

Fantastic Philippines

by Phil Rudin

With over 7000 lush tropical islands and nearly twice as much coastline as the United States, the Philippines is one of Asia's premier beach resort destinations. The Philippines has an endless array of white sandy beaches, warm clear tropical waters and over 15,000 square miles of healthy coral reefs. The Philippines is a true paradise for divers of all skill levels and an area you could not fully explore in two lifetimes. The flora and fauna found here is world class by any divers standards with some of the most unique critters I have ever encountered. This article details two excellent dive resorts in the Luzon area of the northern island group where Manila the capital is located. Crystal Blue Resort is located in the bay area known as Anilao perhaps the most well known dive destination in the Philippines. El Galleon Beach Resort is located in Puerto Galera Philippines about an hour boat ride from CBR in Anilao. If you are traveling to this area of the Philippines I would strongly recommend that you try to split your stay between these two excellent resorts. You can find a number of

packages that include both resorts with transportation from the Manila.

CRYSTAL BLUE RESORT

The first leg of my trip was by van from Manila to Crystal Blue Resort a relaxing three hour drive. On arrival I was met with the warm Filipino hospitality found throughout the islands. In the words of the immortal rock band Led Zeppelin, CBR truly is a "Stairway to Heaven" for macro fauna junkies of all skill levels. The unusual marine critters found in Anilao are second to none and were in great abundance at all of the dive site I visited.

CBR is built into a sloping landscape using beautiful architecture which is surrounded by local vegetation. At the top of the property are the guest accommodations which include family villas, superior rooms and deluxe rooms on three levels. The rooms are all fully air-conditioned with private bath, balcony or terrace, excellent views and much more. Go down a few steps to the main office and gift shop, Down some more steps and you are in the dining area. This area has inside and outside seating



with a library and social area. This is the area of the property where the free WiFi works best. Every evening guests would gather there to socialize, read and view images on their computers. Just beyond this area is Gil's Place the large open air dining area which overlooks the crystal blue waters of Balayan Bay and the islands beyond. From this vantage point you can watch the dive boats coming and going to the protected marine park and house reef which is directly in front of CBR. If you return later in the day you will be treated to a magnificent sunset while dining in style.

The kitchen opens every morning a 6:30 with piping hot



fresh brewed coffee, fresh fruit and a variety of meal options served buffet style. A la Carte dishes are also prepared by the Chef as well as vegetarian and vegan options during the dining hours. Water, coffee and tea are always available in the dining area. The Chef's specialties include seafood, continental, oriental and Filipino cuisine. The buffet-style dishes served during lunch and dinner include two or three delicious entrees and a number of side dishes all prepared in CBR's professional kitchen. I enjoyed the buffet style



Ghost Pipefish Detail, Olympus E-M1, Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Olympus 60 mm macro, ISO-100, F/13, 1/320th, two Inon Z-240 strobes with Nauticam float arms, Saga +5 closeup lens



Clown Fish Eggs, Olympus E-M1, Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Olympus 60 mm macro, ISO-100, F/13, 1/320th, two Inon Z-240 strobes with Nauticam float arms, Saga +15 closeup lens.

meals and the variety of food options. Restaurant service does not end until 9:30pm to accommodate the needs of those doing sunset and night diving.

Going down a few more stairs you reach the Cantina and Camera room level. The cantina is another meeting area where drinks and snacks of all sorts are served. This is a great spot to unwind with a cocktail, critique the days diving and discuss your latest super macro techniques.

The newly finished camera

room is one of the most well thought-out camera rooms I have ever seen. It features twenty-five large individual camera bays and four video bays with some excellent features. Each bay has large storage spaces both above and below the work area. I had all of my camera bags taken directly to the camera room and never had anything other than my land camera in my room. The bags stored under the work station with plenty of room to spare while all of my changers and other



related equipment where within easy access on or above the work surface. Each bay has several power outlets so charging is never an issue. The room is environmentally managed and kept very dry at all times. It is very clean and each bay is equipped with a heavy towel to absorb moisture and a plastic basket for small items like tools and O-ring grease. The room and each bay are very well lighted making camera maintenance quite easy and well organized. Mike Bartick, CBR's on site Photo Pro put a lot of time and effort into the design of the camera room and it shows. Mike teaches workshops during the year which are well worth attending.

From the camera room you

can head down a few more steps to the dive shop area. The dive deck is covered to protect divers and equipment from direct sunlight. It has large hanging racks for wet dive equipment, three equipment rinse tanks and an area with showers and seating. On the opposite side of the dive deck area are restrooms, equipment storage boxes, bench seating and large camera rinse tanks. Nitrox is available on site along with a great view of the Arthur's Rock Marine Sanctuary which runs in front of the property. Go down a few more steps to the pebble beach where your Banca (boat) awaits. The Banca is the unique Philippine dual outrigger style vessel used by fishermen for



Leaf Fish, Olympus E-M1, Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Olympus 60 mm macro, ISO-320, F/22, 1/320th, two Inon Z-240 strobes with Nauticam float arms

centuries throughout the Philippines. Each Banca has a covered area for protection from the sun and they are driven directly onto the beach so all you need do is board. From the time you arrive all of your luggage and gear is handled by the exceptional staff at CBR. Dive equipment and cameras are always loaded into the Banca by the dive staff unless you advised otherwise. When your dive day ends your gear is rinsed, stored and awaiting your arrival the next day. The dive area and camera room are locked down and guarded at night for your piece of mind.

Once you have boarded your banca for the days diving the rides to the dive sites are for the most part short and very comfortable. Most dive plans call for a two tank morning dive of less than 70 feet and a one tank dive after lunch with night dives offered daily. You can also beach dive on the outstanding house reef or arrange for additional dives at the more than thirty-five named dive sites around CBR. I never went to the same dive site twice unless we ask to go back. I dived with the same dive guide, Edgar my entire stay and had a camera on every dive.



I simply told Edgar what lens I was using and the size of the critters I was looking to photograph and before I had finished with one subject Edgar had found at least two or three more for my enjoyment. I can't say enough about the professionalism of the staff at CBR and the ability of the Dive Masters to find the most unique and unusual critters.

If you are considering a trip to Crystal Blue Resort be aware that you will need to be able to handle a sizable number of steps each day. I found CBR to be a stairway to macro heaven and look forward to my next trip back to the resort.



EL GALLEON BEACH RESORT AND ASIA DIVERS

For underwater photographers CBR and El Galleon both offer excellent opportunities for both wide angle and macro with CBR being the more macro oriented of the two. Out of the water things are quite different in regard to the resort locations. CBR is in a quite location with little to see within walking distance of the resort so guests stay on the property most of the time. El Galleon on the other hand is a five minute walk the bustling beach town of Sabang. Located in the center of Sabang's large lagoon and marine reserve, El Galleon is on a beach lined with hotels, restaurant, dive shops, retail businesses and more. Most of the dive sites are within a fifteen minute boat ride from the floating dock at Asia Divers premier dive training center. El Galleon has a wide verity of room options including sea view rooms, family



rooms, poolside rooms, budget rooms, penthouse suites with private kitchens, large private balcony's and spectacular ocean views. Most of the rooms are on the ground floor and second floor levels, however some of the rooms with excellent ocean views are up a large flight of steps. Like CBR you may want to consider your room choice based on your ability to navigate several flights of steps everyday. Large villas, studios and house rentals are also available in the Waimea section of the property. Arthur's Restaurant at El Galleon Beach Resort offers a verity of meal plans

in an open-air dining area which has both covered and tree shaded seating. All meals include warm Filipino hospitality and a diverse selection of both local and international culinary delights. The Point Bar above the dive center is the after hours spot where guests and passersby meet to unwind after a day of diving. I also found that the free WiFi worked best for me while at the bar. In the center of the property is a swimming pool surrounded by palm trees where you can relax and enjoy the warm breeze or cool off in the refreshing crystal clear water. El Galleon



also features the La Palm Spa situated next to The Point Bar and a conference room which seats up to twenty-five people. The camera room is next to The Point Bar it has several work stations with high pressure air and plenty of charging outlets. I had all of my camera equipment moved to this room on arrival and never needed to move any camera equipment into my room. In addition to scuba diving El Galleon can arrange sunset cruises, beach Bar-B-Que's, Kayaking at San Rafael Falls, Trekking Tukuran River, trail biking, motor biking, golf outings, paintball and more. El

Cup Corals, Olympus E-M1, Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Panasonic 8 mm fisheye, ISO-250, F/5.6, 1/100th, two Inon Z-240 strobes with Nauticam float arms and Inon 4600K diffusers

Galleon can provide a wide range of family activities as well as excellent scuba diving and snorkeling.

Asia Divers is a PADI Career Development Center located at El Galleon Beach Resort and the only PADI CDC in the Philippines. The dive center has ongoing recreational courses, speciality courses and an iDAP college for instructor training. Group and individual instruction is available from one of Asia Divers experienced course instructors. The dive center is located on a large fixed dock that leads to an equally large floating docks where the dive boats are prepared for the days diving. Asia Divers has a large dive equipment storage building on the dock where each divers equipment is stored in large numbered plastic boxes at the end of the

days diving. Once you have been assigned a box the dive guides clean and store your dive gear at the end of your dive day. Every day your gear is setup by the dive guides and is ready to go when you arrive at the dive center. A dive boat sign up board is located in the bar where you can chose the boat and time you want for your next days dives. Once you have checked personal gear, analyzed and signed for Nitrox your gear is loaded on your boat by the dive guides. Most trips are one tank dives since the boar rides are so short. When you return to the dock the dive guides have your next tank of Nitrox ready to be analyzed and sign for. This is a great system for those using Nitrox, quite well organized and controlled by the dive staff. I recommend that if you are doing multiple days of diving with several dives each day that you consider adding the additional cost of Nitrox to your dive package at both resorts. Asia Divers can provide Nitrox training course if needed. Asia Divers also has a booking office and a well stocked dive shop



Nudibranch detail, Olympus E-M1, Nauticam NA-EM1 housing, Olympus 60 mm macro, ISO-100, F/13, 1/320th, two Inon Z-240 strobes with Nauticam float arms

just across from the main dock. The compressors and Nitrox systems are behind a large glass wall in a room facing the walkway which is so clean you could eat off the floor. Asia Divers schedules five dives each day for divers of all skill levels including night dives, just sign up for the times you want to dive each day. Most dives are limited to no more than six divers with a dive master in the water on each dive. Most of my dives were with Jamie, a British Dive

Instructor who found loads of critters to photograph and was an all-round great guy to dive with. The dive center operates several Banca style boats for the over thirty dive sites within fifteen minutes of the dock along with two high speed mono hull outboard motor boats for longer trips like the fifty run to Verde Island. Puerto Galera and the marine sanctuary have a wide variety of dive sites including everything from shallow muck dives to a number of excellent wreck and reef dives at

a verity of depths. I shot everything from super macro to wide-angle and fisheye during my ten day stay and never came close to running out of new subject. For me the icing on the cake was the action packed dives we made at Verde Island. If you go to El Galleon plan on at least one trip to Verde Island, the sheer numbers of fish that are found there is simply astounding. Verde Island is a two tank morning dive with a stop at the beach between dives to look for ancient porcelain washed ashore from a nearby wreck site.

Once you have left Manila finding a working ATM may present a problem so if you are using the local Paso rather than credit cards be sure

to load up before you head out to the resorts. Also be aware that internet is often slow and at times non-existent once at both resorts.

If you are planning a trip to this area of the Philippines you may want to start by visiting the divecbr.com and elgalleon.ph web sites which both contain a wealth of useful information beyond this review.

Phil Rudin

www.divecbr.com

www.elgalleon.ph






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