TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE
FEATURE

Across Indonesia's Islands of Wonder

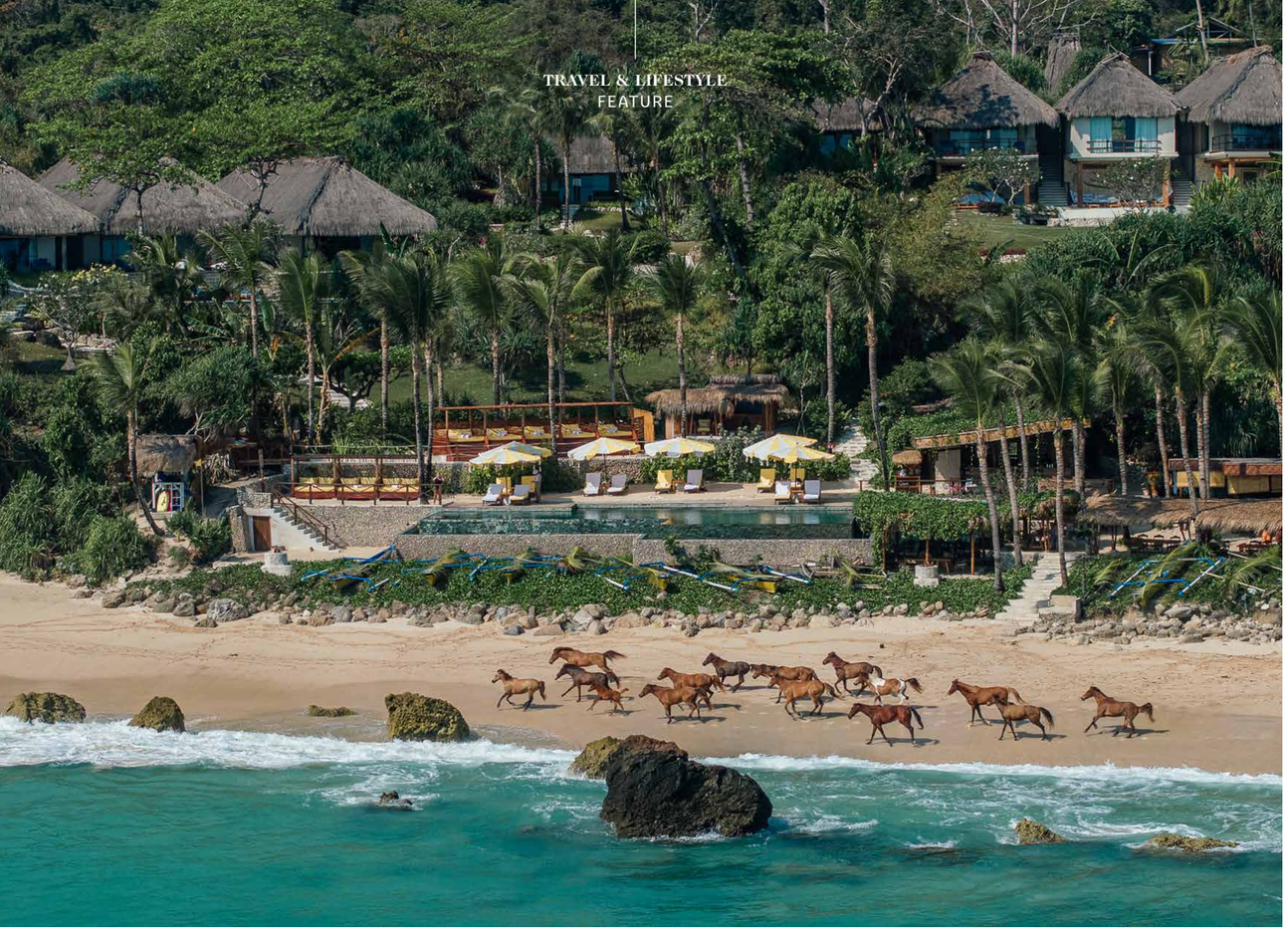
Five extraordinary resorts revealing the remarkable breadth of the Indonesian archipelago.

BY DEWI PRASODJO

Few countries on earth contain as much contradiction within a single set of borders. Indonesia spans more than 17,000 islands across three time zones, home to over 700 living languages and hundreds of distinct ethnic groups, each shaped by a different stretch of coastline, forest or volcanic ridge. Within a single country – often within a single week of travel – the landscape can shift from savannah to rainforest, from the collapsed crater of one of history's most violent volcanic eruptions to coral atolls holding the richest concentration of marine life on the planet.

Off Sumba's coast, a line of horses walks into the Indian Ocean, riders low over their necks as the swell climbs past the animals' shoulders. Near the smouldering outline of Mount Tambora, a shape the length of a delivery truck rises slowly out of the blue beneath a small boat of divers holding their breath. Over Raja Ampat, manta rays wider than a dining table circle a limestone karst rising sheer from turquoise water. In the South China Sea, a seaplane banks low over a lagoon so clear the reef is visible from the cabin window before the floats touch down. And on a stretch of black volcanic sand in North Sulawesi, something no larger than a fist reshapes itself mid-stride into the outline of a flatfish, and vanishes. None of it is staged. It happens daily, whether or not anyone is there to see it.

Five resorts across the archipelago reveal entirely different versions of this country, each built around a corner of Indonesia unlike any other. What follows is a journey through five Indonesian islands. The five properties built to open the door to each one: NIHI Sumba's cliffside villas above a private surf break and a beach where horses enter the sea; Amanwana's beachfront tents inside a protected national park east of Bali; Bawah Reserve's six-island archipelago in the South China Sea, reachable only by seaplane; Misool's water cottages above one of the most successful reef recoveries on the planet; and Coral Eye, a working marine research station turned boutique retreat on the edge of the Coral Triangle.



NIHI SUMBA

The approach alone sets the tone. Villas at NIHI Sumba are built into the hillside above Nihiwatu Beach, cliffside and thatched, each one angled to hold the full 2.5-kilometre curve of white sand and the Indian Ocean beyond it in view from the bed, close enough that the sound of the surf never quite disappears, even at night. There is no shared beachfront to negotiate, no crowd to filter out of the frame. The resort's position on this particular stretch of coastline was chosen decades ago specifically because of what happens on the sand and in the water below it, and everything built since has been designed not to compete with that view but to frame it.

What happens on that beach is available exclusively through NIHI. Sumbanese horsemen and their Sandalwood ponies – small, sure-footed animals native to the island for centuries – meet guests at the shoreline as part of a curated experience run by the resort's own equine team. Guests ride saddled, guided into the surf by an experienced handler, salt spray rising as the horse's stride shifts from sand to swell, the animal never breaking pace. It is choreographed with obvious care, but none of that care dulls the sensation of holding onto something powerful as the ground disappears beneath it.

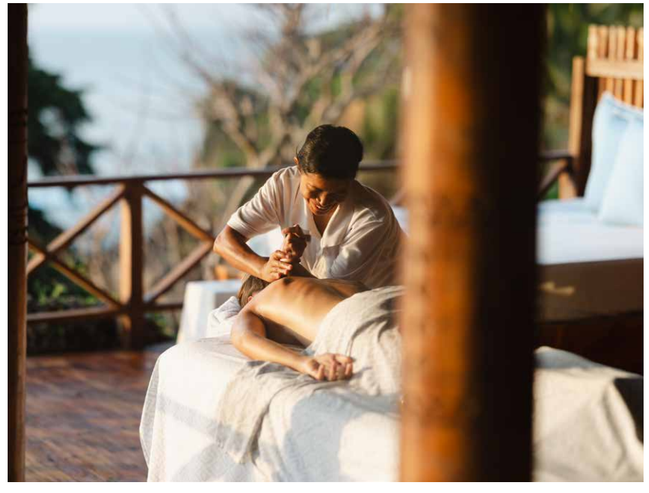
Further inland, another side of NIHI unfolds. Fifteen minutes from the beach, Nihioka spreads across a hundred acres of former farmland NIHI has shaped into a spa destination in its own right, part sanctuary for the resort's retired horses, part retreat from the ocean altogether. Guests reach it by trek, cycle or horseback along a route designed through rice terraces and village outskirts, arriving at an open-air spa built directly into the landscape: treatment bales facing the water, a treehouse platform for breakfast suspended above a private cove few outside the resort ever see. The Nihioka Spa Safari treats the journey itself as the opening act, not a commute to the main event.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RESPECTIVE RESORTS

Nihioka's treatment menu ranges widely, from traditional Sumbanese massage – its specialised stomach work rooted in a local belief that the stomach functions as the body's second brain – to a signature offering found nowhere else on the property: Equine Wellness, built around proximity to the sanctuary's retired horses. During a massage, a horse is brought to stand beside the treatment table rather than left in a nearby paddock – close enough that its breath is audible, its warmth noticeable against the skin, its weight occasionally shifting so a nose or a soft muzzle grazes an arm or shoulder mid-session. The therapist works in the same unhurried rhythm the horse sets, long strokes timed loosely to its breathing, and it is not unusual for the animal to lean in further as the session continues, as though leaning into the stillness itself.

Reiki sessions unfold the same way: guests lie in the grass with a horse standing or lying close by, its stillness doing as much of the work as the practitioner's hands, its calm proving strangely contagious in a way no spa playlist has ever quite managed. Some guests choose full sessions with a practitioner; others simply sit near a horse and let something settle.

Offshore, NIHI's stewardship extends to the wave breaking directly in front of the property. Occy's Left, named for world champion surfer Mark Occhilupo, who scored it on a defining trip in the late 1980s, peels for up to 300m over a shallow reef. Access is capped at roughly 10 surfers a day, all of them guests, an arrangement NIHI protects as closely as it protects the horses. There is no version of this wave surfed by 40 strangers in a scrum. There is only the version NIHI has spent years curating: a private, near-empty lineup on one of Indonesia's most storied reef breaks.







Beyond the resort's boundary, Sumba itself supplies the atmosphere that makes all of this feel earned rather than staged. The island remains one of Indonesia's least developed, its interior a landscape of megalithic tombs, traditional villages and grassland that shifts from green to gold with the seasons. During February and March, Pasola – a ritual battle fought on horseback with blunted spears, timed to the agricultural calendar – draws crowds from villages across West Sumba, and NIHI occasionally recreates a gentler version on Nihiwatu Beach at sunset, riders racing across the sand as the light fails. The Sumba Foundation, established alongside the original resort more than two decades ago, continues to fund clean water, healthcare and schooling across the island, work many guests encounter directly during a village visit arranged through the resort.

NIHI did not simply build villas facing the ocean. It spent 30 years earning the right to safeguard exactly what happens on the sand below them – the wave, the herd, the particular quiet of a beach with almost no one else on it.

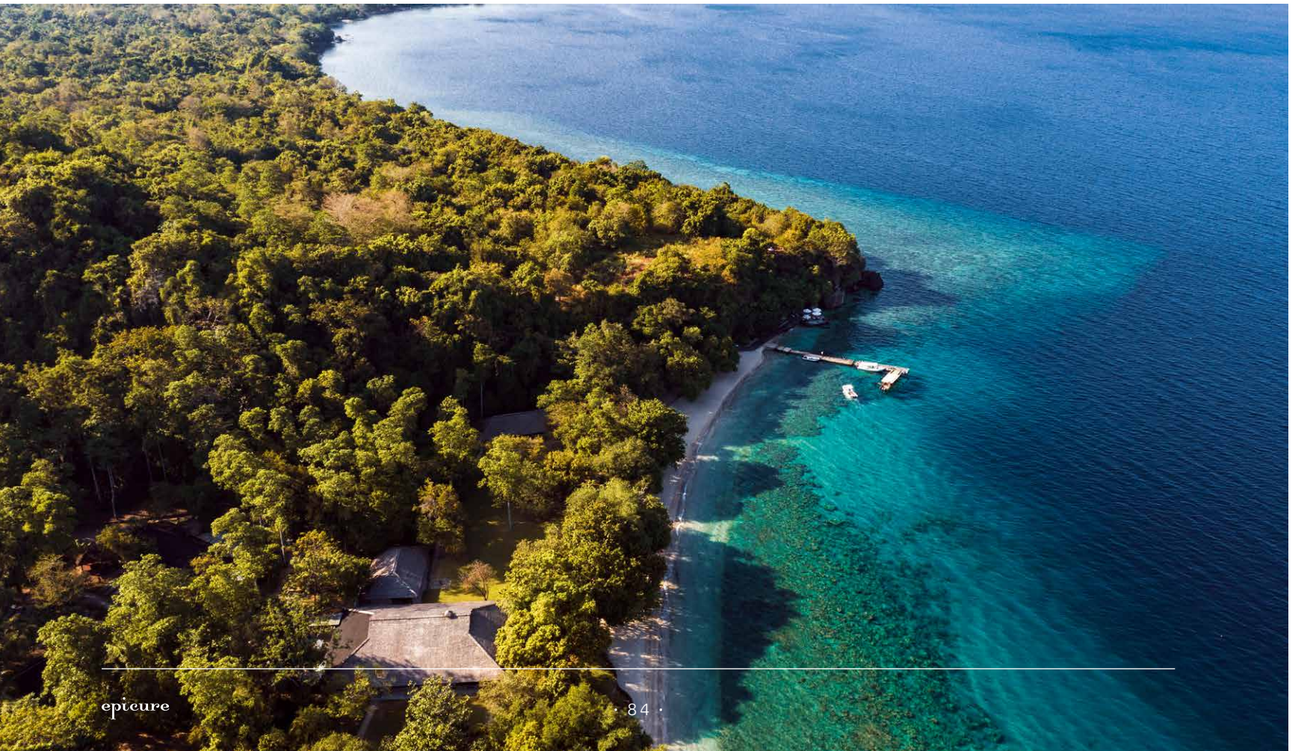
nihi.com
@nihi

AMANWANA

There is no glass between a guest and the Flores Sea at Amanwana, only canvas and timber decking raised a few metres above the tideline. Just 17 tents line this stretch of Moyo Island's coast, spaced far enough apart that privacy feels absolute, close enough to the water that the sea is the first sound of every morning and the last of every night. Inside, the aesthetic is expedition rather than resort: teak furniture with the patina of years rather than newness, a canvas roof pitched high enough to hold the heat at bay, a writing desk that looks built for logging a voyage rather than answering email. Mosquito netting falls loosely around the bed at night; by day it is tied back so nothing stands between the room and the view. This is Aman's expedition register at its most literal: no infinity pool competing for attention, no manicured lawn between tent and shoreline, just jungle on one side and open water on the other, exactly as the site was found before the first tent went up – the sense, throughout, of a castaway's camp built by someone with an unlimited budget and an unerring eye.

That restraint is deliberate, and it is what makes the days that follow feel less like a hotel stay than a private expedition with exceptional support. Diving begins directly off the house reef at Sea Wall, a gentle sandy slope beside the guest jetty that drops away into deeper water – an easy first dive that still turns up ribbon eels and frogfish for anyone willing to look closely. A few minutes' swim north, Turtle Street lives up to its name: resident hawksbills and green turtles hold their ground among moray eels and anemone fish, with the coral-colonised wreck of an old jeep as an unlikely landmark. Amanwana's newest site, Hera Wall, adds a steep drop-off thick with soft and hard coral, green turtles and blacktip sharks moving through water calm enough for a first-time diver and interesting enough for someone who has logged hundreds of dives. Further out, Labuan Aji and Panjang Slope open onto larger pelagic encounters – eagle rays, hunting tuna, reef sharks patrolling the drop-off – reached aboard one of Amanwana's own boats, chartered fresh each morning around the day's conditions rather than run to a fixed schedule. Snorkellers are given the same access as certified divers; nobody waits onshore here.

The furthest and most demanding excursion begins in genuine darkness. Amanwana's speedboat departs at four in the morning, Moyo falling away into silhouette as the outline of Mount Tambora – its 1815 eruption still the largest in recorded history – rises ahead against the pre-dawn sky. Saleh Bay, warmed and enriched by exactly this volcanic





geology, holds whale sharks year-round, and by the time the sun clears Tambora's crater rim, the shapes beneath the boat are unmistakable. Entering the water beside an animal that can measure more than 10m produces a particular kind of silence, the sense of something enormous approaching before it is visible, and then passing with an indifference that only deepens the encounter. Every excursion runs in partnership with Yayasan Konservasi Indonesia, tagging and tracking the sharks that pass through the bay, so the morning becomes quiet participation rather than spectacle alone.

Inland, a jeep track winds towards Barry's Falls, the limestone-pool waterfall at Moyo's centre also known as Mata Jitu, the coast disappearing behind the trail long before the falls themselves come into view. Crocodile Head rewards a different kind of walk entirely: a ridge trail leading to a headland where the Flores Sea opens without warning below, Sumbawa's outline visible through morning haze, and where a modest dive site of the same name – reachable on foot from camp in five minutes – turns up puffer fish, angelfish and sergeant majors along the hard coral just offshore.

Coming back to camp after a morning like that has its own rhythm. A hot towel and cold drink appear on the jetty before the boat is even tied off; salt-stiffened wetsuits are peeled away and rinsed by someone else's hands; the tent, when a guest finally reaches it, is dim and cool behind drawn canvas, the ceiling fan turning lazily overhead. There is little to do in that hour but lie on the daybed at the edge of the deck, the Flores Sea still filling the view even in stillness, and feel the morning's exertion turn slowly into something closer to satisfaction.

Evenings shift into something closer to ceremony. Bakela – meaning sharing from one platter – is Amanwana's signature dinner, Sumbawanese dishes served *lesehan*-style on low



tables and woven mats, lanterns flickering around a private dance performance arranged for the occasion. On quieter nights, Barefoot on the Beach lays a private table directly on the sand, chef and butler in attendance, a bonfire throwing light across the water while the Flores Sea works its way steadily up the shore. Higher up, Sunset Point offers cocktails and canapés – or, later, a charcoal barbecue of grilled lobster – from a volcanic ridge with nothing between the table and the horizon.

Nights end the way they begin: without another light visible along the coastline beyond camp, and without another resort for miles in any direction to share the view with.

aman.com/amanwana
@amanwana



BAWAH RESERVE

A seaplane delivers guests directly onto Bawah Reserve's lagoon – part of the Anambas Islands, the floats touching down on water clear enough to see the reef below before the engines even cut. From there, the sense of arriving somewhere run entirely on its own terms takes hold quickly: no reception desk, no queue, just a cold drink, an electric buggy waiting in the shade, and six islands, three lagoons and 13 beaches laid out ahead.

Waking up here means waking over water. Overwater Bungalows stand on stilts above the lagoon, daybeds positioned to catch sunrise or sunset depending on which side they face, breakfast often taken right there on the deck with the tide moving quietly beneath the floorboards. The jungle-set Treehouse Lodge strikes the opposite note, birdsong replacing surf, canvas roofs stretched over private verandas built by hand from reclaimed timber and bamboo. Getting from one island to the next rarely feels like transport so much as an extension of the morning: guests paddleboard or kayak across water still enough to double as a mirror, the reef visible the entire way, or take a resort boat out to a private beach with nothing arranged beyond a picnic basket and total privacy until pickup. For a week, the six islands function less like resort grounds and more like a small, private country, with nobody else's itinerary to work around.

Turtle Beach exemplifies the castaway spirit Bawah Reserve has built its reputation on: guests are dropped by boat onto a stretch of sand with no other structure in sight, left to snorkel, swim or simply do nothing for as long as they like before being collected. Hiking trails cut through a hundred hectares of primary forest to a ridge overlooking the full sweep of the reserve, a return trek rewarded with views unavailable from any villa terrace.

Time moves differently once the pattern sets in. There is rarely anywhere to be beyond wherever a guest already is, and the days tend to organise themselves loosely around light rather than a schedule – a slow paddle before the heat builds, a long lunch, a drift back to the bungalow as the lagoon turns from turquoise to gold. Evenings often gather at the Jules Verne Bar, perched on the island's highest point in tribute to the novelist's tales of fantastical remote worlds, cocktails timed to a sunset that nobody else is watching, the six islands settling into a hush that only comes with having no neighbours for miles.

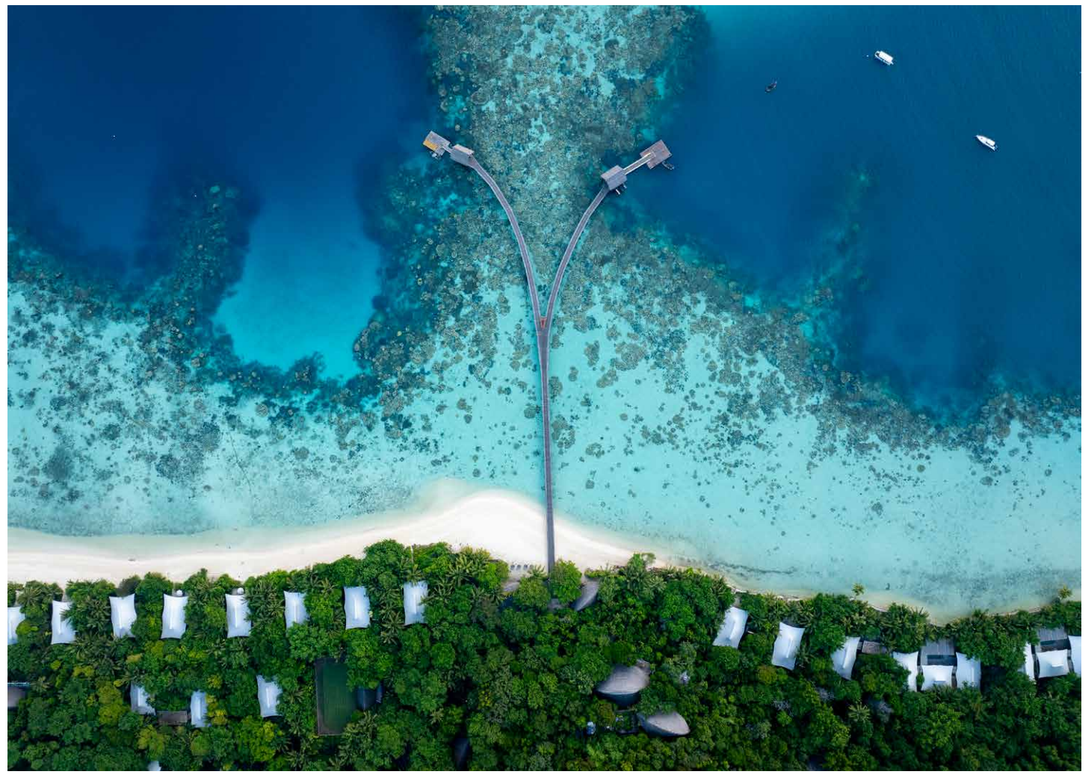
Wellbeing here has recently expanded well beyond a conventional spa menu. Aura Spa Explorer scatters treatment pavilions across several of the six islands, turning an afternoon of massages into something closer to a guided tour of the reserve's quieter corners. Adjacent to it, the newly built Aura Wellbeing Sanctuary offers a full contrast-therapy circuit – a red salt sauna at up to 82 degrees, a steam room, a Polar Room chilled to 16 degrees and an ice plunge pool held at 12, guests moving between heat and cold in a sequence designed to leave the body recalibrated rather than merely relaxed. A butterfly garden sits nearby, one of several details that reveal a property more interested in quiet detail than grand gesture.

That same instinct runs through Bawah Reserve's approach to sustainability, which shapes the guest experience as directly as the architecture does. A permaculture garden supplies a meaningful share of the kitchen's fruit and vegetables, line-caught fish arrives daily from local fishermen, and the surrounding waters – protected as a marine sanctuary since before the resort opened – are closed to any boat beyond Bawah Reserve's own, meaning the reef guests snorkel above has been left undisturbed for longer than most visitors have been alive. None of it feels like a compromise. It simply feels like a resort that never had to choose between protecting its setting and making the most of it.

After dark, there are no roads, no cars and barely any lights beyond the resort itself, so the sky takes over. Staff call it a billion-star hotel, only half joking. Most evenings end on a jetty or a private deck, lying back to watch it, and it's often the moment that lingers longest once the trip is over.

Departure dates here have a way of starting to feel negotiable. Six islands, three lagoons, one sky this dark – a week rarely feels like enough, and it is not unusual to leave already working out when to come back.

bawahreserve.com
@bawahreserve

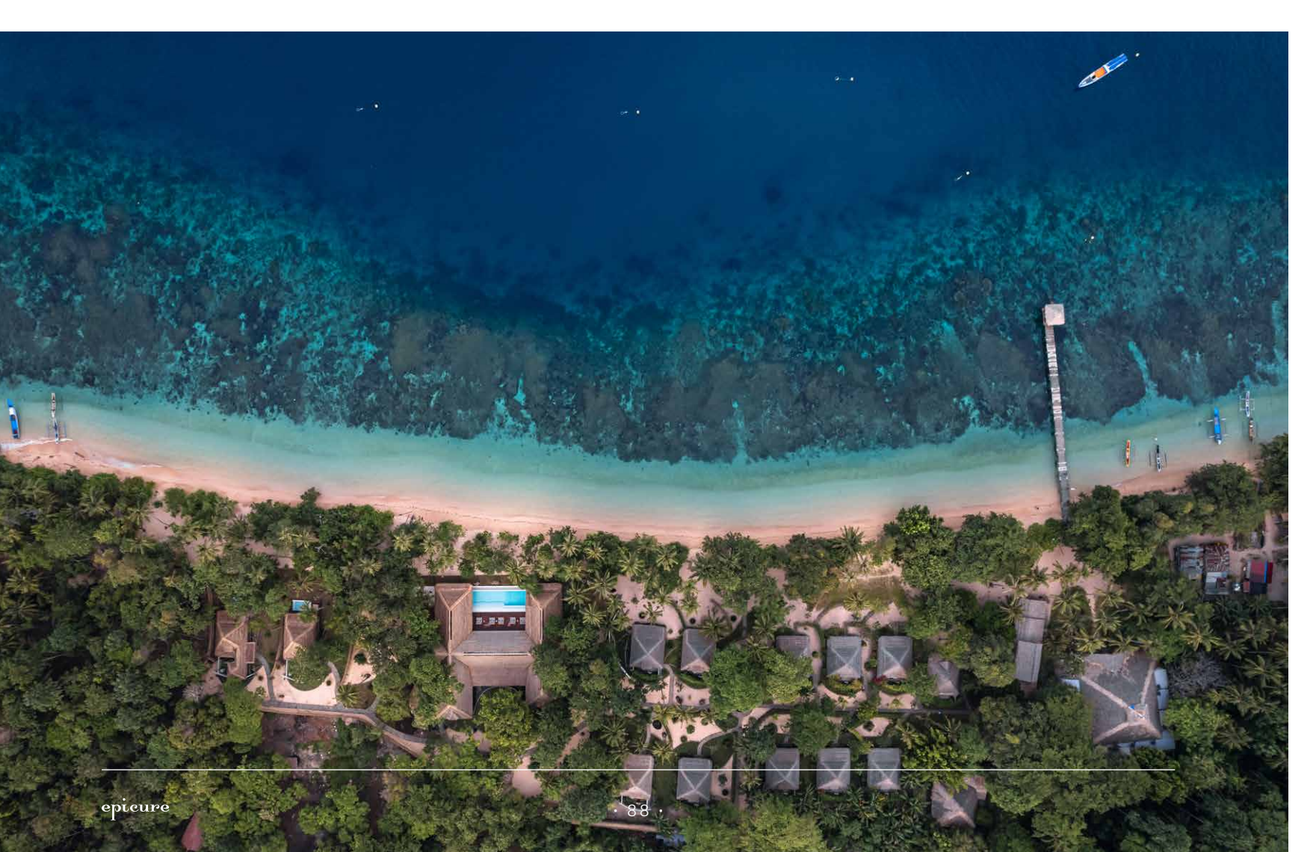


CORAL EYE BANGKA

Diving the waters around Bangka Island rewards a different kind of attention than a dramatic wall or a big-animal encounter. There is black volcanic sand here, apparently barren at first glance, that reveals itself slowly to anyone willing to move across it at a crawl: a mimic octopus reshaping its body and colour to imitate a flatfish mid-retreat, a flamboyant cuttlefish flashing through colours too vivid to seem biological, a blue-ringed octopus pulsing faint electric warnings from beneath a shell no larger than a coin. This is muck diving at its most theatrical, and Coral Eye sits at its centre alongside the nearby Lembeh Strait, a short boat ride away.

What separates a stay here from a conventional dive holiday is what the site was before it became a resort at all. Four young marine biologists founded Coral Eye in 2009 as a research outpost, a shared base where universities and visiting scientists could exchange findings about the surrounding reefs long before a single guest room existed. A dive centre followed in 2013, opening the site to travellers for the first time, but the research culture never left with the tourists. Guests share meals with working marine biologists as a matter of course, dinner conversation as likely to cover coral disease or microplastics as anything from a guidebook. Visiting researchers periodically return to reefs first surveyed in 2013 under a protocol developed by Professor Massimo Ponti, comparing years of change reef by reef. Each year, PLATFORM, Coral Eye's research incubator, hosts a handful of early-career scientists for up to two months to develop their own projects in the field, and a small conservation contribution from every stay helps fund it.

Sahaung, the area's best-known dive site, delivers the trip's closest thing to spectacle: volcanic pinnacles draped in soft coral, schools of blue-striped snapper moving in dense formation, an occasional white-tip reef shark cruising past divers who came for the smaller creatures and find themselves surprised by the larger ones. The surrounding seagrass beds hold a rarer prize still – dugongs, sighted by fortunate divers most years despite never being guaranteed, grazing quietly through meadows that also shelter pygmy seahorses and an unusually wide range of nudibranch species.



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After dark, the reef changes character entirely. Torchlight replaces daylight on night dives along the house reef, and a different cast emerges: shrimp stepping out from cleaning burrows, cuttlefish pairs engaged in courtship display, the daytime residents giving way almost completely to species that only appear once the light disappears. Guests are often told it is a different reef after dark, and the description barely qualifies as exaggeration.

Land offers its own layer of rarity entirely disconnected from the water. Nearby Tangkoko National Park, reachable as a day excursion, is home to spectral tarsiers – among the smallest primates on earth, foraging after dark with eyes disproportionately large for their bodies – and black crested macaques, found nowhere outside this corner of Sulawesi. Few dive destinations anywhere pair a marine research culture this genuine with terrestrial wildlife this singular, within reach of the same base and the same short stretch of coastline.

That curiosity extends onto land and into the wider community. Coral Eye has supported the No-Trash Triangle Initiative since 2018, one of its founders among those who helped establish it, working to build a waste management system for Bangka Island that can actually be sustained rather than simply announced. Guests tend to leave having learned something specific – the name of a species, a dive guide's theory about a shrimp's behaviour, the reason the sand here is black rather than white – in a way that a week spent purely relaxing rarely produces. It is a resort built by people who were curious first and hospitable second, and the order still shows, happily, in everything it does.

coral-eye.com
@coraleyebangka



MISOOL RESORT

Descend onto the reef at Misool and the first impression is one of density rather than any single dramatic sighting: colour and movement stacked from the surface down, schools of fusiliers parting and reforming around passing divers, coral cover so complete in places that the rock beneath disappears entirely. Sunlight breaks apart through the shallows into moving bands of gold, falling across limestone karsts that rise sheer from the seabed like the drowned tips of a mountain range. A manta ray glides overhead without any apparent effort, its shadow sweeping the reef below before it banks and circles back to a cleaning station, trailed by a cloud of small fish waiting their turn. Then, on a sandy patch nearby, something unexpected reveals itself – a wobbegong shark, flattened and mottled almost beyond recognition, resting on a bed of coral in ambers and pinks, visible only once the eye adjusts to the specific way it disguises itself as the reef it lives on. This is not a reef guests read about afterwards. It is one they surface from reluctantly, already planning the next dive.

That abundance is the product of a 20-year experiment run by the resort's founders, who in 2005 leased a 1,220-square-kilometre area of ocean from the indigenous communities holding rights to it and established what became the Misool Marine Reserve – a no-take zone patrolled continuously since by rangers funded jointly by the resort and international conservation partners. The figures are now among the most cited in the Coral Triangle: independent surveys have recorded fish biomass increases of between 250 and 600 percent inside its boundaries compared with unprotected waters nearby, and shark populations roughly 25 times denser than outside them.

Guests who dive both sides of the line, as some deliberately do, are given a rare thing in conservation travel: a visible, side-by-side comparison of what two decades of safeguarding actually looks like underwater.

The resort's water cottages and villas sit directly above this stretch of ocean, reached by a private jetty that places most of Misool's signature dive sites within 15 minutes by boat – a rare convenience in a region where reaching world-class diving usually means days aboard a liveaboard. Non-divers are given equal standing rather than treated as an afterthought: twice-daily guided snorkel trips carry them to the same manta cleaning stations and coral gardens the resort's divers spend their mornings exploring. A long-running photo-identification project, built on the unique markings visible on each manta's underside, has tracked individual animals for years, and guests with a particular interest can join researchers for a day, logging sightings themselves rather than simply photographing them. Night dives on the house reef bring their own reward: the epaulette shark, a small, endemic species discovered only in 2006, using modified fins to walk across the shallow reef after dark, a behaviour found almost nowhere else on the planet outside this stretch of Raja Ampat.

Misool Resort's influence reaches well beyond its own waters. In 2010, the resort's founders presented a petition of more than 8,000 signatures to the Raja Ampat regency government, campaigning alongside the conservation group Shark Savers for wider safeguards. The outcome, formalised in law in 2013, was a shark and ray sanctuary covering the entire Raja Ampat archipelago – roughly 27,000sqkm



granted full protection for sharks, manta rays, dugongs and turtles, a policy shift that echoed across the region rather than staying within one resort's waters.

Reaching Misool Resort requires effort: a lengthy combination of flights and boat transfers into the deepest reaches of southern Raja Ampat, a journey that filters naturally for guests genuinely committed to what waits at the other end. What they find is not simply excellent diving but proof, visible on every dive, of what a reef can become when a resort decides to build its entire identity around protecting rather than merely enjoying it – 20 years of patrol logs, translated, underwater, into something that looks very much like life returned.

misool.info
@misool.resort





ONLY THE BEGINNING

Five islands, five resorts, and still barely a fraction of what 17,000 islands contain. Indonesia spans three time zones and hundreds of distinct cultures, its coastline alone longer than the distance from London to Tokyo and back. No single feature, however long, could hope to close the subject. It can only open a door onto it.

Sumba's horses and Moyo's whale sharks and Raja Ampat's mantas are not outliers in this country; they are simply five examples from an archipelago that produces this kind of wonder as a matter of course. Somewhere in the Banda Sea or the highlands of Papua or the reefs off Alor, an island most travellers have never heard of is doing something equally extraordinary, entirely unrecorded, existing exactly as it would whether a single visitor ever arrived or not.

That is the real appeal of this country to a traveller who has already done the obvious circuit elsewhere. It does not run out. Every answer Indonesia gives only produces a longer list of questions, and the five featured here are simply the ones that happened to arrive first.

Which raises the only question worth ending on. If these are the first five, what are the next five?