

Mantangale Melange

By Stan de la Cruz

Alibuag is the local term for undersea freshwater spring. You read that right: spurting, ice cold, freshwater, under the briny sea. This natural phenomenon can be found in a number of dive sites accessed by the Mantangale-Alibuag Dive Resort (MADR). Looking like a column of dark oily water issuing from cracks in the seabed, diving through one of them is another world of experience. Vision gets clouded, the sound is akin to that of bubbles bursting from a bottle of soda, the feel is very cold, and the taste is definitely fresh.... Once I swim through and my vision returns, I notice the exquisite pastel hues of the scenery and realize that I am in midst of a soft coral garden. I peel my eyes off the reef scenery to take in a small school of barracuda and a shy eagle ray. But bright spots of color pull my eyes back and I see the nudibranchs huddled together, making sure that there is a next generation.

I had come to MADR to get my nitrogen fix and get away from the hassles of city life. Located on the northern shores of the Mindanao mainland, 80 kms. from Cagayan de

Oro City, Philippines, it is one of the best kept secrets of Philippine diving. With access to more than a dozen dive sites, the location offers a variety of sites/ topography, conditions and critters that I find better than in the well known dive locales in the country.

The house reef in Banaug, is also known as “again” reef. I descended ahead of my group, down the buoy line to the reef top at 17 meters escorted by a squadron of batfish. Shaped like an underwater pinnacle rising from the depths, the top was crowded with plate corals, gorgonians and black corals and populated by groupers, snappers, trumpetfish, scorpionfish, and a host of other reef fishes. I watched the rest of the divers come down the buoy line, silhouetted by the blazing sun. The sound of approaching bubbleblowers stirred the inhabitants to life. Then the activity meter kicked up a notch when the divemaster started handing out fishy tidbits, even the eels poked their heads out of their hiding holes to gobble up scraps. Despite associations of a “house reef” with some hohum diving, guests have repeatedly asked to dive



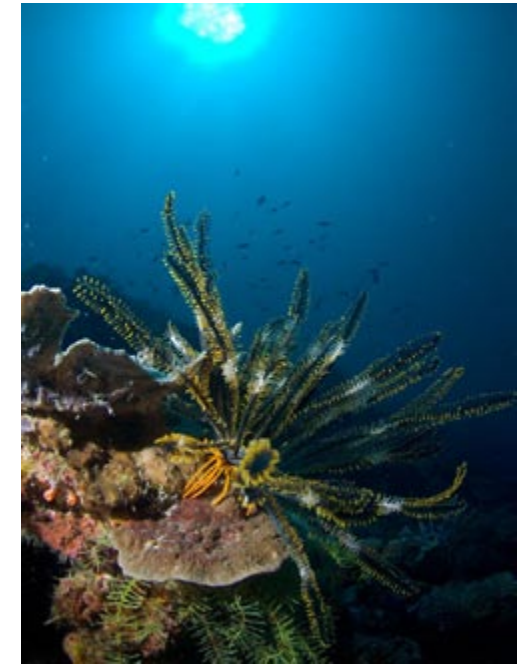
this site again, and again.

Sta. Ines wreck is that of a WWII pontoon boat. Looking like a railroad box car, it sits on a steep sandy slope starting at 10 meters down to 45 meters. Covered in black corals, it serves as home to snappers, grouper and sweetlips. The resident frogfish

(Top) Olympus C7070 in PT27, Manual F5.6 1/125 iso80, Inon M67 WAL + dome, Inon D2000 in sttl

(Right) Fuji E900 in ikelite case, Manual F6.4 1/200 iso80, INON M67WAL + dome, Inon D2000 in STTL





(Left & centre) Olympus C7070 in PT27, Manual F10 1/800 iso80, inon D2000 in STTL, inon UCL 165 (Right) Fuji E900 in Ikelite case, Manual F6.4 1/640 iso80, INON M67WAL + dome, Inon D2000 in STTL

was a very girlie pink that day. The surrounding reef had an abundance of soft corals and whips complete with gobies and xeno crabs. The previously fishbombed talisayan shoal was abandoned by the fisherfolk and over time has recovered enough to warrant a dive. The coral rubble is mostly on the sloping sides of the shoal with the top strewn by large boulders festooned with soft corals and leather corals. The fast growing specie of hard corals are of a good size. Mantis shrimp scurry about the rocks and toxic urchins march along the sand,

many with Coleman shrimp amongst their spines. A dense patch of coral rubble serves as playground to some skittish mandarinfish.

I had a very memorable dive in nearby Lapinig island. We dropped down to 30 meters to pay a visit to a stable of shy bargibanti pygmy seahorses. After I had taken about a dozen pictures, the DM tapped me on the shoulder from behind. I turned around and he was pointing at a different looking seafan. Taking a closer look, I soon spied the object of his interest; a family of denise pygmy

seahorses. Going back up the reef to Mandarin city, we settled down to watch the psychedelic colored fishes doing their frantic mating dance. Total darkness came down all too soon and we brought out our lights to continue the dive. The Tubastrea cup corals were soon in full bloom and other reef critters started coming out too. We spotted cuttlefish, anemone crabs feeding in the slight current and flatheads half buried in the sand. A crocodile snake eel was holding my attention when a signal from the divemaster brought me to his side.

And there in the halo of his divelight was a mimic octopus. It was enjoying a meal and I blinded it with my strobe for a good 5 minutes before it found a hole down which it disappeared.

The next day dawned bright and clear. In the middle of breakfast, the call goes out that a whaleshark has entered a nearby bay and the dive boat was heading there in 5 minutes. A mad scramble ensues as my fellow divers and I abandon our meal, and head for the dive shoppe to kit up. In another 5 minutes we were in the water face to face with world's largest



Olympus C5060 in PT 20, Manual F6.4 1/250 isp80, Inon D2000 in STTL



Olympus C7070 in PT 27, Manual F6.4 1/100 iso80, Epoque WAL, Inon D2000 in STTL



Olympus C5060 in PT20, Aperture priority F5.6, Iso 100, manual white balance

fish; Rhincodon typus, known locally as tawiki, or better known as whaleshark. Such was the impact of it's presence that some divers quickly went through their air supply and had to surface, trying to keep in sight of the animal while snorkeling in full scuba gear! Dodong Uy, the dive guide, explained that this place used to be the biggest whaleshark fishery on the Mindanao mainland, and that it took a while to convince the hunters to stop this practice and instead, report sightings to the dive shoppe whose clientele forked out a "spotters fee" for the opportunity to be in the water with such a majestic fish.

We headed out farther afield to the current swept sites in the Bohol Sea. Burias shoal is a series of mini walls and slopes and is known as the haunt of the elusive manta rays. With the current threatening to blow us off the reef, we made our way down the anchor line to 30 meters. We saw

a parade of horse eyed jacks and black snappers, and a large school of drums going up and down the water column, but alas, no mantas today. Disappointed, the other divers made their way back to boat. I lingered on, hoping that the diving gods would bless me with a manta fly-by. Instead, the current picked me up and brought me back to the anchor point. I grabbed hold of the rope and started to head back to the boat when I noticed movement near the rocks where the anchor was lodged. On a closer look I spotted a normally shy zebra moray snapping its jaws in protest at my intrusion. I surfaced to the rare sight of Camiguin island and Mt. Hibuk-hibuk without a cloud cover; and despite comments from the rest of the group that I was the anti-manta, I felt that the gods had not wholly abandoned me.

Cabuan is on the south side of Camiguin island. A moderate slope always awash in currents,

it features boulders strewn about by some long ago upheaval, now covered in soft coral and green gorgonian trees. That day we had 90+ feet of visibility and a light current to push us along. Schooling bannerfish and Moorish idols were all around, Cuttlefish were in every other coral head, and we spotted an anglerfish in hiding behind some plate coral. In the shallows I spotted a goby sized hole that was emitting a dark cloud of very hot water, reminding me of the volcanic nature of the island.

Heading back in the general direction of the resort, we saw a pod of dolphins heading away from us. Our boat made a sweeping turn and we were soon parallel to the pod. The dolphins seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere and did not linger to play and were soon out of sight.

Last stop of the day was in Sipaca point, Mantangale's claim to muck diving (minus the



2 views of Camiguin island

mud). Nudibranchs, anglers, whip gobies and whip shrimps were seemingly everywhere one looked. Titan triggerfish regularly patrolled the waters and the endemic mushroom coral eel were also spotted. I spied a giant angler and I positioned myself to take a nice portrait when it opened its mouth to yawn! I got off one shot and then spent the rest of the dive waiting for it to move again....When the needle on my pressure gauge went into the red, I reluctantly headed for the surface where the boat was waiting to pick me up.

Another blazing sunset ended a perfect day of diving. Like a conjurer pulling one treat after another from his hat, Mantangale had given me a glorious weekend break.

When I awoke next morning, the rain was falling.

If you are ever in this part of the

world, I encourage you to take a peek beneath the waves of Mantangale.

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