



As a bird enthusiast and photographer, I was thrilled to see many wading birds like the Golden Plover, Beach Thick-knee, Grey-tailed Tattler, Eurasian Whimbrel, and the Great-billed Heron. The tall trees around the resort were home to the colourful Black-naped Fruit Dove, bright yellow Black-naped Oriole, Island Monarch, White-breasted Wood Swallow, Sulawesi Triller, the tiny and colourful Grey-sided Flowerpecker.

From Patuno Bay Resort, we took a boat to Kambode Island. Here, a full day was spent snorkelling, diving and bird watching.

Wakatobi is blessed with beautifully coloured live coral that are in good condition. It's a Barrier Reef, with varied soft corals, hard corals, and fan corals on walls.

The clear, clean waters shelter a variety of marine life, some rare and unusual, like the Pygmy sea horse, Pygmy pipe horse, Skeleton shrimp, Frogfish, and the endearing Clown fish as well as a variety of Nudibranchs. As it's a protected site, fish tend to be large and plentiful like schools of Big-eye Trevellie, black-tipped Sharks, bump-head Parrotfish and Barracuda. Also to be seen are the Napoleon Wras, Green, as well as Hawksbill Turtles.

The next day, we rented cars and motor-bikes and went round the island, visiting Bajo or Sea Gypsy village, a sea weed farm, a traditional cloth weaving place, and a colonial fort, all the while taking in the scenic views of the island.

Next stop was Hoga Island, which is adjacent to Kaledupa Island, which lends the KA of Wakatobi. Once again, a boat ride on a clear blue sea. Along the way, the bird watchers were thrilled to see various sea birds, notably the red-footed Booby, the brown Booby and several Terns. Occasionally dolphins would emerge and frolic along the boat. From Hoga Island more snorkelling, diving or just enjoying the nature, and fresh sea breeze.

Also included was a visit to another Sea Gypsy, or Bajo Village in Kaledupa. This was a very marginalised and poor community. The amenities in this villages were basic, but the people were friendly and welcoming.

The sea gypsy community are an ancient nomadic people, whose main livelihood has been fishing using traditional methods and plying small wooden boats. They live in far flung islands in Indonesia and other sur-

rounding countries. Even in the 21st century, they still rely on fishing, but live in permanent settlements, where houses are built on wooden stilts in the sea. It must be noted that the way of life of these ancient people are now under threat. The younger generations prefer to leave the villages, seeking better lives, while their parents, in the long run, cannot compete with commercial fishing that is creeping into the area.

The crowning part of Kaledupa was visit to Sembano Lake where the adventurous could swim among hundreds of little red shrimps that live in the lake. A little sea snake was sighted here too.

After two days on Hoga Island, we needed to get to Tomea Island, which forms the 'To' of Wakatobi. The ferry from here was unreliable so we had to charter a private boat. Getting into the boat with our bags and baggage from the jetty was a hairy experience. As the jetty lacked a functional stair, a makeshift ladder was connected to the boat.

After a few hours ride on a

choppy sea, we arrived at Tomea. This island too was surrounded by spectacular coral reefs and marine life, as well as beautiful birds both at sea and on land. As bird watchers, we were charmed by the beady eyed Lemon-bellied White-eye, and the bright red breasted Grey-sided Flowerpecker, which has been recently classified as endemic to Wakatobi. On all the islands, we were surrounded by the bluest of blue seas, and saw spectacular sunrise and sunset.

From Tomea Island, we made our way back by ferry to Wangi, and then, by air, to our respective countries and places.

Binongko Island forms the 'Bi' of Wakatobi, but we kept that island for another visit.

Wakatobi is a lot of travelling, often under basic conditions, but to quote Jacques Cousteau, it is an 'Underwater Nirvana' and for me, above the water too.

**By Valli de Vries**  
**Photo: Patrick Andre Brenac and Valli de Vries/Collected**

