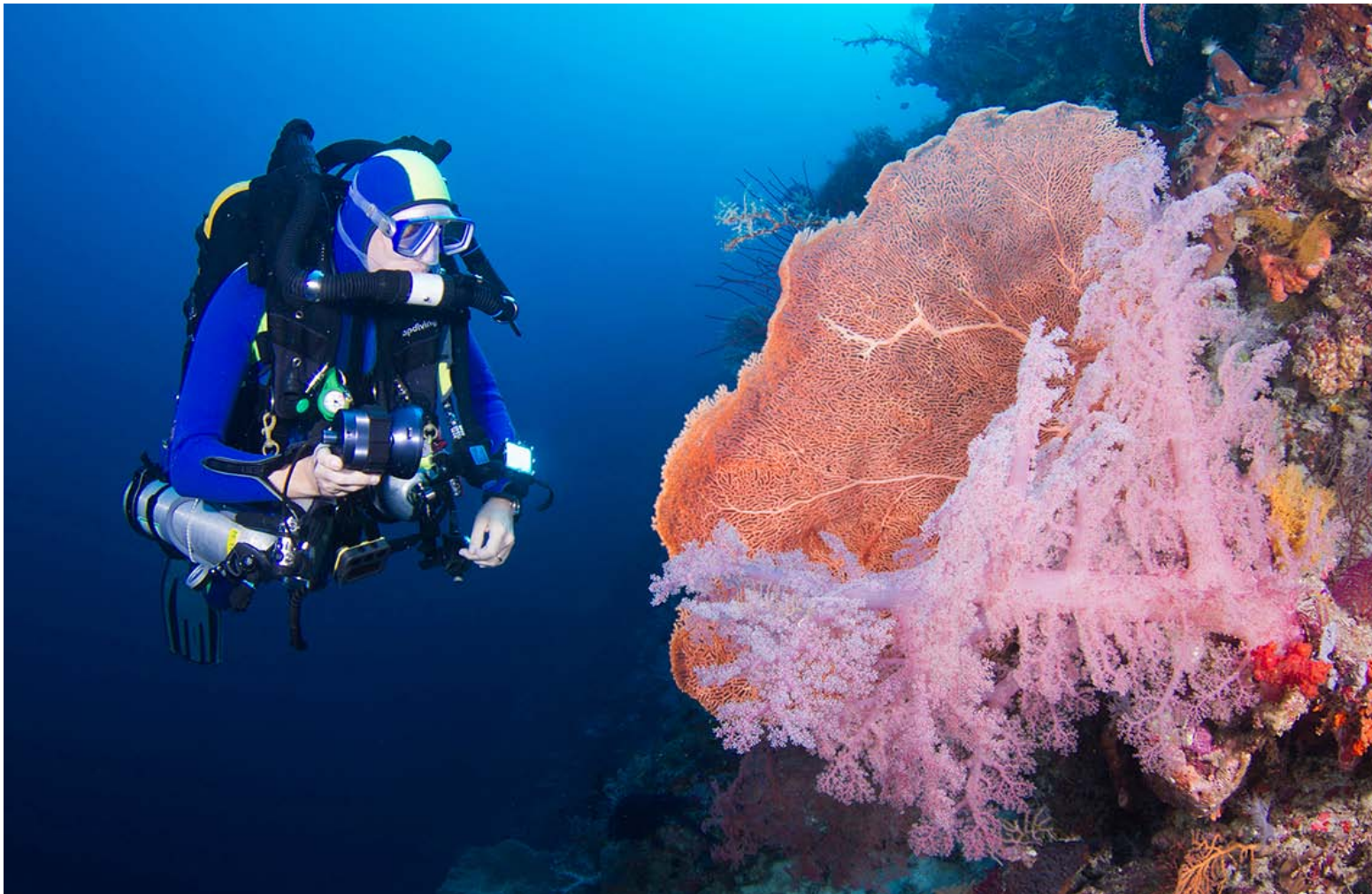
background. When it comes to the tropics, nothing says it better than balancing the ambient light with your own lighting to give it that inviting beautiful blue allure.

I am a firm believer in shooting manually, and this includes the strobes. At Wakatobi, my strobe output was rarely set above 3/4 power, more often the settings would get varied between quarter and half power.

Before setting up any shot, my

strategy always starts with knowing where the sun is, observing where the natural light is transitioning from bright to dark, and taking meter readings of the ambient light through the lens at each point. This allows me to establish a baseline for aperture values. I can then begin the work to best capture the blueness of the water in the background.

For example, at the site called Lorenz's Delight, I found a very large, beautiful red sea fan down the wall at



CCR Diver at depth. (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 300, shutter speed 1/60 sec., lens set at 12mm, Aperture F5.0, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's set manually between half and quarter power.)

110 feet. At that depth the ambient light was still pretty good, allowing me to stay at 200 ISO with meter readings ranging between f4.5 and f8. Once I had proper aperture values dialed to capture the ideal blue of the water, I turned my attention back to

the reef.

At that depth, the fan was more dark maroon than red, which I wanted to bring out, plus add a diver to the scene to give some scale of its size. To retain ambient light, I dropped the shutter speed slightly to 1/80 sec to an

aperture value of f7.1 (plus minus half a stop) to maintain enough depth of field for both the fan and diver.

This entire process might sound a bit too methodical, but remember that unlike a fish, a reef isn't going anywhere. You have ample time to

review your results and make the subtle tweaks needed to dial in your lighting and composition. Because LCD screens don't always tell the whole story, I always review the playback image against the camera's histogram display.

In addition to catering to recreational divers on nitrox, Wakatobi is well equipped to handle divers using rebreathers, including groups as large as 20.

Because of this, I wanted to somehow illustrate that aspect of their services with a CCR diver at a deeper depth. Doing so while retaining enough ambient light to keep the image looking Tropical Ocean rather than the bottom of a quarry presented some challenges. Most notably among these was interference from the reef's steep profile and dramatic overhangs, which cast broad shadows everywhere, further reducing the ambient light.

My normal tendency is to increase the ISO range from 200 to around 350 – 400 ISO.

But again, at a depth of 150 feet, light penetration from the surface through the clear waters allowed me to stick with 200 ISO, dropping the shutter speed to a 1/60 of a sec., which gave me a working aperture range of F4.5 – F5.0



Cuttlefish_1 (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/200 sec., lens set at 10mm, Aperture F9.0, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's manually set between half and full power.)

Few images offer more drama than a wide-angle shot that also includes an interesting marine animal like this Broadclub cuttlefish.

I have found that the Broadclub cuttlefish on the reefs at Wakatobi can be highly tolerant of divers. Providing you keep your movements slow and deliberate, they may allow you to get quite close for pictures.

Adding a human subject to a wide-angle shot not only adds interest, as people find people interesting, it also adds greater opportunity for telling a story.

Rather than simply swimming through the frame, have your model engage in some element of the scene.

If you are partnering with another photographer, an easy trick is to take a photo of them taking a photo. And if they are shooting with

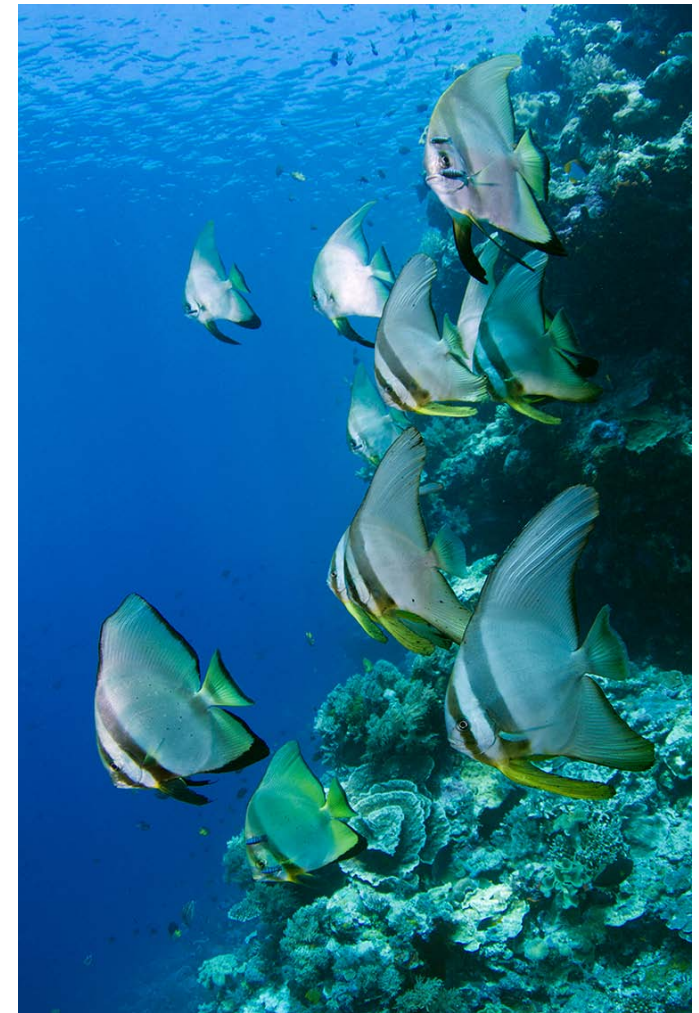


Cuttlefish_2 (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/125 sec., lens set at 14mm, Aperture F8, dual Sea & Sea YS-250's with the right strobe manually set to quarter power, while the left strobe aimed at the diver with the power setting to half power.)

a wide-angle setup as well, they are likely doing the same as you. When using fisheye lenses on people, the field distortion of the lens in the 10-11mm range can at times come off a little too excessive. I find this especially true when the subjects in a frame also include a marine animal. At such times I will often pull back a little, favoring the 13-17mm zoom range.

To up the ante a bit more, provided your subject is still being cooperative, you can shift positions and have another diver move slowly into the spot you just vacated to create a marine interaction portrait.

Keeping your movements slow and deliberate to avoid alarm in your subject will actually give you more time and photo opportunities as opposed to trying to rush through it. Exercising a little discipline pays.



Batfish_1 (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/125 sec., lens set at 17mm, Aperture F9.0. Taking into consideration the surface on the fish in the foreground will be highly reflective, strobe power was dropped to around quarter power on both Sea & Sea YS-250's.)

A school of fish will add a lot of life to your wide angles, but they also can be flighty subjects, which will require you to anticipate the shot well before it happens.

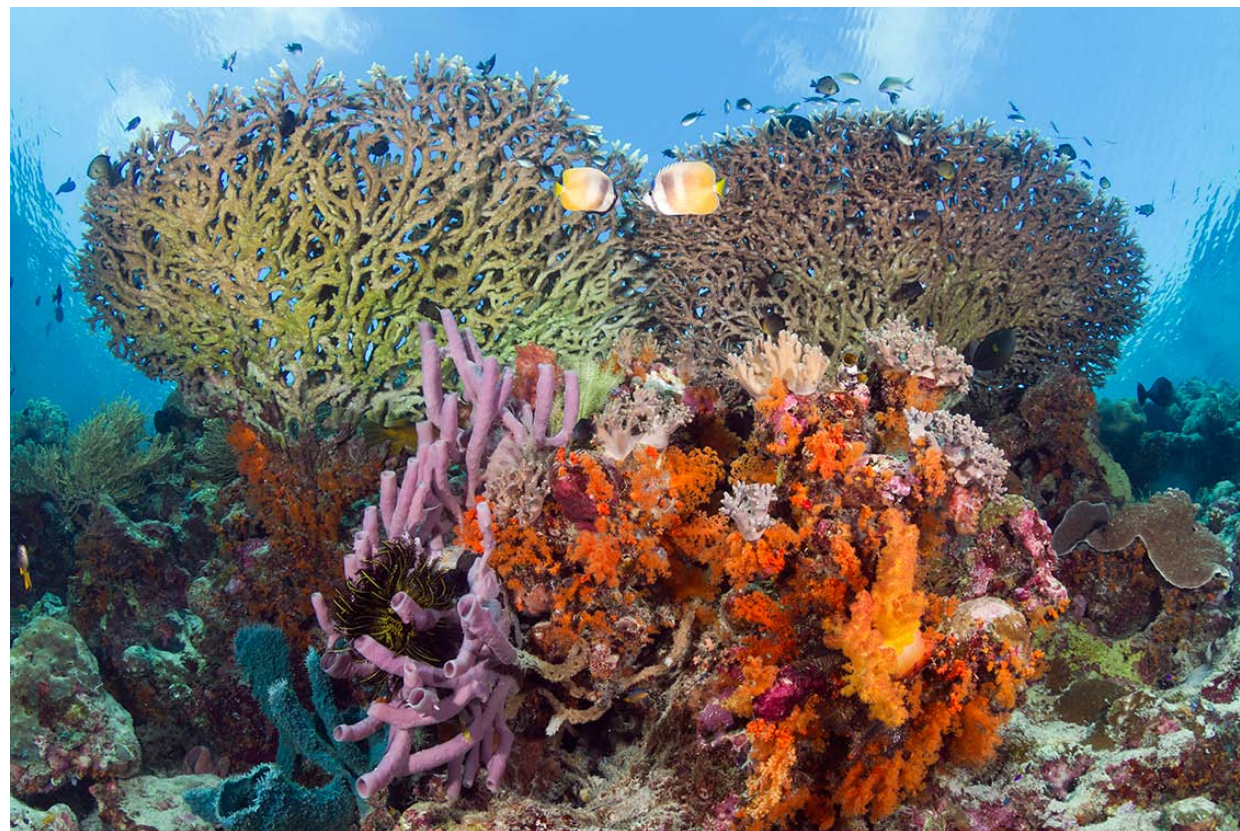
Here again, I suggest applying the same strategy I use for doing general marinescape shots; take meter readings as soon as you are at depth. This will allow you to establish a baseline for aperture values based on the surrounding levels of ambient light, and then be ready when that school of big-eye trevally, bumphead parrotfish, barracuda or batfish enter the scene and come into range.

After capturing some of the stunning reef panoramas, you can then turn your attention to the marine life. During a dive at Roma, I happened upon a pair of large octopus in what looked like a territorial dispute in the making, as both were taking up an erect posture two feet from one another.



Two Octopus (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/125 sec., lens set at 17mm, Aperture F9.0. strobe power on both Sea & Sea YS-250's were dropped just above quarter power)

There was clear water and ample ambient light available to both showcase the vibrancy of the octopus in the foreground and the vista beyond. Only a subtle amount of strobe lighting was needed, as the working distance between lens and subject was less than a foot.



Wakatobi House Reef (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/125 sec., lens set at 12mm, Aperture F7.1, Dual Sea & Sea YS-250's at half power)

Getting back to the small stuff - macro

When combining wide angle and macro photography, my preferred game plan is to do most of my wide angle shooting during the first half of the day, then switch over to close up work at some point during the mid afternoon.

In addition to Wakatobi providing three boat dives per day, you also have full access to the House Reef between 6 am and 10 pm.

Wakatobi's House Reef is often described as the world's best, and for good reason. It offers topography ranging from inshore grass beds to precipitous drop-

offs, perforated by clefts and caverns and decorated with a dazzling array of hard and soft corals.

The resort's House Reef is accessible from both the beach and the property's pier. The pier itself spans the entire 80 meters from the shoreline to the reef's drop-off. Looking down from the

end of the pier provides a window to what awaits, revealing a reef that takes a sudden plunge from snorkeling depths straight down more than 50 meters into the blue.

As a set for macro photography (and even a little wide-angle) the house reef is a photographer's paradise, with an almost inexhaustible wealth of subject matter to shoot.

During one dive, I was amazed to discover I didn't need to venture more than nine meters on either side of the pier to see up to seven different species of anemone fish.

The reef's two-meter deep plateau is also home to a healthy population of small bluespotted stingrays, pipefish, octopus, and nudibranchs living amongst the finger coral formations and grass beds.

Among the more cryptic critters found here are robust, ornate and halimeda ghost pipefish, as well as four species of pygmy seahorses, including Bargibant, Denise, Pontoh and Severn, plus the recently identified pygmy pipehorse, *Kyonemichthys rumengani*.

Macro photographers with an interest in invertebrates will be especially pleased by the diversity of animals that can be found on this reef during twilight and evening hours.

Given the wide variety of subjects, macro SLR shooters tend to bring a complement of lenses from 60 to even 180mm. Something in the range of a 100/105 mm lens can provide a greater range for capturing subject detail, shy creatures that require more space, but a great deal of the marine life at the House Reef can be shot with 60mm macro.

To further broaden your macro and/or wide-angle photography opportunities, Wakatobi also provides a drop off service for guests diving the House Reef. You and a buddy are ferried further



False Clownfish (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/60 sec., Lens Canon 60mm E-FS, Aperture F22, Dual Sea & Sea YS-250's with diffusers at half power.)



Spinecheck Clown (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/80 sec., Lens Canon 60mm E-FS, Aperture F16, Dual Sea & Sea YS-250's with diffusers at half power.)



Leaf Scorpionfish (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/250 sec., Lens Canon 60mm E-FS, Aperture F16, Dual Sea & Sea YS-250's with diffusers at half power.)



Regal Angelfish (Camera settings: ISO 200, shutter speed 1/80 sec., Lens Canon 60mm E-FS, Aperture F16, Dual Sea & Sea YS-250's with diffusers at half power.)



Fire Gobies (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/125 sec., Lens Canon 60mm E-FS, Aperture F29, Dual Sea & Sea YS-250's with diffusers at half power.)



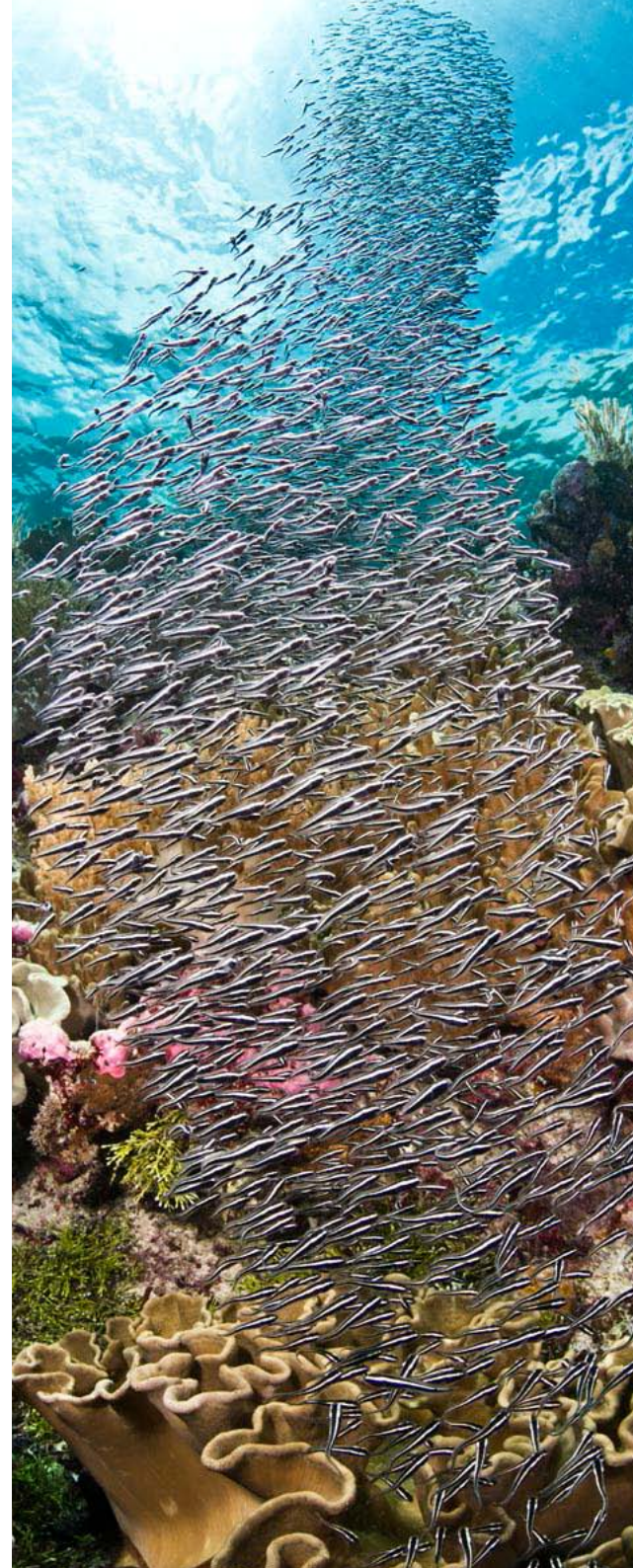
Nudibranch (Subal Canon EOS 7D, ISO 200, shutter speed 1/80 sec., Lens Canon 60mm E-FS, Aperture F27, Dual Sea & Sea YS-250's with diffusers at half power.)

down the reef in a small taxi boat by one of the dive staff, who then drops you off, from which point you work your way back to the resort with the current at a pace of your choosing. If your buddy opts out a Wakatobi dive guide will accompany you on the venture.

Between its great mix of beautiful reefs, drop-offs and unique

marine life subjects, as well as flexible dive services and choices, Wakatobi is a great place to hone your skills – be it wide angle, macro or both! Well, that sums up my game plan; what will be yours?

Walt Stearns
www.wakatobi.com



An experience without equal

"I dream of photographing underwater marine environments in wide angle where the water is clear, the light is beautiful, and the reef is healthy and teeming with marine life. Of all of the destinations I have visited around the world, Wakatobi remains the one where I was really excited on every dive by an incredible underwater perspective that made me think: 'OMG, how beautiful.'"

Warren Baverstock



www.wakatobi.com