

Philippine alternative

by David Reubush

For most divers, Indonesia is “the” place to go for all things tropical: hard and soft corals, large and small fish, and all sorts of wild and wonderful reef creatures. All of the well-known locations and many that have yet to be discovered are photographer’s delights. However, “Variety is the spice of life.” is a truism that also applies to diving.

The Philippines were not on my diving radar screen until I met a couple on a live-aboard in Indonesia a few years ago. They raved about a place called Dumaguete and said that they visited several times a year for a month at a time. What really grabbed my attention was their enthusiasm about the critter diving (aka “muck”) at Dumaguete since I also love critter diving. When I got an email flyer from Rick Heydel of Bluewater Scuba in Franklin, Tennessee, who I had traveled with before, offering a trip in February, 2011 to Atlantis resorts in both Dumaguete and Puerto Galera I jumped at the chance.

The trip was almost a photographic disaster before it started. While packing I discovered that the flash tube in my trusty Ikelite SS 200

strobe had died. I frantically called every regional dive shop to find a replacement - all to no avail. I finally contacted Ikelite to inquire if they had a dealer in Manila. They referred me to Jovic Santos of Splash Underwater Imaging, who I contacted by email. Jovic had a DS 161 strobe in stock and we arranged that I would arrive at his shop at opening time the morning after I got in. At the hotel I engaged a cab to take me to the shop, wait while I bought the strobe, and then take me to the airport. The congenial cab driver even accompanied me into Jovic’s store to make sure I didn’t get lost and translate if needed. The cab driver was typical of the friendly, helpful nature shown by all the Filipinos we came in contact with the whole trip.

Both Atlantis resorts, although totally different in location and design, shared a number of similarities. The food was good, not gourmet, but better than a lot of places I have been and there was always plenty of it. The rooms were comfortable, the a/c worked, and the showers were hot. Not luxury, but more than sufficient. The price was also good for what



Dumaguete Camera Room – Nikon D7000, Nikon 18-70mm lens @ 18mm, F3.5, 1/40 sec., ISO 400

Boxfish at Puerto Galera - Nikon D7000 in Ikelite Housing, Ikelite DS 161 strobe set to TTL with a -1 setting on the housing, Nikon 60mm macro lens, F22, 1/100 sec., ISO 200

we got. You can do up to five dives a day, but we generally only did four. For photographers, both resorts have large, dedicated rinse tanks for cameras, and both have just renovated their camera rooms to include lots of storage and more than enough outlets



for battery charging. One of the most outstanding assets for both resorts was the people. Everyone you came in contact with; the dive masters, wait staff, and front desk personnel knew your name within the first 24 hours, and all were very friendly and helpful.

Dumaguete is located on the island of Negros about 75 minutes by air south of Manila. The Atlantis resort is located outside of town, adjacent to a marine protected area and has a lot to recommend it. The diving just off and near the resort is mainly critter diving. The bottom is a dark brown sand/silt. Negros Island has a large, dormant volcano just inland from the resort. There had been rainstorms the week before we got there and, as a result, the water was full of silt washed down from the volcano. Visibility was typically about 30 ft. Plus, I was diving with a group of 12; which was split into two groups of six. There were a number of critters that I had never seen before (e.g. tiny half inch long frog fish). However, there were not huge numbers of any of them so, even with only six, the bottom got stirred up quickly when we stopped to look at something. I would recommend that it would be best to go as a couple (and there were couples there with their own guides) to help avoid the silt problem. One day ,we motored about 45 minutes to Apo Island for



Dumaguete Jawfish Altercation - Nikon D7000 in Ikelite Housing, Ikelite DS 161 strobe set to TTL with a -1 setting on the housing, Nikon 60mm macro lens, F22, 1/100 sec., ISO 200

three dives (two in the morning, a BBQ lunch on the boat, and 1 after lunch). Apo has beautiful coral gardens and 60+ ft. visibility. Another day we motored about an hour to Siquijor Island which has about the same visibility as Apo, coral gardens, interspersed sand flats, and a lot of interesting things to see. The dive/ lunch routine was the same as at Apo. For Apo and Siquijor I would recommend gloves as there are typically mild currents and lots of stinging hydroids. I got stung when

I tried to two-finger steady myself on dead coral to take some photos in the current. At Dumaguete the only issue I have is with the dive operations. While the resort handles getting your tank/BC on and off the boats you have to schlep the rest of your gear from the dive shop, down the beach, and through the surf line to the boat. While the beach is brown sand there are rocks at the surf line that you have to negotiate and, at high tide, you often have to wade through chest deep water to get to the boat ladder. There



Stargazer with Crab at Puerto Galera - Nikon D7000 in Ikelite Housing, Ikelite DS 161 strobe set to TTL with a -1 setting on the housing, Nikon 60mm macro lens, F22, 1/100 sec., ISO 200

may or may not be one of the boat guys to help you with this process. If you only had to do this once a day it wouldn't be too bad, but some days we changed boats after every dive so, on those days, we had to bring our stuff back after each dive. Having enough boats so that you took your stuff out in the morning and it stayed on the boat all day would have been

better and having a dedicated boat for your group so that you could have taken your stuff out once at the beginning of the week and only brought it back at the end would have been best.

After six days of diving at Dumaguete we transferred to Atlantis Puerto Galera. To get there we flew back to Manila, got in vans, drove three hours south of Manila, and then got on a boat for another hour ride. The resort is on a hillside so you get additional exercise going up and down to your room. Right off the resort is a white sand bottom with some wrecks and lots of stuff to see, especially at night. (I saw my first stargazer. We did three night dives off the resort and saw four stargazers on the first and three on each of the next two.) There are a large number of dive sites within a few minutes boat ride from the resort. Most sites are slopes with coral interspersed with sand patches and have 40 to 60 ft. visibility and mild currents, if any. (We did go for a ride down one channel with fairly strong current and did one wreck with strong current.)

A couple of sites were more like Dumaguete – real critter locations. We took a one day-trip to Verde Island and did two dives on the sea mount off the island. You definitely would have been better off with gloves on these two dives. The current was ripping and the guides did not take the time to ascertain where the lee of the mount was. We just got dumped in and, on the first dive, took off on a ride. The second dive we lucked out and started out in a low current area, but soon swam into another ripping current. (I would not recommend the Verde sea mount to any beginner - otherwise almost all the other dives would have been fine for a beginner.) After these dives we came back to Verde, got off the boat, and had a BBQ lunch that had been prepared



Juvenile Triggerfish & Cleaner at Dumaguete - Nikon D7000 in Ikelite Housing, Ikelite DS 161 strobe set to TTL with a -1 setting on the housing, Nikon 60mm macro lens, F22, 1/100 sec., ISO 200

while we were diving. After lunch the choice was to dive the “washing machine” or a coral garden. After the mount none of us was interested in another punishing dive so we did the coral garden, which was a great dive with virtually no current.

As with Atlantis Dumaguete the staff at Puerto Galera took care of getting your tank/BC between the dive shop and the boats and you carried the rest of your gear. However, Puerto Galera was much easier than Dumaguete. There were more boats, the dive shop was closer to the boats, and the water, even at high tide, was very shallow so it wasn't the pain that Dumaguete was. Because there were more boats, most every day we carried our gear out in the morning and it stayed on the boat the rest of the day. On the last day of diving, even though we were not flying out of Manila until late the next day, all but two of us took off after lunch to pack and visit the two floating bars anchored off the resort. We two



Half Inch Frogfish at Dumaguete – Nikon D7000 in Ikelite Housing, Ikelite DS 161 strobe set to TTL with a -1 setting on the housing, Nikon 60mm macro lens, F22, 1/100 sec., ISO 200

die-hards had, perhaps, the best dive of the trip on our last night dive. Among other things; while we were shooting a stargazer it erupted out of the sand to grab a crab that we had not noticed. We also found a tiny crab with eggs that is listed in the new Humann/DeLoach book as “undetermined” and known only in Indonesia.

While not perfect I'd still recommend the Philippines in general and Atlantis Dumaguete and Puerto Galera in particular to anyone looking for good diving, plenty of good food, and comfortable lodging; all at very reasonable cost. I intend to return to sample some other Philippine locations.

David Reubush

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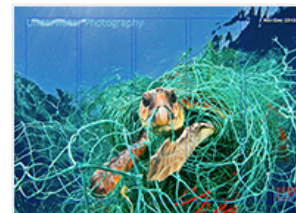
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