

: KEN HOPPEN

from wrecks to reefs

> THE DIVERSITY OF DIVE SITES AND MARINE LIFE FOUND IN THE PHILIPPINES IS ASTOUNDING. ADD THAT TO THE FESTIVE, FRENETIC AND FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE THAT SEEMS TO PERMEATE THROUGH THE ENTIRE COUNTRY, AND YOU HAVE A DIVE DESTINATION THAT WILL KEEP YOU RETURNING FOR YEARS TO COME.



On Sunday 24 September 1944 the Second World War became focused on Coron Bay, with carrier-based allied aircraft sinking at least 10 Japanese vessels that fled from a similar fate in Luzon only to find themselves on the bottom of the ocean here after a battle that lasted just 15 minutes. The long-term result is a veritable wreck utopia for sportdivers here.

The beauty of diving these wrecks from Sangat Island is that most are only a five to 10 minute boat ride away and are impressive to say the least. The main wrecks are all over 100 metres long and over 4,500 tons, but many are much larger. Some of these wrecks have massive crane superstructures, making multi-levelling a dive and some deco stops an easy event, and all have great marine life around them. They range from supply ships to oil tankers, coastal traders, and refrigeration ships, but perhaps my personal favourite was the *Akitsu-shima*, a flying boat tender at 118 metres long, 4,650 tons, and with a maximum depth of 36 metres to the sand. One of the few

real warships sunk in the area (the others are supply vessels), it lies on its side; the massive cranes used to load the huge flying boats pointed out to the sand, a maze of tangled steel. Large cracks in the deck tell of the devastation that occurred here, and machine gun emplacements leave no doubt of the wreck's past.

Visibility on most of the wrecks ranges between 5 and 15 metres, though the Black Wreck (an hour and a half away by boat) usually has 30+. Local reef dives have better viz, but the wrecks are all in a relatively narrow straight between the islands on a silty bottom. This does not lessen their worth – they're simply staggering in size and in the diverse life that can be found on them.

Groupers are known to live here, though we didn't see one on our dive, and the hull is packed with growth. Anemones vie for room with corals, ascidians and a variety of other benthic life. Anthias swarm over the top of the wreck, and lionfish and scorpionfish laze quietly nearby, content in the knowledge that meals will frequently drift into their path

Left: A little artistic sojourn; The Olympia Maru is one of the main wrecks dived - full of colour and life, it is massive, and would take dozens of dives to explore fully. Top: A lionfish hunts on the Olympia Maru wreck.

THE PHILIPPINES

LINKS>

- Sangat Island Resort
www.sangat.com.ph
- Portofino Resort
www.portofino.com.ph
- Out Of The Blue Villas
www.outoftheblue-villas.com
- Action Divers
www.actiondivers.com
- Allways Dive Expeditions
www.allwaysdive.com.au
- Philippine Airlines
www.philippineairlines.com

Clockwise from bottom left:

A great find, a juvenile Pavo's razorfish before it scurried off into the sand; The large crane structures of the Kyokuzan Maru reach for the surface; A white-eyed and an undualte moray share a hole at Verdi Island; A dusky nembrotha hunts for other nudibranchs on the Verdi Island dropoff; A crinoid boxer shrimp in its host - these little crustaceans rarely stand still; Beaked butterflyfish are found around the Asian-Pacific region, but to me they are definitely an iconic fish of Philippine reefs.

CORON BAY AND SANGAT ISLAND RESORT WRECKS:

Name	Type	Length	Tonnage	Max Depth
Akitsushima	Flying Boat Tender	118m	4650 tons	36m
Okikawa Maru	Oil Tanker	160m	10045 tons	26m
Irako Maru	Refrigeration Ship	147m	9570 tons	45m
Kogyo Maru	Supply Ship	129m	6352 tons	36m
Taiei Maru	Coastal Vessel	112m	5617 tons	26m
Kyokuzan Maru	Supply Ship	136m	6492 tons	43m
Olympia Maru	Supply Ship	122m	5800 tons	30m
East Tangat Gunboat	Tugboat/Anti-sub	40m	500 tons	22m
Lusong Gunboat	Gunboat	20m		10m
Black Island Wreck	Coastal Vessel	45m		32m

without them having to waste too much energy moving.

Another favourite was the *Lusong* gunboat, a small wreck sitting on a very nice piece of reef with the bow nearly out of the water. Cuttlefish, anthias, pyjama cardinalfish, orange anemonefish, false clown anemonefish, and much more are all within snorkeling range of the surface, or as a very easy and enjoyable dive.

The return journey to Manila came too soon, but our trip was not finished there. A three-hour car journey took us south on Luzon Island to Batangas where we boarded a large banca to cross Verdi Strait to Puerto Galera.

Sabang is a suburb of Puerto Galera which is virtually dedicated to diving. Whilst there are many dive operators here, the pick is Action Divers. Located

close to fantastic accommodation, and right on the water, Action Divers will definitely take you to the best locations.

The *MV Alma Jane* is a purpose-sunk wreck just offshore near the Action Diver shop. Upright in 30 metres, she's 30 metres long, has superstructure, is easily penetrated, and has a great deal of fish life. We had 30 metre viz when we dived here – the entire wreck was visible plus much of the surrounding sand areas.

Further up the beach three small vessels which sank reasonably close together are known as the Sabang wrecks. Two are wooden fishing boats, the third is a steel-hulled yacht. The life here is fantastic. Angelfish mix with butterflyfish, small spotted pufferfish hang around the structure of the wrecks, clownfish, puffers, anthias; the ocean is alive with colours. Perhaps the best find here was on the sand between two of the wrecks – a juvenile Pavo's razorfish was spotted, and I got the shot I was after. I'd seen this fish before without luck, but this was my time! Eventually it disappeared into the sand (they can swim through sand for quite a distance, so there's little chance of finding one once it has gone).

There are literally dozens of sites worth several dives each at Puerto Galera: The Dry Dock, West Escarceo, Hole In The Wall, The Fish Bowl, and The Canyons, but the prime dive site from Puerto Galera has to be The Dropoff at Verde Island about an hour by boat from the Action Divers shop. The pinnacle breaks the surface, heads down to at least 80 metres and hosts a plethora of marine life from small tuna to baitfish, anthias, schooling

Sangat Island Resort is close to the island of Busuanga, some 300 kilometres southwest of Manila. After overnighing near the airport, the flight to Busuanga takes 50 minutes, a half-hour drive to Coron Town, then a 40 minute trip in a Philippine *banca* brings you to a tropical paradise. The resort is perfect. Picturesque huts near a beautiful beach, each with their own toilet and shower, jungle covered mountains as a backdrop, a central eating area with bar and pool table, monkeys in the trees and visiting during breakfast, the chance of seeing exotic birds such as hornbills; and all in the tropical heat that is synonymous with the Philippine lifestyle. Located in a westerly direction from Coron Town, Sangat Island is in a strait between the larger Busuanga and Culion Islands amongst many other small islets in an area known as Coron Bay.

fish, sweetlips, seastars, crinoids, moray eels and more. But this site is also very well known for the variety and size of its nudibranchs. When you can count 12 different species in a dive without really looking for them, there must be a lot around! Nembrotha's, tambja's, chromodorids; a fantastic variety of colourful benthic molluscs are here if you can tear yourself away from the fish life.

Our visit to this magnificent island archipelago was brief – I could easily have spent more time and dives here. The Philippines has a wide variety of dive locations, and these are two I'm sure I'll visit again. It's definitely an understatement, to say there's a lot to see here!



THE PHILIPPINES



Clockwise from left: Jeepney's are a great way to get around; Out Of The Blue Villas; Mick Jeacle (Vic Sub Aqua), Ian Lockwood (Allways Dive Travel), Jason Vankuyk (Ulladulla Divers), Mark Jeffs (Perth Scuba), Sam Tomlins (Aquatic Adventures Rye), and Lisa Christopoulos (Philippine Airlines); Accommodation at Sangat Island Resort.

ACCOMMODATION:

Sangat Island Resort - Coron Bay:

Beautiful hut units, each with their own toilet and shower, line a pristine beach on the southern side of the island. A central dining area is flanked by the office and a bar, with a pool table that gets lots of use! There is a gym, a souvenir shop, and several options in accommodation, including a very exclusive and private villa with a rock shower recess that you won't believe until you see it.

Portofino - Puerto Galera: This three star resort, located right on the beach next to the dive shop, has a pool with a bar, a restaurant, air conditioning, and is a delightful place to spend your time.

Out of the Blue - Puerto Galera: An alleyway between Action Divers and Portofino takes you back to Out of the Blue, a four star resort located on the hill just behind. With a swimming pool, restaurant, and unbelievable views, you might never leave here during your stay. Not for those with bad knees though, there are a lot of stairs.



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