

Philippine Impressions

By Eric Hanauer

Things I already knew about the Philippines:

1. It's the world center of marine biodiversity. To be exact, the Philippines and western Indonesia boast nearly 3,000 different species of reef fishes, nearly a third of all that have been identified worldwide, along with over 300 species of corals. The further one moves from the epicenter, the less the diversity. Hawaii, for example, at the eastern fringe of the tropical Pacific, has fewer than 500 species.

2. Destructive fishing practices, including dynamite, cyanide, and bleach, pose serious threats to that marine environment.

3. Over 7000 islands spread out over many miles of ocean make enforcement of environmental laws, or any laws, difficult.

4. World War II blasted across the islands. They were conquered by the Japanese early on, and recaptured by American forces two years later. Filipinos still love Americans, and General Douglas MacArthur remains a national hero.

5. Wildly decorated Jeepneys are the primary means of public transportation in the cities.

6. Imelda Marcos was an avid shoe collector.

Things I learned on my first trip to the Philippines:

1. The dive operators are serious about marine conservation. Apparently the word got out that there is more money to be made from live fishes than dead ones. I saw no evidence of dynamite fishing in the areas I dived. No one is naïve enough



Jeepneys, Atlantis Dive Resort, Dumaguete

Kids play outside a dive shop at Puerto Galera



Subal ND20 housing modified by Sam Chae to house a Nikon D300. Ikelite 160s strobes. Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm. Manual exposure 1/60th @ F16. ISO 200

to believe that destructive fishing practices don't exist. But it seems they aren't happening in areas where people come to dive.

2. Muck diving is excellent.

The bottom is a finer brown sand, as contrasted with the coarse, black volcanic stuff in Lembeh. And like Lembeh, the quality of your photography will be in direct proportion to your proximity to a good guide. I was lucky enough to have several.

3. Bangka boats make an excellent dive platform. They are long and narrow, with outriggers that make their footprint as wide as it is long. The large ones are powered by inboard motors; the smaller ones by oars or outboards. Their narrow profile provides speed and hydrodynamic efficiency, while the outriggers provide stability. Seen head-on they resemble a Klingon bird of prey. The basic design dates back 1,000 years. Guides helped us gear up, so all we had to do was roll off the boat.

4. Jeepneys are rolling works of art. After World War II, Filipinos took abandoned Jeep bodies, stretched them, and decorated them with fanciful designs. The back is bare bones; passengers sit facing each other on long benches. They don't make military Jeep bodies any more, but new ones are manufactured in



Hermit crab. Subal ND20 housing modified by Sam Chae to house a Nikon D300. Ikelite 160s strobes. 105mm Nikkor. Manual exposure 1/60th @ F22. ISO 200

the Philippines, using Japanese and Korean engines, but still looking like the old classics. Typical fares are about 8 pesos, or 10 cents US.

5. The Marcoses are long gone, and tourism in the Philippines has seen a renaissance. There may be a cause and effect relationship.

6. Oh, and about the kidnappings. They have occurred primarily in the southern islands where the Abu Sayyef gang hold sway. That's far from the diving areas,

and nearly 90% of the victims are Filipinos. Abu Sayyef thugs are in it primarily for ransom money, not for jihad. The people we met were as friendly and helpful as can be. I don't even like writing about such things, but when I tell people about my trip, that's invariably the first thing they ask. There never was a moment when I didn't feel safe.

With 7,000 islands, any visitor can only get a fragmentary hint of



Georg Flashar and a piling, DuCoMi Pier. Subal ND20 housing modified by Sam Chae to house a Nikon D300. Ikelite 160s strobes. Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm. Manual exposure 1/250th @ F11. ISO 400

diving in the Philippines. My trip was limited to the Atlantis Resorts in Dumaguete and Puerto Galera. Although the diving at the two was similar, the topside aspects are strikingly different. Dumaguete is a large city that's about an hour flight from Manila. But the resort is in a secluded, woody area outside of town,

so it has the feel of a quiet retreat from the hustle of the everyday world.

Getting to Puerto Galera entails a 2 _ hour bus ride from Manila's airport, and a one hour boat ride. The resort is in the middle of a small town that's a raucous, raunchy mélange of bars, souvenir shops, and other tourist traps. Good natured hawkers will try to sell you \$25 Rolexes, t-shirts, cheap jewelry, weed, or their sisters.

But partying isn't mandatory, and you'll still have the option of retreating to the pampered comfort of the resort. The Atlantis Resorts were built with American tourists in mind, although a vibrant mix of Europeans and Asians predominated while I was there. Rooms are spacious, well appointed, and spotless. Food selection and presentation is excellent, as is the service, both at the resort and at the dive centers. Gear storage is well arranged and secure, and the guides do all the heavy lifting. You leave everything on the boat, it all quickly appears at the rinsing facility, and the next morning it's back on the bangka waiting for you. There's even a secure camera room with 110 and 220 volt current, air hoses, and lots of storage.

Of course, it all comes down to the diving. And that was excellent at both locations. Most sites are within 20 minutes or less from the resorts, except for outlying islands which



Head-on bangkas resemble Klingon birds of prey. Panasonic DMC-TZ4, Programme mode 1/500th @F4.8. ISO 250

are 45 minutes away. At Dumaguete that's Apo Island; at Puerto Galera it's Isla Verde.

My favorite site of all was the DuCoMi Pier at Dumaguete. The acronym stands for Dumaguete Coconut Milling Company, and above water it's a busy commercial pier. A smaller pier, about 50 meters away, is similar and part of the same dive. Underwater, the closely placed pilings are a brilliantly colored, phantasmagoria of hard and soft corals, sponges, nudibranchs, fishes, and other critters too numerous to recount. The toughest decision for a photographer is whether to shoot macro or wide angle, because it's all there. Subdued light filtering around the structure lends an ethereal look and feel to the experience. I could have spent all my dives there and



Bangka from below. Subal ND20 housing modified by Sam Chae to house a Nikon D300. Ikelite 160s strobes. Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm. Aperture priority exposure 1/100th @ F22. ISO 200

never scratched the surface. However, it was so popular that access was strictly scheduled, and had to be shared among the local dive centers.

Earlier this year the company decided the pilings needed repair, which would have necessitated scraping off decades of marine life. Although the pier is little known outside the Philippines, it's justifiably considered a world class dive site. There was a public outcry, especially among dive operators. One meter was scraped at the bottom of each piling

for inspection and repair, because that seemed to be the area most prone to damage. Subsequently the company decided to scrape everything. They claim that in a couple of years the marine life will be back. If you believe that, I've got some British Petroleum stock I'd like to sell you.

Apo Island has been a marine protected area for over 25 years and features hard and soft corals, along with a variety of marine life in the clearest water in the area. There are drift dives, walls, and areas with



Subal ND20 housing modified by Sam Chae to house a Nikon D300. Ikelite 160s strobes. 105mm Nikkor. Manual exposure 1/50th @ F8. ISO 400

hundreds of schooling fish. Table corals predominated, with occasional bright soft corals. One of my favorites was an open cavern, the ceiling decorated with soft corals and gorgonians, and a mob hundred of tiny glassfish fluttering around my head so close I could hear their fins beating the water as they went by.

Most of the local dives were of the muck variety, where the guides found the usual suspects: devil scorpionfishes, jawfish, nudibranchs, and of course the ever present pygmy

seahorses. They seem to know where every creature is hiding, as if they had a GPS running in their heads. Every once in a while I'd pride myself in finding my own critters, but that didn't happen very often. Once I was photographing a sea horse and didn't even notice a leaf fish posing right next to it, until somebody pointed it out.

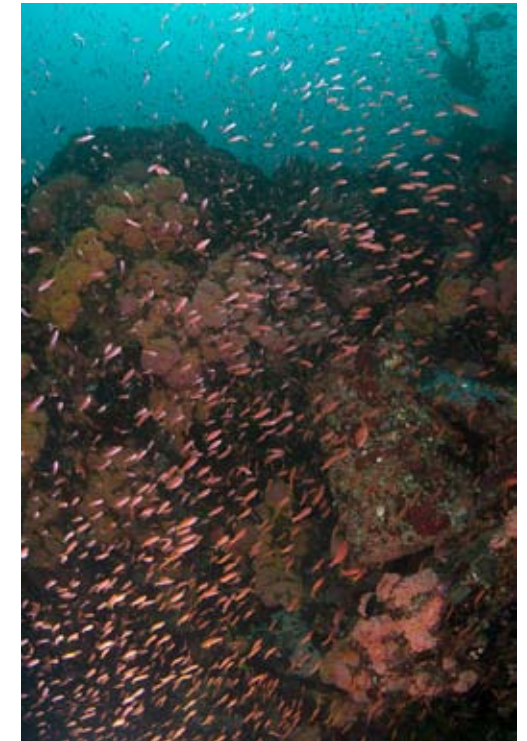
The muck diving at Puerto Galera was very similar. Its outlying island is Isla Verde, home of hundreds of thousands of anthias of various



Subal ND20 housing modified by Sam Chae to house a Nikon D300. Ikelite 160s strobes. Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm. Aperture priority exposure 1/100th @ F22. ISO 200

species. I've never seen so many of them in one place, flitting about the walls and slopes like so many butterflies. A male anthias will have a harem of up to 40 females. When he dies, one of the females will change sex and take his place. But you probably knew that.

The Washing Machine is a unique site that's strictly for fun. It's



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the only one in either place where gloves are allowed, because you'll need them to hold your position in the current. It's a series of finger reefs at shallow depths, and is best dived when the current is running strong. You pull yourself down the anchor line and ride the current between the reefs. When you reach the end, you crawl over into the next cleft, and

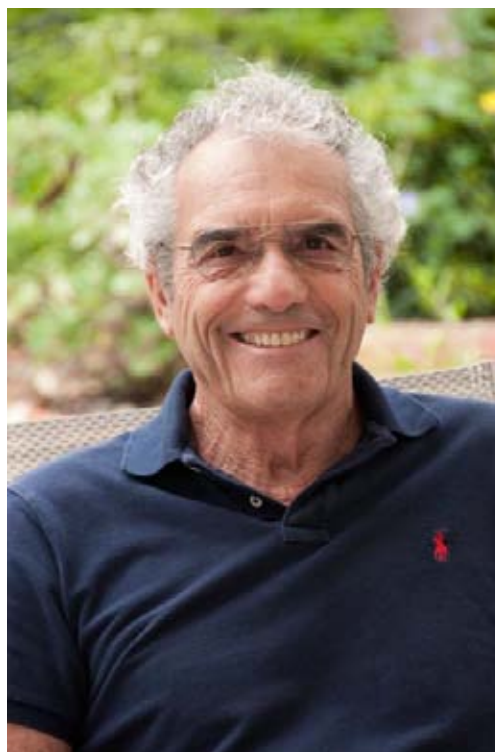


*Aboard a bangka,
Puerto Galera.
Panasonic DMC-
TZ4, Landscape
mode 1/1000th @
F3.3. ISO 100*

work your way against the current by pulling yourself along the bottom. Then it's over the top again for the ride downcurrent. The rules on this dive are no cameras and follow the guide. Once you've done it you'll understand why.

No gloves are allowed on any other dives, and guides are conscientious about keeping peoples' fins and bodies off the substrate, without acting like dive Nazis. On the sand during muck dives, no problem.

About the only things missing are sharks and big fishes. But if you are looking for a wealth of exotic creatures in a friendly country, for economical prices, the Philippines is definitely worth considering. I'm ready to see more of it.



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A diver is seen from behind, swimming over a sandy ocean floor. The water is a deep, clear blue. The seabed is mostly sand with some small, dark rocks and sparse, dead-looking coral or seaweed. A stream of bubbles rises from the diver's breathing apparatus towards the surface. The overall scene conveys a sense of isolation and environmental degradation.

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Photo by Joseph C Dovala