

Magnificent Pelagian

by Karen Stearns

A cruise aboard the dive yacht Pelagian is a ticket to some of nature's most memorable underwater experiences

The setting sun ignites the western sky in shades of orange and red as you step into the dive tender, ready to embark on a long-anticipated adventure. As always, the crew has your dive kit secured, and all you need do is make final adjustments during the short ride towards shore. Adjacent to a concrete pier, you roll overboard to discover a shallow coral plateau that slopes gently downward from a depth of five meters. You level off a meter above the bottom, and begin a slow swim along the underwater structure of the pier. At first there's nothing, just a few unremarkable coral heads scattered among the rocks and sand. Then you see them. Though scarcely 6 cm in length, there's no missing the half dozen small fish that hover over a pile of coral rubble. They display a riot of colors: vivid blues, bright yellows and oranges, electric greens and purples, all mixing together in swirls, stripes and spots, as if graffitied by an abstract artist.

From the pre-dive briefing, you recognize this as a group of male

mandarinfish. The school jostles among themselves, their enlarged pelvic fins fluttering like hummingbird wings. As you settle in to watch, a pair of slightly smaller mandarinfish come into view, and the males take immediate notice. The ladies have arrived, and the show begins. The males swirl about, strutting their stuff, and two lucky bachelors are singled out for companionship. A female nestles up to a male's extended pelvic fin, as if taking his arm. They align themselves belly-to-belly and begin a slow, swirling dance that carries them upward a meter above the reef. At the apex of their ascent, they release simultaneous clouds of egg and sperm into the water. The dance is done, but the show has just begun.

This 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

Mating Mandarinfish at Magic Pier
Photo by Steve Rosenberg



Pelagian after a night dive. Photo by Wakatobi Dive Resort





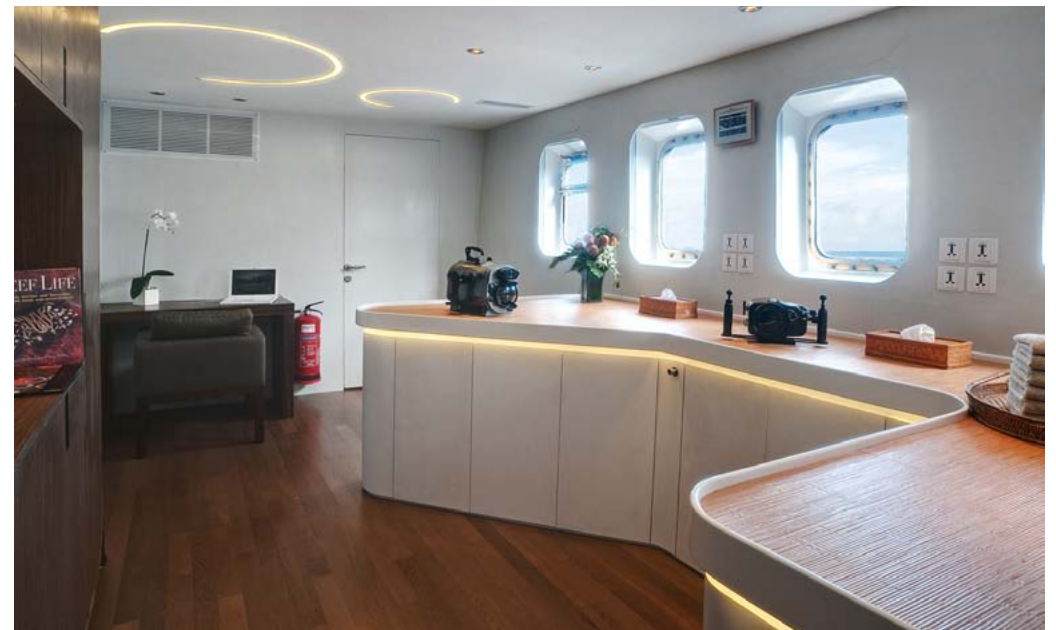
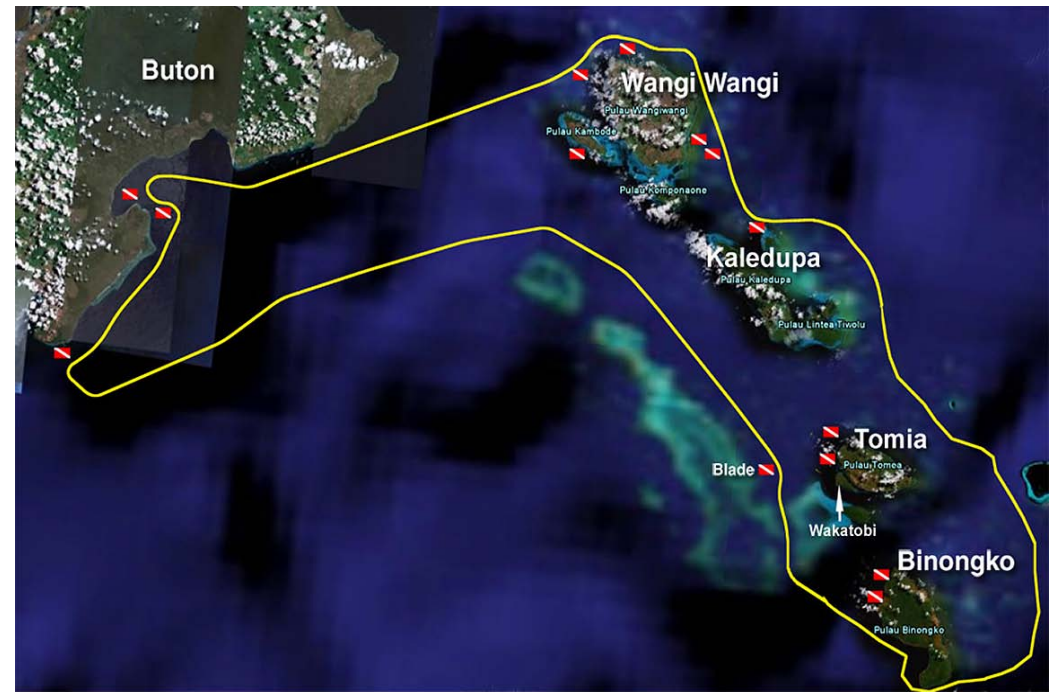
Reef scenic by Mark Snyder

switched on to reveal a nocturnal cast of characters. 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 octopus. Schooling razorfish flash silver, then scatter as a trio of pulsating cuttlefish appear. Turning your attention back to the reef, you begin a close-up search of a stand of gorgonians, where you hope to discover the tiny form of an ornate ghost pipefish hiding among

the branches.

The dive stretches on for more than an hour, and the cast of characters continues to entertain. Back on the surface, a short boat ride takes you home to the inviting sight of your dive yacht, riding serenely at anchor, with cabin lights aglow. On deck, you enjoy a refreshing shower and a warm towel, knowing that the crew will have your kit rinsed, filled and ready for tomorrow's dives. Within a few minutes, you'll be enjoying a nightcap in the salon while recounting the evening's adventures.

This is liveaboard diving at



Camera Room by Didi Lotze



Squid free swimming by Wayne MacWilliams

Reef scenic by Warren Baverstock

White eye eels by Nigel Wade



it's finest. With just ten guests, the 36-meter dive yacht Pelagian has provided you with a level of personal service, spaciousness and diving freedom far above any other liveaboard you've ever experienced. The onboard chef has created some truly memorable meals, the dive staff has proved both helpful and informative, and every member of the crew has gone above and



Flamboyant cuttlefish by Walt Stearns

beyond expectations of service and hospitality.

Even more memorable than the onboard amenities is the diving. Your underwater adventures began with a stay at Wakatobi Dive Resort, where you spent a week on the resort's famous House Reef, and exploring the 40-plus sites accessed by a fleet of custom dive boats. It might seem a tough act to follow, but your cruise aboard Pelagian has proven even more amazing. This cruise has carried you farther afield to remote corners of the Wakatobi archipelago, and to the southern shores of Buton Island. The itinerary included walls, reefs

and offshore seamounts. Some sites offered calm, sun-dappled shallows where you spent more than 90 minutes searching for small treasures. Others placed you in blue water, where currents propelled you past submerged ridges and dramatic cliffs. A drift dive at aptly named Gone With the Wind yielded the sensation of effortless flight, along with a chance of sighting of a school of tuna passing by in blue water.

Pelagian also provided access to a whole different type of underwater experience: muck diving. Along the shoreline of Buton Island's Pasar Wajo Bay, the shallows are yielding



Pelagian cruising Photo by Wakatobi Dive Resort

a wealth of intriguing subjects. Amid the subterranean detritus of the site known as Asphalt Pier, you captured great video of a swivel-eyed jawfish, methodically cleaning out its burrow by spitting out sand and small stones from an impossibly big mouth. What at first seemed like a lifeless sand bottom yields a spectacular variety of life, from frogfish to flounders and flying gurnards. Hermit and sponge crabs scuttle about; blue ribbon and garden eels poke their snouts into the sunlight, and nudibranchs slither slowly about.

As the week comes to a close, you take stock of all you've seen and

done. From grand underwater vistas to micro-environments, this week aboard Pelagian has provided an unrivaled range of underwater adventures. Your cabin seemed more like a luxurious hotel room than a cramped ship's berth, the other guests were delightful, and the staff without reproach. Looking back, you congratulate yourself on having the foresight to add this cruise to your stay at Wakatobi.

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