

El Dorado



Diving the Philippines A superb house reef with its own mermaid

Text and photos: Nonoy Tan

“El Dorado” reminds me of the mythical land of gold and riches that is dreamt of by treasure seekers. As I aimed my camera in search of the exotic marine wildlife of the “El Dorado” house reef, I felt like a treasure hunter from the fable.

The El Dorado dive resort is 20 minutes from Dumaguete City, Negros Island of the Philippines. Situated along the beach, it is a staging point to the popular Apo Island and other appealing locations.

One of the most enthralling dive spots is the house reef in front of the resort. This muck site contains a zoo of the strangest critters. Here I experience regular encounters with the ornate ghostpipefish, frogfish, cuttlefish, dragonet, spearer mantis shrimp, leaf fish, an array of nudibranchs, and a mermaid. That's right! A mermaid!

The leaf fish mimics a leaf as it sways with the water current.





A decorator crab poses for a portrait.

Before leading the first dive, Rico (my guide at El Dorado) asked me what it was I intended to find during the dive. Nothing was impossible, he said. I jokingly challenged him to lead me to a mermaid. Without hesitation, he agreed. During the dive, I heard Rico making grunt noises intended to catch my attention. Then, from the pocket of his BC, he pulled out a Barbie doll with long blue hair as if saying that my wish had been granted. I immediately took a picture of this rare find. Consequently, I soon used up all my remaining air as I laughed dur-

ing the rest of the dive!

After a few hours of rest, it was time to do the second dive. This time, Rico hinted that we might find an albino great hammerhead shark. That was impossible, I thought. No way could there be a great hammerhead shark in the shallow waters of the house reef, much less an albino! Well, I was mistaken. During our second dive, a toy hammerhead shark materialized out of Rico's BC pocket. I wondered what else Rico had in his BC. He is a genie of sorts.

The best was yet to come. It was get-

ting dark and that meant it was time to do another shore entry. The reef was teeming with nocturnal creatures – decorator crab, squid, Spanish dancer, crocodile snake eel, pebble crab, sea snake, robust ghost-pipefish, and others I could not identify. There were so many interesting subjects that I immediately ran out of film.



INSET: One of El Dorado's underwater surprises is this mermaid. RIGHT: The El Dorado house reef is also host to sea horses like this one.



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And it was only my first day! True to its name, the El Dorado dive resort is treasure-filled. ■

Resort & Travel Information

El Dorado dive resort in Dumaguete city is located southeast of the Negros island, central Philippines.
www.eldoradobeachresort.com

From the capital city of Manila, one-hour flights (approximately 250 kilometers) are provided by Philippine Airlines. El Dorado resort can provide land transfers from and to the Dumaguete city airport.
www.philippineairlines.com

Facilities include air-conditioned rooms, swimming pool, open-air theatre, souvenir shop, bars, restaurants and excellent food.

Diving in the house reef and other fabulous sites is best experienced with guides like Rico of Sea Explorers, who operates a PADI Gold Palm IDC center and dive facility at El Dorado and other locations in central Philippines.
www.sea-explorers.com

The magnificently colored dragonet is one of the house-reef's popular inhabitants.



fact file



Philippines



Map of the Philippines

History: The Philippine Islands became a Spanish colony during the 16th century; they were ceded to the US in 1898 following the Spanish-American War. The islands attained their independence in 1946 after Japanese occupation in World War II. The 21-year rule of Ferdinand MARCOS ended in 1986, when a widespread popular rebellion forced him into exile. In 1992, the US closed its last military bases on the islands. The Philippines has had a series of electoral presidential transitions since the removal of MARCOS. The government continues to struggle with armed Muslim insurgencies in the south.

Government: Republic **Capital:** Manila **Currency:** Philippine peso (PHP) per US dollar - 56; per Euro - 70.

Geography: Southeastern Asia, archipelago between the Philippine Sea and the South China Sea, east of Vietnam, mostly mountains with narrow to extensive coastal lowlands; **Coastline:** 36,289 km; **Elevation:** lowest point: Philippine Sea 0 m; highest point: Mount Apo 2,954 m **Agriculture:** rice, coconuts, corn, sugarcane, bananas, pineapples, mangoes, pork, eggs, beef, fish **Natural resources:** timber, petroleum, nickel, cobalt, silver, gold, salt, copper.

Climate: Tropical marine; north-east monsoon (November to April); southwest monsoon (May to October).

Environmental issues: Uncontrolled deforestation especially in watershed areas; soil erosion; air and water pollution in major urban centers; coral reef degradation; increasing pollution of coastal mangrove swamps that are important fish breeding grounds.

Population: 86,241,697. Percent of population below poverty line: 40%, Ethnic groups: Christian Malay 91.5%, Muslim Malay 4%, Chinese 1.5%, other 3%. Religions: Roman Catholic 83%, Protestant 9%, Muslim 5%, Buddhist and other 3%; **Language:** Filipino & English

Medical/Decompression chambers: Cebu City Recompression Chamber Camp Lapu-Lapu Lahug / Doctor Memerto Ortega. (032) 310-709 or (032) 312-325 / (032) 746-652 loc. 2625

Dive Travel: The best time to visit the Philippines is during the period from November to June. Precipitation is lowest during April and May. Temperatures are cooler during December to Feb-

ruary (26- 27°) and warmer between March and May (29°).

Web sites:
Sea Explorers Dive Center www.sea-explorers.com
El Dorado Beach Resort www.eldoradobeachresort.com
Dive info: www.starfish.ch

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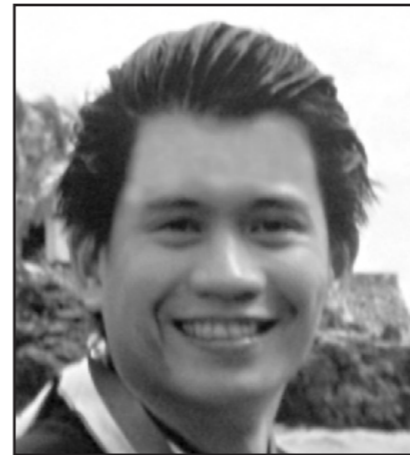
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profile



Philippino Underwater Photographer Nonoy Tan talks macro

interview by Gunild Pak Symes
photos by Nonoy Tan

Nonoy Tan was born in Manila, Philippines. His photographs of marine life behavior and underwater critters have been published in various print and web magazines circulated worldwide. By profession, Tan is a development worker, who spends most of his time, when he is not underwater, in the poor, rural communities of Asia and Africa.

One of your photographs won international recognition by the online underwater photography competition at Underwaterphotography.com. How did you get that award winning shot? (Fighting Wrasses, see page 3) Tell us the story.

Fortunately, I was at the exact place and time when the two wrasses initiated the combat. With jaws locked to each other, the competitors were engaged in a fierce tug-of-war. Eventually, one of them gave up the fight. The struggle did not last for more than a minute, but I was able to take a few shots. In order to increase my chances of getting rare images like that, I spend a lot of time underwater.

Your images show an intense observation of marine life and

environment. What drives you to capture images underwater?

Getting good images involves a lot of time, hard work and patience. But it's all worth it, especially when I get the results I want. The compulsion to continually improve on past performance is addictive.

What achievement are you most proud of accomplishing?

Last year (2003), I decided to join competitions. The first competition positioned me against Gutsy Tuason, an award-winning underwater photographer who has been counseling me since 2001. I consider him as my teacher. As expected, he won overwhelmingly, but I nonetheless succeeded in bagging a minor trophy. I was proud not just for myself, but also for both of us. Also in the same year, I received a gold medal award in an international competition. Luckily for me, Gutsy did not join that one!

When, how and why did you start taking underwater photographs?

My interest in taking underwater photographs began during

A male ribbon eel





A spotted porcelain crab on a sea anemone

Nonoy Tan

my open-water course in 1997. At that time, I was merely interested in showing the photographs to friends. Soon, the interest developed into artistic pursuit. Consequently, I had become very conscious of image composition, lighting, sharpness and artistic impact.

What special training or education in underwater photography or related fields have you received and why?

I knew nothing about photography before 1997. However, I gradually acquired knowledge through research, practice, and trial-and-error. I made a lot of mistakes that has provided me unforgettable lessons (e.g. flooded camera). In 2001, I met Gutsy Tuason. Since then, he has been providing me invaluable photographic tips and equipment advice during our occasional beer-drinking sessions. I continue to undertake self-study and have a lot to learn still.

What are your favorite subjects, techniques, film, equipment, locations?

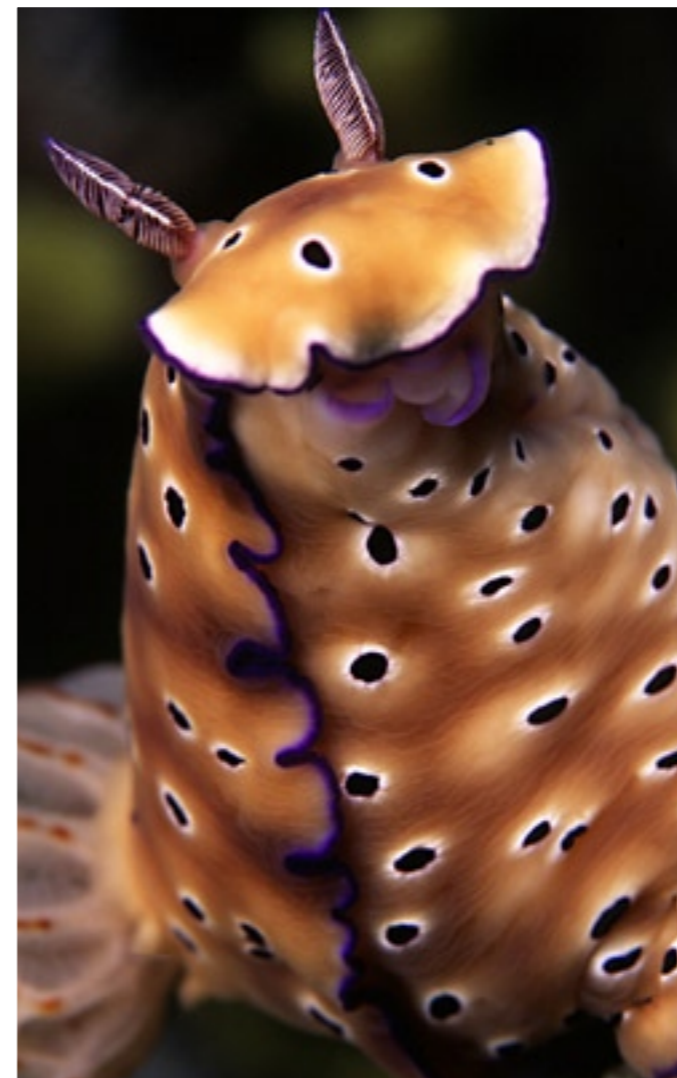
I like taking shots of critters – nudibranchs, cephalopods, and crustaceans. There are a lot of these in the reefs of the Philippines, my home country. I especially enjoy capturing animal behavior on film.

When I started diving in 1997, I was using a disposable camera in a waterproof casing. To save on cost, I learned to disassemble the camera and reload film into it. It was not easy getting satisfactory images with this equipment, but it was all that I could financially afford. As my pocket allowed, I gradually acquired better equipment and started using an amateur SLR in a plastic housing. It was still not the best camera set-



ABOVE: Hypselodoris bullocki nudibranch

RIGHT: Risbecia tryoni nudibranch





The Spanish Dancer is home to a tiny shrimp





Nonoy Tan



An oversized snapping shrimp resting on a crinoid

Close-up of a pipefish

up, but I learned a lot from using it. At present, I use a housed Nikon F100, lenses 16mm, 20mm, 60mm and 105mm, Ikelite sub-strobes 200, Ultralight Arms, and RVP135 film.

What do you look for in a shot?

Sharpness of the image is a must. When taking a shot, I watch for this sharpness through the viewfinder before pressing the button. In nudibranchs, for example, the rhinopores should be perfectly sharp. I also seek images that "capture the moment" for example, wrasses in combat.

What are the tricks you rely on most?

In a technical sense, I don't have any photo-

graphic trick. The photographs that I produce exactly mirror the subject when the image was captured on film. I don't push or pull film nor undertake any type of digital manipulation. Some say that I am a purist and silly. I tend to agree on the latter description. I am sometimes able to "trick" an elusive photo subject by anticipating its behavior. I avoid direct eye contact because that can frighten the fish. Instead, I pretend to look somewhere else while I approach with stealth. Some individual fish are intelligent enough to read my body and eye language, so I have to be conscious about this. Again, I could just be acting silly.

Who are your greatest influences?

I regularly look through coffee table books cre-

ated by master photographers like Constantinos Petrinis, Tony Wu, Jurgen Freund, Michael Aw and Gutsy Tuason. Their photographs are very inspiring.

What are your immediate plans, future goals, projects, dreams?

While I will maintain to use film, I foresee the eventuality of using digital cameras for specific purposes and situations. As a goal for the future, I would like to take underwater images of humpback whales.

Please add anything else you would like to share that is unique about you, your work or your experience.

By profession, I am a development worker. I have spent most of the last ten years in poor communities of Asia and Africa. I do a lot of traveling and get exposed to many different cultures, languages and locations. Like underwater photography, working with indigenous peoples is my other passion. ■

To order images by Nonoy Tan, please contact the photographer directly by emailing him at:

nonoy@hotmail.com

