

THE BALANCE AND WONDER OF OCEAN CORAL REEFS

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Two clown anemonefish in a magnificent sea anemone, fully exposed. Dive site: Fan 38 East in Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

In the words of *Star Trek*'s creator Gene Roddenberry, "Space [is] the final frontier", but for a grounded explorer with a sense of adventure, there is no need to go so far to discover "strange new worlds". They surround our continents and islands in our planet's ocean barrier reefs. These fragile ecosystems exist in a symbiotic relationship of creatures and fish. The delicate balance of these populations creates a wondrous paradise that a lucky few get to enjoy, but "No touching, please!"



Soft coral. Dive site: Magnifica, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Wakatobi National Park is not easy to get to, but it is well worth the days of travel to this remote area in Indonesia. It is located off the coast of Southeast Sulawesi among the Tukangbesi Islands, between Banda and Flores seas. The name of Wakatobi is an acronym of the four main Tukangbesi Islands: Wangi-wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia, and Binongko. This incredibly bio-diverse reef is situated in some of the clearest water a SCUBA diver can explore and affords incredible views and creature sightings.



Gomophia egyptiaca starfish. Dive site: Fan 38 East, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

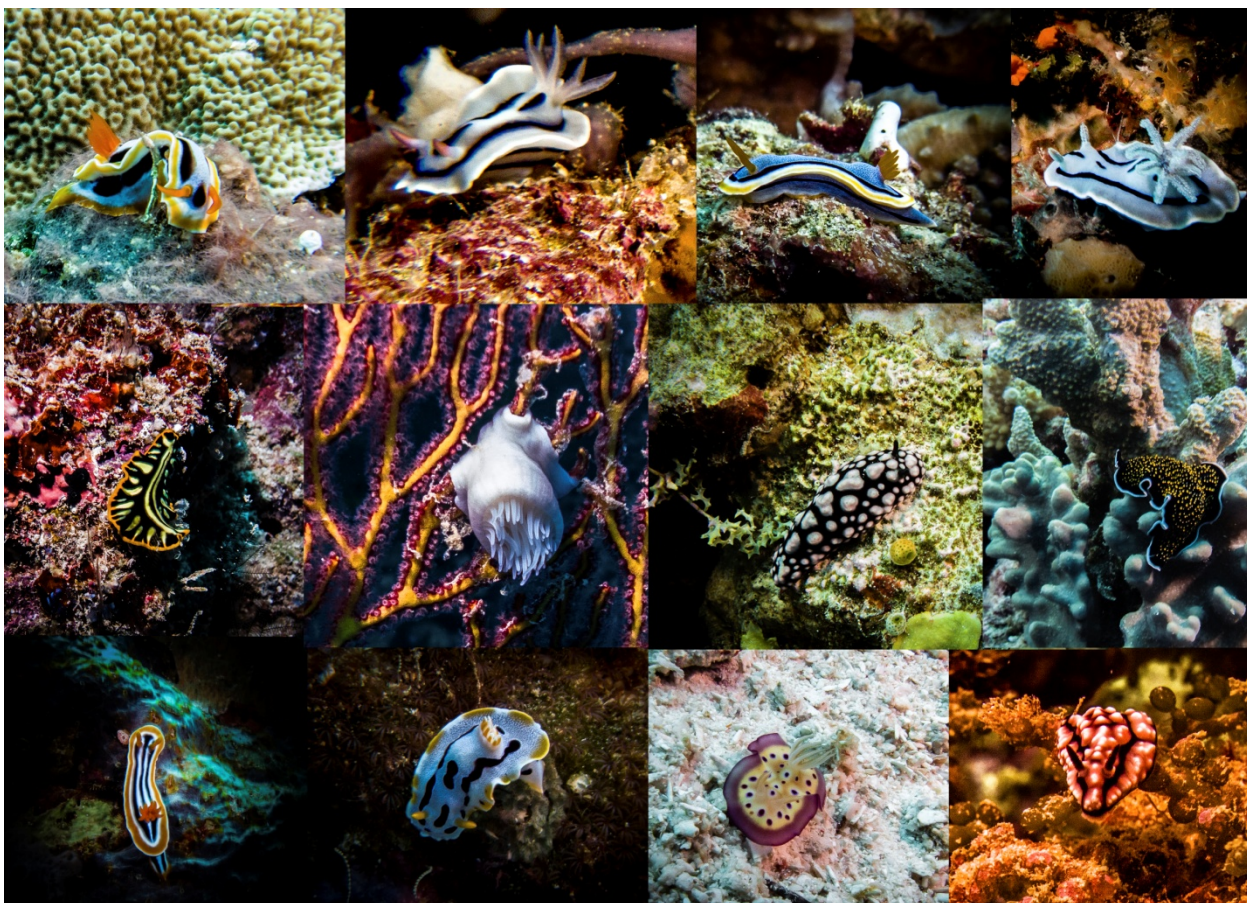


Soft and hard coral seascape. Dive site: Batfish Wall. Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Fishing restrictions are strictly enforced, as well as the no touching of the reef policy in Wakatobi. As a result, just about every inch of this magnificent reef is covered with living creatures such as many varieties of soft and hard corals.



Bubble coral. Dive site: Cornucopia, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.



Nudibranchs and flatworms. Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia and Great Astrolabe Reef, Kadavu, Fiji

When one thinks of slugs and worms on land, nothing beautiful comes to mind to most people, but under the sea, these tiny colorful invertebrates are among a diver's favorite discovery. Their small size and great camouflage skills make for a rewarding experience when detected.

First row (left to right): 1. *Chromodoris annae* nudibranch. Dive site: Kollo-Soha Beach, Wakatobi. 2. *Chromodoris lochi* nudibranch. Dive site: Kollo-Soha Beach, Wakatobi. 3. *Chromodoris annae* nudibranch. Dive site: Kollo-Soha Beach, Wakatobi. 4. *Chromodoris willani* nudibranch. Dive site: Batfish Wall, Wakatobi.

Second row (left to right): 1. *Pseudoceros dimidiatus* flatworm, Fiji. 2. *Chromodoris bullock* nudibranch, wrapped around a sea fan, Fiji. 3. *Phyllidiella pustulosa* nudibranch. Dive site: Roma, Wakatobi. 4. *Thysanozoon nigropapillosum* flatworm. Dive site: Tanjung Lintea, Wakatobi.

Third row (left to right): 1. *Chromodoris magnifica* nudibranch. Dive site: Batfish Wall, Wakatobi. 2. *Chromodoris elizabethina* nudibranch. Dive site: Kollo-Soha Beach, Wakatobi. 3. *Chromodoris kunei* nudibranch. Dive site: Waitii Ridge, Wakatobi. 4. *Phyllidiella pustulosa* nudibranch, Fiji.



Sea fan, a type of soft coral. Dive site: Malabea, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.



Blue tang fish sleeping in a potato coral. Night Dive. Dive site: Teluk Waitti, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

At night, a lot of fish find protective nooks within the coral beds for shelter and go to sleep. These blue tangs are snoozing the night away head first within the comforts of a potato coral (*Pavona clavus* coral).



Crocodile flathead fish. Dive site: Roma, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.



Scrawled filefish peeking from behind some hard coral. Night Dive. Dive site: Dunia Baru, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.



School of longfin spadefish (a.k.a. batfish) swimming next to a reef wall. Dive site: Fan 38 East, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.



Painted Frogfish. Dive site: Waitii Ridge, Wakatobi National Park, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia.

One of the strangest and most difficult fish to spot in a coral reef is a frogfish. I didn't realize I was looking at it until my husband pointed it out to me. This plain sight hidden wonder is sitting on a coral with a three-quarters view to the camera. It is mostly creamy-beige with brown and orange outlines.

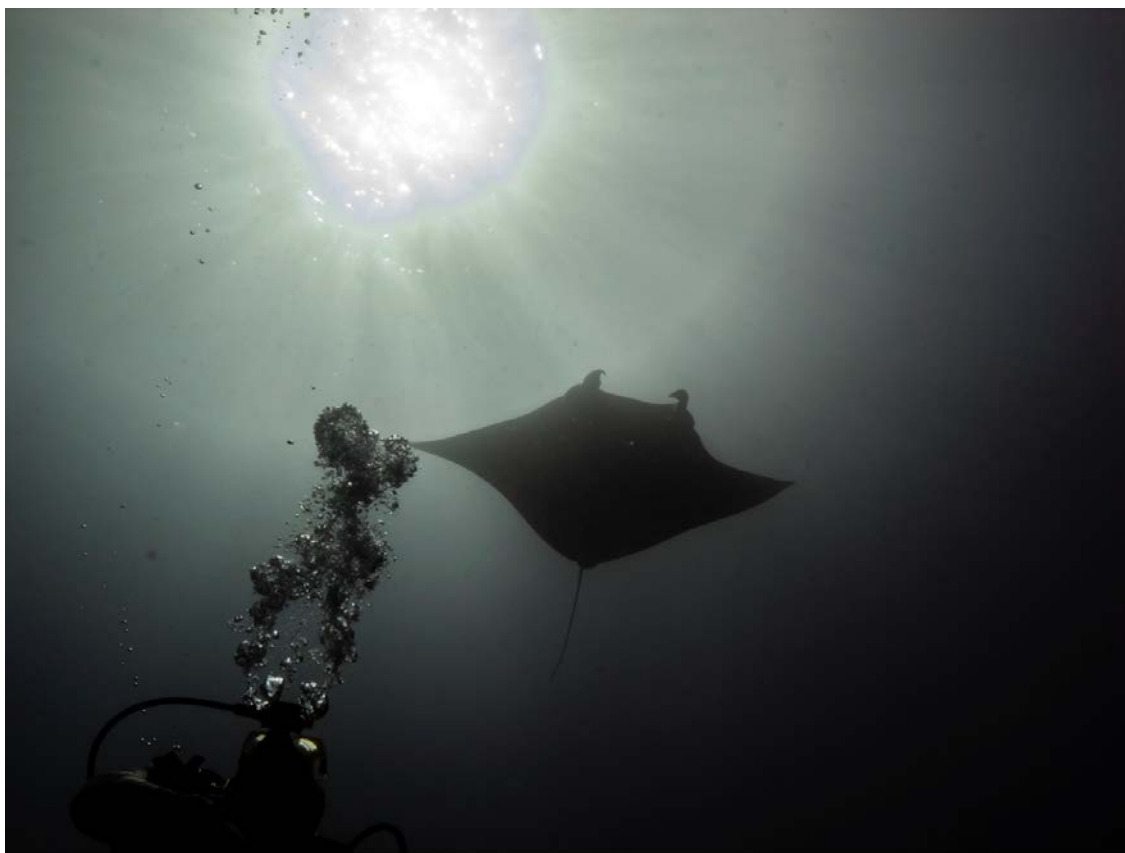


Whitelined Toadfish, Cozumel Reefs National Marine Park, Isla Cozumel, Quintana Roo, Mexico.



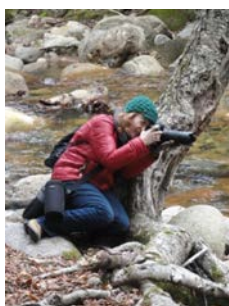
Hawksbill Turtle, Cozumel Reefs National Marine Park, Isla Cozumel, Quintana Roo, Mexico.

Cozumel Reefs National Marine Park has been experiencing a significant comeback over the last few years, as is evident by the increase of fish schools and adult as well as juvenile species. However none are as prevalent, from the point of view of a diver, as the abundance of marine turtles and the extreme age of some of them. They are not at all shy of divers and go about their daily lives freely.



Young Giant Manta Ray, Great Astrolabe Reef, Kadavu, Fiji.

The Great Astrolabe Reef near Kadavu Island in Fiji is the fourth largest barrier reef on the planet. Like all ocean reefs, its fragile survival depends on the delicate balance of creatures and fish that compose it. In places where fishing is restricted, a lucky traveler can find magnificent creatures like this young giant manta ray visit a natural feeding station. Meeting a giant manta ray is like no other experience on the Earth. If you hold really still and wait, one will float up above the reef and approach like a space ship in a science fiction film. The young ones are playful and curious by nature, often coming up close to the divers to check them out. However, overfishing, poaching and coral bleaching, due to rise of ocean temperatures, deplete the food source of these majestic sea dwellers. Each time I have the great privilege of coming in contact with a giant manta ray, I always wonder, if it's for the last time. ■



* **OLGA BENTSMAN KUNDRA BARRON** was born in Russia and spent the second half of her childhood in New Hampshire. Her interest in photography was first piqued by her family's purchase of an Olympus OMG camera which she took on her hikes around New Hampshire and later to Israel and the Nepal Himalayas. Eventually, Olga traded New Hampshire's White Mountains for the Colorado Rockies, where she lives full time with her husband. She is an avid hiker, runner, skier, SCUBA diver and photographer.