

Malapascua Challenges

By Nigel Marsh

Malapascua is a lovely tropical island located off the top end of Cebu in the Philippines. The island is famous for its thresher sharks, but also offers the underwater photographer a wide range of subjects and challenges.

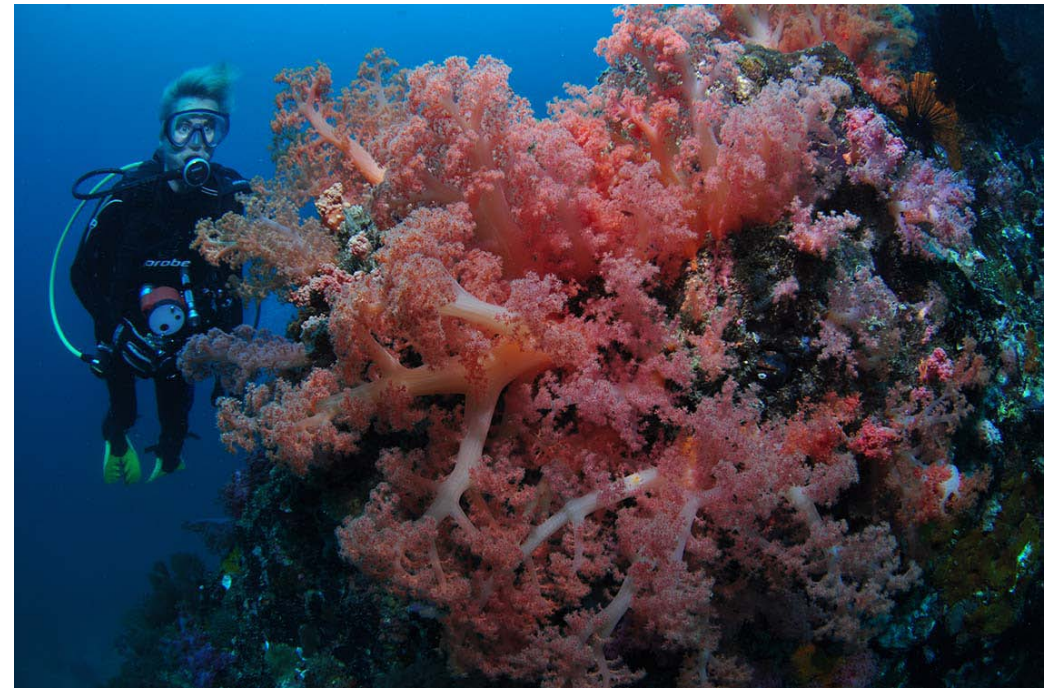
I had wanted to visit Malapascua for almost twenty years, ever since I first heard reports of the thresher sharks. However, I never got around to organising a visit and in a way I am very happy that I delayed my visit for so long as the challenge of photographing these sharks at dawn would have left me very frustrated and disappointed twenty years ago. It is only now that I think the cameras are up to the job with the vast improvements in high ISO settings.

For our week at Malapascua we choose Thresher Shark Divers (TSD), an operation that was recommended by a number of people for their professional service and excellent thresher shark dives. TSD operate three traditional banca dive boats and have a very well equipped dive shop. They work closely with a number of the resorts, including Tepanee Beach Resort where we stayed, which is one of the newer resorts and in a great location on a headland. Tepanee

Beach Resort is about a five minute walk from TSD, which we didn't find to be a problem as the rooms are comfortable and they also have a lovely Italian restaurant attached.

Our checkout dive introduced us to the local reefs around Malapascua at a spot called Bantigue. This site had pretty coral gardens, but the soft sandy bottom proved to be the most interesting, and typical of the area had abundant reef fish, few big fish, but a great range of macro subjects. My 60mm lens got quite a workout photographing pipefish, anemonefish, shrimps, nudibranchs, shrimp gobies, leatherjackets, box crabs, lionfish, scorpionfish and razorfish. Some subjects were easy to find, but I was very glad to have my sharp-eyed local guide Wilbert to point out things that I would have missed.

The following morning was the first of our thresher sharks dives. These are done at sunrise, so the 4.30am wakeup was a bit of a shock to the system, but well worth the effort. The boat departs at 5am, in darkness, for the half hour journey east to Monad Shoal, an isolated sea mount that rises from 250m of water. A dozen dive boats were already



Lovely soft corals decorate the reefs around Gato Island (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f8)

at Monad Shoal when we arrived, crowded together on the one dive site. Fortunately TSD have their own site here, several hundred metres away, so no crowds.

With the sun still hidden behind the hills of nearby Leyte we geared up and plunged into the dark waters. With no flash allowed the challenge was to photograph the thresher sharks in dark water with natural light only. Luckily I had got some tips from good friends, and top underwater photographers, Kevin Deacon and Andy Murch, that had both recently

visited the island. This gave me a head start so I didn't have to play around with my settings too much. They recommended pushing the ISO as high as it could go, 3200 on my Nikon D90, setting the camera to aperture priority, f-stop to f4 and dial down the exposure compensation to -1.

I took a couple of test shots of the other divers as we descended, and all looked good. We then settled on the reef edge at 14m and waited for the sharks to appear. Even though the water was dark, the visibility was at least 30m and I could see plenty of

reef fish and a huge colony of garden eels on the sandy rubble slope in front of us. We only had to wait a few minutes for the first shark to arrive from the depths, a 3.5m long pelagic thresher shark, with a 2m long tail!

I kept myself and my camera down low and just watched this amazing creature for the first few minutes as it slowly cruised the slope about 10m away, too far away for my Tokina 10-17mm, even set on 17mm. Suddenly this shark was joined by two others. The pelagic thresher shark (*Alopias pelagicus*) is a deep water species, evident by their very large eyes, that visit Monad Shoal each morning at dawn to get cleaned by an army of cleaner wrasse. As I watched these three sharks I was expecting to see cleaning behaviour, but they seemed to be more interested in us than getting cleaned. They were also getting closer and closer on each pass, finally close enough to get some images.

Wilbert then indicated for us to move down the slope a little to get closer to the sharks. I inched my way down, staying low and slowing my breathing and avoided looking directly at the sharks, a tip from shark photographer Andy Murch, so I appeared less threatening. This seemed to work and the shark became more curious of me, but still stayed about 5m away. With three sharks

it was hard to know which way to look to avoid direct eye contact, and when surreptitiously watching one approaching head-on I missed another that had come in from my side, about 2m away, only getting a photo of its long tail as it swam away.

The sharks then seemed to lose interest in us and returned to deeper water, so Wilbert indicated that we should follow them deeper. At this site, that TSD call Shark Wall, they have over a dozen spots where the sharks get cleaned, so the dive groups can be split up and move around depending on where the sharks are. We headed to one of the cleaning stations at 31m, but the sharks stayed in the distance, and then disappeared.

Heading back to the shallows we discovered that the sharks had snuck around us, or it could have been two other sharks, and were now patrolling the ridge top above us. When these two departed we drifted along the reef edge and saw several more thresher sharks, plus two pygmy devil rays and a number of trevally and mackerel.

After 50 minutes the sun was up, the water very bright and sharks seemed to have disappeared. At least that was what we thought until we arrived back at the mooring line



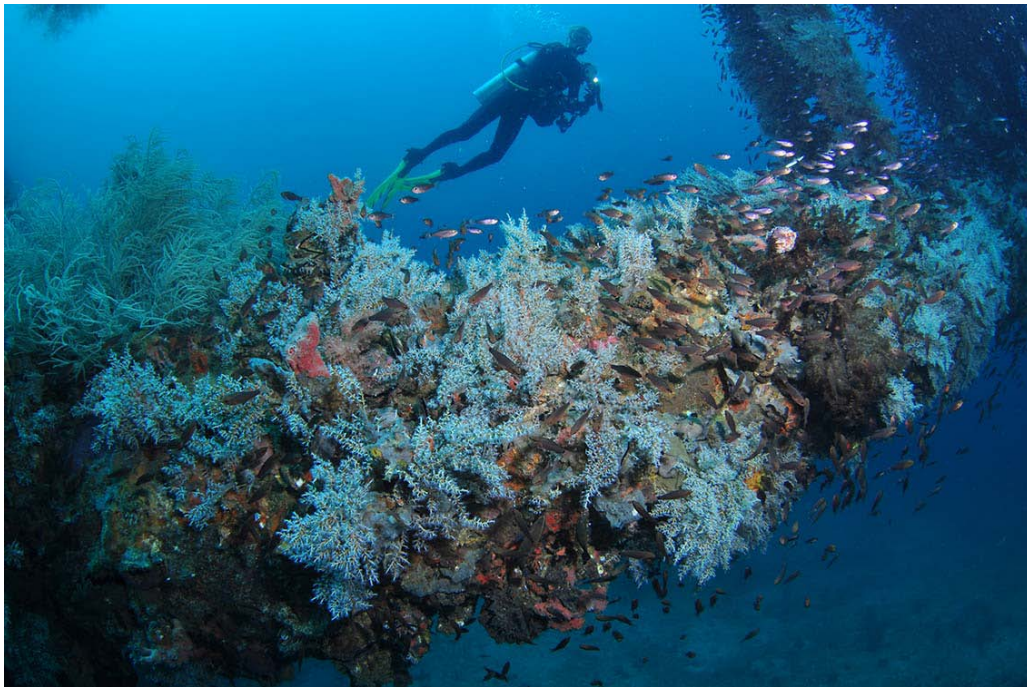
My favourite image of a pelagic thresher shark (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 3200, 1/200, f6.3)

to find another thresher cruising around the divers there. What an incredible dive! I had a dozen decent photos of the threshers, but none as close as I had hoped, and none like I had envisioned in my minds-eye. Fortunately I still had quite a few more dawn dives to get it right.

Of course there is much more to Malapascua than just the thresher sharks and each day TSD offer two local dives around the island or a two dive day trip to nearby sites. The local sites were all great for macro, and also

had some beautiful corals for wide angle photography, but with so many great critters I stuck with the 60mm lens.

TSD employ six local dive guides that all have sharp eyes and as the saying goes, know the dive sites like the back of their hand. At the local sites I photographed cuttlefish, mantis shrimps, shrimp gobies, moray eels, sea stars, cleaner shrimps, nudibranchs, lionfish, zebra crabs, dragonets, squat lobsters, porcelain crabs, orang-utan crabs, candy crabs,



The Dona Marilyn shipwreck is covered in corals and multitudes of fish (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f8

commensal shrimps, spindle cowries and a great range of wonderful reef fish. But the highlights for me were my first Coleman shrimps and mushroom coral pipefish.

The day trips were also very special, especially the dives at Gato Island. I had heard nothing but good reports about this small island and it certainly lived up to its reputation. I did three dives here and photographed some great subjects - banded sea snakes, cuttlefish, sea horses, pipefish and a good collection of unusual nudibranchs. The most popular dive

here is a 30m long cave that cuts right through the island and is decorated with lovely sponges and tubastras corals. It was also home to a great range of crabs and shrimps. White-tip reef sharks usually rest in the cave mouth, but I didn't see any as both times I dived The Cave one or more groups of divers had preceded us.

The big challenge I had set myself for Gato Island was to photograph another shark species, the shy and retiring white-spotted bamboo shark. Gato Island is one of the best places in the world to see this



A beautiful pair of Coleman shrimps photographed at North Wall (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Nikkor 60mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f14

small rare species, but finding them is the big challenge. Wilbert managed to find three of these elusive sharks, but all were tucked away under ledges and well out of camera range.

Another brilliant day trip we enjoyed was to Calangaman Island. This is one of those picture postcard islands - white sand, swaying palm trees and surrounded by blue water. Steep walls are found off the western side of the island which are decorated with colourful corals. I could have used my wide angle lens here for all this lovely coral, plus the turtle,

barracuda and schools of fusiliers, but the guides had informed me that this was another good spot for critters, and it didn't disappoint. I photographed pygmy sea horses, ornate ghost pipefish, longnose hawkfish, blue ringed octopus and many other subjects.

I did get my wide angle lens out for the trip to the Dona Marilyn shipwreck. This 100m long ferry sank in a typhoon in 1988 with the tragic loss of 389 people. The wreck is north of Malapascua and lies in 33m of water on its side. I always

enjoy photographing wrecks and the challenge is to find good angles with colour, structure and hopefully marine life. This wreck is covered in black coral trees, soft corals, sponges and sea whips, plus swarms of small fish. After a lap of the ship I found the protruding masts provided the best photo opportunities, so got my wife Helen busy modelling. One dive on this wreck wasn't nearly enough as there was just so much to see.

Each morning on Malapascua I got up early to dive with the thresher sharks and each day was very different. Day two I managed to get some closer shots of the sharks, including a few with divers in the background observing them, but I still didn't see any sharks getting cleaned. Speaking to the guides they informed me that there are more sharks now than in the past and rarely a day goes by without seeing several threshers. The increase in numbers can be directly attributed to the dive operators on Malapascua employing rangers to patrol Monad Shoal and keeping fisherman away.

My third dive with the thresher sharks was the best. It might have been because it was overcast, or I just got lucky that day. It started with a bang, two sharks swimming around the mooring line as we descended. I hadn't expected this, so by the time I got my camera on and ready they had

dropped down deeper. We then had three sharks cruising up and down in front of all the divers for the next few minutes. While these sharks came in close to a few divers, they stayed well away from me and then departed into the blue.

We then swam up and down the reef edge for the next thirty minutes without see a shark. Just when we were about to give up we noticed a shark patrolling one of the deeper cleaning stations. We moved in, slowly dropping down the slope to 28m and for the next five minutes I finally got to see a thresher being cleaned. The shark would swim circuits around the station, slowing down each time it passed over the main site so the cleaner wrasse could rise up and pick off a few parasites, then continue again on another circuit.

With only Wilbert and I watching this shark it got use to us and quite bold, getting closer and closer. I stayed down low and finally got a sequence of shots I was very happy with when the shark came within 3m of me. It then came back for another pass; I had heard they will come within a metre of you so was hoping this pass would be even closer. But the shark suddenly turned away. I then looked to my left to discover another diver had suddenly appeared from nowhere, and was standing on the bottom with an outstretched arm



Sea horses are a highlight of the night dive at Lighthouse Reef (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Nikkor 60mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f13

holding a Gopro, making him appear even bigger. The shark didn't like this and now stayed well back, intimidated by the larger diver. I indicated for the diver to get down low, but he was too engrossed in filming the shark. I couldn't really blame him, he was over excited and didn't realise that he was actually causing the shark to back off.

I returned to Monad Shoal for the



Cuttlefish are found quite regularly around Malapascua Island (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Nikkor 60mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f9

next few mornings, but it although it wasn't as good, we saw sharks each time, but they stayed well away from my camera. But at the end of the day I had got a very nice sequence and I was more than happy just to have seen these magnificent creatures.

The final photographic challenge at Malapascua was the sunset dive. First of all it was a challenge just finding the energy to do this dive



A tiny candy crab hides in a soft coral at Deep Rock (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Nikkor 60mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f18)

after such an early rise. This sunset dive is done at Lighthouse Reef each evening, on the eastern side of the island. This spot has dense hard coral gardens in 6 to 12m of water where mandarin fish mate. These colourful and secretive fish are always fun to watch and always difficult to photograph, as they don't like torch light on them, so focusing at twilight is quite a challenge. I managed a few images, but found that this wasn't the highlight

of the dive, it was the dozen sea horses we saw clinging to the corals here. This spot was also good for a range of nocturnal molluscs and crustaceans and a great way to end the day on Malapascua Island.

The photographic challenges presented around Malapascua Island certainly made for a wonderful dive holiday, and while I met some I know I will have to return to complete the rest and maybe add

a few more, like the manta rays and hammerhead sharks that are also seen around this brilliant Philippine island.

Typhoon News

The day after we left Malapascua the island was hit by Super Typhoon Haiyan, the largest storm ever recorded. While there was extensive damage on the island, no one was seriously injured, unlike in other parts of the Philippines. Within days many of dive centres and resorts reopened and have reported that there is little or no damage to the local reefs. The best support they can receive is for you to visit Malapascua, as this will help to rebuild the island, as many of the locals lost their homes.

For more information contact

Thresher Shark Divers

www.malapascua-diving.com

Tepanee Beach Resort

www.tepanee.com

Nigel Marsh

www.nigelmarshphotography.com



www.uwpmag.com