

Anilao - A Mecca For Macro

by Nigel Marsh & Helen Rose

I'm sure most underwater photographers are like us and have a wish list of species they would dearly love to photograph. We plan many of our dive trips to reduce this list and on most trips we manage to tick off two or three subjects if we are lucky. However, on a recent trip to Anilao in the Philippines our wish list was decimated. In a week of diving we eliminating over a dozen species off the list, but we also saw species that we hadn't even thought of having on the list!

Over the last few years Anilao has built up a reputation as one of the best muck and macro destinations in the world - a Mecca for macro. Located 120km south of the Philippines capital of Manila, Anilao is an easy destination to reach by car, and has always been popular with divers living in Manila. As such countless dive resorts are located right around the Calumpán Peninsula, spreading well beyond the little town of Anilao.

Our resort of choice was one of the newest in the area, the wonderful Buceo Anilao Beach and Dive Resort (BABADR). Located at the southern end of the Calumpán Peninsula, BABADR is located close to the

best dive sites in the area, most only a 5 to 15 minute boat ride away. This brilliant resort has spacious rooms, with great views and air-conditioning, a bar, two pools and a wonderful restaurant serving a mix of local, Asian and western meals. They also have one of the best dive centres we have seen, with wash tubs, drying areas, gear storage and even a dedicated camera room for setting up cameras and charging batteries. We found all the dive staff first class and barely touched our dive gear, except to put it on and go for a dive.

At any good muck and macro dive destination the key to successful underwater photography is a good dive guide, and BABADR was some excellent guides to spot those weird, wonderful and tiny critters. Our guide was Nelberto 'June' Ilagan, who

Buceo Anilao Beach and Dive Resort (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 18-300mm, ISO 400, 1/500, f11).

The reefs off Anilao are colourful and home to many amazing macro species (Nikon D7200, Tokina 10-17mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f9).





Hunting flamboyant cuttlefish at Coconut Point (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f13).

is actual a freelance guide and was recommended to us by one of the resort owners Martin Nussbaumer, so that we wouldn't have to share a guide with other divers. You have to pay a little more for this service, which in reality isn't much at all, but having our own dedicated guide proved invaluable. June has been diving the sites off Anilao for longer than he would care to remember, but he wasn't fazed when we produced a wish list of twenty subjects we dearly wanted to photograph. June looked at the list, smiled, nodded his head and

said he would see what he could do.

BABADR operate several traditional style banca dive boats, and limit the numbers on each boat to avoid overcrowding on the boat and dive sites. They schedule four dives daily, two in the morning (usually done as a double dive), one in the afternoon and followed by either a sunset or night dive. They have over 50 dive sites to choose from, which are located along the Calumpan Peninsula and across the Maricaban Strait on Maricaban Island, Caban Island and Sombrero Island.



Pebble crab found on a night dive at Secret Bay (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f14).

For our first dive we headed only five minutes away to Bubble's Point, a pretty site with a mix of muck and coral. It was also where we ticked off the first wish list species, a rhino shrimp. The sloping black sand at this site bubbles from volcanic activity, but we saw the most interesting species on the coral walls and coral gardens. Here were numerous nudibranchs, two giant frogfish, turtles, ribbon eels, cowfish, moray eels, lionfish and many other species. At the start of the dive June led us to a black coral tree and pointed

out a tiny little brown lump. At first I didn't realise what it was, but once my 60mm micro lens focused on the 1cm long critter I realised it was a bizarre rhino shrimp, horn and all.

Next up was Secret Bay, the most famous muck site at Anilao. The sloping black sand at this site provided a bounty of critters - thorny seahorses, longhorn cowfish, oriental sea robins, demon stingers, xeno crabs, shrimp gobies, shrimpfish and many other species. The highlight was two blackfoot lionfish, a rare lionfish species with lovely blue pectoral fins,



Weedy scorpionfish at Bethlehem (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f11).

and a new species for us.

June later informed us that Secret Bay is nowhere near as good as it was in the past, and at one time we would have got almost every critter on our wish list, and more, at this one site. But too many boat anchors and runoff from new resorts has degraded the site. It must have once been mind-blowing, as the dives we did here were still spectacular.

Top of our wish list was a flamboyant cuttlefish, a species that had managed to elude us at many top muck sites in Southeast Asia. June knew just the place to try, Coconut

Point. This dive site is now the premier muck site in the area and is a sensational dive. On the sandy slope at Coconut Point we saw ornate ghost pipefish, several species of snake eel, colonies of garden eels, razorfish, flounders, nudibranchs, dwarf lionfish, commensal shrimps and much more. But the climax came at the end of the dive when we finally found the flamboyant cuttlefish. This colourful performer was a delight to observe and photograph, and was completely unconcerned by two photographers acting like the paparazzi! It continued to walk slowly across the bottom



Anilao Pier is a great location to find mimic octopus (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f11).

on its tentacles and abdomen, stalking tiny shrimps and lashing out to capture them with its feeding tentacles.

Our first night dive at Anilao was a return to Secret Bay, and once again we saw something new and plenty to keep our cameras busy. At night Secret Bay transforms into Crustacean City, with shrimps, prawns and crabs of all types everywhere. But the pebble crabs were the most interesting, as they are rarely seen elsewhere. But new to us was a pretty carpet sole, found in a group of three just resting on the bottom. There

was also numerous shell species out grazing, including a rarely seen species, the Venus comb murex. These lovely spiny shells are popular with collectors so rarely seen at most muck sites, but on this dive we saw several.

The next day the wish list kept getting smaller. First up was a trip to Bethlehem; a reef, rubble and rubbish site that was very productive. This site, right next to a small village and used as their garbage dump, was home to moray eels, mantis shrimps, ribbon eels, garden eels, dragonets and two spectacular weedy scorpionfish. A weedy scorpionfish was near the top



Bobbit worm found on the house reef night dive (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f13).

of the wish list, but we never dreamt that we would see one of these rare fish at Anilao. We spent five minutes with both fish, one didn't move the whole time we sat with it, but the other was slowly walking across the bottom on its fins, and even did a long extended yawn for the camera.

At Saddle we ticked off another species, a tiny boxer crab with anemone boxing gloves. Saddle is one of dozens of very pretty reef dives off Anilao, with lovely gorgonians, soft corals, sunshine corals and sponges. We later returned with a wide angle lens to capture the beauty of this reef.

But even the reef dives at Anilao are loaded with macro critters, like nudibranchs, frogfish, shrimpfish, mantis shrimps, jawfish, hawkfish, filefish and sea whip shrimps.

Each dive we seemed to either knock another critter off our wish list or encounter something special we hadn't even considered adding to the list. On the afternoon dive it was a humpback turretfish at Coconut Point, a very cute fish closely related to the more common cowfish. But that dive also produced a little magic that we never expected when we encountered the flamboyant cuttlefish



This Donald Duck shrimp was a nice surprise at Apol's Point (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 60mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f14).

once more. This time it was laying eggs. As we watched, the colourful cuttlefish squeezed under a coconut shell to deposit a tiny round egg. June had previously shown us several eggs attached to the underside of a coconut shell, but to see the flamboyant in action was very special.

A second night dive at Secret Bay also produced something completely unexpected and unimagined, a pygmy squid. Actually a type of cuttlefish, the pygmy squid is the world's smallest cephalopod, only growing to 2cm long. How June spotted this tiny critter I will never

know as it was hidden in a black coral tree. I managed a few images of the minute critter with my 60mm lens and upon reviewing the images discovered it had captured a tiny shrimp, which must have been 1mm long!

Another critter ticked off the list the following day was a two-spot lionfish at a site called Daryl Lout. This is the local wreck dive, once a floating casino it now looks more like an underwater construction site with beams, bricks and other building materials. The wreckage is home to schools of batfish and the odd turtle, but was also a good place to see leaf

Helen explores the colourful reef at Saddle (Nikon D7200, Tokina 10-17mm, Ikelite Housing, Inon Z240 strobe, ISO 200, 1/100, f9).

scorpionfish, dragonets, flatworms, nudibranchs, mushroom coral pipefish and flashing fileshells.

One species that we had missed after dozens of trips to Southeast Asia was a mimic octopus. June had looked for one at Coconut Point without success so suggested we head to Anilao Pier for an afternoon and night double dive. We assumed we would be diving under a pier, so were a little disappointed to discover a tiny pier in only 1m of water. The dive site was in the sandy bay adjacent to the pier, fortunately it didn't disappoint. Exploring the fine sand at this site we encountered a great range of muck critters; grinner, razorfish, gobies, nudibranchs, snake eels, demon stingers and a surprising number of murex shells out in the day. We even stumbled across a group of three murex shells laying eggs, in one large corncob-like clump.

But halfway through the dive we heard June tapping his tank frantically. When we found him he was with a large mimic octopus. This amazing animal was a sight to behold as it changed shape and colour before our eyes, even imitating a flounder as it swam at one point. We topped off this dive by finding another mimic octopus, this one much smaller and even more photogenic.

The night dive at Anilao Pier was also very special as a dozen coconut octopus and long-arm octopus had emerged from hiding. But we also saw countless crustaceans, molluscs, a bobtail squid and a strange little file snake.

Over the next few days the wish list continued to dwindle as June found us a Bobbit worm on a night dive at the house reef, known as Buceo Point,



a sawblade shrimp on another dive at Coconut Point and a Donald Duck shrimp while exploring Apol's Point. If that wasn't enough there were also those wonderful subjects we are happy to photograph again and again - a pair of Coleman shrimps at Bethlehem, a warty frogfish at Koala Point, Bargibant's pygmy seahorses at Sunview, hairy squat lobsters at Minilog and mating splendid Mandarin fish on a sunset dive at Dakaida.

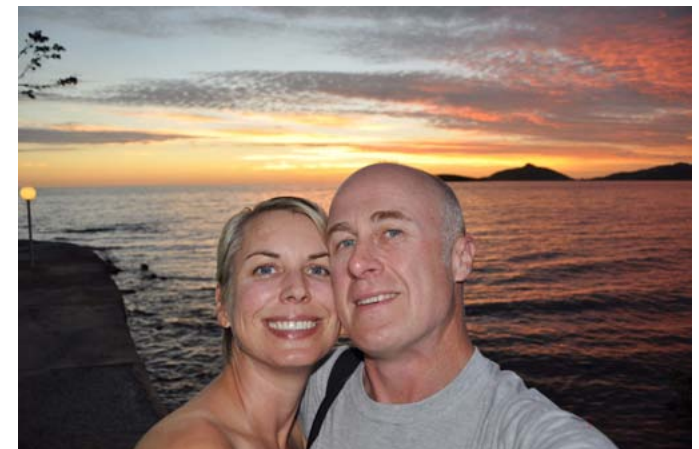
Anilao really turned it on for us thanks to our



wonderful dive guide June, who provided an endless array of great macro subjects for our cameras. The only problem we now have is that our wish list has been so decimated that any future trips to Southeast Asia are going to provide very slim pickings.

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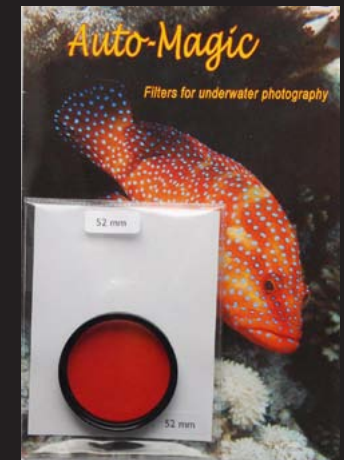
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