

So far, SoGod

by Dr Alex Tattersall

Southern Leyte and specifically the town of Padre Burgos at the southernmost tip of Sogod Bay has not been on the diving map for long, but is establishing itself as a must-visit destination for divers travelling in and around the Philippines. I first visited Sogod Bay 6 years ago staying at the Sogod Bay Scuba Resort, nine months before my son was born (!) so this magical place has special meaning to me.

I was delighted to go back in April this year, bringing with me a group of twelve enthusiastic underwater photographers. We chose this time hoping to catch the end of the four-month whale shark season and because conditions above and below water were expected to be approaching their optimum.

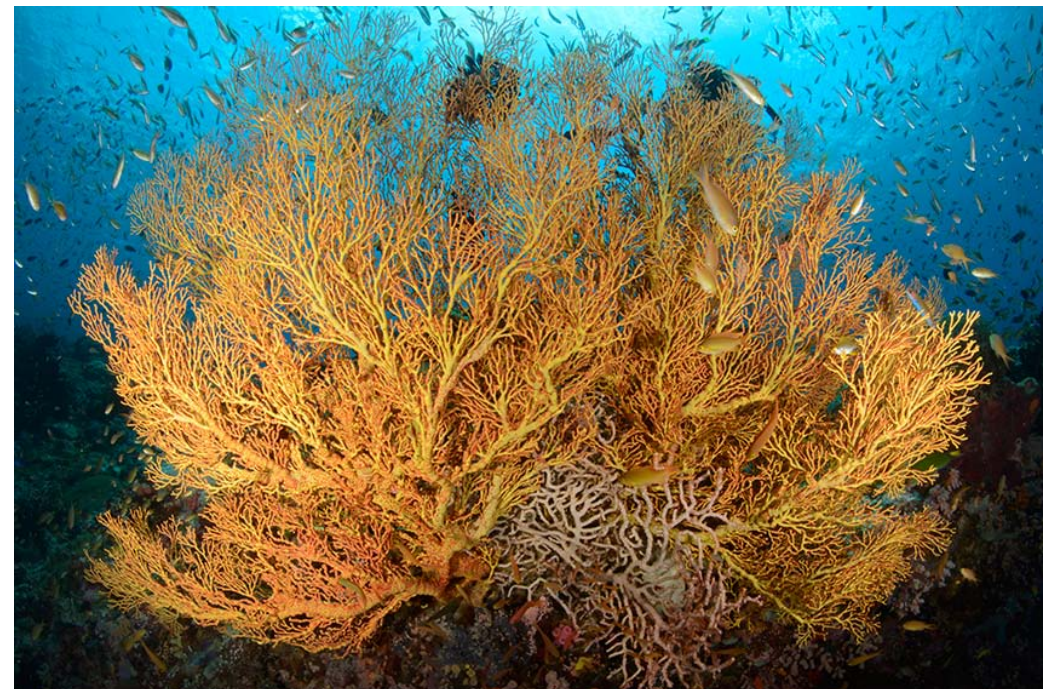
The enchanting Philippines lies in the heart of the 'Coral Triangle', an imaginary area covering the Coral and South China Seas, from Papua New Guinea, across Indonesia and Borneo and to the Northern tip of the Philippines. The 'Coral Triangle' is widely regarded as having the highest diversity of marine species anywhere on the Planet. There are 7,107 islands in the Philippines, and Leyte, situated

in the east of the central Visayas region, is one of the largest. Although it is a little more off the tourist beaten track, the southern province and the reefs surrounding the horseshoe shaped Sogod Bay attract many hardened dive tourists. They have become regarded as some of the most pristine in the country, as dive resorts and dive operations are limited to just a handful centred around the area of Padre Burgos, a small town on the south-western tip of the island.

Padre Burgos has demonstrated that it is a town committed to an investment in sustainable dive tourism activity looking towards the long-term future. Its council is working with the dive resorts and specifically the British N.G.O., Coral Cay Conservation, to secure numerous Marine Protected Areas (M.P.A.s), wherein fishing practices are banned

Sogod Bay Scuba Resort, everything you need for a wonderful dive trip.

Breathtaking scenery as far as the eye can see at Napantao MPA – Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 10-17mm Tokina Fisheye INON strobes





Crab Eye Gobies, Olly's Wall dive site, Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 60mm macro INON strobes



Underneath the banca, another long, long dive nearly over – Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 10-17mm Tokina Fisheye INON strobes

and boat activity limited, thus giving the reef and its inhabitants a chance to grow and flourish. It is also home to an active pier which despite its precarious entry and exit route is recognised as one of the best night critter dives in the region. Offering shallow and benign water and an outstanding richness of subjects, it is an underwater macro photographer's paradise.

Sogod Bay is particularly interesting in that the region has an assortment of different dive sites. Generally, the sites facing southwest

are predominantly covered in hard corals due to exposure to the strong summer winds and waves of the 'Habagat' season. Inside the bay the reefs have a higher cover of soft corals and sponges and other organisms that cannot tolerate the increased wave action. Furthermore, coral expert, Dr. Douglas Fenner, wrote that the reefs around Southern Leyte, housed vertebrate and invertebrate species numbering far above average for the Philippine surveys he had conducted.

Southern Leyte is not just for those divers looking for an array of

coral colours, but is also great for those looking for exceptional macro life. Ranging from the tiny Pygmy Seahorse, *Hippocampus bargibanti*, to nudibranchs, which scatter the bay in weird and wonderful variations, small, curious critters at newly discovered sites such as 'Little Lembeh' are just waiting to be spotted by the keen macro eye. From the tiny to the enormous, the largest fish in the sea, the Whale Shark, *Rhincodon typus*, visits Sogod Bay, arriving in numbers in December as sea temperatures drop, staying feeding on the numerous

plankton blooms, through to April when they move on North towards Taiwan.

This period, December through April is considered the 'high season' as tourists come to see the Whale Sharks, however, the weather at this time is not always favourable, with 'Amihan' season bringing rains from the northeast. The visibility increases up to 30m or more over the spring as temperatures rise and plankton decreases, with April – June offering near perfect diving conditions. The 'Habagat' season runs through



August and September, with occasional strong south-westerly winds when diving is confined to the inner, calmer waters of Sogod Bay. This is generally marketed as the Philippines 'Typhoon Season', however typhoons are extremely rare in this area, as Southern Leyte and the Visayas are south of the typhoon belt, which passes through Manila and Northern Luzon. The Autumn months of October and November can offer some lovely, sunny conditions for diving with moderate sea temperatures.

Unfortunately for the region, three years ago a relentless invasion of uncountable numbers of highly destructive crown of thorns starfish arrived in droves, feeding on hard corals and all but wiping out several of the previously pristine dive sites. Fortunately the local dive centres and marine park rangers came together and actively hunted the crown of thorns, injecting them with a diluted vinegar solution, and saving many key dive sites from the vicious onslaught.

Local dive guide Pedro Batestil, was visibly close to tears as he recounted seeing some of the

(Top left) Nudibranchs in many wonderful forms are commonplace in the bay, Buluarte dive site, Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 105mm VR macro, FIT +5 and +8. INON strobes

(Top centre)

Look on the numerous fire urchins for the very photogenic Coleman's shrimp, Little Lembeh dive site, Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 105mm VR macro, FIT +5 and +8. INON strobes

(Top right) Juvenile flamboyant cuttlefish, spectacular and fascinating, brave and bold. Little Lembeh dive site, Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 60mm macro



Anemones and anemonefish appear throughout the region in all their variance and splendour. This one was at Olly's Wall dive site. Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 105mm macro. INON strobes

reefs he had grown up with being decimated by the crown of thorns attack. More philosophical, seeing this as a natural phenomenon and an opportunity for the reef to regenerate, Sogod Bay Scuba Resort's owner, Phil McGuire, who was a key player in the fight to save the region's corals, has now instigated a coral regrowth programme, planting primarily branching corals throughout the bay. He is planning to offer an interesting opportunity to divers to become involved in the implementation of this

programme. Another positive result of the invasion is that local dive companies have begun exploring sites further afield with some very pleasing results.

The bay offers 20+ dive sites but here I have listed four which our photographic group found to be the most outstanding.



Turtles are often seen feeding on the lush soft corals at Napantao MPA. Olympus EPL5, Nauticam housing, 8mm Panasonic fisheye. INON strobes

Napantao MPA

This dive site, for good reason, is seen as the jewel in Southern Leyte's crown. It is one of the longest established MPA's in the province and its clever and strict policy of no fishing rules have allowed this area to truly flourish.

The MPA covers a large area with two full dive sites both with deep vertical walls dropping into the blue abyss. It is a fabulous wide-angle dive with millions of orange and yellow anthias swarming around large green tree corals (*Tubastrea Micrantha*)

synchronised swimming into the often-strong current. The wall is home to an amazing array of large sea fans, corals, whips and sponges and closer inspection can turn up hidden gems such as the fascinatingly ugly giant frogfish.

On top of the wall is a 9m large basin which is known as the 'Fish Bowl' where thousands upon thousands of small reef fish gather with schools of Unicornfish, Chub, Mullet and Surgeonfish among many, many others. Turtles are regular visitors to the fish bowl and are



Feeding porcelain crab on a night dive on Max Climax house reef, Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 105mm VR macro, FIT +5 and +8. INON strobes

unphased by approaching divers. Our group found this site so conducive to photographic opportunities that we visited several times over the ten days that we were there.

Padre Burgos Pier

For the macro photographer, this site is quite simply outstanding. When we first went to the area several years ago, there was tension between the divers and the fishermen and I heard tale of bricks and other debris being thrown onto divers, easily identifiable by their strong torches. Now though, a

timeshare system has been instigated with divers only permitted to use the pier on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the remainder of the time it being used by the local fishermen.

It is truly a muck dive with debris discarded from the town forming perfect homes for an abundance of weird and wonderful marine life. Seahorses, stargazers, nudibranchs, basket stars, cup corals, octopus, cuttlefish, frogfish, decorator crabs, razorfish, pipefish, reptilian snake eels, the list goes on. We spent many happy hours under the pier in



Giant Frogfish (spot the pink one in the background!) nestle among the hard corals on Napantao MPA – Nikon D7100, Nauticam housing, 10-17mm Tokina Fisheye, 1.4x Kenko teleconverter. INON strobes

among such a rich diversity of species and photographic subjects.

Little Lembeh

Little Lembeh is one of the sites which has been discovered recently following the crown of thorns invasion. The site is a muck diver's heaven with black sand much like its namesake, Lembeh in Indonesia. This is an excellent site for practicing photographic techniques with numerous encounters with some wonderful critters. Examples that we saw are the stunning fire urchin with resident Coleman's shrimp and zebra crab, tiger shrimp, sea moth, mimic octopus, seahorses, porcelain crab in their anemone homes, flamboyant cuttlefish, the list goes on. As this is a gentle slope, dive times for our group exceeded 100 minutes each time we visited this excellent site.

Lungsoda'an MPA

This is Sogod Bay Scuba Resort's house reef and, whilst having been a partial victim of the crown of thorns still provides subject rich

encounters at all depths. There are regularly frogfish found here, hiding in sponges, pygmy seahorses are found on the gorgonians, hairy squat lobsters hide in the enormous barrel sponges, ornate ghost pipefish, whip shrimp, nudibranchs, xeno crabs, and even large schools of sweetlips. The site is also used for night dives when the Padre Burgos pier is off limits and provides excellent opportunities to see feeding porcelain crabs, hunting octopi and even the occasional sleepy turtle.

Thanks to Olly Wood for his contribution to this article and local knowledge of the Sogod Bay area.

Dr Alex Tattersall

Dr Alex Tattersall will be running another underwater photographic trip to another region of the Philippines, Puerto Galera, in March 2014. Bookings through Oonas Divers

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