



Exotic Diving

The Philippines

7,107

Reasons to Go Diving!

Exploring The Islands of the Philippines



STEWART L. SY



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Text by Stewart L. Sy
Images by Stewart L. Sy, Scott Bennett

The Pearl of the Orient is a term now not normally associated with the Philippines. Nowadays, the association is more toward corrupt politicians, People Power and most recently, the Abu Sayyaf rebels' association with Al Qaeda. I read and hear about these stories of my birth place with a heavy heart. To me, the Philippines brings back thoughts of a warm and friendly people, rich in culture and old world traditions. A place where adversity, be it political, social or financial, is met with a nonchalant shrug of the shoulder and a smile just before the strong will of the Filipinos decide to tackle the issue.

You know, it's funny. I spent the first 20 years of my life in these beautiful islands. My family even had a beach house near what is now the most popular province for diving in the country. But, call me crazy—and believe me, a

The magical Philippine islands are hosts to some of the most diverse ecosystems in the world

lot of people do—I learned how to dive in the frigid waters of British Columbia, Canada, instead of this tropical paradise. Now, over a decade later, I'm just beginning to appreciate the wonders beneath the waters of the Philippines.

Located along the western edge of the Pacific, about 500 miles west of Guam and that other diving Mecca—Micronesia—the Philippine Islands are technically considered an

archipelago, encompassing approximately 7,107 islands, which combined, is more coastline than the entire US. Home to approximately 80 million inhabitants, the country's heritage is a mixture of Malay, Chinese, Spanish—it was a Spanish Colony for 400 years—American, and of course, *Pinoy*, which is the local slang for, well, being a local. The Philippines is the only predominantly Christian country in Asia.

I've been returning regularly to the Philippines in search of some great diving for the past six years, mainly going with a bunch of friends to capture some of the underwater wonders on film (and lately on CF Cards!) Unfortunately, blast and cyanide fishing is still practiced.

I will not whitewash the issue, there is still some reef destruction going on, many of the locals are subsistence fishermen, they need the seas for food. I don't think it is for us, Westerners, to stand on our soap box and say that the

PREVIOUS PAGE: Aurora
LEFT: Dauin Beach

TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: *Amphiprion Ocellaris*, a.k.a. "Nemo", Anilao;
Pygmy Seahorse, Puerto Galera; Blue Ribbon Eel, Anilao





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The Philippines

FAR LEFT: Delicate ballet of manta rays

BELOW: Lively coral gardens are homes to a great diversity of marine life

world's reefs.

Anilao is a fairly painless three-hour car ride from the city of Manila, Puerto Galera requires a further 1 hour boat ride from Anilao. Diving in the Philippines is usually done on local outrigger canoes called "bangkas". The smaller ones will take up to four to six divers and the larger boats are capable of transporting up to a dozen.

A simple backwards roll takes one into the warm clear tropical waters. To adequately describe the area would require a lot more space than I have here. Dive sites of note in

Anilao are: Beatrice, Bahura, Basura (local term for garbage, but the ultimate in critter dives!), Cathedral and Twin Rocks, although there are over twenty sites in the area.

Across the channel is Puerto Galera (Port of Galleons). Its sheltered natural harbour is a former stop point of the Spanish Galleons headed back to Spain from the Americas. The underwater flora and fauna of Puerto Galera is similar to that of Anilao, though in my opinion they are in greater numbers here. Must see dives are those of Sabang Wreck—five years ago, I did five of my first 31 dives in Puerto Galera on this one site alone—the Canyons, Sinandigan Wall, The Drydock and Verde Island Pinnacle.

Palawan

West and slightly south of Mindoro is the island group of Palawan and its captial city of Puerto Princessa. Here is the jump of point for liveaboard dive-



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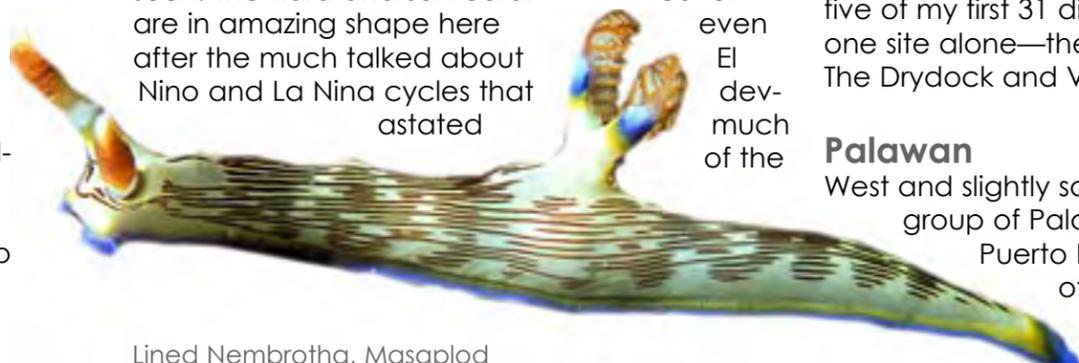
preservation of our reefs is of paramount importance, especially when the one's we're preaching too are simply trying to feed their families.

There is an admirable conservation effort going on in the country. Many marine parks, official and unofficial, are being formed by either the government or by the local towns. The country has begun to realize that diving dollars is more lucrative than fishing, and that happy divers will tip more after a one week trip than the fishermen would make in a month.

Well, let's get to the good stuff: the underwater world of these beautiful islands. The country is divided into basically three distinct island groups, Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao. I've had the pleasure of diving in the first two. Although diving is found throughout Luzon and it's surrounding islands, the predominant areas are the Provinces of Batangas and Oriental Mindoro, more popularly known as Anilao and Puerto Galera.

Anilao & Puerto Galera

Anilao and Puerto Galera are a macro photographer's heaven. There are hundreds of species of nudibranchs found in the area (700 at last count). Blue ribbon, moray and snowflake eels, lionfish, various species of parrot, damsel and trigger fishes, and of course, the perennial favourite of any South Pacific reef species, Ocellaris, the clown or anemone fish, recently made popular by Disney/Pixar's film Finding Nemo. Once in a while, large species such as tuna, black tip sharks and mantas can be seen. The hard and soft coral cover are in amazing shape here even after the much talked about Nino and La Nina cycles that devastated much of the



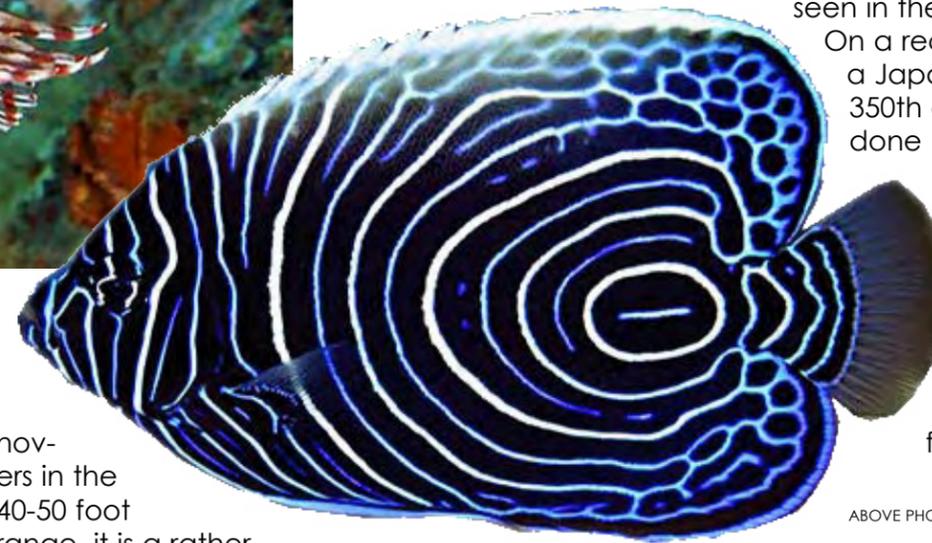
Lined Nembrotha, Masaplod

SCOT BENNETT



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Neon bright tropical reef fish hover in schools around a large barrel sponge; Lionfish; Juvenile Angelfish; Moray eel and cleaner wrasse



ABOVE PHOTO BY STEWART L. SY

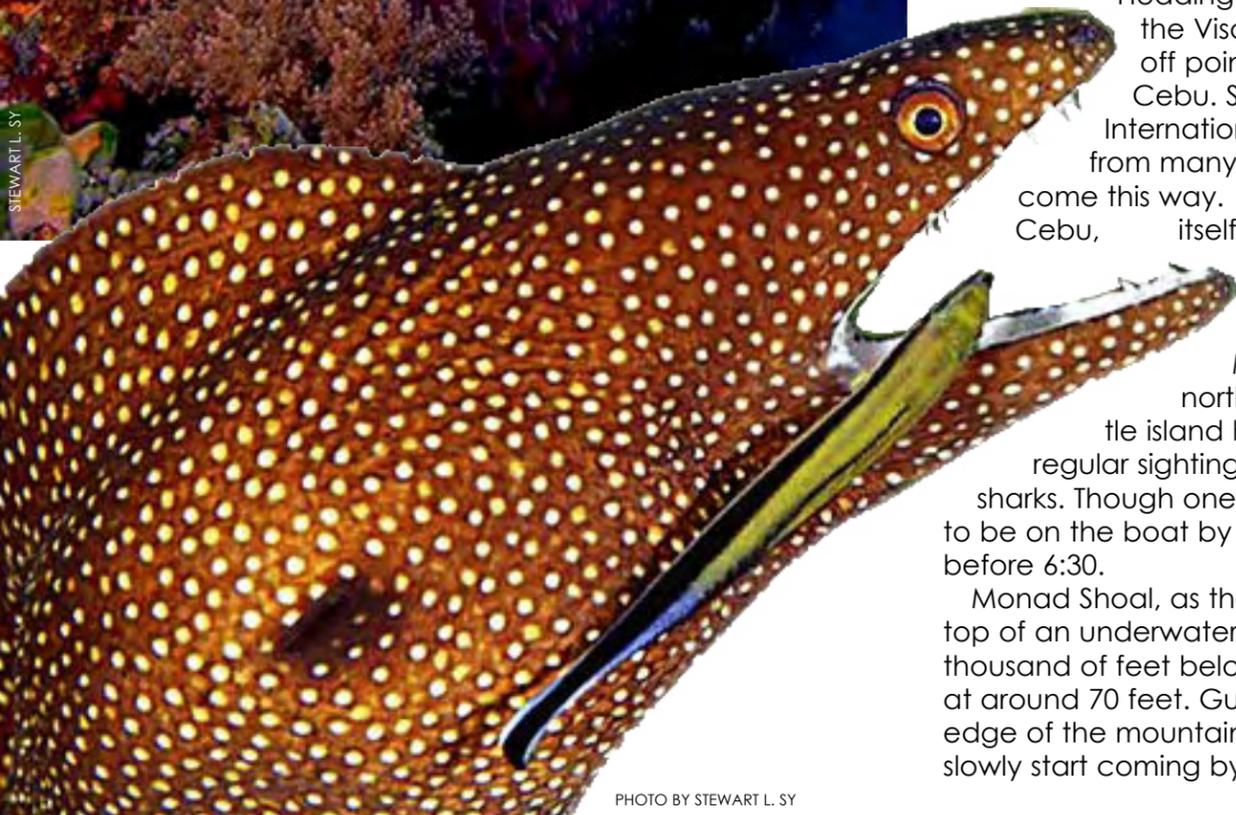


PHOTO BY STEWART L. SY

boats going to the Tubataha National Marine Reserve, a United Nations World Heritage Site. Open only during the months of March to June, this amazing reef system teems with amazing fish life and amazing coral walls. Large pelagics such as sharks, rays and mantas can be seen here. It is truly a place worth visiting.

Visayan Islands

Heading south takes one to the Visayan Islands. The jump-off point here is the island of Cebu. Serviced by the Mactan International Airport, direct flights from many of Asia's gateway cities come this way.

Cebu, itself, has numerous dive spots. One area now gaining popularity is the island of Malapascua. Three hours north of the airport, this little island has become famous for regular sightings of deep-water Thresher sharks. Though one has to be up at 5:30 am to be on the boat by 6:00 and in the water before 6:30.

Monad Shoal, as the site is called, is the top of an underwater plateau. Rising from a thousand of feet below, the top averages at around 70 feet. Guides lead divers to the edge of the mountain. The sharks will then slowly start coming by. As the visibility here

hovers in the 40-50 foot range, it is a rather un-nerving experience when a 12-foot long fish materializes out of the gloom. Shark sightings are pretty regular, year round. At the approach of the rainy season, large Pacific Mantas will start visiting the shoal as well.

Southeast of Cebu is the Bohol and the gorgeous island of Balicasag. A tiny little island that one can walk around in 45 minutes, Balicasag has amazing drop-offs just a few yards from shore. Large coral fans and schools of jacks are ready to greet you. A fish sanctuary was established by the Philippine Department of Tourism here as well as a lovely resort on the west side of the island. Duplex huts of native construction are within 20 yards from the drop-off.

Apo Island Marine Reserve

Southwest of Balicasag is the Island of Negros and specifically the Apo Island Marine Reserve. The southern most tip of Negros is composed of dark volcanic sand. The most amazing creatures are found here. Most notable is the clown frogfish. This tiny creature was found on a channel marker in 15 feet of

water—right in front of a fishing village! Apo Island Marine Reserve allows only 15 divers per day and the condition of the reefs show it! Beautiful fronds of soft coral, large amounts of fish and the most amazing site of all, Anemone Fish City, where in 30 feet of water, literally hundreds of thousands of anemone fish rise up to greet divers.

I've only scratched the surface of what can be seen in the waters of these amazing islands. On a recent trip to Puerto Galera, I met a Japanese fellow who was logging his 350th dive in the area. Well, having only done 120 or so myself in Puerto Galera, I guess I have to start catching up! Mabuhay!

Getting There

Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd (www.cathaypacific.com) and Philippine Airlines (www.philippineair.com) offer the most flights from the west coast. Cathay Pacific



Visayan Islands



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requires a quick layover in Hong Kong, though they offer a choice of either Manila or Cebu as a final destination. Philippine Airlines will fly you to Manila where you can then take advantage of their local routes to get around the country

Climate

Temperature ranges from the mid 80's during the rainy season to near 100 in the summer. High SPF sunscreens are a must. What to Bring: For us accus-

The Philippines



tomed to the North American climate, light clothing is desirable. Leave those heavy jeans at home. Unless you're planning on going to a formal dinner party a polo shirt and slacks will do for pretty much any occasion. Besides, make sure you leave room to buy some of the shirts available as souvenirs!

Water temperature

Low to mid 80's. If you're diving only occasionally then a dive skin is fine, but for repetitive dives (3 or



more a day) a 3mm suit is best.

Electricity

220 volts, 60 cycles. Bring a voltage transformer and only 2 prong plugs.

Entry requirements

American and Canadian citizens are automatically allowed 1 months stay, as long as you have a valid departure ticket and that your passport is valid for 6 months past your departure date.



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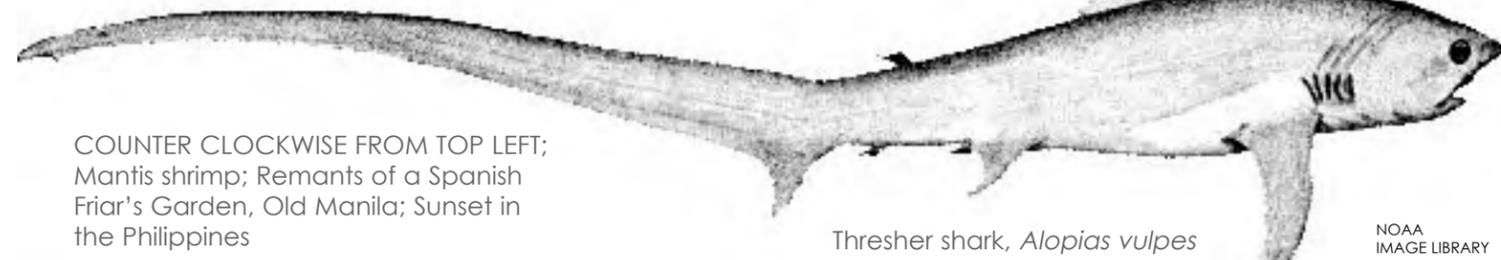


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Ghost Pipefish

SCOTT ENNETT



Thresher shark, *Alopias vulpes*

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COUNTER CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT; Mantis shrimp; Remants of a Spanish Friar's Garden, Old Manila; Sunset in the Philippines

The Philippines

Money matters

At the time of this writing, the Philippine Peso hovered at the 56:1 mark to the US Dollar. In the cities, credit cards are ok but unless you've made prior arrangements with the resort, cash is preferred to credit cards or traveller's cheques. There will be a surcharge to use plastic.

Stewart Sy is originally from the Philippines. He is now based in Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. Ironically, Stewart learned how to dive in the chilly waters of Western Canada. He returns to the Philippines annually for the fantastic diving and photography. His photographs and articles have appeared in Philippine Diver, The Golden Dolphin, Naturescapes.Net and The Vancouver Sun. ■

LEFT TO RIGHT: School of Barracuda; Two Mandarin fish snuggle above the corals; Porcelain crab in anemone; Frogfish



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Nudibranch

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One of The Philippines' Best Kept Secrets

Dumaguete

Text and Photos by Scott Bennett

Negros, one of the largest islands in the Visayas region of the Philippines, is one of the least visited, often overlooked in favour of more popular Cebu or Bohol. This is a shame, as Southern Negros is one of the Philippines best kept diving secrets! Lying outside the typhoon belt, southern Negros is a year-round scuba destination. A twenty-minute drive south of Dumaguete is Dauin. Wide beaches of brown volcanic sand line the shores, remnants of an ancient eruption. A wide variety of dive sites can be found here; the brown volcanic sand provides superb muck diving, with a number of great sites to be found right off the beach.





Dumaguete

Bethlehem

I queried Chris Heim, owner of Sea Explorers, as to why the site was named Bethlehem. Grinning, he replied, "Because it's better-than-Lembah!"

Situated right in front of Sea Explorers' new Pura Vida resort is the area's newest star attraction. This artificial reef was created in 2004 with the sinking of a banca, one of the ubiquitous outrigger boats found throughout the Philippines. In just over a year, the wreck has become a magnet for a diverse assortment of critters.

The remainder of the site, consisting of



a sandy slope with intermittent weedy patches, is an utterly superb muck diving site. The substrate of volcanic sand and variety of critters present are indeed reminiscent of Lembah in Indonesia.

Although diving is good during the day, it really comes alive at night. A shore entry and a short

swim down the slope leads to the banca resting at a depth of 12m. Currents here aren't usually a problem.

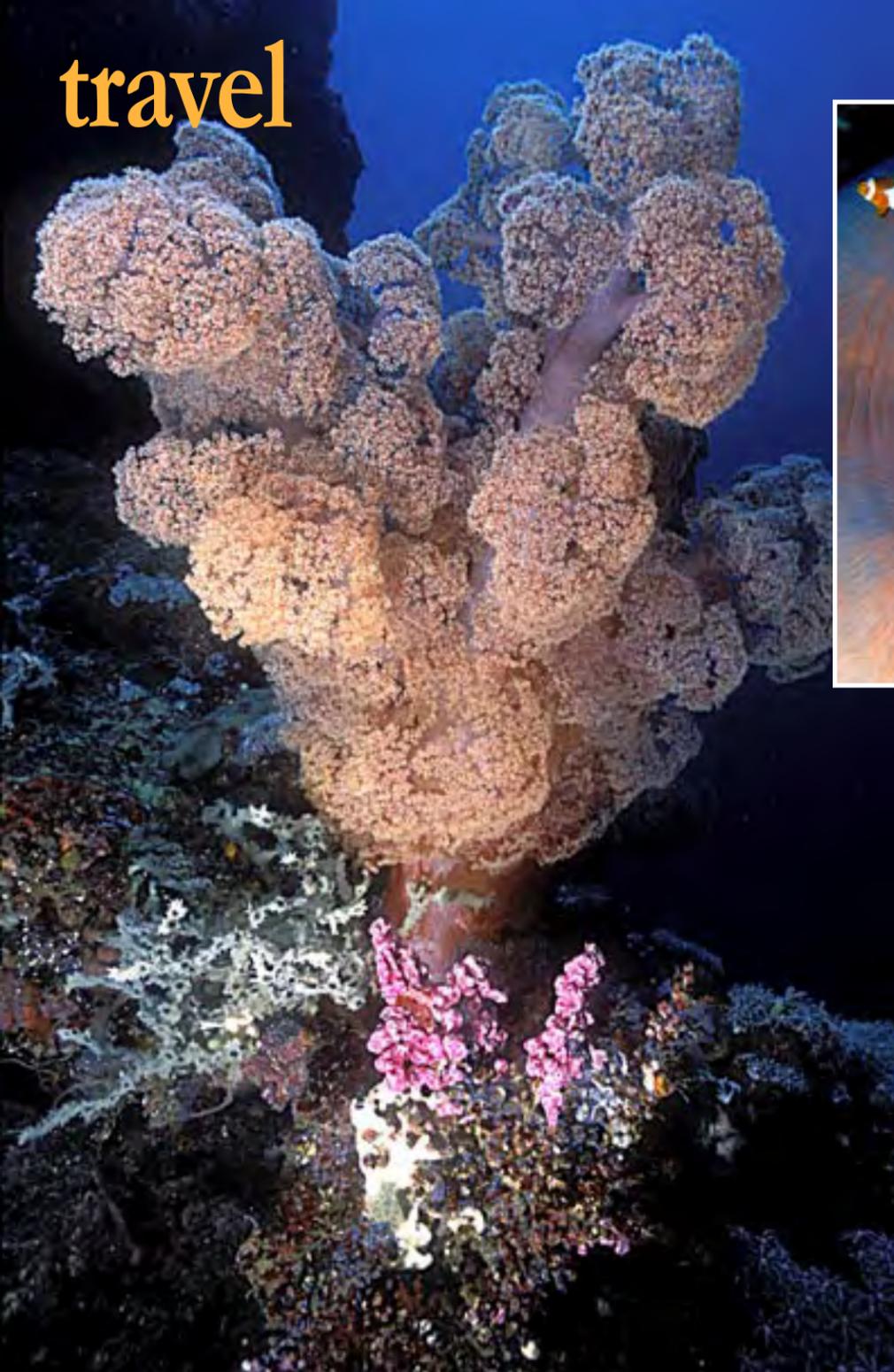
My first dive here was during a full moon, and the current around the wreck was very strong. One unhappy member of our group aborted the dive within a few minutes, but the rest of us pressed on. Photography was nearly impossible, as the current pushed one diver into another, creating a domino effect.

Generally though, the current is usually slight. Crabs can often be found peering out from the underside of the wreck, while the numerous recesses in the side provide a home for numerous scorpionfish.

A number of large and very friendly lionfish make their home within the wreck. At night, they will often utilize your torch illumination to hunt unwary prey.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Squat lobster, Bethlehem; Kabira Phyllodesmium, Sarah's Place; Frogfish, Bethlehem; Cleaner shrimp and Moray Eel, Bethlehem; Stargazer



were bound together and sunk. In less than a year, the tanks have already been colonized by a noticeable amount of marine life. A large moray has taken up residence in one, sharing his abode with boxer shrimp and a small school of juvenile striped catfish. Further on up the slope, the volcanic sand yields bobbit worms, devil scorpionfish, finger dragonets, crocodile snake eels, bristle-worms, giant mantis

shrimp and hairy frogfish. It's truly a paradise for macro enthusiasts. Film users will run out of film long before their air! It's also quite shallow, making it an ideal last dive if you have to catch a flight the next day. Look out Lembeh; you've got some competition!

Masaplod

A 10-minute boat ride from Pura Vida is the small but beautiful sanctuary of Masaplod. Although only covering six hectares, the sanctuary features large areas of hard coral, with beds of seagrass in the shallows. With a maximum depth of 18m, this small but diverse reef is ideal for beginners and advanced divers alike. Being a protected area, the boundaries are surrounded with marker buoys and boats aren't permitted to enter.

After being dropped off at the boundary, a brief swim across the seagrass leads to the reef. If you are a photographer, the biggest hazard here is trying to decide which lens to use, wide-angle or macro! With many species of fish in large numbers, it's very easy to overlook the smaller but no less interesting residents, such as mantis shrimp, ringed pipefish, double ended pipefish and nudibranchs. Along with the schools of big snappers and sweet-lips, a very large turtle often puts in an appearance. Blue-spotted stingrays can be observed in the sandy areas.

The beach facing the site is very popular with locals, who congregate here on weekends. A large



Fan Coral, Sanctuary, Apo Island

ABOVE: Cauliflower Soft Coral, Chapel Point, Apo Island

INSET: Anemone and Clownfish, Sanctuary, Apo Island

Divers must be vigilant and watch their surroundings at all times. The overly friendly lionfish have a very bad habit of swimming around and under the legs of unsuspecting divers.

A wide variety of critters, including crabs, nudibranchs, pipefish, scorpionfish, frogfish and feather stars housing tiny squat lobsters can be found on and around the wreck.

Nearby at 14m a cluster of three scuba tanks



Dumaguete

LEFT: Porcelain crab in anemone El Dorado Reef

CENTER: Unusual green Ghost Pipefish hiding among sea grass

BELOW: Blenny hiding in sea coral

BOTTOM RIGHT: Harlequin crabe hiding in tube worm



beach hut is used for picnics and family get-togethers, which aren't complete without the ubiquitous portable karaoke machine. Both my shore entry and exit were accentuated with some truly painful renditions of popular songs!

Davin

At Davin Beach, a five-minute boat ride from resort, lays another banca wreck, albeit bigger and deeper. Lying on its side at a maximum depth of 30m, the boat has slowly become colonized with a varied assortment of marine life. The interior is home to a congregation of extremely large lionfish, while various nudibranchs are to be found outside.

However, the special attraction is the pipefish, of which several species are often present. Ornate ghost pipefish, in both red and black colour phases, are commonly seen around the wreck, as are banded pipefish. During my last visit, I spotted an unusual green ghost pipefish, with a body similar to a robust, but with a fan-shaped tail. I still haven't been able to identify it in any guidebook.

The seemingly barren slope adja-

cent to the wreck is anything but! An ascent to 7m reveals a lone anemone, home to a small colony of saddleback clownfish, glass shrimps and porcelain crabs. Small, but possessing heaps of attitude, the clownfish prize their tiny piece of real estate and defend it vigorously.

On one occasion, I was a short distance away just looking in their general direction. Within moments a feisty pair of clownfish propelled themselves at me like two miniature torpedoes.

Scattered about the immediate area are small isolated patches of coral, each a tiny microcosm of life with humbugs, reticulated damselfish, sponges, urchins, seahorses and ghost pipefish. At the top of the slope, an extensive bed of seagrass can be found at a depth of depth of 3-5m. A careful eye may reveal robust ghost pipefish, as well as various species of snails, nudibranchs, pygmy pipehorses, razor wrasse, juvenile ribbon sweetlips and sharpsnout eels.

A mere 100m from the



Dumaguete

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Fronds of yellow Featherstars decorate the reef at Rock Point East, Apo Island; Hairy Frogfish, Bethlehem; Celestial Phyllidia Pair, Sarah's Place; Leopard flounder, Banca Wreck.



Banca Wreck, surrounded by debris, sits are the Car Wrecks. Although the area may be small, the variety of creatures to be found here more than makes up for it.

The copious nooks and crannies are crammed with a wide variety of critters: Banded boxer shrimp, Durban hinge-beak shrimp, ornate ghost pipefish, frogfish, blue-spotted stingrays and various species of nudibranchs are just some of the residents to be founding and around the wrecks.

Each dive will reveal something totally different. Make sure to keep an eye on your computer though, as your deco time will vanish in no time. A short swim back up the slope leads to the Seagrass. If the sea is too rough, the site can be reached by road from the resort and an easy shore dive. Unfortunately, due to the depth, both sites can't be done on the same dive. No matter—you'll want to repeat them both!

Sarah's Place

Located adjacent to the Atlantis Resort, Sarah's Place consists of a sandy bottom punctuated with a large artificial



reef. The shallows are characterized by beds of sea grass and small clusters of coral, ideal for novices and macro photographers alike. Moving deeper you will reveal large areas of stag horn and other hard corals. On one dive, a giant frogfish was found perched upside-down under a rocky overhang.

After examining the developed slide, I realized it had a tiny goby clinging to the side of its face. Up to a half dozen species of nudibranchs add a splash of colour, while blue-spotted stingrays can be found hiding in the sand. A blue ribbon eel, continuously twitching spasmodically, allowed an extremely close



approach before finally ducking into his burrow in the sandy bottom. I also managed to spot an elusive crab-eyed goby—the first time I had seen this species in the Philippines. Be sure to make a sunset dive here to see the mating mandarin fish.

As this is a sanctuary, diving is not permitted after sunset. As tempting as it may be, try not to linger too long; I heard the story of one hapless dive guide who had his gear confiscated after being caught by a local official.

Apo Island

A thirty-minute banca ride southwest from Pura Vida is Apo Island, one of the crown jewels of the Visayas. This small rugged island in the Philippine

Sea offers superb hard coral gardens and outstanding drift dives. A dozen different dive sites can be found around the island. One of the country's most successful marine reserves, the entire island, as well as the surrounding sea, was granted full protection status in 1995. The islanders themselves now manage the reserve and sanctuary. Mooring buoys have been set up to prevent damage from the frequent boat traffic.

The island is completely surrounded by fringing reefs adorned with healthy populations of both hard and soft corals. In the shallows, Acropora, lettuce, brain, table and elkhorn corals grow in dense profusion. Equally prolific is the fish life, with a multi-coloured array

of butterflyfish, damselfish, squirrelfish, anthias, groupers, Napolean wrasse, triggerfish, and several species parrotfish.

Dramatic cliffs and overhangs characterize Chapel Pt. A cave harbours copper sweepers and a resident ribbon eel, while elephant ear sponges and cauliflower soft corals adorn the steep walls. Out in the deep water, the strong currents attract an impressive array of tuna, mackerel and barracuda. At Mamsa Point, in the sanctuary, a large school of jacks are regularly encountered. Mamsa means jack fish in the local Visayan dialect. Currents can be quite strong, especially around the full moon.

Between dives, the boats usually

RIGHT: A sea turtle cruises over the reef
LEFT: Apo Island boasts picturesque bays and pristine white beaches



LEFT; Hermit crab
BELOW: Mating Dusky Nembrothas,
El Dorado House Reef

off Cebu's Southern tip, Sumilon Island is home to the country's first marine sanctuary, established in 1974 by Siliman University. The abundant marine life and splendid coral gardens provided a living laboratory for the university's marine biologists.

Unfortunately, spear and dynamite fisherman moved in and the once prolific reef was decimated, ruining years of patient conservation work. In recent years however, the reef has been showing signs of recover, most notably along the walls. The clear waters surrounding the island provide exceptional visibility, especially during the summer months between December and May. Sea snakes, turtles, mantas, barracudas, schools of jacks and even whale sharks have been spotted here.

Pura Vida

While there aren't huge numbers of them, Dauin boasts several higher-end resorts stretched out along the beach. The newest is Pura Vida, owned and operated by Sea Explorers. Opened in late 2004, this is the first resort to be built by the company, run by Swiss-born Chris



put ashore, where battalions of eager t-shirt and sarong vendors descend upon the hapless arrivals. On one occasion, they were patiently waiting ON the dive boat at the conclusion of our dive! Once escaping the cheerful but persistent sales tactics, pleasant strolls can be made around the village and surrounding rocky coastline. Now, the biggest threat to the island is its own popularity. As a result, a 15 diver per day limit has been imposed for the Sanctuary dive site, so be sure to get there early! Accommodation is available on the island if you don't want to take any chances.

El Dorado House Reef

Located in front of the El Dorado Resort, the El Dorado House Reef is another terrific site. An artificial reef was set up some years ago and is thriving. Giant frogfish can usually be seen sitting on a couple of sunken tires. Anemones are abundant, with several species of anemonefish to be found hiding amongst their waving tentacles. Nearby, a large concrete block was home to a small black frogfish that contentedly posed for photographs as well as a perpetually smiling tube worm blenny, which played hide and seek with me as I tried

to snap its picture. Devil scorpionfish, dwarf lionfish, ghost pipefish, tubeworms housing tiny harlequin crabs and tiny squat shrimp, spottin lionfish and a host of other species are easily observed.

Alas, the site has been declared a marine sanctuary, so night diving is no longer permitted. This is a pity, as it is one of my favourite night dives anywhere. Hopefully, diving will be allowed again in the future.

Sumilon Island

Situated 12 km northeast of Dumaguete and just



Heim. This resort was built by divers for divers and it shows. The resort's eagle-eyed dive guides are experts in finding even the tiniest of creatures.

The comfortable cottages sit on beautifully landscaped grounds surrounding a central pool. Every palm tree is original, with the resort being built around the already existing trees. The poolside bar is open 24 hours and is a great place to relax and have a drink after an eventful day of diving.

Dumaguete

Negros Oriental offers a wealth of attractions, ranging from historical sites to both man-made and natural attractions. Dumaguete, the province's laid-back capital, is renowned for its warm and friendly people. This pleasant city is the region's centre of shopping, business and nightlife. It is also the home of



captions

Dumaguete



Siliman University, the country's premier marine biology institute. The attractive tree-lined esplanade along the water is a pleasant place to take a stroll. Be sure to pay a visit to the weekly Wednesday market in Malatapay.

Approximately 25km west of the city are the twin lakes, which are very popular with hikers. Also popular are dolphin and whale watching cruises. These depart Dumaguete and venture out to the deep waters of the Tañon Strait and Bais Bay, where dolphins and pygmy sperm whales can be observed in their natural habitat. A bit further a field is

Kanlaon Volcano, located within the Kanlaon Nature Park. One of the tallest peaks in the Visayas, it towers 8,085 ft. above sea level and is quite active, often spewing plumes of gray ash skyward.

This 25,000-hectare reserve is popular with hikers, but it is strongly advised to avoid the summit. While only 165km from Dumaguete, an all day trip is required to get there and is best done as an overnight trip. The helpful staff at Pura Vida can arrange any of these excursions.



THIS PAGE: Scenes from Pura Vida Resort and the city life of Dumaguete

Getting There

Dumaguete is easily accessible by land, sea and air. The Ocean Jet fast ferry from Cebu makes the trip to in just over three hours, including a stop in Tagbilaran in Bohol. Direct flights from Manila are available daily on both Philippine Airlines and Cebu Pacific. Flying time is approximately one hour and 15 minutes. Cebu is serviced by flights from many cities throughout the Philippines, as well as direct flights from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Japan. From Dumaguete's airport, Sea Explorers provides free transfers to and from the resort.

When he isn't applying his creative skills to one of the animation projects he's working on, Canadian Scott Bennett can frequently be found behind the lens of a camera. While on an extended business trip in the Philippines, a passion for diving was rekindled while succumbing to the lure of underwater photography. His hobby soon developed into a passion, and Scott seizes every opportunity capturing Southeast Asia's beauty, both on land and under water. He makes his home in Toronto, Canada. ■

Ligpo Island

Reefs of Stunning Sea Slugs & Flatworms

Text and photos by Nonoy Tan

Divers love Ligpo for its magnificent drop-offs. On its south and west sides, huge coral fans stretch out against the water current. One hundred feet below, divers encounter seasonal pelagics; Ligpo is a popular destination for wall and recreational deep diving. Not known to many, however, it is also a place to see strange but beautiful critters that photographers dream about.



A pair of mating *Risbecia tryoni*. Each individual is both male and female, but lay eggs separately



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A pair of *Chromodoris geometrica* finds home on a discarded soda can; a flatworm preparing to launch itself into the water column; a *Hypselodoris krakatoa* feasting of fish eggs

It is 10 o'clock in the evening; I have just completed my second night dive. Although it has been an exhausting day, I exit the shore with a usual smile of delight. Again, the waters of Ligpo Island have not disappointed me. Ligpo always presents me with something new to discover.

Located 100 kilometers south of the Philippine capital of Metro

Manila, Ligpo Island can be reached by a two-hour land travel and a short boat ride from the famous Anilao, birthplace of scuba diving in the Philippines.

The waters on the north and east sides of the island are shallow (from 10 to 40 feet). In this area lives a circus of small creatures. It is home to the ghost pipefish, blue-ring octopus, spearer mantis

shrimp, orangutan crab, frogfish, crocodile snake eel, flamboyant cuttlefish, seamoth, dragonet, squat lobsters, just to name a few. Among all the critters, however, the sea slugs and flatworms dominate.

I have done several hundred dives during the last five years, but I am amazed at how Ligpo still gives me the thrill of discover-

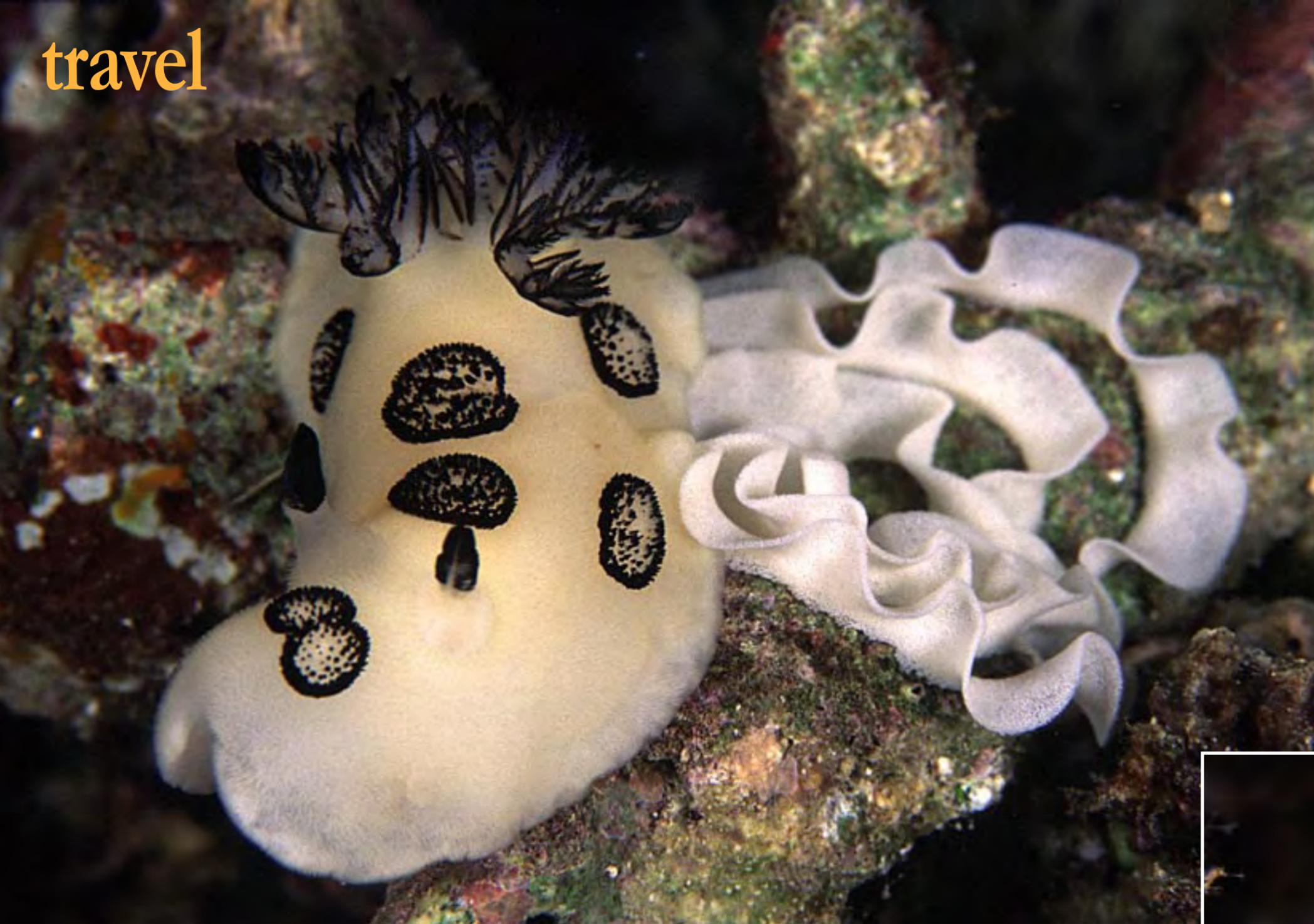


Ligpo Island

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Entwined pair of mating *Pteraeolidia ianthina*; Unlike other sea slugs, the body of the *Micromelo undatus* possesses a shell, which is possibly a remnant of its evolutionary past; a camouflaged flatworm emerges from within a sea squirt

ing new shapes, patterns and colors of the sea slugs. A dive is not complete without a sea slug photo opportunity. Even at night, it is common to encounter the Spanish dancer with its commensal emperor shrimp, or a green flatworm emerging from a sea squirt. Sometimes, the evening reveals strange species of sea slugs or flatworms that I haven't identified up to now. With such a good number of sea slug population, Ligpo is one of the best places to observe these critters – feeding, resting, laying eggs, competing, courting, and mating.

Although sea slugs are hermaphrodites, they normally need a partner to mate successfully. By chemoreception, they are able to recognize a potential partner. When the pair meets, the process of courtship proceeds with body contact. At this point, the genitalia located at the right side of their necks are readily stretched out. The courtship process usually doesn't last long, and the act of copulation begins when the genitalia are engaged. I have seen a pair of *Nembrotha* that were so "hot" that they immediately began mating without any noticeable courtship ritual. Mating can go on for several



LEFT: A *Jonnura funebris* laying a ribbon of eggs. BELOW: This *Nembrotha lineolata* stretches to reach its food

Ligpo Island

them consistently.

The feeding preferences of sea slugs are diverse. Some like to eat algae, sponges, ascidians, or even fish eggs! Sea squirts seem to be the favorite food of the *Nembrotha* as they are often seen sucking within them in absolute pleasure. In another instance, a *Hypselodoris* was enjoying a buffet of fish eggs so plenty that it seemed like food paradise. In Ligpo, I learned that each sea slug species could be found near its particular food source.

The amount of time I spend with the sea slugs provides me the opportunity to observe and learn more about their behavior and at the same time capture rare images. With a lot of available subjects getting these images is uncomplicated. I merely concentrate on critter hunting and image composition. Moreover, at the usual shallow depths of around 15 to

25 feet within an area of 500 square meters, I don't even have to care about decompression or about getting lost! Dives that last for at least 90 minutes is the norm.

Ligpo Island can be reached from resorts located in Anilao, Batangas. Among these are Dive n Trek Resort (www.diventrek.com) and Club Ocellaris (www.clubocellaris.com). Both offer excellent dive guides, food and a variety of accommodation.

Nonoy Tan was born in Manila, Philippines. His photographs of marine life behaviour 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 isn't underwater, in the poor, rural communities of Asia and Africa. Order prints and images, email: nonoy@hotmail.com ■



hours.

On several occasions, I have observed a *Chromodoris* subsequently mating with at least two partners, especially when they are in a group of three or more. Orgies are a common pastime in Ligpo (I mean, the sea slugs). I have also witnessed a pair of *Pteraeolidia ianthina* in an intensely aggressive courtship behavior – more like a rape attempt. Having sensed a potential mate, the aggressor chased the potential victim, who was obviously dis-

interested as it tried to push back the assailant using its anterior.

In an apparent show of desperation, the attacker started to pounce its mouth against the defender. The struggle persisted until they reached a ledge and fell separately. After observing what had happened, I felt that I had witnessed a crime.

Subsequent to receiving a reciprocal exchange of sperm, each individual will produce a “ribbon” of eggs that come in

different patterns and colors, depending on the species.

Then, the eggs are left to develop on their own as most adults proceed with their regular activities. However, *Pteraeolidia ianthina* parents tend to stay with the eggs while other adults accompany them. Thus, wherever there is a brooding parent, then there must be more individuals in the vicinity. And since they prefer to stay in the same locations throughout the year, I am able to find



Malapascua

White sands, magnificent wrecks & macro heaven...

Text by Scott Bennett.
Photos by Scott Bennet and Stewart L. Sy

Anchored off the extreme northern tip of the island of Cebu, one of the principal islands of the Visayas, the tiny island of Malapascua is one of the gems of Philippines diving. Boasting a dazzling sugar-white beach fringed with coconut palms, it's the perfect vision of a tropical paradise. Although famous for its thresher sharks, Malapascua and its environs offer world-class macro life.



Malapascua



Malapascua, also known as Logon by some of the older locals, is a very relaxing place to stay. There's a wide variety of accommodation to suit every budget, from simple huts to resorts. The idyllic beach is every bit as beautiful as that of the more famous Boracay, but without the crowds. It's possible to relax on the beach without being hassled by persistent souvenir vendors.

The island is fairly compact, being only several kilometres in length. A lattice of paths and tracks envelop the island's verdant interior, leading to sleepy fishing villages and picturesque, deserted coves. The only traffic encountered is the odd bicycle, as there are no cars on the island. A lighthouse at the northern end provides striking views over the entire island and the surrounding Visayan Sea.

Malapascua's signature dive site is Monad Shoal, a sunken island rising from the abyssal depths of the Visayan Sea. The top of the plateau rests at a depth of 15-25m, with steep walls plunging down to more than 200m. The star attraction is the thresher sharks. Easily distinguished by their bullet-shaped bodies and long sweeping tails, these graceful creatures come here often to visit a cleaning station on the top of the plateau. There are two primary dive sites here, Shark Point and The Hole. The best chance to see them is between 5:00 and 9:00 in the morning. Try to get here really early and avoid the inevitable boatloads of other divers. Despite their large size, the sharks are quite shy and can be easily frightened off.

Spotting the threshers can be very hit

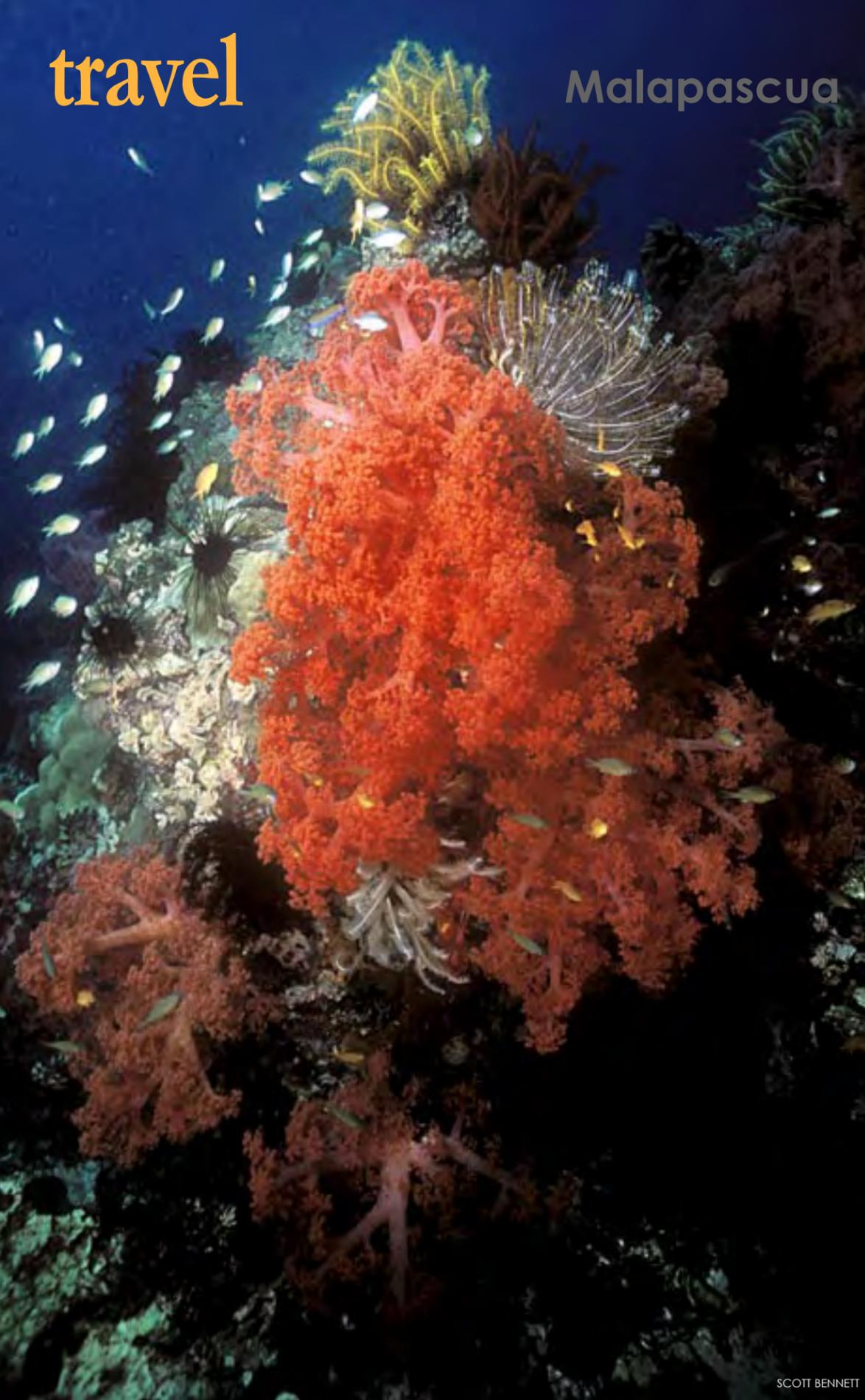
and miss. Although not as plentiful as in recent years, the sharks are still around. After spending 50 minutes waiting on one dive without any luck, we reluctantly swam back to the mooring line. All of a sudden, my guide gestured frantically towards the blue. I looked just in time to see the massive tail of a thresher go by. In the blink of an eye, it had vanished into the murky depths. It turned out that I was the only one of our group to see one that day. Back on the boat, my guide related a story. Two weeks earlier, he had taken a group of five German divers to the site. They came to within three metres of a large specimen being attended to by a number of cleaner wrasses. One diver, unnerved by being so close, had to back away. Wouldn't you know it, not one of them had a camera! As well as

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Malapascua at dawn; seaside lounge on the beach; False Clownfish hiding in anemone



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the threshers, hammerheads can sometimes be seen, while from May to January, mantas are known to put in an appearance. In addition to the magnificent sea life, a number of impressive shipwrecks can also be found in the area. The most famous is the *Dona Marilyn*, a passenger ferry that sank during a typhoon in 1984. Lying on her starboard side at a depth of 35m, this 100m long wreck is cloaked with a wide variety of hard and soft corals. Experienced divers can penetrate the wreck in several places. Big black spotted rays can usually be found on the seafloor surrounding the wreck. Even deeper is the *Pioneer*, a Japanese vessel sunk during World War II. Standing upright with the bow at a depth of 54m, the wreck is reached via a blue-water descent down a mooring line. The anchor and propellers are still plainly visible. Encrusted with corals and sponges, the wreck is home to a number of large stonefish and

scorpionfish. Sometimes, large groupers and barracuda can be spotted. Unfortunately, bottom time is quite limited due to the depth. Nevertheless, it's a fascinating wreck to explore. Visible on the horizon to the northwest and a 40-minute banca ride from Malapascua, is Gato Island. Translated as "cat" in the local dialect, the island is a fully protected marine sanctuary. A lonely little cabin, perched on bare rock, provides a home for the guards. Surrounding the island is a number of spectacular caves and rock formations. In some places, soft corals in radiant hues of red, orange, yellow and purple adorn the steep walls. Caves and crevices around the island harbour a variety of sleeping sharks, such as white-tips and coral cat sharks. One of the most remarkable features is a tunnel running underneath the northern half of the island. From the entrance on the west



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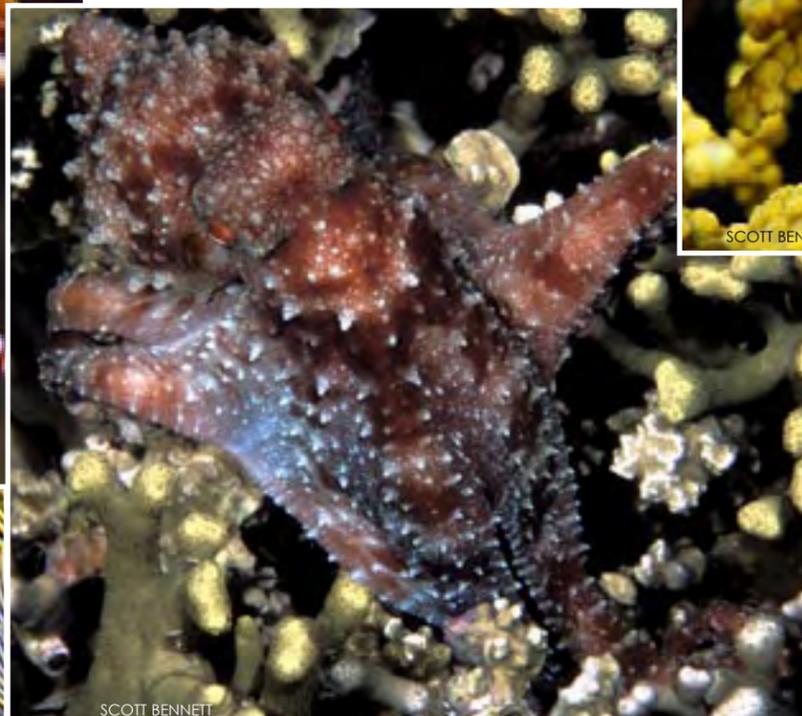
LEFT TO RIGHT:
Coral gardens of Gato Island reef walls;
Gato Island bare rock caves; Stonefish



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LEFT TO RIGHT:
Commensal Shrimp
Black Ghost Pipefish
Nudibranch
Leteus Octopus
Yellow Pigmy Seahorse
Cardinal fish with Urchin
Red Ornate Ghost Pipefish



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STEWART L. SY

skeleton shrimps to football-sized sponge crabs. From time to time, whitetip sharks and sea snakes can be found sleeping in the tunnel. It's definitely not for the claustrophobic!

Outside the entrance during my visit was a colossal school of orange cardinalfish. So big, in fact, you could swim right into the school and be totally engulfed by the billowing mass

side, the tunnel descends from 5m to 14m at the exit on the east side. Swimming through the snaking, 80m long tunnel was alternately eerie and fascinating.

Despite my initial reluctance of entering, the tunnel is actually quite wide and will comfortably fit several divers at once. Illuminated by torch beams were numerous crustaceans, ranging from minute

of fish! Our guide estimated there were probably a million of them.

The island is a treasure-trove for the macro photographer, with great subjects to be found at every corner. Just inside the cave entrance, a large number of Spanish dancers could be found concealed in rocky crevices. On one dive, our guide found seven of them in a few square metres.

Nearby, a brilliant yellow tigertail seahorse was found hiding underneath a rocky overhang.

Gato is also a haven for pipefish, as both black and red ornate ghost pipefish are commonly seen hiding amongst feather stars. Despite their vibrant decorations, these delicate creatures can be quite difficult to spot.

Equally colourful are the wide variety of frogfish that can be found around the island. These masters of camouflage perfectly mimic the colour and texture of the sponges on which they sit. I was thrilled to find a vivid orange specimen and photographed it from various angles. After the dive, I was told that a pair of frogfish, one white, the other hairy and striped, were sitting side-by-side no more than four metres away!

The bottom surrounding the island is reasonably flat, with sandy areas interspersed with clusters of large boulders. At a depth of 24m, a pair of large purple and yellow seafans sat almost side by side.



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ABOVE: Crab
RIGHT: Red Pigmy Seahorse
FAR RIGHT: Striped catfish
BELOW: Black Seahorse



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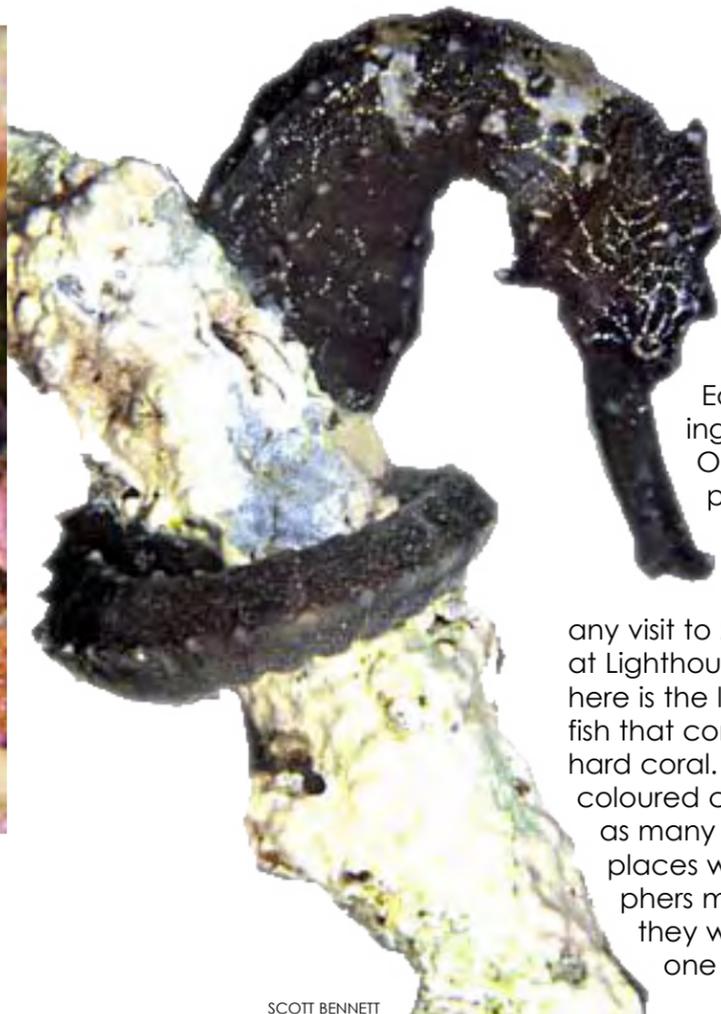
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Malapascua



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TOP LEFT: Red Leteus Octopus
BOTTOM: Mandarin fish



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Each one had its corresponding resident pygmy seahorses. On one dive, a very out-of-place yellow tigertail seahorse was discovered sitting on the purple fan!

One of the highlights of any visit to Malapascua is a dusk dive at Lighthouse Point. The star attraction here is the large number of mandarin fish that congregate in the patches of hard coral. I've seen these flamboyantly coloured creatures before, but never as many as I saw here. Unlike other places where a crowd of photographers mob one hapless pair of fish, they were so numerous that everyone had their own pair to photo-

graph.

Once the mandarins were finished with their amorous displays, there were plenty of other subjects to attract the photographer's eye. Seahorses are quite common here as are a large variety of cephalopods. Red leteus octopus, bobtail squid, pygmy cuttlefish, bigfin reef squid and, on occasion, blue-ring octopus can be seen.

The best part is that depths don't usually exceed 3m, so your film will run out long before your air! Digital shooters will definitely have an advantage.

Another fine site is the Malapascua Exotic House Reef.

Lying just offshore from the resort, owner Dik DeBoer created this artificial reef only a few years ago. What started out as barren sand now is an eclectic assortment of artificial reef structures, ranging from a pyramid of blocks, clusters of tires and metal poles tied together, to a couple of sunken jeepneys. Even if you miss out seeing a thresher at Monad, you'll see one here, albeit made of concrete!

In



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just a few short years, life on the reef has blossomed. The jeepneys' interiors provide a home for a school of cardinalfish and assorted lionfish, while a large number of batfish can usually be found swimming by. Nearby, a large pole structure is encrusted with tunicates, ascidians and urchins as well as providing shelter for a school of painted sweetlips and a large resident cuttlefish.

There are plenty of subjects to appease the macro enthusiast. You'll almost certainly run into the resident flamboyant cuttlefish as he makes his rounds along the sandy bottom.

At night, however, the reef really comes alive. Innumerable pleurobranchs, nudibranchs, flatworms and crabs can be found in profusion. A pile of bicycle tires provides a home for a huge tawny-coloured moray with a body thicker than a man's forearm.

Watch out for those petite urchins carpeting the bottom. They appear innocent enough, but their little spines are sharp. After being repeatedly impaled by the little pests,

I got my revenge when I spied a crab devouring one.

This once out-of-the-way tropical jewel is now quite easy to reach. The jumping off point is Cebu City, gateway to the Visayas region and second-largest city in the Philippines. A number of international flights arrive here from various cities in South-East Asia, allowing travellers to avoid flying into Manila.

For first-time visitors, Cebu City, despite a population approaching two million, is a lot more manageable than the country's chaotic capital. From here, buses depart for the three to four hour journey to the little town of Maya, at the northern tip of the island. From here, it's a 30-minute trip to the island by banca, the ubiquitous pumpboat found throughout the country.

These elongated craft, with bamboo outriggers bound to cross struts on both sides, are the workhorses of inter-island transport and diving in the Philippines. Passengers have the option of taking the public ferry or chartering their own banca for the trip to the island. When the tide is out, the larger

boats can't come close to shore, so passengers must be ferried out to them by smaller vessels.

Malapascua, with its winning combination of superlative diving, fabulous beaches and laid-back charm, is a destination to cherish time and time again. Maybe next time I'll find that elusive pair of frogfish! ■



SCOTT BENNETT

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Malapascua at dawn; concrete Thresher shark; Beach kids; Flamboyant Cuttlefish

SCOTT BENNETT

Denizens of Dauin



Text and photos by Nonoy Tan

The tranquil town of Dauin appears typical. Each morning, the men ride their small bancas to catch fish, while the women are busy cooking, cleaning and looking after the children. Just before dawn, the kids come out to play and frolic on the beach. During this time, the fishermen return with their catch, and soon afterwards retire for the day. The same pattern of activities is repeated the next day.

But the daily routine of Dauin has been changing, in fact. Now, larger boats that display a red flag with a white diagonal stripe regularly visit its shores. They carry strangers to the area. They are dive boats that bring divers from all over the world. Everyday, their passengers come here to see the critters that hide below the water's surface.

Dauin's popularity as a muck dive destination has grown tremendously. Declared as a marine sanctuary, it has become an integral component of the local tourism industry. Also, Dauin's obvious potential has attracted both local and foreign investments. Such are the development of several resorts. Among them, is the Swiss run Pura Vida Resort. This place just opened and the native-inspired cottages provide com-

LEFT: Arrow crab
ABOVE: Short-pouch Pigmy Pipefish



INSET: Frogfish

ABOVE: A pair of Thorny Seahorses

fortable and exotic dwellings.

Although new, the management and staff are by no means inexperienced. Pura Vida is fully owned and operated by the Sea Explorers (www.sea-explorers.com), with whom I have been diving for the last five years. The well-trained local dive guides are probably among the best in the country. They have the knack for spotting any critter no matter how well camouflaged or miniscule. Nothing escapes their vision.

In a recent trip, I was once again accompanied by one of the expert guides. As usual, I had great expectations. In fact, I had brought two sets of underwater cameras, expecting that

each dive would be photographically intense.

Past dives at Dauin have provided me with such optimism, and I was not disappointed this time either. By the end of three days, I had consumed 16 rolls of 36-exposure film.

Macro heaven

At Dauin, I was overwhelmed with the array of macro subjects. In fact, frogfishes were so common that I soon started to ignore them. Furthermore, my interest on the thorny seahorses, dragonets, elegant squat lobsters and ghost pipefishes had similarly diminished. They become secondary choices as I soon realized

they were not so uncommon at Dauin.

Consequently, the abundant macro opportunities made me more ambitious. I began to seek the oddball and hard-to-find critters. To my surprise, that did not prove to be too difficult to accomplish either.

It didn't take long, for example, for my guide to find for me a short-pouch pygmy pipehorse (*Acentronura brevipe- rula*). In fact, we discovered three individuals in a matter of minutes.

We also came across several unexpected finds, such as a Flying gurnard, Pegasus seamoth, Arrow crab and a tiny Commensal crab that resided on a Fire urchin. The discovery of a rock lobster in

Black-pitted Snake Eel



Davin

full daylight was also a pleasant surprise. It was seeking refuge among the debris of a small boat wreck.

My favorite subject, however, was the sighting of a Velvet fish (*Paraploactis intonsa*). Measuring a length of about one and a half inches (38mm), I watched as it "walked" with its pectoral fins and dragged its disproportionately long body across the sandy bottom. It was clumsy but beautiful nonetheless.

Another memorable moment was an encounter with a pair of shrimp gobies. In all other places where I have dived, I have never been able to get near and take a decent photograph of a shrimp goby. Before I ever got into position, the subject



goby would have scampered inside a burrow. Because of these previous disappointments, I stopped taking goby photos.

However, I became inspired during my dives at Davin to try again and try my luck one more time. After spotting a pair of shrimp gobies, I began to inch myself slowly towards the couple. Interestingly, they allowed me to

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Pipefish
Pegasus Seamoth
Rock Lobster
Dragonette



get very close. Even as my strobes flashed, the barrage didn't seem to bother them. After several shots, I left them undisturbed. I can only speculate the reason for their seemingly careless attitude. Maybe they were as curious about me as I was of them.

Night dive

The best was yet to come. By nightfall, the reef in front of the Pura Vida Resort became host to a critter extravaganza. Aside from the crabs, cuttlefishes and octopuses, I also encountered several exciting finds like a Flying gurnard, a Black-pitted snake eel and a Red crocodile snake eel. As usual, I exhausted both camera films within a single dive.

After a few days of diving at Dauin, I started to encounter rare critters that I had never seen before. Despite my jubilation and sense of accomplishment in those moments, I felt that I had witnessed only the tip of the iceberg. So, I will most likely be spending more

time at Dauin in the years to come. Needless to say, I am hopeful that the denizens of Dauin will continue to be there to greet me.

Resort and Travel Information

Dauin is a small town located on the island of Negros, central Philippines. From the capital city of Manila, one-hour flights are provided by Air Philippines to Dumaguete City Airport which is only 15 minutes away from Dauin. Pura Vida Resort provides transfers between Dumaguete City Airport and Dauin. www.airphils.com

Facilities include native-inspired rooms, swimming pool, bar, restaurant, communication facilities, spectacular house reef and excellent food. Pura Vida Resort is managed by Sea Explorers, which also operates a PADI Gold Palm IDC center and dive facility at Dauin and other fabulous locations in central Philippines.

www.sea-explorers.com ■

ABOVE: Crocodile Snake Eel

RIGHT: Velvet fish

FAR RIGHT: Flying Gurnard





fact file

The Philippines



History During the 16th century, the Philippine Islands became a Spanish colony; In 1898, they were ceded to the US following the Spanish-American War. The Philippines became a self-governing commonwealth in 1935 under elected President Manuel QUEZON who had to prepare the country for independence after a 10-year transition. The islands fell under Japanese occupation in 1942 during WWII. US and Filipino forces fought together to regain control from 1944-45. July 4, 1946 marks Philippine independence. A widespread rebellion of the people forced President Ferdinand MARCOS into exile after 21 years of rule in 1986 when Corazon AQUINO was installed as president. During her presidency, there were several coup attempts, which affected political stability and economic development. In 1992, Fidel RAMOS was elected president who enjoyed a presidency marked by greater stability and progress on economic reforms. The US closed its last military bases on the islands in 1992. President Joseph ESTRADA, elected in 1998, was impeached on corruption charges and was succeeded by his vice-president, Gloria MACAPAGAL-ARROYO who was elected to a six-year term in May

2004. Armed communist insurgencies and Muslim separatists in the south continue to threaten The Philippine Government. Government: Republic; Capital: Manila

Currency Philippine peso (PHP); Exchange rate: 53 peso per US dollar; 63 peso per Euro

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; northeast 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. Percentage 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

Language Filipino and English

Map of The Philippines



Decompression chambers

Cebu City Recompression Chamber Camp Lapu-Lapu Lahug . Dr Memerto Ortega. (032) 310-709 or (032) 312-325 (032) 746-652 loc. 2625

Manila (Quezon City):
AFP Medical Center at V. Luna Hospital, V. Luna Road, Quezon City
Dr. Jojo R. Bernardo
Phone: 920 7183
921 1801 loc. 8991

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

Web sites

- Club Ocellaris www.clubocellaris.com
- Dive N Trek www.diventrek.com
- Sea Explorers Dive Center www.sea-explorers.com
- Pura Vida Resort www.pura-vida.ph
- Philippines Department of Tourism www.wowphilippines.com.ph

Dive info

- PADI Dive Guide www.padidiveguides.com
- Starfish www.starfish.ch
- Dive Sites of the Philippines by Jack Jackson www.amazon.com



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