

Diverse Dumaguete

by Troy Mayne

Dumaguete, located in Negros Oriental in the Visaya's, Philippines, is a true diving mecca, and as convenient as diving of such caliber can be. With plenty of world class diving sites boasting the most sought after critters, without sounding like a dodgy TV sales network presenter, Negros Oriental has it all.

I have been living in the Philippines for a number years and have travelled extensively to dive and photograph underwater Philippines. There is some great diving here, and some great dive areas, but each has been an effort. There is nothing simple here. Well that's what I thought until I found, then relocated to Dumaguete.

With critter dives surpassing Anilao and Coral Reef diving rivalling Tubbataha Reef, Dumaguete has everything here in a small easy to get to bundle, that makes a photography dive excursion rewarding and hassle free. There are as many varying photo opportunities as a photographer could expect anywhere else in the world.

With diving ranging from easily accessed shore muck dives to world class Coral Reef dives and big animal dives, there is a little something here to please everyone. Littering the Dumaguete coastline are the numerous dive resort house reef dives amongst the Muck dive, the world renowned reefs of Apo Island to the closely neighboring Oslob Whale sharks. There is no shortage of dive sites to captivate and enthrall.



Peacock mantis Shrip with eggs. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes-manual full power. Nikon 105mm VR. f/100th, f/22, ISO 200.

The critter coast extends from Dumaguete through 2 towns, Dauin, down to Zamboanguita in the south. Each town is 15 minutes' drive from the last along the National highway, so driving or getting transport between each is very simple.

There are over 30 recognised dive sites in this area with dozens of other unnamed "house reefs" scattered among these. Any entry along the coastline would provide great muck diving ready to

be explored.

There is no doubt there are copious amounts of unexplored and undocumented dive sites all along the coast. I do hope to explore them myself in the future.

Whilst these dives are called "muck" dives they are not true muck dives in the sense that the average visibility is 15m plus. Every site I have dived has provided many sought after critters on



Coleman Shrimp. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes-manual, Full Power Nikon 105mm VR, 1/100th, f/25, ISO 200

most underwater photographers wish list. From the rarest Cephalopods, to the most bizarre fish it, is very easy to cross off a lot underwater bucket list animals in a very short time!

The majority of these sites are just barren fields of sand, hiding many critters in plain view. The local government and resort owners have been laying down all sorts of material and junk to create artificial reefs. The validity of placing tyres, car bodies and other junk being ecologically sound is not being debated, however their affect is certainly obvious.

More recently, local Governments have heeded advice and laid more eco-friendly artificial reef devices such as concrete models of various designs to encourage critters to settle. Regardless of natural or artificial structures in place, each site boasts all myriad of wild and bizarre creatures to keep the shutter buttons clicking.

The Dauin Government controlled sites at Problacion 2 have 2 sets of car bodies that have been sunk as well as concrete blocks, tyres and a catamaran hull. There are shipping



Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes-manual, half power. Sigma 10-20mm @ 10mm. 1/160th, f/7.1, ISO 200.

containers at other sites as well.

Dauin is universally recognized as a top muck diving destination. Now a few kilometers down the road some top new sites are also being realized in Zamboanguita as world class, and considered by local photographers as better than most of the Dauin Sites.

One of the most diverse shore dive sites is Basak, in Zamboanguita. It has a small reef, and has a large school of resident Barracuda, and a resident turtle. I have found all the usual critters found at most of the other sites including Frogfish, various

Octopus, Flamboyant Cuttlefish and various eels including Blue Ribbon Eels, and everything in between.

But wait there's more! Apo Island is one of the best reef dives in the Philippines and in mostly pristine condition. The eastern side was devastated in a Typhoon a few years back, however the western side weathered the storm and remains extremely beautiful.

Apo was one of the first community organized protected ocean zone. It was protected in 1982 and has flourished only because of this

protection.

Apo Island is under Dauin Government control but is actually closer to Zamboanguita. It's an average of one hours traveling time from most resorts with some resorts in Zamboanguita only requiring a quick 30 minute Banka (local boat) trip from those resorts. The sea conditions are generally calm and the Bancas with their outriggers are reliably stable. Only the most weak stomached will lose previous meals during the trip.

Apo Island does have two accommodation options. The whole Island is on generator with only 5 hours a day with power and most visitors seem to be content with an overnight stay and remaining on the "mainland" for most of their trip.

Diving can be done from the Dive resort on Apo Island. The Island is perfect for snorkelers as well, so Photographers may travel with human baggage if necessary and keep them entertained whilst more important photography activities are fulfilled. They can also be dropped on the island whilst diving happens. There is not much to do and explore on the island itself but is very nice and relaxing.

Coconuts is widely regarded as one of the top ten dive sites in the Philippines, and rarely disappoints. Even with heavy dive traffic on busy days the site is large enough not to get congested. There are many sites around the Island to be shared. The colours of the many sponges intertwined with corals makes this a uniquely colourful reef dive.

Coconuts is the most likely site for larger pelagic and fish encounters. The windward (Eastern) side of Apo, whilst devoid of pristine corals also provides other exciting encounters. In the right conditions, large schools of Jacks can be encountered.



Harlequin Shrimp. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes-manual, Full Power, Nikon 105mm VR, 1/100th, f/29, ISO 200

Very strong currents can be experienced around the Island all year round. Most operators are flexible enough to provide safe drift dives in these conditions and protection from winds can be sought most days at various sites. This area is also plagued by Turtles, both Green and Hawksbill, and I have yet to experience a turtle free day with the best



Juvenile Warty Frogfish. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes-manual, full power. Nikon 105mm VR. 1/125th, f/36, ISO 200.

being 18 Turtles in one dive.

A suitable dive site is almost always able to be find in even the worst conditions.

But wait there is still even more! In the very south of Cebu Island in a small town called Oslob is swimming with Whale sharks encounter. This is a rare chance for people to swim with an otherwise



Ornate Ghost Pipefish. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes -manual, Full Power Nikon 105mm VR, 1/125th, f/20, ISO 200

very large but elusive creature.

Oslob is actually closer to Dumaguete than it is to Cebu City. A short 30 minute ferry then 15 minute drive is all that is required to reach the sleepy resort town. Small dugout outriggers (paddled) ferry swimmers just 40-80 metres from shore to the interaction area. Divers enter from their Dive Boat or from shore. A conduct brief for the interaction is given by government officials.

There is much controversy over the Whale Shark interactions, as the sharks are fed. Simply if you are against these experiences do not go there.

The cost of swimming and diving with the whale sharks is quite high at Around \$23USD to swim \$34USD to dive (not including tanks and gear) and there \$11 USD fee to take a camera. Most resorts can organize trips to Oslob for their guests.

Whilst I have not visited all of the resorts as an overnight guest, (as I live here) the resorts and operators I have seen have all been very photographer friendly. Two resorts in particular,

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Mimic Octopus. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes-manual, full power. Nikon 105mm VR. 1/125th, f/16, ISO 200.

Atmosphere in Dauin and Acquaviva in Zamboanguita cater specifically for photographers. Providing all manner of facilities for charging, maintenance, soaking, specialty critter guide spotters etc that will satisfy the most demanding photographers. Both also have excellent house reefs for simple shored based dives, and provide trips to all other dive sites in the region.

If you still want to do something different there is also Siquijor and Sumilon Islands. Whilst not in as pristine condition as Apo Island, each is different and have their own appeal. Siquijor is mostly wall diving and Sumilon Island is mostly for larger encounters as well. These sites take longer to get to and not so regularly visited from Dumaguete, but always an option for groups. Some resorts schedule dives and many dive operators from these Islands visit Apo Island every day.

The typhoon season is generally from October to January (can be a few months either side thanks to climate change). The best diving and critter



Whale Sharks, Oslob. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, Tokina 10-17mm @ 17mm Natural Light. 1/250th, f/10, ISO 200.

actions is between February to August. Negros Oriental is rarely affected by the typhoons directly, if anything, mostly just strong winds and monsoonal rain affect Dumaguete. Cancellation of flights to and from affected areas to the Dumaguete region may also be affected. Otherwise Negros is nicely tucked away among the Visayan Islands, and a little



Flamboyant Cuttlefish. Nikon d800e, Sea and Sea housing, 2 x Inon z240 Strobes-manual, half power. Nikon 105mm VR. 1/125th, f/4, ISO 200.

further too south to be affected by most typhoons. A suitable dive site is almost always able to be found in even the worst conditions.

During Typhoon Hagupit, (Super Typhoon in 2014) whilst most of the Philippines was being ravaged, Dumaguete experienced the best diving conditions we had for months. Not a breath of wind nor drop of rain was encountered.

The Philippines, now known as the Fee-lippines does charge fees for just about everything. Whilst the fees are very cheap, it can feel

like everybody here is trying to take a piece from you. There are very few sites which are feeless, as most sites are marine Sanctuaries. Most are around the \$2.50USD mark and another \$1 USD for cameras. Generally operators take care of the fees and include them as a total charge. Just be aware they exist. Always good to keep small notes available.

There are concerns about safety in the Philippines, and rightly so. There are areas to avoid. Fortunately, Dumaguete is not one them. There

have been few very incidents of violence and crime towards foreigners in this area. Having lived in Mindanao where it is dangerous I deliberately moved to Dumaguete for its relative climatic safety and personal safety against violence. Dumaguete has been listed by Forbes as one of the ten best places to retire in the world!

Dumaguete is a modern University town. It has great shopping, nightlife, restaurants and transportation. The Airport is relatively small but has multiple daily flights from Manila and Cebu international airports. Internal connections are very cheap. Ferries and busses can also provide simple

connections from Cebu as well.

Dumaguete also has many beautiful tourist attractions, including waterfalls, beaches, whale and dolphin watching tours, hot springs, lakes, markets and mountain tours are easily organised through resorts for the no-fly day before traveling. Most dive resorts are out of the city of Dumaguete, and not close to shopping or other amenities. It is very easy to organise transportation into the city or to other shopping areas or markets.

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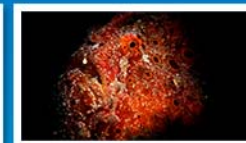


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