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PLENTY MORE FISH IN THE SEA

On a multi-destination trip to the Philippines, **Nick and Caroline** spend a few days exploring the popular dive resort of Moalboal.

WORDS & IMAGES: NICK AND CAROLINE ROBERTSON-BROWN





Moalboal, on the island of Cebu in the Philippines, is famed for its shoal of sardines that can be found right off the beach all year round. There are an estimated one million fish in this shoal that can attract top predators as well as plenty of diving and snorkelling visitors. But this unique region has plenty more diving to

offer including the island of Pescador, mating Mandarin Fish, healthy corals and macro aplenty, as well as the chance to visit nearby Oslob to dive and snorkel with the biggest fish in the sea - the Whale Shark. With only four days of diving in our itinerary we planned to pack it all in and dive as much as possible.

With that in mind, after our two-hour transfer from Cebu airport through lush forest

and on breathtaking coastal roads, we ditched our gear in our poolside room and headed straight to the dive centre. We were lucky to have an amazing house reef to explore at Magic Island Dive Resort, so we walked right in and were soon watching turtles rest on the reef top, while our eagle-eyed guide found all manner of macro critters to show us. It was a great shake-down dive and a wonderful reef to have on our





doorstep.

We had another dive planned on this reef as the sun was about to set and we were so excited. It was a full moon and the dive staff had told us we had timed our visit perfectly to get the very best show of mating Mandarin Fish. So, although a little tired from our journey, we were back in the water as dusk fell, hovering by, somewhat unusually, a healthy portion of reef, widening our eyes to adjust them to the low light levels. Soon we started to get glimpses of the fish we were looking for.

The Mandarin Fish is possibly the most beautiful fish in the sea. It is diminutive, only a few centimetres in length, but nonetheless is renowned for

IMAGES
Above: The female Mandarin Fish releases her eggs in the peak of the mating ritual.

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putting on an impressive show. This was not the first time we had tried to photograph the mating ritual of these fish but this event was by far the best we had seen, with several pairs rising up above the coral to mate. It was an incredible start to our trip and we were buzzing when we returned to dry land for dinner and told the other divers about our experience.

Our second day saw us head to the famous sardine shoal. We had done our homework and knew what to expect;

nevertheless, our first glimpse of this spectacle was still one of awe. The fish swirl and swoosh in unison in an endless movement that creates a glinting curtain just off the reef wall. As divers and marine life swim amongst them, the fish change their movements accordingly, creating little windows where you can see out to the sea beyond.

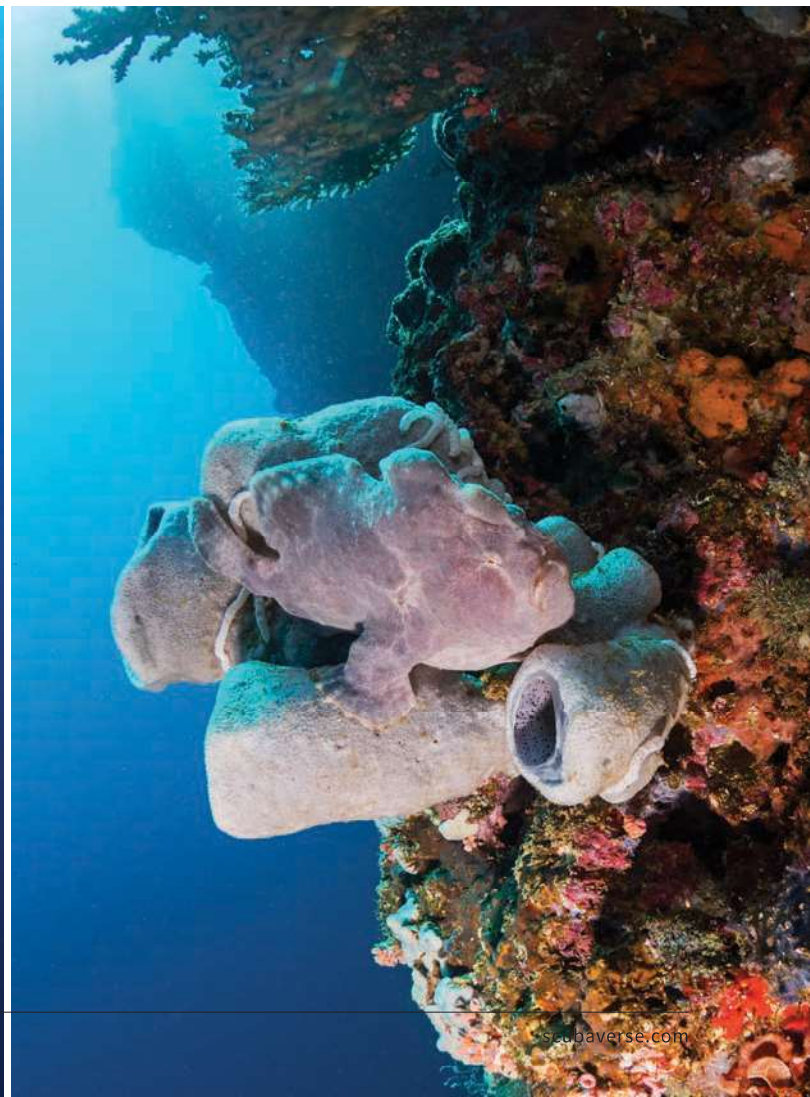
One thing they do not tell you about this experience is that, if you are down current from the shoal, you will also

IMAGE: A huge
Whale Shark swims
below us.





WITH CLEARER WATER THAN ANYWHERE
ELSE WE HAVE SEEN WHALE SHARKS,
OSLOB IS AN INCREDIBLE PLACE TO
ENCOUNTER THEM IN ALL THEIR GLORY.



IMAGES

Left top: The huge mouth of a Whale Shark as it swims towards us on a dive at Oslob. **Bottom left:** A diver marvels at the colours of the corals on a Pescador Island wall. **Bottom right:** The walls of Pescador Island have an abundance of corals and sponges, and if you look closely, a frogfish. **Below:** Vibrant colours on the reef top.

see how much poo a million fish can make! It's a good idea to keep an eye out into the blue beyond the shoal, as those with luck on their side might catch a glimpse of one of the hungry Thresher Sharks that are known to hunt here. Alas, we did not see any sharks, but the shoal on its own is an incredible dive and worth spending time exploring from all angles.

One of the finest diving areas this region has to offer is Pescador Island. The walls here are stunning, covered in bright soft corals, and we hoped to spot the famed giant nudibranchs that, although large, are well camouflaged and difficult to find. Unfortunately, currents meant that we did not

ONE OF THE FINEST DIVING AREAS THIS REGION HAS TO OFFER IS PESCADOR ISLAND.

make it to the part of the island that has a cave entrance that looks like a skull but the marine life more than made up for this. We were delighted to find a large purple frogfish balanced on an identically coloured sponge as we cruised past, drifting along the wall.

One of the most contentious attractions in the Philippines is quite close to Moalboal – the Whale Shark tours in Oslob. It takes about two hours to get there and we were diving with an accredited dive centre, which meant that we would be able to try both diving and snorkelling with the sharks. We set up at a dedicated picnic area and were the only divers there.

We could see the boats out on the water that take the snorkellers out to see the sharks and our guide told us that the number of boats is a good indicator for the number of sharks in the bay. On that morning there were about 12 boats, which should equate to

about 12 sharks for us to see. A short walk down the beach followed by a short dive and we were in the Whale Shark zone. We slowed down and simply waited and soon we were rewarded with a couple of curious Whale Sharks swimming past us. They would return regularly to the surface to the boats, but diving is a great way to see them from below and gives you a different perspective to the one that was coming next.

A picnic lunch was waiting for us back on the beach before our allocated slot on the snorkelling boats. In the past Oslob has had mixed reviews and we were not sure what to expect. Recent research has indicated that the majority of the sharks that visit the bay use this as a stop off on their journeys and are not unduly affected by visitors. The local people benefit hugely from the tourists that flock here, with a new school, hospital and more robust homes, and many of



the fishermen, who in the past may have killed sharks for food, now earn a much better living showing them to tourists from all over the world. A marine charity monitors all the shark encounters, so valuable data is also gathered here.

Our experience was not what we were expecting. No engines are allowed here and our group got into a tiny boat, paddled out to our spot. The first thing we noticed is that many of the tourists here to see the Whale Sharks did not get out of the boats and those that did were given strict instructions not to approach the sharks. We saw one person break this rule, trying to touch a shark, and they were quickly ejected from

IMAGES

Right: A jellyfish drifts by on the blackwater dive. **Below:** A Whale Shark gulps in water to filter out the tiny food particles.



the water and stopped from going in again. Other strictly enforced rules are no flash photography, no sun cream, no touching, no obstructing, no chasing... and we were also told to stay close to our boat and listen to any instructions from our guide.

We just floated on the surface and let these gentle giants come to us. They are fed small handfuls of fish to attract them to the area. This used to be a practice the fishermen undertook to keep them away from their precious fishing nets and consequently the sharks have learned to come here to be fed. At midday, all the boats are returned to shore so that the sharks must fend for themselves. With clearer water than anywhere else we have seen Whale Sharks, Oslob is an incredible place to encounter them in all their glory.

Our day was not yet finished. We had agreed to test out the first blackwater night dive offered by the resort. We loaded our gear onto a traditional Filipino boat and as the sun set, casting reds and purples over the flat calm sea, we headed out to deep water. The crew attached a bright light on a line that hung down from a float. We hoped to attract all sorts of unusual critters to photograph. Usually you have a reef or



IMAGES Top: Sunset before the night dive. Left: A squid hovers above us as we dive the Moalboal coastline. Above: Setting up the equipment at the dive shop.



TRAVEL LOG: Moalboal, Philippines

Flights

We flew Philippine Airlines from London to Manila and then on to Cebu.

Top Tip!

There is so much great diving in the Philippines that we recommend you do a multi-destination dive trip and visit two or more dive spots.

Transfers

Magic Island Dive Centre provided car transfers from airport to resort.

Water temperature

This can vary from 26–30°C. When we visited in May, we had the warmer of this range.

Currency

Philippines Peso.

Favourite non-diving activity

Snorkelling with the sardine shoal.

Favourite place to eat

We stayed in resort the whole time and ate family-style with all the other divers. The food was great and it was fun to swap stories at the end of a great diving day.

Final Word

Moalboal has lots more to offer than just the sardines, so make sure to allow enough time to explore all the other dive sites.

wreck to navigate when you drop into the water for a night dive but this experience was quite different. Deep, ink black water below and all around you. We hovered near the lights and waited. A few odd critters and fish came past, but I think we had not tuned in our eyes to the truly tiny stuff we needed to look out for.

We were also able to squeeze in a couple of dives on the local reefs, which offer divers a huge array of macro critters to marvel at. But all too soon it was time to move on to our next destination.

The Philippines is a perfect place to consider a multi-

location dive trip, with so many different and iconic diving destinations all within an easy transfer by road, sea or plane. Moalboal is unique in that it can offer so many different types of diving, with the coral reef wall and caverns of Pescador Island, the incredible sardine shoal, gorgeous macro critters, and the magnificent Whale Sharks all in one place. We can't wait to return. ■

MORE INFORMATION

Nick and Caroline stayed at Magic Island Dive Resort:

www.magicisland.online

www.itsmorefuninthephilippines.co.uk



Located in Moalboal in Cebu, Magic Island has 10 detached cottages and an incredible house reef..

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"This was probably my best dive vacation!"

The resort is wonderful, and the staff friendly. The dive guides and boat crew are professional and find marine life that is hard to see. I would definitely return!"

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