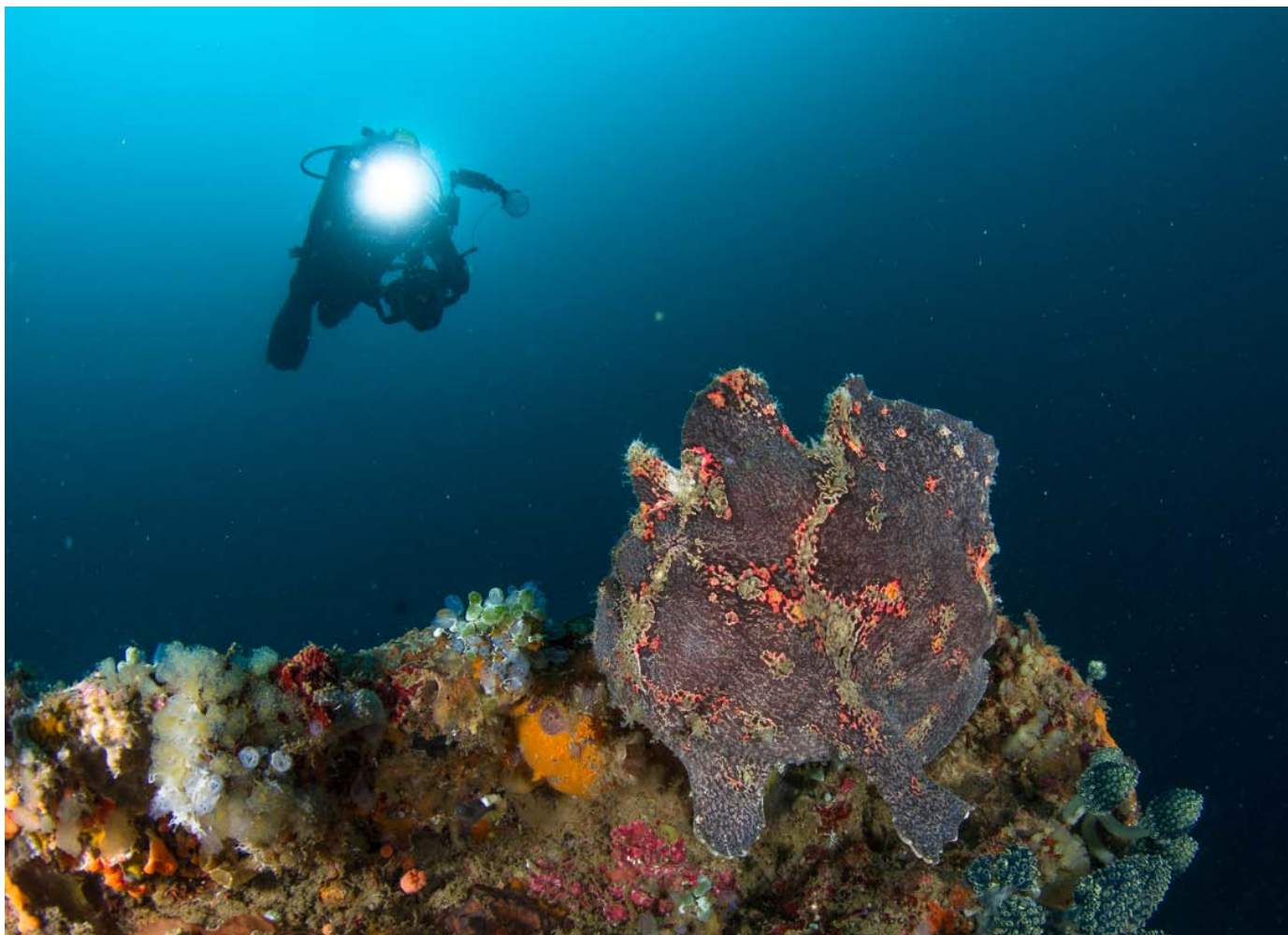


Anilao, Philippines

by Mark Webster

Underwater photographers are always keen to find new locations that offer good image opportunities and comfortable amenities between dives. This may be to hunt down a specific marine species or pursuing a seasonal event or, as in this case, a happy mix of reef diving and exotic macro life. The Philippines is of course not unknown to photographers, but it seems to me that more attention is often given to locations in neighbouring Indonesia but the conditions and image opportunities are very similar. I had been to the Philippines previously and explored the sites around Dumaguete so for this trip I was keen to explore a new area. The Philippines archipelago covers a huge area but only certain locations have been developed for diving so whether you choose a resort or a live aboard you will only scratch the surface and you need to be guided to the best locations through the experience of others.

One of the better known locations is Puerto Galera but this has always sounded a little too developed and busy for my vision of a tropical idyll. But with a little further investigation and one or two recommendations we homed in on the alternate location of Anilao on the Calumpan Peninsula in the municipality of Mabini, Batangas. This area offers equally good diving but with much lower key development and in fact you will find only a handful of dive resorts here. The other advantage is that it is an easy run by road of around three hours (approx 120km) from Manila so you can spend a couple of days in the busy city adjusting a little to



The wreckage of a former floating casino at Daryl Laut is covered in coral and invertebrate growth and is home to all sort of fish species including several giant frog fish that make great CFWA compositions. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO250 f10 1/80.

the jet lag before appreciating the tranquil contrast of your resort in Anilao. Being relatively close to Manila this area can be popular at the week ends particularly during holiday periods. So consider this when planning your trip and maximize the number of week days in your stay. We stayed at the Crystal

Blue Resort in the middle of January which was a good period to choose after the Christmas and New Year holidays and we generally had dive sites all to ourselves.

Most of the resorts here are set into the hillside of this narrow peninsular, so your room here will



The banca style dive boats arrive on the beach just a few steps from the dive deck and with only four divers plus the guide offer plenty of space. Nikon D7100, 18-200mm zoom, Programme Mode

have a sea view and small terrace or balcony. The rooms at Crystal Blue are comfortable and air conditioned, but we found we did not spend much time in it if you are maximising the diving day. There is a restaurant and lounge area (with WiFi) overlooking the beach and below this a very well designed camera room with spacious individual cubicles that have dedicated power supplies and lighting and good storage space for camera bags and boxes. The dive deck is a few steps away just above beach level

with plenty of room for kitting up and separate tanks for wet suits and cameras.

The diving is from local banca outrigger boats that arrive each morning on the beach front a few steps from the dive deck. Once you have set your kit up on the first day your dive gear will be rigged for you for each dive and then taken to the boat together with your camera after you have dip tested or vacuumed your housing. The boat crews are very helpful and cheerful and pay particular



Crystal Blue resort is set up with photographers in mind and has a well designed and spacious camera room which is close to the dive deck. Nikon D7100, 18-200mm zoom, Programme Mode.

attention to ladies in the party and handle the camera gear gently, which is stored in a safe area in the centre of the boat during transit. Crystal Blue limit the number of divers per boat to four plus the guide, so there is plenty of space and you don't have to share the subjects with too many others during the dive, which is good news if you take your time and want to try a number of lighting angles or techniques. The usual routine here is a two tank trip in the morning, return for lunch then a further two tank

trip in the afternoon or a single tank followed by a night dive.

Many of the dive sites are within 10-20 minutes of the resort along the coast and most fall within the local marine reserve which was established in 1991. There is also a house reef directly in front of the resort (Arthur's Rock) if you still have the energy after the four available boat dives each day. The sites provide a good variety of habitats to choose from ranging from classic muck, coral rubble, fringing reef and offshore reef and wall sites



There are frog fish of all sizes here from the giant species to this dwarf species which is about the size of a grape and has a terrific deep red colour. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 125 f20 1/60.



Both the mimic and in this case the wonderpus octopus will be seen on the muck sites in Anilao and some are more keen than others to put on a display for you. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO250 f22 1/50.

which have thriving coral formations and structures. There is also a wreck site of sorts (Daryl Laut wreck) comprising a large steel structure close to Caban Island which apparently is all that is left of the superstructure of a floating casino. I am not sure of this provenance but the framework covers a large area from a few metres depth at the shoreline to 28-30m and is well covered with hard and soft corals and home to a wide variety of marine life including schooling bat fish and some giant frogfish.

No matter how good your spotting skills may be you are very unlikely to be as good as the local guides. The guides have immense knowledge of the habitat and feeding habits of most if not all the species you may request and have endless patience with photographers who want to take multiple shots of a subject. As with all the well known muck

destinations, in order to find the more challenging hidden species the guides will need to lift rocks and dead coral in their search, so if this offends your personal standards of marine life intervention be sure to mention it before you start. Be sure to come with a species wants list as the guides will enjoy the challenge of finding a particular species for you and there seems to be good cooperation between the guides from other resorts in passing on current species information. Come equipped with a muck stick or buy one on arrival as these are invaluable for holding your position on dead coral or in soft sandy slopes to steady yourself for the shot.

Although the temptation may be to stick with your macro lenses in order not to miss the next critter it is worth planning at least a couple of days or mornings for your wide angle lens. There



Imperial shrimps live symbiotically with many hosts but are most often found on large sea cucumbers. Look first at the rear end of the host as this seems to be where the shrimps prefer to be! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO100 f29 1/125.



Schooling bat fish are found on several of the wide angle sites and are always a cooperative subject for the photographer if you make a slow approach. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO250 f10 1/250.

are some very good wide angle compositions to be found with healthy coral and colourful sponges, crinoids and invertebrates. The Twin Rocks site also has a resident school of big eye jacks and barracuda as well as a stunning display of orange tubastrea which are fully extended during the day when the current is running. Most of the wide angle sites are best dived with a little current running as that will encourage the anthias and other schooling reef fish to perform and

the crinoids to extend - add a splash of sunlight to illuminate the blue water and maybe a diver and that will complete the composition.

I found that most of the macro subjects fit well with the 105mm macro lens (I am using DX format) with a few of the larger species better suited to the 60mm macro lens. There are also numerous subjects which require additional magnification into the super macro range and a +10 wet lens is the ideal tool for this which can



Flamboyant cuttlefish are always a colourful macro subject but it is unusual to find them guarding eggs which makes a great behaviour shot. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO250 f22 1/30.

be installed and removed during the dive as the critters present themselves. You can expect to see everything from hairy shrimp to hairy frogfish with a host of other aquatic stars in between and each dive site will offer something a little different. Staying here for a typical 7-10 day trip gives you the opportunity to return to a site more than once if you are not happy with your results for a particular subject or to experiment with a different technique or approach to the

subject.

A short list of my favourite sites at the end of the trip summarises the diversity of this location:

Secret Bay is big enough to have three separate dive areas that vary between a classic muck site with dark volcanic sands and coral rubble which regularly produce boxer crabs, tiger shrimp, bumble bee shrimp, mimic and wonderpus octopus, ghost pipefish, hairy frog fish etc. Most of the dive is quite shallow on a gentle



The sun does not shine on every dive and often disappears at the crucial moment when using your wide angle lens. You can compensate in part by using a fellow photographer with a torch or focus light for a classic composition. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO250 f10 1/100.

slope so you have plenty of time to capture good images here.

Twin Rocks comprises two submerged pinnacles connected via a shallow saddle and gulley between them. They are just a stones throw from the shore but even so are exposed to some strong currents, particularly during new and full moon. But it is this strong water flow that makes the site so attractive and keeps a resident school of big eye

jacks and yellow fin barracuda on location. The two rocks have healthy corals and masses of colourful orange and green tubastrea. The surrounding shallows also boast very attractive coral gardens with all the usual reef species in residence.

Sombrero Island apparently looks like a hat, hence the name, and there are several dives around it. It is exposed to the tide so if you don't like a little current strike this off your



A first for me this trip was the discovery of a bamboo shark which is very similar to the small dog fish found in UK waters. This one patiently ignored our attempts to capture the perfect composition with the wrong lens for the job.....a 105mm for the critters of course. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO250 f18 1/125.

to do list. Our first dive here was to photograph marbled (Saron) shrimp which are reliably found in a cave at 18m, but having seen the quality of the reef I was keen to return with the wide angle lens. The depth on the reef is no more than 10-12m and topography of bommies and large reef patches provides shelter from the tide so the dive is not much of a struggle due to current. There are some nice soft corals and large sponges here,

masses of reef fish and the Anilao trademark tubastrea corals in bright orange and green.

Bethlehem starts on a fringing reef and then follows a fairly steep sandy slope which flattens out around 25m on an area which is rich in algae and broken corals that attract a large population of fire urchins, so many that it is essential to use your muck stick to keep out of harms way. This is a very good site for Coleman shrimp



There are numerous examples of mantis shrimps to be found here but this was the first time I had seen a pure orange coloured one which seemed almost fluorescent against the sandy seabed. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO100 f29 1/40.

denizens here, but this won't be a disappointment as the variety of critters, reef fish and corals will keep a photographer sated throughout your stay.

Whilst there are a number of resorts to choose from here, Crystal Blue resort was a good choice for us offering a comfortable accommodation, informal atmosphere with a good focus on the small details that keep clients happy and relaxed in order to get the most out of the photography and diving experience.

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which may be found on one in 30 or 40 of the urchins, but once one pair is found you will often find three or four other urchins hosting shrimps close by. Also look out for squat lobsters on these urchins and zebra crabs. The algae are also an excellent hunting ground for numerous colourful nudibranchs and it is easy to run out of time here even if you are using nitrox.

Occasionally bigger pelagic species turn up in the waters of Anilao and everything from whale sharks, mantas, tuna and the occasional shark might be seen. However, you shouldn't plan on seeing the bigger

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