

Going Wide in Cebu

by Alex Tyrell

It was a sunny Sunday morning when we set off on the short drive from our house in Dauin, Negros Oriental, up the coast to San Jose, which is just north of Dumaguete City. From here we boarded the car ferry, or 'Ro-Ro' as it is known locally, which took us across the Tañon Strait to Samboan, on the southwest corner of Cebu. Another hour or so drive along the winding coastal roads of the island took us into the town of Moalboal, the first stop on our 10-day dive trip.

We had booked into Kasai Village for the next 4-nights to dive the 'Philippine Sardine Run' at Pescador Island. The Sardines were first spotted gathering in large numbers around the island in early 2009 and stayed for a few months. A year later the phenomenon occurred again in even greater numbers and for some reason they decided to make Pescador their home. Mark, the Dive Shop Manager at Kasai Village, told us there are an estimated 7 million fish in the school, but god knows how anyone managed to count these! I was now itching to get out to Pescador to see this fishy phenomenon for myself.

As September is the 'low season' in the Philippines, we were the only divers in the resort, so had the privilege of being able to set our own schedule with our dive guide, Felix. We kicked things off with a dive at The Marine Sanctuary, a wall along the coast that was covered in huge Gorgonian Sea Fans in a variety of colours.



About half way through the dive we came across an old mooring line running from the reef-top downwards that was now the home to a colony of *Dendronephthya* soft corals. The vibrant orange and yellows hues made a great CFWA subject, enhanced by the silhouetted Gorgonians sprouting from the wall above. I'm sure there are a ton of macro subjects to be found here, but being in the enviable position of having such an abundance of critters in Dauin, I was concentrating only on wide-angle during this trip.

In the afternoon it was time to head out to Pescador Island for 2 dives, which is only about a 30-minute trip from the resort by Banka, the local style of boat here in the Philippines. The island is quite small and you could swim around it in a single dive at slack tide. When we arrived, there was a mild current running from south to north, which was less than I expected, it being full moon. We dropped in on the southwest side of the island and were immediately buzzed by a pair of turbo-charged Yellow-Fin Tuna. As we drifted along the wall you get to The Cathedral, which is a large cave



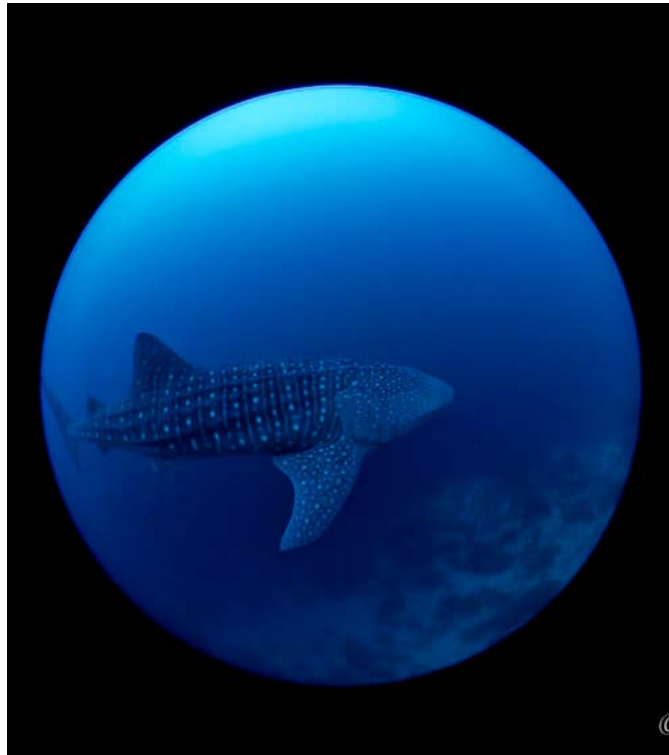
Dendronephthya Soft Corals at Moalboal - Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Inon Z240 Strobes, Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm, Manual : 1/320th f/8 ISO 200

with several openings along the wall. Shooting from inside the cave, it resembles a strange shaped skull with the pair of holes looking like the empty eye sockets! As we carried on drifting towards the northern end of the island, a huge dark shape appeared out in the blue. As we got closer, the



Sardines & Snappers at Pescador - Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Tokina 10-17mm at 11mm, Manual Mode: 1/125th f/8 ISO 800

jaw-dropping spectacle of an enormous school of fish came into view. It was quite an unbelievable sight seeing so many Sardines packed together in a swirling, undulating mass. You could hang there watching them for hours, mesmerized by the shapes the fish formed, all moving in complete synchronicity.



Whaleshark at Moalboal - Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Sigma 4.5mm, Manual Mode: 1/160th f/5.6 ISO 400

Due to the immense size of the school, it is simply impossible to light them with strobes; so ambient lighting is the way to go. Also, Sardine excrement rains down constantly from the school that would cause more than a little backscatter! I used the Tokina 10-17mm on all but one dive at Pescador, as to capture images of this huge school of fish you really do need the 180-degree angle of view provided by a fisheye lens. It was a bit dark on the first dive of the day, so I started with an ISO 800, which gave me good exposure when using a shutter speed of 1/125th to freeze the action of the

ever-moving school, together with an aperture with enough depth-of-field to have sharp focus through the depth of the school.

We switched our schedule around for the following day and headed to Pescador in the morning and stayed local in the afternoon, diving a site called Dolphin House that was only a few minute ride from the resort. I took this opportunity to shoot with the Sigma 4.5mm circular fisheye for the first time. Just before descending, Felix said ‘maybe we see a Whaleshark, as there was one around the area last week’. Considering he hadn’t dived with a Whaleshark all year, this seemed quite a far-fetched statement. However, 10 minutes into the dive I was experimenting with different strobe positions for the immense angle of view this lens yields and had that feeling that something was behind me, so I turned around to be greeted by a 6m spotty shark! Swimming like a lunatic as the shark gracefully powered past me and started to descend, I adjusted my camera settings and switched off my strobes, getting off a couple of shots before my dive computers started beeping like crazy as I passed my Nitrox MOD’s! I then halted my descent and watched this huge fish swim off into the distance.

Upon reviewing the images after the dive, I found that this currently unique Nikon mount lens for APS-C sensors gave a very different perspective of the Whaleshark and other subjects. So I decided to take it to Pescador the following morning to see what compositional-twist I could give to the Sardine School. It was a lot of fun playing with this lens and, one shot I took particularly appealed to me, as it reminds me of a photo of the Earth taken from outer space, where the blue-water is the different oceans and the Sardines the land – A View of Earth from Inner Space!

Three days of diving at Moalboal soon passed and it was time to pack up the dive and camera gear ready for the onward trip to Malapascua. It took us three hours to get across the island to Cebu City, and after a quick refuel, another three hours and we were arriving at Maya, the port at the far north of Cebu where we had to catch the boat over to Malapascua. A 40-minute boat trip and we were walking up the white sandy beach, into the restaurant of Exotic Island Resort where a welcome drink was awaiting us. After we had checked into our room, which was a Deluxe Air-Con and very spacious giving us ample room for camera preparation, we went back out to the dive shop to meet our guide for the week, Tong. I had booked Tong for a couple of reasons; he is the brother of one of the Divemasters where I work, but more importantly, he was one of the first divers to see the Thresher Sharks at Monad Shoal back in 1997 when the site was discovered. Tong has been guiding divers there ever since and has notched up many hundreds of dives at Monad, so he knows the site intimately. We made our plans for the next day, starting with a dive at Monad leaving at 5.00am ready to hit the water at 5.45am, to hopefully coincide with a Thresher Shark at a cleaning station.

Monad Shoal is a sunken island rising from the ocean floor, which is over 230m below. The top of the shoal is fairly flat with the southern side at around 17m, gently sloping down to 25m at the northern edge. This means that a multi-level dive profile is not possible, so Nitrox is highly recommended to extend NDL's. Monad is the only known place in the world where Pelagic Thresher Sharks (*Alopias pelagicus*) are seen on a near daily basis within recreational dive limits, as they normally inhabit deep-water. In the early morning,



Manta Ray at Monad - Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Nikon 12-24mm at 12mm, Shutter Priority Mode: 1/100th f/11 ISO 640

before it becomes too bright, the sharks come up from the deep to the cleaning stations at the edge of the shoal to have parasites removed. The time window for seeing the sharks is from sunrise through to around 9 am. To increase your chances of seeing a Thresher Shark it is best to dive multiple days, especially if you want to capture images.

The following morning we dragged ourselves out of bed while it was still dark and headed to the dive shop. We then boarded the boat for the 30-minute trip to Monad Shoal. Tong made sure Elaine and I were ready just before we arrived at the dive site, so we were the first to hit the water. We followed the mooring line down and swam to the edge on the Shoal. We settled at the first cleaning station, known as Manta Point, and immediately a shark appeared from the gloomy depths and commenced its morning cleaning ritual, swimming in and out of the cleaning station. We were both in awe of this majestic Shark, it's huge whip-like tail gently moving from side to side as it slowly swam



Thresher Shark at Monad - Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Nikon 12-24mm at 24mm, Shutter Priority Mode: 1/60th f/5.6 ISO 1250

in to let the Cleaner Wrasse go about their business. Shortly after a second shark joined and they seemed to take turns coming in to be cleaned. This lasted about 15 minutes and allowed me to get the shots I had been wanting for some time.

When the sharks had returned to deeper water, we were taken on a tour of the Shoal to orientate ourselves to the other stations. A short swim heading east took us to Shark Point, a station at a similar depth. The first two stations had been 'roped-off' to stop divers getting too close and disturbing the sharks cleaning. Good for the sharks but, from a photographer's point of view, a little further back than I would have liked. But the shark's well being is more important than a photo, so it was a matter of patiently lying in wait and praying for that extra-close encounter. At the southeast edge of the shoal there is another area that the sharks come to be cleaned and this is slightly shallower, at a depth of 17-20m. Here there is no roped-off area so it is possible to get a bit closer for photos,

however there is that fine line between being close for a shot and getting too close, scaring the shark away. There are normally other divers in the water and I'm sure nobody wants to be the 'idiot' that ruins the experience for all!

Photographing the Thresher Sharks has its challenges. First of all light levels are low early in the morning at these depths and strobes have been banned because they disturb the sharks. Getting a close encounter is very much a matter of luck. I shot with the 12-24mm lens on my D7000, as it would be an extremely fortunate encounter to be able to fill the frame with anything wider. If I were to return I think I would choose a slightly tighter lens, like an 18-35mm, as all of my shots were at 24mm. The sharks do not swim quickly and I found a shutter speed of 1/60th was adequate to freeze their movement. I used Shutter Priority Mode, setting the shutter speed and adjusting the ISO until I got an aperture of f/5.6 or above to give enough depth-of-field. I started with ISO 1600 and, as light levels increased through the dive, gradually changed to ISO 1000. I am very glad I received my ND7000 Subal housing from Backscatter before the trip, as my old D200 would have struggled with noise at these settings.

Over 6-days we made nine morning dives at Monad seeing sharks



The Cathedral at Pescador - Nikon D7000, Subal ND7000, Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm, Manual Mode: 1/80th f/9.0 ISO 640

on seven and being close enough for decent photos on four. I never got the extra-close encounter I constantly prayed for, but was not disappointed with the images I got. On one morning the group that dived just after us had a very close encounter, the shark literally swimming through the group taking everyone by surprise! We also dived there in the afternoon and had an action-packed hour with Mobula Rays being cleaned non-stop

and a couple of Manta's, one around 5m wide which repeatedly swooped over our heads. We paid a visit to Gato Island too, seeing sleepy White-Tip Reef Sharks, Harlequin Shrimps, all the usual reef fishes and lots of brightly coloured soft corals. The only other site we dived was East Garden, specifically for Tong to show us a Spot-Tail Frogfish brooding eggs on the side of it's body and I did deviate from the wide-angle set up on this occasion. There are many other sites around Malapascua offering both wide-angle and macro subjects in abundance and you could easily spend 2 weeks diving without getting bored.

Malapascua is an idyllic tropical island paradise, with white sand beaches lined with Coconut

trees. Exotic Dive Resort was very comfortable and professionally run, the food in their restaurant was excellent (they had the best fish and chips I've tasted outside the UK), all of the staff are extremely friendly and the dive shop catered to my photo-needs without questions. I would definitely recommend them if your heading to this part of the world, combined with a visit to Kasai Village to dive the Philippine Sardine Run, the memory of which will stay etched in my mind for years to come.

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