

Island hopping in the Philippines

by Alan Larsen

It is 6.30am; we have been waiting for thirty-five minutes at twenty-one metres looking intently into the blue. Our air and no-deco time are low – and our spirits are sinking. We decide to ascend when at last we see a long shadow coming towards us from the middle distance. As it draws closer, we see the unmistakeable long tail and large eye of a thresher shark.

This is what we have been waiting for – and our luck is in: behind it is another. For the next five minutes we watch as they circle close to us, their dull grey bodies turning bright silver when caught by the early morning sun. Getting up at 4.30am has suddenly become worth the effort!

December 2009 and we were at Monad Shoal off Malapascua Island in the Philippines. The plateau we had settled on is in fact the top of an underwater island, now famous as an early morning cleaning station for thresher sharks.

I had my camera with me – and my buddy his video; but just after dawn at a depth of twenty metres in

average visibility are not the ideal conditions for photography, especially as flash is not allowed either. But there are times when the experience of just being there and watching a rarely sighted pelagic shark from a few metres away compensates for having to settle for a few ‘snaps’ of the subject.

It was day two of a three week trip to the Visayas Islands in the Philippines – day four if you count the time it takes to get there from London. And even though I was still tired and jet-lagged from the travel, those five minutes reminded me why I make the effort: sharing the space with two thresher sharks for that short time was exhilarating.

Diving at Malapascua is not only about thresher sharks. At nearby Gato Island and Chocolate Island we dived along walls covered with soft corals: pink and red ‘broccoli’ coral (*dendronephthya*), mushroom soft coral (*sarcophyton*), and ‘grasping’ coral (*goniopora lobata*) were particularly prevalent, punctuated by colonies of disc-like *protopalythoa*.



Thresher Shark at Monad Shoal, Malapascua. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20,, Nikon 12-24mm at 24mm. 1/30 @ f4 Manual, ISO 100 No strobe

These sites were a good introduction to the biodiversity of the whole area: from the more common scorpion fish, several species of nudibranch, seahorses, and banded pipefish, to the more exotic harlequin shrimp, mantis shrimp, and blue ring octopus.

The water was thick with plankton at that time of year, so visibility wasn't great at around fifteen feet; but the plankton soup gave the water an unexpected green tint, which was unusual for me as a confirmed warm water diver! It also meant that the soft corals were



Traditional banca dive boat

actively feeding on the plankton, their motion creating an elegant, if hyperactive, backdrop as we moved along the walls.

When my buddy had first suggested a trip to the Philippines, my initial research indicated that we would need to be a bit more specific about where to go. The Philippines is a vast scattered archipelago of over 7,000 islands forming the northern apex of the Coral Triangle. The rich marine biodiversity makes it an excellent dive destination. It is also a large country with several dive locations to choose from.

We decided on the Visayas, the central island group of the Philippines. And to give ourselves the opportunity to experience several locations, we arranged our trip with Sea-Explorers, a Swiss-owned and run outfit with five dive centres on different islands throughout the area. Sea-Explorers advertises ‘island-hopping’ around their dive resorts, with transfers between most of them by banca – the traditional timber and bamboo outrigger – allowing you to dive on the way. This means that you can maximise the number of diving days, and you don’t have to pack wet dive gear each time you move on as it stays in your dive box.

We chose four locations over 18 days covering the length of the Visayas from north to south: Malapascua Island, Cabilao Island, Alona Beach (on Pangalao Island) and Dauin/Dumagete (on Negros). The diving transformed along the way from lush reefs and walls, to sandy slopes and pure muck diving; and the subjects we saw encompassed a vast range from thresher sharks to pygmy seahorses.

The topography of the dive sites along the coast of Malapascua, Cabilao and Alona Beach are similar. Typically a sandy/rocky plateau at about five metres, a reef or wall down to about twenty metres, and a sandy bottom sloping gently away, punctuated by coral heads, rocks, and sea fans. Each section was full of interesting life in its own



Orangutang crab on Bubble coral. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 105 VR micro. 1/90 @ f16 Manual, ISO100 Inon Z-240 strobes

way.

Although at first glance similar to Malapascua, Cabilao – our second location – was subtly different. The reefs were just as lush, but the subjects were more abundant and varied, demonstrating the biodiversity of the area. There are apparently at least seventeen different species of anemone fish in the Visayas. We regularly saw at least three of them: tomato, common, and false clownfish – and we usually saw others too. Pegasus sea moths and robust ghost pipefish became a common sight on every dive; along with several types of cowry and nudibranchs in abundance.

Here we also started to see regularly what became for me the ‘signature’ subjects of the trip: crinoid shrimps and squat lobsters. Both are highly photogenic, but each has its own challenges.

Crinoid shrimps are perhaps easier to photograph; they are usually more accessible as



Family of clownfish (amphiprion ocellaris) in host anemone. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 60mm micro. 1/250 @ f16 Manual, ISO100

they loiter at the edge of the crinoid. But because they are the same colour as the host crinoid, the challenge is to make one stand out against the background.

Squat lobsters strike dramatic photogenic poses with their long chelipods projecting forwards and often have vivid complementary colours to the crinoid. But they generally hide near the centre of the crinoid, or rush there for protection when they spot a camera approaching.

To add to the challenge, crinoids dislike the close interest of a photographer and a gently coaxing dive guide; objecting to the attention, they start to close. But the wide range of colours and poses of both makes them well worth spending time with.

We had arrived at Cabilao on Christmas Eve and after a festive dinner, we were treated to a show put on by the staff – singing, dancing, and cross-



Diver and soft coral on Balicasag Island. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Tokina 10-17mm at 11.5mm. 1/45 @ f8 Manual, ISO 100



Crinoid squat lobster (Allogaiathea elegans). Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 60mm micro. 1/125 @ f16 Manual, ISO100



Ornate ghost pipefish. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 60mm micro. 1/250 @ f9.5 Manual, ISO100



Clown frogfish. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 60mm micro. 1/125 @ f19 Manual, ISO100

dressings for our entertainment! This was as lively as it got though, as the resort was secluded and otherwise peaceful.

In contrast Alona Beach is more like a miniature version of Naama Bay in the Red Sea. The beach is lined with restaurants, bars and dive operations as it is a local holiday destination as well as being on the itinerary of most backpackers visiting the area. Perhaps not what you want for the whole trip, but good for a few days.

Underwater is different too. The first impression is that it is much less vibrant with less soft and hard corals;

even a bit dull maybe. With a closer look however, there is plenty to see.

Our first dive was typical: on the sandy plateau at around twenty metres we saw mantis shrimps, nudibranchs, various types of cleaner shrimp (three in one place!), crabs, ornate ghost pipefish, crinoid shrimps and more. In the shallows there were more nudibranchs, a yellow leaf fish, scorpion fish, whip coral gobies and

frogfish.

A forty minute boat ride away is Balicasag Island, a marine sanctuary that usually dived on a two-tank boat and a contrast to the semi muck diving of Alona Beach. Wide angle is a possibility here, especially on Black Forest, a dive site named after the swathes of black corals covered with feather stars. The visibility was better too, but the overcast late December

sky did not really provide enough light, so for the second dive I changed to the 'all-purpose' 60mm macro lens.

This turned out to be a good choice. The dive site was Cathedral City – a wall with abundant coral and many overhangs, caves and ledges. The highlight of the dive was a clown frogfish. A true joker, it had decided to make taking photos as difficult as possible by hanging vertically on the



Turtle and diver on Balicasag Island. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm. 1/90 @f8 Manual, ISO 100



Crinoid shrimp. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. Nikon 60mm micro. 1/250 @f9.5 Manual, ISO100



Adams' urchin crab (Zebrida adamsii) on Fire urchin. Nikon D200 in Subal ND20, 2x Inon Z-240 strobes. 60mm micro. 1/125 @f16 Manual, ISO100

wall – directly behind a vast two-metre gorgonian fan! Getting a good angle from underneath, whilst trying to avoid being carried into the fan by the current, was challenging. Well worth the effort though!

The rest of this dive was excellent with much more to see. The wall was covered with feeding soft corals, especially the grasping stems of the goniopora lobata. A large school of jacks circled lethargically just off the wall in the blue, and the caves and ledges revealed ghost pipefish, nudibranchs, orang-utan crabs, scorpion fish and more. We dived Balicasag again on our transfer to Dauin/Dumagete; it is definitely worth two visits – and I got a second go at the frogfish!

The grey skies and rain on the long banca ride from Balicasag on New Years Eve were not going to dampen our spirits. Good natural light is not essential for macro and muck diving. And Dauin is a muck diver's paradise!

The apparently lifeless sandy bottoms are home to a myriad of critters, most of them highly photogenic. And much effort has been put into creating artificial reefs to attract more critters and fish. 'San Miguel Point' has a well established reef made of old tyres. 'Banca Wreck' and 'Car Wreck' are self explanatory.

On our first two dives in Dauin my logbook lists the following critters: devil scorpion fish; ornate ghost pipefish (singly, and in twos and threes); robust ghost pipefish (singly and in pairs); filefish, crinoid shrimps and squat lobsters; crown crab; a shoal of catfish; cuttlefish; thorny seahorse; mantis shrimp; several frogfish (black, white and more); baby stargazer; and a weird spider crab that looked like a green leaf.

These are only the subjects I spent time with! Our local guide Jesse pointed out many more. In fact I needed to curb his desire to show me everything in his enthusiasm to demonstrate his vast

knowledge. I wanted to take several shots of fewer subjects, rather than a couple of shots of everything. For me 'less is more' underwater.

Nearby is the famous Apo Island, listed in all dive books as a 'must see'. I found it a bit disappointing. On Cogon we had a good drift over great reef with numerous huge barrel sponges. The current was too strong for photography though. The reefs were excellent on the next two dives as well – and there was no current. Photographically I did not find them very productive though. Perhaps it was because I had to work a little harder at identifying suitable subjects for a change...

Choice of lens can be a difficult decision in an unknown location. The local guides and dive travel guidebooks can help make a choice; on balance I found the guides more reliable. In Malapascua and Dauin I mainly used a 60mm macro lens on my DX format Nikon D200. In Cabilao and Alona Beach I mostly used a 105mm macro – with my excellent



Alona Beach at sunset

new StiX buoyancy floats making focusing and framing significantly easier.

‘Island hopping’ is a great way to experience some of the variety that the Philippines can offer. Sea-Explorers were efficient throughout: the dive centres were highly professional, the resorts comfortable and transfers prompt. The mainly local guides were excellent and ‘photographer friendly’; we rarely dived with more than two other divers – and we often had a guide to ourselves, even if only one of us wanted to dive.

6.30am in early January 2010. I’m back in London and I’ve been scraping snow and ice from my car in the airport car park for five minutes. The temperature is minus four and, tired after the long journey, my spirits

are just as low. As I heave my bags into the car, I’m lifted by the thought of well over two thousand images to review. The experience of the Visayas will be with me for a long time to come...

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