

## TRIP NOTES

### PHILIPPINES TRIP DECEMBER / JANUARY 2004 / 2005

Please note that trip notes are exactly as the name suggests. They are not polished literal works. If you would like to know some specific to the area, feel free to e-mail me.

My main reason for travelling to the Philippines was to dive with the thresher sharks that inhabit the waters north of Malapascua Island. In addition to diving with the thresher sharks, I also visited a number of other locations to determine the standard of diving with light to a future dive trip.

This was my first visit to the Philippines and on the whole I enjoyed my trip, however, I believe there are many other locations less spoilt by commercialism, overfishing, overpopulation and pollution that provide far better diving with greater species diversity than I observed. As such, I probably would not return to the Philippines unless I was specifically targeting thresher sharks or specific critters.

Please be aware that these notes are my impressions based on the locations I visited. You may have a differing opinion or a better or worse experience. I only dived the central area at a few locations and this may not be representative of the entire Philippine land mass.

My overall rating for diving in the Philippines is 6.5/10. See separate dive operator reports for further ratings.

### **Demographics & Overall Opinion**

The Philippine archipelago consists of approximately 7,000 islands which have been divided into several manageable geographic sections. I visited the central area called the Visayas.

If you want to get away from it all and not see any people and only see wild untamed natural places – then the Philippines is not the place to go – well at least not the coastal areas. Although pristine areas no doubt exist, for the most part the coastal areas are densely populated, overfished, polluted and contaminated.

The population of the Philippines at the last census is a staggering 76 million people (year 2000). The World Bank cites the Philippines as the slowest country to develop due to its inability to counter against over population. I spoke to one girl who said the government freely gave her contraceptives, however, she didn't want to use them and instead feed them to her plants. Apparently, the drug ensures the plant flowers brighter.

In all the areas I visited, I observed some form of human occupation or interaction on 97% of all beaches, coastlines, rocky points, roads verges, rivers and streams. I did not visit the inland areas.

Cities and small villages are very dirty and don't have the same standard of living as other first world countries or developing countries – air pollution, water contamination, over population and a strong reliance on a natural resource base are common themes. In the Philippines this resource base is the ocean and the food it provides.

There is complete polarisation when it comes to the very poor, the middle class and the very rich. On one side of the street there is a shopping mall which sells everything you would find in Wal-Mart or K Mart whilst adjacent there are hundreds of people living in squats lacking the basics of anything other than the shirt they wear and the few pots and pans they attempt to cook on. In central Cebu City the local municipal rubbish dump had many people living on the actual dump!

Despite frequent warnings about terrorism, I saw little evidence of anything terrorist like. Armed police were obvious at airports and seaports and Cebu City had check points across some of the roads. Shopping centres had armed security and bags had to be checked in before entering the complex. I did see one Filipino wearing a balaclava and Americans no doubt became worried, however, he was only protecting himself from the harsh unrelenting sunshine.

### **Transport & Construction**

Transport is either by motorbike, motorised tricycle, local bus or taxi. Traffic is chaotic everywhere and rules are made to be broken. The horn is continually used to signal other road users that you are passing. Indicators are never used, speeding is not an issue, and drivers overtake on blind corners. It is not unfamiliar to see a driver pushing a smaller vehicle or motorbike off the road to enable him to pass – with oncoming traffic! Motor bikes are usually designed to carry two individuals, however, in the Philippines as many as 5 or 7 people may clamber aboard a 125 CC motorcycle. Driving is an interesting if not dangerous experience.

Transport between the many islands is via fast catamaran or slow boat. The fast cats are modern inter-island ferries while the slow boats are overloaded death traps! I found it interesting that the boats charge you excess baggage if you have a lot of gear. Porters working for the ferry company also charge you to take your bag on-board whether you want their help or not. The amount they charge is relatively low, however, you get very tired of continually being charged for anything and everything because you are westerner

Despite the distance between islands being quite short, the time it takes to transfer to another location is very time consuming and usually involves two or three types of transport (tricycle, taxi and boat). Transfers usually took the most part of the day and in one instance took 14 hours to travel 150 kilometres.

Filipinos appear to love cement. Nearly all structures are made from this material as are many of the roads. The next commonest building material being bamboo and other wood products.

Interestingly, when a structure is not required any more, it is rarely pulled down and the material recycled. Rather the structure is left to rot and erode in the tropical sun and rain whilst a new building is erected in another location. This practice, which is evident throughout the Philippines, ensures there are plenty of old run down derelict buildings.

### Noise

One defining thing I will always remember is noise. The Philippines is very noisy – everywhere. The people talk loudly, the traffic due to its density is noisy – not to mention continual horn blowing. Ferry terminals and ferries always have DVD's playing very loudly, or if you are outside the terminal pop music will be played loudly. Taxis always have their radios on – loudly. In fact there are two switches on a TV or radio – off and loud! The high population ensures that there is noise 24 hours a day, even in the smaller villages outside the main cities. If the people aren't making the noise, then the dogs will be yapping or the hundreds of roosters will be crowing – all at the wrong time of the day.

### People

The people in general are friendly, although not over friendly as in some Pacific locations. They are not that interested in where you come from or what you do. Basically, they are busy doing whatever they do. Hawkers are common and continually annoy you – more or less no matter where you are. Even the dive boat was accosted by a lady trying to sell trinkets and sea shells!

I found the males to be more genuine than the females. The females appear to be friendly only because you are westerner. Perhaps they think you will marry them and take them out of hell! I was approached several times and asked if I was married and whether I would like a girl. Even the Filipino males call many of the girls "limpets"

We met one disillusioned Swiss man who honestly believed that the girl hanging off his arm, who whispered and giggled in his ear was actually interested in him and not his bank balance!

Amputations appear to be quite common in the coastal areas; a legacy of dynamite fishing using home made bombs.

Children are everywhere, however unlike in Pacific nations where they are curious, the Filipino children demand money or want to sing to you for money.

The police are an interesting curiosity. In a humid tropical climate they seem to always look fresh with a cleanly pressed and starched shirt. Most officers carry shotguns with pistol grips and a pistol or revolver. I saw several security officers wearing ammunition for a pistol in an western style gun belt, however, they didn't carry a weapon. Obviously the ammunition looks pretty and is a needed fashion accessory.

### **Pollution**

The Philippine people are not like westerners when it comes to pollution. When they have finished with something, most discard the rubbish immediately – so be it if that is in the ocean, the beach or the footpath. Disused plastic bags and bottles are everywhere. The bottles are the result of a contaminated groundwater resource. Rivers and streams are choked with rubbish in addition to inert rubbish such as disused motor vehicles.

On several reefs I dived, I discovered corals choking for light as they were covered with disposable baby nappies! Major cities smell of rubbish. Even the smaller villagers are total rubbish dumps! Many villagers burn their rubbish and the smoke permeates everything in the vicinity for hours. The people seem to have absolutely no idea to what the word conservation or cleanliness means – this is interesting considering that they have a 98% literacy rate and education is very high on the agenda for most Filipinos. Recycling ventures do not appear to be prevalent.

### **Marine Animal Diversity and Declining Fish Stocks**

Marine diversity increases the further west you travel from Papua New Guinea. This increased diversity also parallels higher population rates and pressure on marine resources to provide food for burgeoning populations. According to 2003 data 60% of the world's population lives in Asia.

At many Philippine dive locations fish diversity and stock is very low. The reason for this is over population of the Philippine Islands and over fishing. The local people eat anything that swims, no matter what the size or species. Therefore, recruitment of species is very slow.

I observed fish traps on many of the reefs I dived. Caught within these traps were small reef fish, decorator crabs, fire fish, squirrel fish, white eyed eels and zebra fish. I asked local fisherman if they returned any of fish because of their small size and they replied that they ate the lot!

I spoke with divers who have been diving the area for twenty years and they all said that diversity was falling very quickly. I certainly noted a complete lack of small tropical fish on many dives. Large pelagic fish were non-existent, with the exception of a few dives. For example coral cod and trout which are usually prevalent on all reefs were totally lacking; I saw one very small coral trout in 40 dives. The smaller invertebrates and other cryptic reef creatures are relatively common, such as

nudibranchs, however, if fishing does not cease on local reefs used for diving, then I fear the worst will occur in the not too distant future.

Compromising reef diversity is also the very popular practice of reef bombing and cyanide poisoning. Reef bombing destroys the very fabric of the reef (corals) whilst cyanide is used to capture fish for the marine aquarium trade business.

If this attack to reef diversity and species numbers is not enough, at low tide villagers flock to the reef and remove any marine life that is eatable or sellable (shells). Rocks are overturned looking for creatures such as octopus and left overturned ensuring the marine life on the underside of the rock perishes in the sun. This occurred at every location I visited at every low tide.

I have never dived so many reefs that have been bombed and are basically shells of their former selves.

On one occasion, I came up from a dive and the boatman was eating an octopus that has just been caught from the dive site I was diving. He also had captured some anemone fish (Nemo).

I would rate the diving overall, in relation to fish species diversity, as 2/10. Certainly I have observed higher species' numbers in many other Pacific island locations.

With regard to coral and invertebrate diversity I'd give a rating of 7-8/10.

In relation to animals that photographers call "critters" I'd give the areas I visited 6.5/10.

## **Food**

Have you seen very many "true" Filipino restaurants in your city?

Two words describes the food – bloody awful! I thought the food would be a mixture of Thai and Indonesian. Rather it is an assortment of western style food and local delicacies served traditionally with rice. The food is very salty and very oily which promotes strokes and heart attacks in the population. The reason for the high salt and oil content is refrigeration or lack of it. Lack of power/refrigeration in many areas means that food must either be consumed immediately or be stored for later consumption. The easiest method to store perishable food is to use a high amount of salt or use oil. Oh, and the oil is not extra virgin olive oil – more like used sump oil!

I ate in a few local village restaurants or cafes and suffice to say the Australian Health Dept. regulations were not represented there. I promptly became sick the next day after eating lunch at one of the local establishments. Perhaps it was the animals lying on the kitchen floor, or perhaps the improperly cleaned squid and fish, or maybe the cause of my illness was the unsanitary behaviour of the person preparing the food. At one establishment the toilet (hole in the ground) was located beside the kitchen – and I am certain hand washing is not a normal practice.

I remember thinking that the restaurant at the dive centre could not go wrong with scrambled eggs. The eggs came floating in a few millimetres of oil. Next I tried boiled eggs only to discover the eggs were not fresh. Even the bread was awful.

Brewed coffee in the Philippines appears to be a delicacy rarely found outside the major cities. Coffee is Nescafe instant with coffee whitener. Fresh milk is unavailable, however UHT milk was used on a few occasions.

Some of the traditional food was quite tasty, especially the fresh raw fish, but in general this was not the norm. We did eat some lovely Thai food in a western style restaurant in Cebu City.

#### **Locations Visited:**

- **Malapascua Island**
- **Southern Leyte**
- **Cabilao Island**

#### **Malapascua Island**

- **See separate dive operator report on web site**

The island located approximately 4 hours drive from Cebu City is a coral atoll and is comprised of coral rubble with little top soil or sand. Vegetation is quite sparse and mainly consists of coconut trees, grass and very light scrub. There is fresh water present on the island as groundwater, however, the water has been contaminated from unchecked sewage. The water is not drinkable due to high coliform counts.

The population on the small island is around 2500 which is very high and most of the island has been developed at some stage or another either by villages or by tourist accommodation and restaurants. Malapascua island is not an exotic and unspoilt tropical island. Rubbish (trash) is disposed of wherever you want to. I discovered several large uncovered holes full of plastic bottles, cans, batteries and everything else that is disposable.

The nationals do not bother to clean the coral beach and rubbish is strewn along its length comprising fishing line, fishing nets, plastic bottles and plastic bags. This is evident for all the locations in the Philippines I visited.

There are many restaurants and various styles of accommodation on the island ranging from European type apartments to native style bungalows. Likewise, there is an assortment of restaurants – some quite good and other atrocious.

#### **Animals not looked after**

Stray dogs and cats are everywhere; many suffer mange or some other disease. The animals are not looked after by anyone and rely on tourists giving them food from time to time. Rabies is epidemic and touching the animals, unless they are well looked after is not recommended. Many of the animals are pregnant and there is no veterinarian supplies to provide aid to the animals. I was told that now and again when animal numbers reach plague proportions the police shoot the animals and dispose of the carcasses at sea. Unwanted dogs and cats occur in most Philippine areas and is a problem that authorities fail to address.

## Diving

Co operation between diving enterprises on the island is non existent and it is very much “dog eat dog”, although once at sea the boatmen between the different boats often work together to enable several bancas to moor at the same dive buoy. Also safety is not really an issue on the island with regard to diving. You are very much by yourself when it comes to ensuring your own dive safety. The weather when I was on the island was quite rough with 2-3 meter breaking swells. Despite this boats still took tourists diving. I am an experienced diver and found the conditions marginal and I’m certain novice divers were quite scared at times. The motto of the dive shops is very much “profit before safety”

During the week I was on the island the weather was marginal so I was not able to dive many of the locations. I was surprised by the lack of clarity in the water especially at Monad Shoal. The water visibility was between 7 and 18 meters and the water colour was very green. The poor visibility is due to plankton blooms. The sea floor of the mount has been highly degraded by dynamite fishing, but despite this I observed several white anemones and nudibranchs. I also sighted a few small highly coloured moray eels darting between the few remaining non-dynamited coral and rock outcrops.

The thresher sharks were worth the visit and I was lucky to have a close encounter considering the rough surface conditions and poor underwater visibility. One large (3 meters not including the tail) female thresher approached to 5 meters from my left, swam slowly past then turned to repeat the manoeuvre before swimming away. This was the closest interaction I witnessed with the remainder of sightings being more distant than 10 meters. I also was lucky to observe a school of a dozen or so large devil rays swimming past, although the visibility was too poor for decent photography. It should be noted that the water at Monad Shoal is challenging to underwater photographers as it is very green in colour due to the high load of suspended plankton.

The other two areas I dived were at Lapu Lapu, an inshore reef which is hardly worth diving. Lapu Lapu is a fish sanctuary, however, I saw very little fish life. The bottom slopes away and consists of coral rubble on sand with several outcrops a staghorn coral and many large sponges. I did see quite a few critters such a commensal crustations during my two dives at this location. Visibility was very limited due to the rough conditions.

At Gato Island I did a seventy minute dive and the diversity was very good. Soft corals, sea whips, nudibranchs, flatworms, sea snakes, holothurians, bobbet worms and an assortment of other marine invertebrates. Fish life was lacking and I was upset to discover a large banded sea snake with its head cut off! Inspecting the wound I would hazard a guess the snake was decapitated by a diving knife. Unfortunately the conditions were too rough to do a second dive at this location.

It takes quite some time to reach Malapascua Island from Cebu City and other than being a stepping off point and base camp for diving with the thresher sharks, I do not think the island has much going for it.

### Southern Leyte

- See separate dive operator report on web site

Sogod Bay in Southern Leyte was a complete transformation from Malapascua Island.

The area was very precipitous due to the proximity of the Philippine Trench and several uplifted limestone plateaus are easily identified. Sogod Bay is approximately 12 kilometres across and is flanked on both sides by uplifted land. At the bay's entrance is Limasawa Island which comprises uplifted coral reef and andesitic volcanic breccia and tuffs. Certainly the views across the bay rival any other ocean view elsewhere.

Much of Limasawa's precipitous slopes are still covered in dense foliage. One particular area looked very much like the set from Jurassic Park (without the dinosaurs "*pity as dinosaurs would eat the people keeping overpopulation in control*"). Despite the relative isolation of the island several villages can be seen and much of the surrounding reefs have been decimated through over fishing. I saw very few large fish diving around this island, and smallish reef fish were not in abundance. Fire fish were very common.

The villages and towns were different to that seen on the island of Cebu, although poverty was still very evident. The architecture was more Spanish and Portuguese in origin.

One interesting thing I observed at the local village was the blacksmith at work. He was recycling leaf springs from cars and remoulding the metal with the aid of a very hot fire into blades for bush knives.

I did fifteen dives in Sogod Bay and they were variable in quality and visibility. Overfishing has removed many of the small and larger reef fish from many of the sites, however, the invertebrate life, especially the nudibranchs were outstanding. Several sites also provide habitat for some beautiful hard and soft corals. For the most part many of the dives are current dives.

The only school of fish I saw was a large school of large rainbow runner located in the fish sanctuary at Napantaw.

I also did some night dives on the house reef and was very impressed with the species diversity. I saw ghost pipefish, ornate pipefish, decorator crabs, cone shells, mantas shrimps, many varieties of nudibranchs and several urchin species.

## **Cabilao Island**

- **See separate dive operator report on web site**

Cabilao Island is an exposed limestone reef. Vegetation consists of low scrub, coconut trees and some mangrove forests. Sand and soil is minimal on the island and the beaches are comprised of coral rubble. The population is quite high and numbers around 2500 people. Three operational resorts are on the island and there is the usual number of abandoned buildings from past ventures.

Rubbish is prevalent everywhere as in most Philippine locations. I watched one Filipino sweeping outside her store removing the leaves that had fallen the night before but leaving the remainder of rubbish (plastic, fishing line etc) on the ground. On another occasion I noted a woman sweeping the dirt street removing dust!

Other than diving there are no other activities on the island. Despite this there were quite a few European tourists at La Estrella who were non divers escaping the harsh European winter for the sunny climes of the tropics.

Diving is relatively easy with both shore and boat diving being catered to. Visibility is variable and I experienced visibility ranging from 5 meters to 40 meters.

Large, medium and small sized fish are non-existent, although I am sure you may be able to find one or two if you search long enough. I observed no school fish during my twenty dives at Cabilao Island with the exception of a dive I did at the fish sanctuary at Balicasag Island near Bohol. The fish sanctuary at Balicasag Island had a very large school of big eye jack which schooled tightly at 5 meters. I also saw a large school of chevron barracuda at this location and quite a few other reef species such as: butterfly fish, moorish idols, coral trout and midnight snapper.

The only reason these fish are located here is that the fish sanctuary is proximal to a large naval garrison which has taken onto itself to police illegal fishing in this area. I also dived 300 meters from the sanctuary and didn't see any fish whatsoever. Invertebrates were also very thin on the ground.

Despite the lack of reef fish, the main drawcard for the Cabilao Island is the proximity and easy access to observe several species of cryptic marine life such as: the crocodile snake eels, ribbon eels, electric clams, various nudibranchs, star gazers, pegasus fish, ghost pipefish, pygmy sea horses and sand divers – too mention but a few!

I would return to Cabilao island, not for the fish life, accommodation and terrestrial night life, but more for the shy marine creatures which are difficult to find in other areas.

Please read the dive operator reports on the web sites if you are thinking of visiting these locations.