

Cebu

a place of giants
and pygmies



SCUBA Editor **Simon Rogerson** heads to the Philippines in search of diving heaven, and his long lost youth...

The island of Cebu lies in the Visayan Archipelago, in the heart of the Philippines. There's good diving all over the island, but we'll focus on two of the best spots – Moalboal in the south and the island of Malapascua in the north. Both offer exceptional underwater experiences at a competitive price. We begin with Moalboal, a modest 55-mile drive from Cebu's international airport, though the journey is liable to take an immodest three hours, thanks to the apocalyptic traffic. It's worth the journey – Moalboal is a soulful enclave of stylish resorts, backpacker chic and silky sand beaches.



Panoramic view of Moalboal's peninsula

I was staying at Magic Island Dive Resort, a sister operation of Magic Oceans on the neighbouring island of Bohol [featured in Travel Special, March 2023]. It's small but perfectly formed, 10 well-appointed bungalows nestling in tropical gardens and a swimming pool. A well-stocked bar overlooks the sea, with views of the Island of Negros. There is no beach; the resort was constructed close to the water coast with the dive centre carved into coastal rock.

I arrived in a frazzled state after the journey, but a warm welcome and a night's sleep make a big difference. I emerged

feeling refreshed the next day and enjoyed a light breakfast of fruit and coffee as I contemplated the coming six days. You see, this trip was taking place on the 30th anniversary of the year I learned to dive, at the location I started diving in earnest. I even briefly worked as a dive guide here, and I wanted to see if the place was as beautiful as I remembered it.

At Moalboal, the beaches give way to coral walls. Back in my day, these were regarded as of secondary interest to the area's signature site, the island of Pescador, but a lot has been discovered since then.

The local guides have become more adept at finding and pointing out cryptic animals, which I don't remember seeing at all 30 years ago. Magic Island's all-seeing guides turned up all manner of treasures, including giant frogfish, its camouflaged frame suspended between sponges as it faced into the current, waiting for an unwary fish to swim into its lunge-zone.

There were also tiny Shaun the Sheep' nudibranchs munching on seaweed fronds, and pygmy seahorses the size of rice grains nestling in *Muricella* gorgonian fans. The pygmy species around Moalboal is *Hippocampus barginanti*, which has only been known to science since 1965. If its size wasn't barrier enough to detection, the seahorse's skin is mottled to impersonate the polyps of its fan coral. Tiny they may be, but they represent a near impossible challenge for underwater photographers.

Another challenge is the secretive mandarinfish, a romantic if elusive dragonet that lives under the jagged protection of shallow water corals. The only time you get to see them is just before dusk, when they emerge briefly to enact a

timeless ritual – an urgent dance around the coral that culminates in a mating couple rising a few inches off the reef and loosing a life-affirming puff of eggs and sperm. These psychedelic love bugs – the Fabergé eggs of the fish world – are a huge draw, and have even been adopted into the logo of the Magic Island resort.

Pescador Island

I was impatient to dive the area's two best known attractions. The first of these was Pescador Island, a 25-minute boat ride away in the Tanon Strait, and a marine park since 1990. I wasn't disappointed, as the walls are decorated by garish curtains of soft coral, some of the most colourful I have seen anywhere. There's also a vast cavern with four openings, resembling a giant demonic head from inside.

The memories came flooding back, but time can be cruel. There had once been a beautiful coral garden in the shallows, ideal for snorkelling. However, it had been hit by a typhoon and the rock was scoured almost clean. Perhaps we can take heart that this degradation was the result of natural



Mating mandarinfish on Magic Island's house reef

forces; we can only hope that that the developing corals I saw on the site will have a chance to restore Pescador's shallows to their former glory.

Back in the day, Pescador had also been home to a colossal school of sardines, so densely packed they blocked out the sun. They had long since moved to the mainland, where they took up residence on a house reef opposite the main drag at Panagsama Beach.

We dropped in the water and swam along the reef, anticipation building as we drew ever nearer to the much celebrated fish

ball. The viz was understandably quite milky, but the water was still (just about) blue; this is to be expected in areas close to downtown development, moored boats and of course a multitude of prodigiously pooping sardines.

Then the sky went black. Unlike the big schools of trevally at Ras Mohammed or Cocos Island, the sardines barely reflect any light. They move in much the same way as a murmuration of starlings, their ever shifting mass forming brief shapes before crashing in on themselves. I could see a few predators lazily testing the school – a



Dragon face pipefish



Pygmy seahorse



Pinnate batfish



Soft corals at Pescador Island



Magic's Dive Centre Manager Jamie Gladwin takes on the sardines



Whale shark
madness at Oslob

grouper here, a jackfish there – but for the most part it was freedivers harrying the fish, dropping down like gannets.

At times the school would separate, then coalesce a little further along the reef. There were stragglers, quite a few mini-schools and weird individuals on a 'time-out'. On several occasions the school turned into a silver waterfall, with separate columns of sardines tumbling away from the central mass. Definitely one for the logbook.

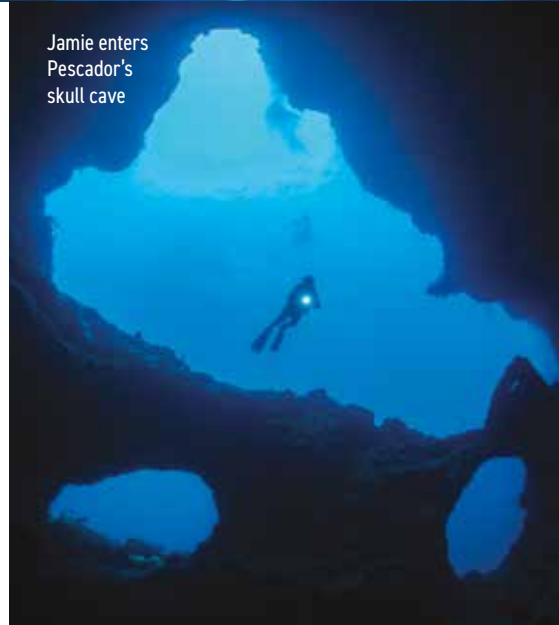
Seeing spots at Oslob

How do you top a school of fish the size of a church? My final treat would see the Magic Island minibus pressed into action to take us around the picturesque southern coast of the island to a village that decided to

embrace shark tourism. Oslob is home to a whale shark aggregation that has been 'enhanced' by regularly feeding the sharks a type of krill-like shrimp that they find irresistible, even in relatively small amounts. The villagers have set up a number of small outrigger boats as feeding stations, while larger vessels take the punters or divers to set points for their scheduled one hour snorkel.

So here's the question... is the Oslob model a seaside circus that demeans nature by bringing whale sharks to the masses? Or a means of bringing about conservation by making money from megafauna? It's down to the individual, and I think it's an aesthetic choice rather than a scientific one. Some people

Jamie enters
Pescador's
skull cave



Spiralling
sardines

want their whale shark experience to be a wonderful surprise in a truly wild setting; others just want to see a whale shark, and these ones are guaranteed.

As long as there is no demonstrable risk to the animals' welfare, I personally believe the Oslob model can be a positive force. My thinking is rooted in realpolitik – the sharks now have a greater value alive than dead. In one generation, shark hunters have turned to shark guardians. This is either the great good, or the lesser of evils.

As for the experience, it's quite a show. We had an hour of scuba diving, then an hour of snorkelling; the diving was fun,

but most of the sharks just stayed at the surface chuffing shrimp; only a few came down to see us at 8m. Snorkelling, by contrast, was much more gripping. Most of the time we just held onto the outrigger's support floats and gawped as a dozen whale sharks competed for prawn privileges. Most were adolescents, about six or seven metres in length, but a few were fully grown – I saw at least one shark at least 10m long.

You put your face underwater, and there was this mêlée of huge spotted sharks, flailing human legs and wide open mouths. Then you raise your head above the water and there's nothing but a gentle serenity, save for a few gentle splashes as the shrimp guardians ladle their treats into the sea. It's an incongruous scenario – a scene of feeding giants demands an epic soundtrack, such as the Triumphal March from Aida. Instead, there is only the warm tropical breeze, carrying a faint whiff of prawn cocktail.

My time at Magic Island was at an end. I can recommend the resort unreservedly as a great one stop shop for diving, accommodation and meals. It's a simple place in some respects, but everything is run very efficiently, the staff are very friendly, the meals are delicious and the dive centre runs smoothly. There are more luxurious, showy places out there, but the Magic team offer everything you need, at a competitive price. Incidentally, the resort is located on a peninsula, not an island.. but Magic Peninsula doesn't have quite the same ring to it! 🍷



Ribbon eel at Pescador



Painted frogfish, the size of a satsuma



Giant frogfish, the size of a watermelon



Shaun the Sheep nudi



BSAC's Sophie Rennie
at Gato Island



Oceanic thresher shark being cleaned
by half-moon wrasse at Kimud Shoal

All change at Malapascua

Simon Rogerson visits 'Thresher Island' to investigate reports that tiger sharks are cramping the locals' style

Thresher shark
waiting for a clean



Prior to Moalboal, I lead a small group of divers to the island of Malapascua, at the northern end of Cebu. It's an idyllic place of sandy beaches and backpackers' bars, where local villagers mix with the many divers who visit in search of thresher sharks. This is the best place in the world to dive with the otherwise elusive deep water threshers.

I had received reports of tiger sharks in the area, and there was concern that the tigers may have forced the thresher sharks away from their usual cleaning stations on the nearby Monad Shoal.

We arrived to a hearty welcome and the customary bucket of ice cold beers courtesy of Leon, manager at Thresher Shark Divers (TSD). While our luggage was carted off to the hotel, we made a plan for the coming days. Leon confirmed that the threshers had indeed moved away from Monad, but that we could find them reliably at a different site, another seamount known as Kimud Shoal.



Venomous striped-
eel catfish




The next day's diving started early; even the cockerels were still snoozing as we lugged our cameras down to the dive centre. A golden sun rose as we left the beach and chugged off on TSD's huge outrigger to this new (to me) dive site.

It turned out that Kimud was even better than Monad. The water had a slightly milky quality, but the reef was nicer and the sharks approached much closer. What's more, we didn't have to go deep, as the cleaner wrasse were operating at depths of around 15m, sometimes shallower. It was a gift for the photographers in my group, who had the

freedom to move around the reef as long as they held their buoyancy.

We had just four days of diving at Malapascua, but there was time to visit some of the signature dives. The group's favourite was Gato Island, with its beautiful swim-through and giant boulders covered in bright red soft coral. In addition to its wide angle beauty, Gato remains a prime location for small stuff – we found pygmy seahorses, frogfish, octopus and a geek-pleasing supply of nudibranchs.

I'll say it again. Malapascua is a world class diving destination, and the thresher shark experience just got better! 

Essentials

Getting there: Fly to Cebu International Airport via Singapore or Manila; prices vary across the calendar from £800 to £1,200. We'd recommend Singapore Airlines or Philippine Airlines, but you need to shop around for a deal and route that suits your needs.

Resort: Magic Resorts via reservations@magicresorts.online or phone: +63 9695329439 (WhatsApp available) or check out the website: www.magicresorts.online for more information. For Malapascua, begin by booking with Thresher Shark Divers malapascua-diving.com and ask for their guidance on accommodation deals.

Tour operator: Dive Worldwide [diveworldwide.com 01962 302087] can arrange tailored packages with flights from the UK, with transfers, land tours and hotel layovers if necessary.

When to go: Cebu has a tropical rainforest climate: warm, humid and rainy. High season is December to April, but you can dive year-round.

Kimud Shoal has loads of octopus

