

Dumaguete Delights

by Mark Webster

The number of divers visiting the Far East has gradually increased over recent years as they seek a new experience or have a desire to see the amazing marine diversity that the area has to offer. The big name destinations of Komodo, Raja Ampat or PNG often grab the headlines but there are hundreds of other locations boasting excellent diving and marine life. One of the alternative destinations now building a name for itself in Europe is the Philippines, which covers a vast area and offers substantial variety both under the water and topside throughout its more than 7000 islands. I have long planned to visit the Philippines and the opportunity arose at last early this year to sample the diving – so this short piece will hopefully whet the appetite of anyone considering this destination.

From Europe the journey is long but relatively painless and there are a number of air lines that fly directly to Manila from European hub airports. Dumaguete on Negros Island was our final destination and is reached by a further one hour flight from the domestic terminal.

Most of the resorts and dive centres are a short trip from the airport, through the outskirts of Dumaguete city and along the coast, on good roads through lush tropical vegetation. Many of them are totally secluded with their own beach front – we had chosen the Atlantis resort which was no exception and a world away from our daily hurly burly



The rooms at the Atlantis resort are on two levels and designed to match the local building techniques and architecture. Inside they have all modern conveniences we have come to expect. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, programme mode.

existence in the UK. This is a 'full service resort' which provides a complete full board package with diving and so you can indulge yourself totally diving every day or (as many do) make occasional excursions to Dumaguete city or take scheduled tours and activities in the local area.

Negros is one of the largest islands in the Philippines group and Dumaguete is a small university city situated on the south eastern tip – there are in fact seven universities and colleges are situated here. Negros is a beautifully lush and tropical island and is well known for its sugar cane production in the north and the coconut plantations in the south.

The authorities have been quick to recognize the value of the unique marine environment here and the fringing coastline has been an established marine sanctuary for several years as is nearby Apo island. This of course attracts divers and



The deck area of a typical 'banca' dive boat. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, programme mode.



As you would expect there are anemones and clown fish to be seen on most dives, of at least four or five different species, which are a subject hard to resist. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f11 @ 1/60



The coral formations at Apo Island are perfect for an ultra wide or fish eye lens. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini's, ISO 100 f11 @ 1/60

photographers, but the area also attracts many tourists seeking land based activities or just looking to kick back, relax and enjoy the slow pace of life here.

The resort itself offers very comfortable accommodation built to mimic the local style of architecture but with all the modern amenities we have come to expect. Most of the rooms are a few steps from the beach along a path that winds through lush tropical gardens which are tended and tidied throughout the day. The bar

and restaurant are right on the beach adjacent to the reception and dive centre. The majority of guests come here on a full board package and will not be disappointed with the menu which is a first class mix of Asian and international cuisine.

The dive centre is well organised and managed with individual locker space for each guest, separate rinse tanks for dive gear and cameras and a dedicated camera room with 110/220v stabilized power, work benches and shelf space below. So there is no need



Sea snakes are commonly seen on the reef dives in this area and show no fear or real interest in divers, although they do occasionally surprise you by 'snaking' between your legs when you least expect it! Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f11 @ 1/125

to carry your camera gear from your room each day, just set it up the day you arrive and tend to the charging, lens and card changes between dives.

The majority of the diving is



These triple fin blennies are one of the most common species found on coral and sponges. If you are patient enough or get lucky they will yawn like most other fish species. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f16 @ 1/125

from local banca outrigger boats that arrive each morning on the beach front a few steps from the dive centre. We softies are of course not expected to carry the heavy bits of equipment – your dive gear will be rigged for



There is a resident school of bat fish at the DuCoMi pier who cruise around following the visiting divers, making them an irresistible subject. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini's, ISO 100 f11 @ 1/20

you and taken to the nominated boat and you simply follow with fins, mask and camera kit. The boat crews are very helpful and cheerful and pay particular attention to ladies in the party and will move camera gear to a safe spot away from the forward dive deck during loading. If you are going on one of the offshore trips then watch your camera kit if the weather turns



Often when shooting macro we do not look up into the water column until the end of a dive – I only spotted this tiny jelly fish as I began the ascent from a muck dive. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f11 @ 1/30

windy to prevent it sliding. Each dive boat is also equipped with an open top 'thunder box' loo on the stern, which is an unusual experience but you will never get caught short!

Many of the dive sites are within 10-20 minutes of the resort along the coast. There are several marine reserve areas that are marked out by roped lines of buoys and the boats are



Even a common reef fish like this yellow chromis can make a striking image with the right negative space behind it. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f16 @ 1/125

not allowed to enter these areas. So a dive will normally start just outside a sanctuary area and then route through it to finish outside for pick up by the boat. You can follow the guide (recommended for their excellent spotting skills) or elect to dive as a buddy pair. Groups are small and the guides are both knowledgeable and patient with photographers and enjoy



There is a large population of frog fish at the DuCoMi pier – our guide found seven on one dive – which always make excellent macro portraits. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f16 @ 1/125

the challenge of finding a particular species for you. The topography consists primarily of low reefs on a gently sloping seabed reaching maximum depths of 25m or so. Adjacent to the sanctuary areas are more traditional 'muck dive' seabed conditions which are very productive, but it is best to have the help of a guide to find the elusive subjects.



I think that this yawning lion fish was objecting to his reflection in my dome port and was trying to warn off a challenger. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom Subtronic Mini's, ISO 100 f16 @ 1/60

Another feature between the sanctuary areas are a number of artificial reef programmes constructed mostly from old car and truck tyres, a couple of cars and a fishing boat. This does not sound very inspiring to begin with, but I was amazed at how much marine life these structures attract, the levels of coral growth on them and the range of critters to be found and photographed.

Right in front of the resort is a 'house reef' dive which includes eel grass beds, a large coral bommie, an

artificial 'tyre' reef and an adjacent sanctuary area. The last dive of the day and night dives are often made here, but it is well worth some additional dives to investigate the life here, but watch out for the healthy population of *Inimicus* scorpion fish.

My favourite local site also turned out to be man made. With prior booking you can dive on the Dumaguete Coconut Mill (DuCoMi) pier which is just a fifteen minute boat ride from the resort. The dive comes in two parts – a small mooring



Jaw fish are commonly seen at the edges of the reefs in rubble areas and if you are lucky you may find one brooding his eggs in his mouth. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f11 @ 1/60

'dolphin' and the main pier complex some 50m apart. The vertical steel legs are bathed in a gentle nutrient rich current and are a magnet for marine life. There are spectacular growths of soft corals, sea fans and sponges and numerous invertebrates species which contrive to cover every square inch of steel work. There is an amazing array of critters to be found here and on the 'muck' sand bank which leads down to the piers and the

guides delight in finding a new subject every couple of minutes – we had no less than seven frog fish within half an hour on one dive. In fact I thought this site so good that we made five dives here during our stay!

If you need a fix of pristine coral and wall diving then the day trip to Apo island is well worth it. Transit time is around 45 minutes and there are generally three dives planned for the day. The lunchtime break gives

you the opportunity to wander a little onshore and explore the village and perhaps buy some gifts or a T shirt from the local ladies who will definitely see you coming. The island community here established a marine reserve in 1982 and this certainly shows in the condition of the coral reefs which are very lush in the shallows and top of the reef walls. There are the usual coral reef inhabitants and fish here, numerous sea snake sightings and turtles, but not a lot of big fish action. There is a resident school of big eye trevallies at one of the sites named Mamsa and some tuna are seen cruising by in the blue, but it is the coral formations that will impress you most.

A week of diving here passes by all too quickly but is enough time to get a flavour of the dive sites available and perhaps revisit several of them. The diversity of species is on a par with many other locations which offer a mix of coral reef and muck diving and there is more than enough subject variety to keep even the most avid photographer happy. There are countless subjects for a macro lens in the 50-100mm range but also some good wide angle opportunities particularly at Apo Island and on the DuCoMi pier. The resort and dive



centre staff are very attentive and willing to put together a programme that suits your needs. If you need a break from diving there are a number of alternative tours to take or you can spend some time in the spa having the aches and pains of four dives a day eased from your body – my wife selected this option whilst leaving me to endure the diving schedule!

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk



**"It is always a joy to return.
 Hard to improve on perfection!"**



Heather & Bud Sellick, USA, September 2007 (4th visit)



Kungkungan Bay Resort
 Lembeh Strait, North Sulawesi, Indonesia
 T. 62-431-817347, divekbr.com



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