

ASIAN
Geographic

passport

Blue and Black Magic

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With an abundance of verdant isles and diverse blue space, deciding where to visit in the Philippines can be a mind-boggling task. Yet, regardless of where you choose, you'll be captivated by the magic of this rich and wild archipelago

Located at the heart of the Coral Triangle, the Philippines boasts a magical underwater wonderland bursting with colour and life



At the epicentre of global marine biodiversity lies the Philippines. A friendly nation of more than 7,000 islands in the Western Pacific, it serves as a sanctuary to almost nine percent of our planet’s coral reefs and oozes adventure in every sense of the word; both underwater and on land. With its prized position in the heart of the Coral Triangle, it is home to more than 500 species of hard and soft corals and some of our planet’s most alluring – and most intriguing – marine dwellers. From blue to black and everything in between, let’s dive into the Philippines.



BLUE MAGIC: PUERTO GALERA

Known for its pint-sized pocket beaches and numerous diving sites, Puerto Galera is a haven for an abundance of marine life. It is even believed to host 800 species of

nudibranch, or should I say 801 now that we recently sighted the obscure *Melibe colemani* here. Otherwise known as the “ghost nudi”, and resembling a jumbled assortment of “snotty”

▲ Soft corals of multiple hues smother the wreck of the *Alma Jane*



string, this strangely translucent and gelatinous creature is usually only seen in neighbouring Romblon. First discovered in Mabul, Malaysia in 2008 by Australian naturalist Neville Coleman (1938–2012), it had never been seen in Puerto Galera until now, but you will have to be exceptionally lucky to find it!

While we love nudis, it is the nutrient-packed currents enriching the area’s labyrinth of soft coral and sponge gardens that really impresses. In Puerto Galera’s protected coral garden coves, fairy basslets boogie to the mercy of the current. Set this against a backdrop of jaw-dropping colour and you have some very pretty diving.

The area also harbours some interesting shipwrecks. Purposely sunk to become an artificial reef, the 30-metre hull of the *Alma Jane*, a cargo ship scuttled in 2003, makes for an alluring dive. While parts of the deck have since collapsed, you’ll find the wreck encrusted with a range of psychedelic soft corals and

harbouring resident frogfish, mantis shrimp, nudibranchs, and a variety of schooling fishes. The wreck itself presents another captivating photographic opportunity.

Just a short boat ride away, you’ll find the richest and most biodiverse marine area in the world, the 1.14-million-hectare Verde Island Passage – and my namesake island! In a 2005 study by Dr. Kent Carpenter, IUCN Global Marine Species Assessment coordinator, and Victor Springer of the Smithsonian Institute, the Philippines was declared the world’s “centre of marine biodiversity” and the Verde Island Passage as the “centre of the centre of marine shorefish biodiversity”. Located at the apex of the Coral Triangle, the Verde Island area was proclaimed to have the highest concentration of marine species, with 1,736 overlapping marine species over a 10-kilometre area, and the highest concentration of marine life anywhere on the planet. Best accessed from Puerto Galera, the diving here more than lives up to this reputation.

▲ Verde Island’s spectacular reefscape promise a riot of colour and action



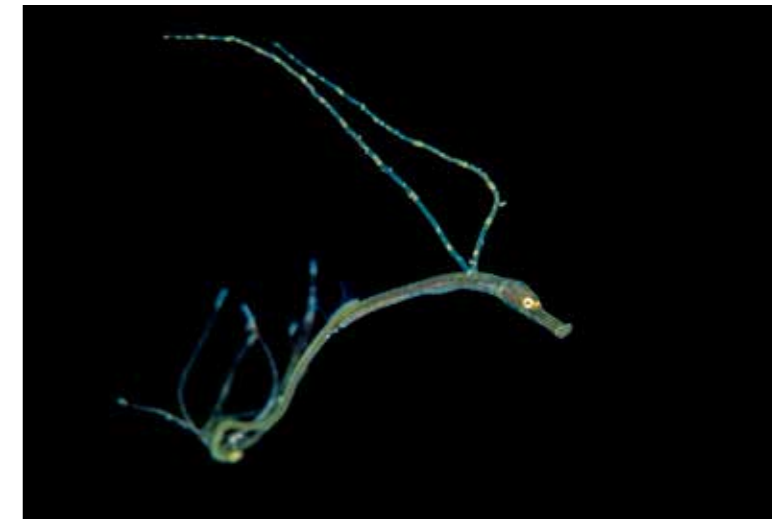
At the pinnacle dive site of San Agapito, located just off Verde Island, marine life is rampant. The lively and energetic currents that whirl and eddy around the reefscape replenish the nutrients that are paramount to fuelling the area's profusion of species. The topography of this underwater landscape is arresting, with secret passages, rocky outcrops, and striking sheer vertical walls that provide the substrate for a diverse range of coral species to explode. The site endears itself to pelagics and a multitude of macro critters. Schooling jacks, redtoothed triggerfish, *Anthias*, and fairy basslets are guaranteed, along with frequent appearances from numerous turtle species and sea snakes. Be sure to dive this site when the current is asserting itself to witness the labyrinth of exquisite *Tubastrea* corals blossoming against a sea of redtoothed triggerfish.

▶ Puerto Galera's fascinating waters are home to a dizzying array of nudibranchs and sea slugs like this luminous sap-sucking slug

BLACK MAGIC: ANILAO

A mere two-hour drive from Manila's Ninoy Aquino Airport and the closest dive location to central Manila, Anilao offers not only some of the most accessible diving, but some of the best underwater photographic opportunities in the Philippines. While it is a popular wide-angle and muck-diving location with stunning vibrant reefs teeming with *Anthias* and sandy slopes starring all the coolest critters, we are here for one thing: blackwater. This is the chance to photograph alien-like creatures during the planet's biggest animal migration. As we back-roll into the blue – or should I say “black” – a giant sunfish passes gracefully beneath me. *Holy mola!* You don't see these guys every day, especially not on a blackwater dive!

You might ask: What is the appeal of drifting in the dark open



ocean at night with thousands of feet of water underneath you? Well, at night, with the arrival of the new moon, the sea reveals its true cosmic beauty. Microscopic plankton fills the water column, as billions of otherworldly creatures migrate to shallower depths to feed under the cover of darkness.

▶ A juvenile bent-stick pipefish sporting long filaments on its body

▼ A tiny argonaut, otherwise known as a paper nautilus, riding on a salp

AUTHOR'S TIP

For that unique, fun and friendly “Filipino style”, you can't go past Scandi Divers Resort (www.scandidivers.com) located on Puerto Galera's Big La Laguna Beach. Offering more than 40 smart rooms across various categories overlooking the sea, their great boats and fabulous guides make the diving experience here second to none. Photographers are also well catered for with a spacious and well-equipped air-conditioned camera room adjoining the dive centre. When you're not diving on one of the awesome dive sites, check out the spa for an epic massage, or relax at the Sky View restaurant for panoramic views and delicious international cuisine. Located about 130 kilometres south of Manila, getting to Puerto Galera is easy via a two-hour vehicle transfer to Batangas, followed by a short 40-minute speedboat ride to the resort.



At Scandi Divers Resort on Big La Laguna Beach, you have pristine white sands and crystal-clear blue water literally on your doorstep





Many are tiny and in their larval stages, luring us with their alien light displays. The migration of these strange creatures from the twilight zone (mesopelagic layer) to shallower depths (epipelagic layer) is believed to be the largest migration of species anywhere on Earth, and incredibly, it happens every single night of the year.

First started commercially in Hawaii more than 15 years ago, blackwater diving is now hugely popular in Anilao. For underwater photographers and enthusiastic critter hounds, it offers the opportunity to come face to face with rarely seen creatures of the deep. We are greeted by tiny larval fishes and squid, along with numerous crustaceans, cephalopods and the argonaut, which is actually a tiny pelagic octopus. If you're lucky, you might even encounter the elusive and highly prized blanket octopus.

▲▲ The juvenile wunderpus octopus has a translucent body dominated by colour-changing chromatophores

▲ A pair of *Costasiella kuroshimae* sacoglossan sea slugs, affectionately known as "Shaun the Sheep" nudis (even though they don't actually belong to the Nudibranchia)



AUTHOR'S TIP

Designed to blend perfectly within the surrounding mountainside, Aiyandar Beach and Dive Resort (www.aiyandar.com) offers 16 luxurious rooms spread over two floors with balconies facing a grand panoramic view of the sea. Underwater image-makers are well catered for with an excellent air-conditioned camera room with provisions for 18 photographers. Strategically located in Mabini, Batangas, only two hours' drive from Metro Manila, getting here is easy via a direct transfer from Ninoy Aquino International Airport or your downtown Manila hotel.

▶ On your way to Mabini, make a stop in the town of Taal for a visit to the Taal Basilica, the country's biggest church and the largest in Asia



MUCK MAGIC: DUMAGUETE

The provincial capital of Negros Oriental, Dumaguete is best known for its universities and colleges, myriad restaurants and bars, and September Sandurot Festival, a celebration of the rich and varied cultures and traditions of the region's people. But drive down the coast to the nearby town of Dauin and you'll discover black volcanic sandy beaches and some of the best "muck diving" in the world. This is the "frogfish capital of the Philippines", and with more than 20 local muck dive sites, there's no shortage of froggies to find.



It is believed there are more than 10 species of frogfish here, and all our grumpy-looking favourites are present: the hairy frogfish, the painted frogfish, the giant frogfish, and the clown frogfish (who starred in the recently produced BBC *Planet Earth III* series). You'll also find pipefish, mating mandarinfish (if you have the patience), seahorses, mantis shrimp, ribbon eels, snake eels, dragonets, spiny devilfish, wunderpus octopuses, bobtail squid, a large variety of nudibranch species, blue-ring octopuses, harlequin shrimp, and flamboyant cuttlefish.

▲ Seahorses are another common macro critter that call Dumaguete home

▲ This painted frogfish is one of at least 10 frogfish species found in Dumaguete's waters

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▲ Famous for its stunning coral reefs, Apo Island boasts an abundance of marine life, including countless turtles



▲ If you need a break from the muck, you'll discover there is far more to Dumaguete than just black sand and obscure critters. Only half an hour by boat lies one of the oldest marine sanctuaries in the Philippines, Apo Island. First established in 1982 to address the notable decline in fish stock, this fringing reef system contains 400 of the 500-plus coral species found in the country, and is renowned for its lush, healthy reefs, and gin-clear waters. Encounters with green sea turtles are guaranteed.

▲ A crinoid shrimp, also known as a feather star shrimp, creatively lit with blue light

AUTHOR'S TIP

If you are a tragic for critters and underwater imaging, there is no looking past Atlantis Dumaguete Resort (www.atlantishotel.com/dumaguete-resort), which is part of the municipality of Dauin. Catering to guests in slick rooms set amidst a jungle clad garden setting, and with a professional camera room, ocean view restaurant, swimming pool and luxurious spa, Atlantis is the perfect jumping-off point for Dumaguete's muck sites as well as the nearby Apo Island. Getting here is a breeze, too: It is just a 45-minute flight from Manila to Dumaguete, where the resort will pick you up for a short 30-minute transfer to muck paradise.

Day trips to dive the crystal-clear waters of Apo Island are available from Atlantis Dumaguete Resort in nearby Dauin



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MACKEREL MAGIC: MALAPASCUA

Just off the northern tip of Cebu, the reefs around the magnetic island of Malapascua are the place to encounter one of the world's most beautiful shark species – the pelagic thresher shark.

Naturally, thresher sharks are deep water dwellers and spend the vast majority of their time well below recreational diving depths. But as tiny parasites irritate their bodies, they move to shallower reefs and hit the spa, allowing small cleaner fish to nibble pea-sized parasites called copepods from their slender bodies, giving divers an opportunity to spend time in their company.

Having frequently visited the designated “Shark and Ray Sanctuary” known as Monad Shoal for cleaning since the late 1990s, the threshers suddenly disappeared in September 2022. Why they left after nearly a quarter century of cleaning at the same location puzzled local diving operators. Reportedly, tiger sharks had become common in the area,

potentially pushing the thresher sharks out of their spa. It wasn't long before news spread that the thresher sharks had moved to the neighbouring Kimud Shoal, a shallower reef, less than a tenth of the area of Monad Shoal.

“The thresher sharks are now in a smaller area and sightings are better in terms of numbers and proximity as they don't have so much space to go,” explains Matt Reed from Malapascua's Evolution Diving Resort. “It also means there is more light, so the viewing of the sharks tends to be nicer.” The sharks also seem to be there later in the day, meaning divers can do more dives at Kimud Shoal and still see thresher sharks from the early morning up to lunchtime. However, given the “Shark and Ray Sanctuary” status of Monad Shoal is not yet in place at Kimud Shoal, the focus for local operators is therefore now on managing the diving experience appropriately to ensure sustainable practices are followed to respect the sharks and to protect the reef.

▲ Malapascua is one of the few places on Earth where daily encounters with thresher sharks are almost guaranteed



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“This reef is the home of the cleaner fish that are the reason for the thresher sharks being there, so if the reef becomes damaged by poor diving practices then it’s safe to assume we may see less sharks in the future,” Matt tells us. “Seeing a thresher shark here in

Malapascua is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and we want that to continue well into the future.”

▲ The pelagic thresher (*Alopias pelagicus*) found in Malapascua’s waters is one of three extant species of this large mackerel shark, the others being the common thresher and the bigeye thresher

AUTHOR’S TIP

Just a stone’s throw from the beach and flanked by palm trees, Evolution Diving Resort (www.evolution.com.ph) offers an excellent location to relax and feel the white sand between your toes over a freshly prepared mango shake! This small and friendly owner-operated resort has everything you need for a great diving holiday. All 16 rooms have personal terraces just metres from the beach, restaurant and dive shop. Getting there is just a 90-minute flight from Manila to Mactan-Cebu International Airport; just let Evolution Diving arrange the rest for you. Kimud Shoal is around 45 minutes by boat from Malapascua.

Evolution Diving Resort is the leading specialist for encounters with the thresher sharks of Monad Shoal – and now of neighbouring Kimud Shoal



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BLUE JEWEL: TUBBATAHA

At the southwestern part of Puerto Princesa on the Island of Palawan lies the Philippines’ “blue jewel” – the Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park. This is the largest marine protected area in the country and a unique UNESCO World Heritage Site.

As a protected area of almost 100,000 hectares, Tubbataha is a sanctuary for a vast diversity of marine life. Whales, dolphins, sharks, turtles and Napoleon wrasses are among the key species found here. The reef supports more than 360 species of coral and almost 700 species of fish. This is a place where the schools of fish are so huge, they block out the sun! The underwater landscape is simply arresting, with

incredible reef formations, dramatic walls and vibrant pinnacles.

Part of the reason for Tubbataha being so unspoiled is that it is incredibly remote. And because of its isolation, the only way you can dive here is by liveaboard. The best – and only – time to dive in Tubbataha is from mid-March to mid-June. During the rest of the year, rough sea conditions simply make the reef inaccessible. While the diving window is small, the rewards are literally as big as you can get – with whale sharks, the planet’s biggest fish, being a common sight.

▼ At Tubbataha Reef, a turtle keeps a stern eye on the photographer



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It seems that wherever you choose to travel in the Philippines, a treasure trove awaits. From the alluring coral reefs, obscure and fascinating critters, and mysterious shipwrecks, to the pinnacles of abundance, vast blue and green spaces, and unique Filipino charm, this vast archipelago wholly deserves its reputation as one of the world's top dive destinations. ♦ AG

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▶▶ A reef manta gets a belly clean at Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park

▶ The biggest fish in the world, the whale shark, is one of Tubbataha's highlights



On *Solitude One's* Tubbataha trips, guests visit the North and South Atolls as well as Jessie Beazley Reef

AUTHOR'S TIP

While a number of liveaboard operators run trips to Tubbataha each season, the *MV Solitude One* (www.solitude.world/solitude-one) is our pick. Originally rebuilt from a 52-metre steel-hulled merchant vessel, this mighty liveaboard handles the seas with ease. Catering to a maximum of 22 guests in 10 well-appointed and incredibly spacious rooms, the boat also looks after photographers well, with a generous and well-equipped air-conditioned camera room at their disposal. The seven-day itineraries, which generally run from late April to late June, start and end at Palawan's capital, Puerto Princesa.



- Time zone +8
UTC+08:00
- Capital Manila
- Language Filipino, English
- Currency Philippine peso (PHP)
- Calling code +63
- Electricity 220V
Plug type A, B (US-style), C (European-style)

EXPEDITION INFORMATION

HOW
Philippines Airlines services Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport daily across more than 40 international routes throughout Asia Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, and North America, with domestic connections to its chain of charming islands.

WHEN
While the best time to visit the Philippines is during the dry season from December to April, don't disregard a visit during the southeast monsoon season (June to October). The rain in the Philippines is hugely unpredictable and you will be surprised at how incredible the weather can be. We have visited both in late August and also in February, and both times experienced warm sea temperatures, clear sunny skies, smooth seas, and great visibility underwater. During the southeast monsoon season, there is the added benefit of fewer visitors, which gives you more exclusive access to the dive sites and other topside attractions.

INFORMATION
<https://philippines.travel>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Based in Melbourne, Australia, Anita Verde and Peter Marshall have a passion for the planet's wild places, and through their images and narratives, they hope to inspire better appreciation and protection of the natural world. When they are not underwater or on a mountaintop, they also work professionally as strategic consultants, advising governments and industry on sustainable destination planning and development, investment attraction, government relations, brand strategy and marketing.

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