

Diving the Heart of the Philippines

Part I - Cebu

The Philippines; from Thresher sharks to treasures, coral reefs to gentle giants and home to some of the richest marine ecosystems on earth with more than 7000 islands to choose from. This is a diver's dream destination, yet it can be daunting to know where to begin to experience what this boundless country has to offer. Why not start at the heart of the Philippines around the island of Cebu that offers a variety of dive spots for all levels of divers?



The Philippines consists of more than 7000 islands which lie just north of the equator. It is a hidden gem that many travellers, fortunately for all of us, overlook.

For many years the Philippines has received so little publicity that it is still a relatively secret destination among travellers and divers. In the middle of the Philippines lies the Island of Cebu, located in the Central Visayas region.

It was the original capital of the Philippines until the 17th century. Cebu Island is a long and narrow island which stretches about 200 kilometres from north to south and still remains a prominent and popular area for tourism in this great archipelago, boasting an ethnically diverse population and numerous cultures.

It is considered to be one of the most dynamic islands in the Philippines, attracting local and international tourists from all over the world. About 8 kilometres from the northern tip of Cebu Island is the small island of Malapascua. It is only about 2.5 kilometres

by 1 kilometre and relies on tourism, fishing, boat building and coconuts for its inhabitants to make a living.

This island is well known for its macro life and famous for its Thresher sharks. It is one of the few places in the world to see them where the sharks come in every morning just before sunrise for a clean at one of the cleaning stations around the island.

Yet the main diving area is Moalboal, about 100 kilometres south of Cebu city. Moalboal is situated on a peninsula which stretches out from the main island and is home to many unusual underwater creatures that are rare elsewhere in the world. It offers some of the country's most dazzling dive opportunities where the western side of the peninsula is a reef wall which runs straight down to around 60 metres.

The stunning sheer walls have many cracks, crevices, caves and overhangs, which provide a suitable shelter for a wide variety of marine life. They are a wonder to dive, being covered with a vast number of hard and soft corals, huge Basket sponges, Sea whips and some of the biggest Gorgonian sea fans in

the world.

Moalboal peninsula has a number of different dive spots for you to go and explore, but you can break up the Moalboal peninsula into four different areas; the Northern peninsula, Middle/Panagsama section, the Southern peninsula where Magic Island Dive Resort is situated and the island of Pescador.

The northern section of the peninsula is fringed by white sandy beaches with some of the pristine coral reefs in the area. The area is also known as a sanctuary zone where some of the dive spots are out of bound for any fishing; even the locals are not allowed to fish there and this creates a rich ecosystem for the marine environment.

The dives around the northern tip are outstanding with colourful coral slopes and walls rising to a few metres below the surface.

In the shallows, stony hard corals grow with confidence. Anemones thrive, nestled between coral boulders and surrounded by an abundance of reef fish. Heading into deeper water the beauty of the walls unravels – large Gorgonian sea fans,

huge Barrel and Leather sponges, colourful Crinoids and Tunicates, Long whip corals and delicate soft corals are on display. The area, where a plane was sunk to create an artificial reef is known to be home to spotted Eagle rays and Black and White tip reef shark.

In the middle of the peninsula around the backpackers village of Panagsama is one of the few places in the world where you are guaranteed to see schools of sardines in the millions.

This is an exceptional marine phenomenon with so many sardines that at times the sun is completely obscured and you can't find your dive group.

Upwelling currents from the deeper water around the peninsula bring nutrient-rich waters to the coastline and consequently brings food for the sardines.

The sardines, in turn, attract a substantial number of predators, including schools of Jacks, Tuna and Mackerel, offering you a once in a lifetime experience.

On the southern side of the peninsula you



By Johann Benschhoff
 can expect to find an astonishing number of turtles swimming freely around the walls, but my favourite is the Mandarin fish; at sunset they look for another mandarin fish to mate with. The male and female rise in unison above their coral-rubble home to spawn, dorsal fins erect and colours blazing.

The sexual encounter is over in an instant and they disappear back into the coral in a second. This spectacular site can be seen on the home reef at Magic Island Dive Resort.

However, the real star of this region is Pescador Island which is located in the Tañon Strait, a few kilometres west of Moalboal. The waters surrounding this small uninhabited island are extremely deep and reach up to 400 metres in some areas. This marine sanctuary consists of a sandy slope that is covered with hard and soft coral to about 10 metres where the wall starts and then drops straight down to about 40 metres. The wall is covered with hundreds of sponges and colourful sea fans providing a great place for a Frog fish to hide.

Large numbers of resident schools of



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Barracuda and Jacks can be found around the island and on the west side of the island an open-top underwater cave nicknamed 'the Cathedral' can be found.

Around the Moalboal peninsula you can see over 500 species of coral and more than 1500 species of fish, but my favourites were the huge amount of Frog fish, Nudibranches, Ghost pipe fish, Leaf fish and the Pigmy seahorses.

But let's keep the best for last, how about diving or snorkelling with the gentle giants of the ocean? Just over an hour's drive from Magic Island Dive Resort is Oslob, a world renowned village to dive or snorkel with Whale sharks.

It is guaranteed on a daily basis where you are able to get right up close to the world's largest shark. Locals say that Whale sharks have been swimming around Oslob for ages, but only as recently as the past few years have fishermen begun taking tourists to encounter these massive wonders, an incredible experience for tourists and divers. I estimate that I spotted at least a dozen

Whale sharks during the days diving and snorkelling and it was absolutely amazing.

And there is no better way to explore the underwater world and everything that Cebu has to offer than with Magic Island Dive Resort, a jewel situated on the southern tip of the Moalboal peninsula.

It is a stunning resort that is surrounded by mountains and nestled in between lush tropical gardens with palm trees right on the ocean. It's a real island resort gem in this rugged country.

The resort is small and exclusive resort and guarantees personal attention and great service; the resort has 10 bungalows with private balconies with either a pool or sea view. It is ideally located between the town of Moalboal and Panagsama, the main tourist village in the area.

Each bungalow is spacious and fully equipped with everything that you need for you stay. There are many areas around the resort for relaxing; you can lay around the pool or sit at the ocean view bar and have a drink, or even go for a manicure, pedicure or a



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relaxing body massage while overlooking the ocean and hearing how the waves break against the rocky coastline.

The whole resort is built on multiple terraces and the main terrace is used for your meals, which offers an awesome view and a cool sea breeze. The open view kitchen allows you to see how the chefs prepare a variety of delicious meals that will suit every taste.

There are many areas around the resort where you can just sit back and relax while the wonderful staff will look after all your needs, especially the resort manager Concheng who makes sure that all the guests are treated like kings and queens. The dive centre is located at the bottom of the restaurant right on the ocean's edge and it is fully equipped with a separate camera room.

It is designed and well laid out for the modern diver with helpful staff and dive guides. But the best of all, it is a few steps from the dive boats that will take you out for the day's diving, or simply walk a few metres to dive their famous house reef where the wall drops to about 50 metres.

Magic Island Dive Resort also offers two unique dives; have you ever heard of Fluoro Dives where you use a special UV torch and a special lens over your mask which allows you to see the fluorescent colours emitted by the fish or coral when under UV light?

For some strange reason, unknown to science, many marine creatures fluoresce



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under UV light, which is usually invisible to the human eye. The reef turns into a whole new spectrum of colours during these dives. For the braver divers, try the Blackout Dive where they take you out to the open ocean during the night and you descend on a line with lights attached to see what the lights attract in the dark and deep ocean.

Cebu Island has so many things to offer other than diving and Magic Island Dive Resort can organise more than just great diving. Take daytrips to the local waterfalls or explore the surrounding towns and villages, dive or snorkel with Whale sharks or for the more adventurous, try to do the Kawasan Canyon Trip.

If I asked you to describe a perfect traveling destination, I'm willing to bet this would be a perfect match for you.

Information

Traveling: Cebu City, the principal port and the second-largest city in the country, is the gateway for the region. Both Manila and Cebu City are serviced by international flights from many cities in Asia including Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Tokyo and Seoul.

Entry/visa requirements: Visitors from most countries may enter the Philippines for three weeks without a visa as long as they have a passport valid for six months beyond the period of stay and a return or onward ticket. For longer stays, visas should be arranged prior to departure. Extensions can be obtained within the country.

Currency: Philippine Peso (AUD\$1 = 35PhP)
Weather: Average daytime temperatures in the Visayas are 30°C. The rainy season lasts from July to October.

Water: The water is colder from December to February (26-27°C) and warmer in March to May (29°C) with an average visibility of around 20-25 metres.

Best time to dive: Diving is possible year-round, with the prime season being November to June. There is virtually no rain between April and May.

Magic Island Dive Resort: For more information or bookings go to www.magicresorts.online or email them on reservations@magicresorts.online



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