

This sheltered deepwater bay is at the southern end of Leyte in the Visayas Group in the eastern Philippines. Leyte is more famous as the birthplace of the infamous Imelda Marcos and the site where General MacArthur landed with his US troops to retake the Philippines from the Japanese during World War II. Now, Leyte's secret treasure is the fabulous diving in Sogod Bay, which divers only discovered in recent years.

The Sogod Bay Scuba Resort offer daily shore and boat dives to the best dive sites so far discovered in Sogod Bay. They have an extensive range of hire gear, nitrox fills and also offer dive courses when requested. Ron and Phil are ably assisted by a staff of very friendly

Filipinos, that produce superb Asian and Western meals in the restaurant, while the dive team look after your dive gear like it is their own. The service is outstanding, the only time you touch your dive gear is to put it on to go for a dive.

**Magic House Reef** Right in front of the Sogod Bay Scuba Resort are five brilliant shore dives. We explored a few of these on our first day and were amazed at the wonderful corals and marine life. Sogod Bay is over 2000 metres deep, so much of the diving is on walls. In front of the resort are pretty coral gardens to 15 metres, then walls to 40 metres plus.

At Max's Climax 1 we had a lot of enjoyment investigating all the coral heads in the shallows. The visibility was

20 metres, but Phil informed us it can be 40 metres at times. The corals, invertebrates and reef fish were just beautiful, especially the abundance of colourful feather stars. We encountered parrotfish, butterflyfish, moray eels, hawkfish, fairy basslets, angelfish, grubfish, pipefish, clown anemonefish and many, many more. On the dropoff are much larger fish, like snapper, sweetlip and batfish. Here the corals were also spectacular with radiant soft corals, huge barrel sponges, seawhips, gorgonians and bushy black coral trees. Much of the area in front of the resort is a marine sanctuary, but there are also five other protected areas in the bay.

Our favourite shore dive was Voltaire's Rock, which we did several times. Not

only are there lovely corals and reef fish, but also outstanding critters as well. Pedro, the head dive guide and master critter finder, took us for a fantastic dive here to see the resident colony of Bargibant's pygmy seahorses. These tiny creatures are masters of camouflage and blend in so well on their gorgonian home. They're a challenge to photograph, but also wonderful to simply observe.

However, the pygmies are not the only critters here; Pedro also pointed out several ornate ghost pipefish sheltering in featherstars, numerous nudibranch species and a bizarre sea moth dancing across the sand. On other dives here we also saw green and hawksbill turtles, garden eels, blue spotted stingrays and a very fast-moving banded sea snake that was

investigating every hole for prey.

Voltaire's Rock also has a small wreck, an old dive boat that was scuttled to attract fish. The old wooden boat is fun to explore as it is decorated with glorious soft corals and home to sweetlips and a small groper.

**The Nightlife** Sogod Bay Scuba Resort is a little isolated, so karaoke at the nearby Moose and Squirrel Restaurant is all there is. Here, the best nightlife is underwater. We only did two night dives, but they're two of the best night dives we've ever done. The first was right in front of the resort no deeper than nine metres – and the wealth of nocturnal marine life was stunning. As soon as we entered we saw several huge basket stars, which seemed

> WHEN PLANNING OUR PHILIPPINES TRIP WE SCoured GUIDEBOOKS AND WEBSITES FOR POSSIBLE DESTINATIONS. AFTER CHOOSING A COUPLE OF BETTER KNOWN AREAS WE STUMBLED ACROSS A SOGOD BAY WEBSITE. IT LISTED WONDERFUL DIVE SITES, EXOTIC CRITTERS, COLOURFUL CORALS AND EVEN WHALE SHARKS RATED A MENTION. WE'D NEVER HEARD OF IT, BUT WE HAD TO CHECK THIS PLACE OUT.



Soft corals on the wall at Napantao Fish Sanctuary; A painted anglerfish at night under the Padre Burgos Pier; Sogod Bay has fabulous nudibranchs, like this ocellate phyllidia; Helen inspects the dive boat wreck; A small-scale scorpionfish at Max's Climax 1.



: NIGEL MARSH AND HELEN ROSE

# THE SPECIAL DELIGHTS OF SOGOD BAY



Colourful gorgonians and featherstars decorate the reef at Voltaire's Rock.



A spectacular mollusc ploughs over the sand on a night dive in front of the resort.



A yellow edged moray eel photographed on a dive at Ampo.



Whale sharks gather in Sogod Bay from November to April each year, allowing divers to swim with these gentle giants.

### OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

The old saying that 'the journey is better than the destination' doesn't hold true for Sogod Bay, but the journey was pretty interesting. You could say that Sogod Bay is a little off the beaten track, not hard to reach but it does take time. You can fly into Cebu international airport then catch a ferry to Southern Leyte – but we were coming from Manila.

We took an internal flight to Tacloban, the capital of Leyte at the northern tip of the island, and then had a four hour local bus ride to Sogod Bay. This was great fun, the locals obviously don't get too many western tourists on their buses, so we caused a few stares and were the topic of a few conversations. Leyte is a very beautiful island and we thoroughly enjoyed the scenery – local villages, roosters, markets, pigs, palm-lined beaches, water buffalos and dramatic vistas when we passed over a mountain range. It took most of the day to travel from Manila but was well worth the effort.

### TROPICAL RESORT

The Sogod Bay Scuba Resort is close to the town of Padre Burgos. It's a beautiful location; very quiet, lush tree-lined hills and swaying palms, with the calm blue of Sogod Bay lapping the shore. The resort was opened in March 2006 by Englishman Ron Parkes and Australian Phil McGuire, who have found themselves a slice of paradise. The resort has very comfortable airconditioned rooms, a bar, restaurant and dive centre. Check out their website – you won't believe how cheap it is to stay and dive here.

to be on every outcrop. The coral sheltered crabs, shrimps, a sleeping turtle, moray eels, sleeping fish, molluscs, nudibranchs, seastars, brittlestars and lionfish. But the best stuff was on the sand – seapens were everywhere, plus some very unusual nocturnal nudibranchs. Helen spotted a strange snake eel emerging from the sand and then Pedro topped this with a cockatoo waspfish.

However, this night dive was surpassed by the Padre Burgos Pier. You can only dive here at night, as during the day there is too much boat traffic. It didn't look too appealing when we arrived. After climbing down some steep stairs we stood in dirty brown water surrounded by rubbish and weed. But once underwater, the vis cleared to 12 metres and delivered a wonderland of fantastic critters. Swimming over patchy coral and

sand we saw lionfish, crabs, shrimps, seastars, brittle stars, nudibranchs, leatherjackets and even a painted anglerfish. It was even better under the pier; we saw three common seahorses clinging to a sponge, a group of shrimpfish, a lovely yellow painted anglerfish, a banded sea snake and a variety of seastars, crustaceans and nudibranchs. Lionfish and sea urchins were everywhere, so you had to be careful where you placed your hands. We also saw squid, seapens, octopus, pipefish, cowries, anemones and a rather weird double-ended pipehorse. And all this in only nine metres, simply breathtaking!

**Boat Diving** The Resort runs a large banca daily to the best dive sites in the bay. They currently have over 20 regular dive sites and are still discovering new

ones. North of the resort we dived the pretty walls at **Bunga Bend**. Lots of colour and plenty of reef fish, but the best part was all the great bommies in the shallows. These were packed with marine life, especially fairy basslets, moray eels, nudibranchs and anemonefish.

Nearby is the **Malitbog wreck**, which is thought to be a Japanese landing craft sunk during World War II. It lies just off the town of Malitbog, so the vis was only 10 metres but it was a fun dive. The wreck is in six to 18 metres and completely encrusted in hard and soft corals, so it's difficult to make out the actual vessel at times. We were impressed with the abundant marine life – masses of reef fish, crustaceans, nudibranchs, seastars, flatworms and several pipefish.

South of the resort are many varied dive

sites. At **Turtle Rock** there is a pretty reef with four huge bommies decorated by colourful soft corals. Plenty of reef fish on show, a large patch of garden eels, and we did see a turtle. **Adrian's Cove** is on nearby Limasawa Island, where a dramatic wall drops to 40 metres. More great corals, a few caves to explore and plenty of marine life. This is usually a good spot to see pelagic fish, eagle rays and the odd hammerhead shark. Ampo is a dive site with more hard coral species than the entire Great Barrier Reef. We again found plenty of reef fish and were lucky enough to see a clown anglerfish and a splendid mandarin hidden amongst the coral.

On our final day Ron took us to his favourite site, **Napantao Fish Sanctuary**, on the eastern side of the bay. Fully protected, this dive site is magnificent, and easy to see why it is rated as one of the best dive sites in Asia. We dropped down the wall to 30 metres, seeing incredible soft corals, black corals, gorgonians, seawhips and barrel sponges. The wall teemed with fish; millions of fairy basslets, schools of damselfish, surgeonfish, sweetlips, fusiliers and parrotfish. This was the most fish we had seen in the Sogod Bay, and proved that protecting a site from fishing does work. We also saw turtles, rock cod, lionfish and many species of nudibranchs.

**Gentle Giants** Known locally as *Ihotiki*, and better known to divers as whale sharks, these gentle giants are found in Sogod Bay from November to April.



A bizarre snake eel.



A shy common seahorse.

**OUR DIVE GUIDE  
OGIN WAS  
INVALUABLE AT  
FINDING TINY  
CRITTERS, LIKED TO  
TAKE THINGS  
SLOWLY, DIDN'T  
MIND WAITING  
WHILE WE TOOK  
ENDLESS PHOTOS  
AND ENJOYED  
EVERY DIVE AS  
MUCH AS WE DID.**



Large barrel sponges in Sogod Bay.

# SOGOD BAY, SO GOOD



Whale sharks gather at the southeast tip of Sogod Bay at a place called Sunok and each year seem to gather at a different location in the southern part of the bay. Encounters are never guaranteed, but if you stay for at least a week you have a good chance of seeing one or more of these huge sharks.

It's an early start for a whale shark day; everyone's on the boat by 6.30am. We then headed across the bay and down to Sunok. There we picked up some guides, local fishermen – no spotter planes needed here – and then cruising off a nearby village looking for dark shapes in the water. It didn't take long to spot the first shark. We grabbed our snorkel gear,

while Phil briefed us on the whale shark guidelines. No touching, keep three metres away, no camera flashes and the shark always has right of way.

When the boat stopped in front of the shark we slipped over the side and followed Pedro. With 20m visibility we had a fabulous view when the 8m long whale shark swam out of the blue. We then swam with the shark for the next ten minutes, following it while it swam over the coral reef and into deeper water.

Over the next two hours we swam with two other whale sharks; a four metre baby and a nine metre giant. The last shark was only seen by two divers who reported it was a 12 metre long monster! This is without doubt one of the best places in the world to swim with whale sharks, and at a very affordable price.

One week in Sogod Bay wasn't nearly long enough for us. If there had been a local real estate agent we'd have been looking to buy a piece of land – this would be the perfect place to retire!



Sogod Bay Scuba Resort & dive boat.

**QUICK FACTS** International flights to the Philippines arrive in either Manila or Cebu. **From Manila** - To get to Sogod Bay on Leyte, take a domestic flight to Tacloban and then a bus or taxi. **From Cebu** - Ferries operate to several towns in Southern Leyte.

Tourists can get a 21-day visa on arrival in the Philippines, but if staying longer you will have to organise a visa before you travel.

Diving conditions are great year round at Sogod Bay. The water temperature varies from 25 to 30 degrees C and visibility ranges from 20 to 40 metres.

➤ **LINK Information & bookings** – [www.sogodbayscubaresort.com](http://www.sogodbayscubaresort.com)

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