

Freediving Moalboal

by Nicholas Kouvaras

Moalboal is a peninsula on the south-western tip of Cebu, bordered to the west by the Tañon Strait. From its shore you can clearly see Negros Island across the strait. Pescador Island, a popular tourist attraction, is also part of the municipality.

Since the 70s Moalboal has developed a tourism industry based on diving and the beaches that look into the sunset.

To reach Moalboal you will first have to go to Cebu City. It is one of the biggest cities in the Philippines and it has a big international airport. From there you can take the bus or hire a car for the 3 hour drive to Moalboal. The buses leave from the South Bus Terminal and prices are around 200 PHP. If you decide to take a taxi or hire a private car it is highly recommended to negotiate the price first.

The high season is considered to be from November to April. It is the busiest time for the small coastal town. Between May and October is the rainy season but it is still good for diving. Actually the best conditions that I experienced were during May and June. In 2021 a typhoon hit Moalboal and destroyed a big part of the waterfront and seriously damaged the reef, which is still recovering. All around the area there are walls and big depths are just a few metres from the shore.

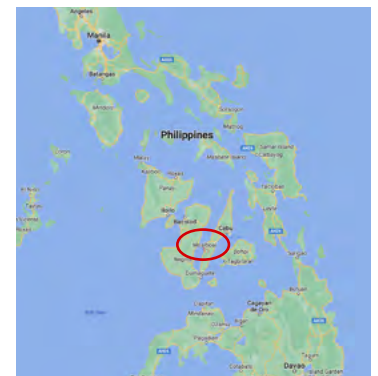
There are plenty of accommodations close to the beach and a big variety of restaurants for all tastes and cuisines. The nightlife, like all touristy beach towns, is very lively.

The main attraction in Moalboal are the sardines in Panagsama beach. Big schools of



I have to admit that I got lucky with this shot. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/160 sec , ISO640, A Mode

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My model that day knew only 2 words in English. Photo and Video. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/160 sec, ISO800, A Mode

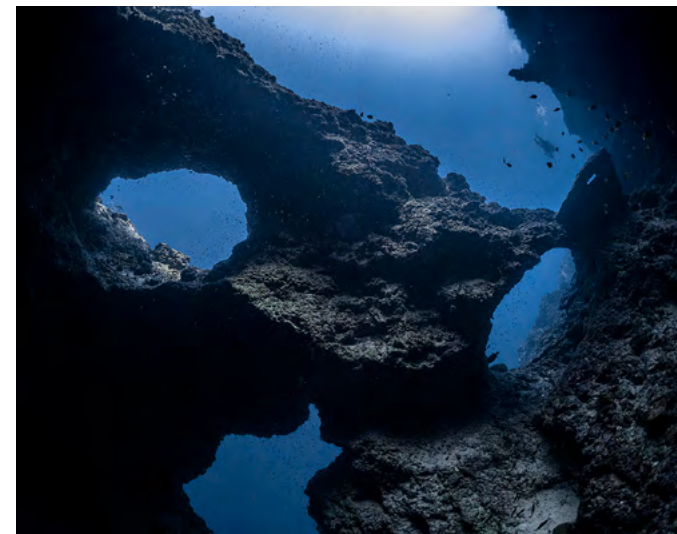
sardines are for some reason always there. The spot is easily accessible from the beach and 100s (literally) people visit everyday. Snorkelers, people with life vests, freedivers and scuba divers all mingle with the schools of sardines that create a very photogenic environment. Sometimes small trevally try to chase the sardines. If you are very lucky you



might even see a thresher shark joining the party.

With a little bit of practice you can learn to manipulate the sardines and make them open up in a perfect circle around your subject. Swimming just under the school is usually the best way to get really close to them.

A bit further north, there are also some



It really looks like a skull. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/3.5, 1/250 sec, ISO1600, P Mode

Two freedivers chilling @33m, lucky me. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/2, 1/80 sec, ISO800, P Mode

In the morning the sun is at the back of the mermaid. You have to make sure your subject is not covered by the shadows. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/800 sec, ISO800, A Mode

underwater statues. A mermaid around 7 metres deep and the Moai statue in a small cave @33 metres. Turtles are also very common here and they are comfortable with the divers. If you like macro and black water photography the walls offer lots of opportunities. But most photographers that visit Moalboal focus on the sardines and the caves.



Me and my friend the turtle. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/1600 sec, ISO1600, A Mode

Pescador island with the skull cave is the other famous diving attraction in Moalboal. The island is just 10 minutes away by boat and offers nice walls and a spectacular open cave dive.

During the morning many diving boats arrive at the small island and fill the cave with divers. The afternoon is always quieter. The skull cave also is also named the cathedral and it is open at the top. It is also a bit demanding in terms of depth. The

entrance is @18m and it goes down to 40m. At around 25m there are 2 windows and @30m one big opening that from an angle creates the shape of a skull. What I like the most about the cave is that it is open to the top. It makes taking pictures inside the cave so much easier. You have the walls of the cave and the windows to frame a nice picture and at the same time plenty of sunlight. The downside is that you might have to wait your turn if it is a busy day.



Meeting a whale shark in the open water feels different. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/400 sec, ISO800, A Mode

There are also waterfalls in the area. The most famous are the Kawasan Falls, 20 kilometres away from Moalboal. The White beach is also one of the main non diving attractions in the area. A 2 kilometre beach that offers a beautiful sunset view.

One of the first things I noticed when I arrived in Moalboal were the local "freediving guides". They offer a "freediving experience" which translates into pushing people down

for the other guide to take a picture. As a freediving instructor it kind of looks bad to me but I am guessing people are happy despite the pain in their ears. Yes they don't bother teaching them to equalise. I am not sure if I prefer going in the morning to enjoy the circus or in the afternoon when things are more calm. If you want to take pictures choose calm days when the visibility is better. When the wind picks up the waters are not so clear.



The mooring line provided an unexpected frame. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/80 sec, ISO800, A Mode

I often take my students to the sardines and the mermaid statue and both spots are great for fun diving. Sometimes we get requests from freedivers just for a photoshoot. Both spots are very easy to get nice pictures of your guests even if their diving skills are not very good. Good visibilities and small depths make it very easy and consistent. I would like to have more pictures of the Moai statue too, but... I don't easily find people who can freedive comfortably @33m.

Moalboal also offers great opportunities for training in freediving. Many people come here to either learn or train. The strait offers consistent conditions and there is plenty of depth just a short swim away from the shore. No swell and usually not strong currents.

If you are lucky you can also have a whale shark pass next to your line while you are training. Sightings like this are rare but are definitely welcome. For some reason it feels special to meet a whale shark away from the commercial feeding spots.

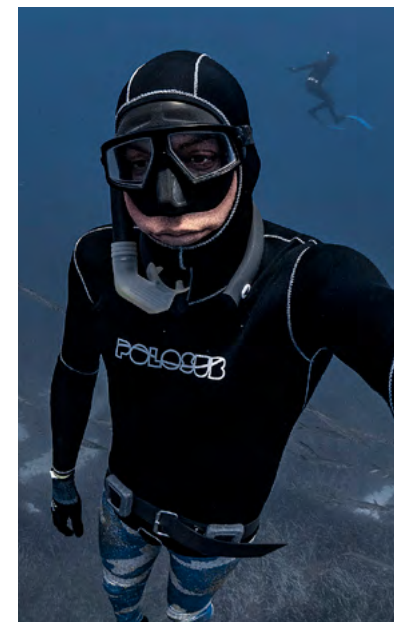
During my stay in



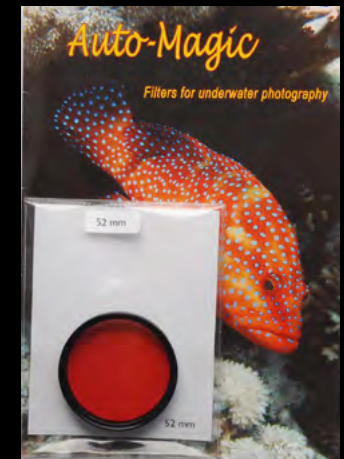
The Panagsama beach. Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/2500 sec, ISO800, A Mode

Moalboal I was working for Freediving Planet. One of the oldest and well known freediving schools in the Philippines. The school offered courses for all levels of freediving and of course fun dives to the nearby spots. Actually the mermaid and the Moai statue were put in the water by the school.

Nicholas Kouvaras
Instagram



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