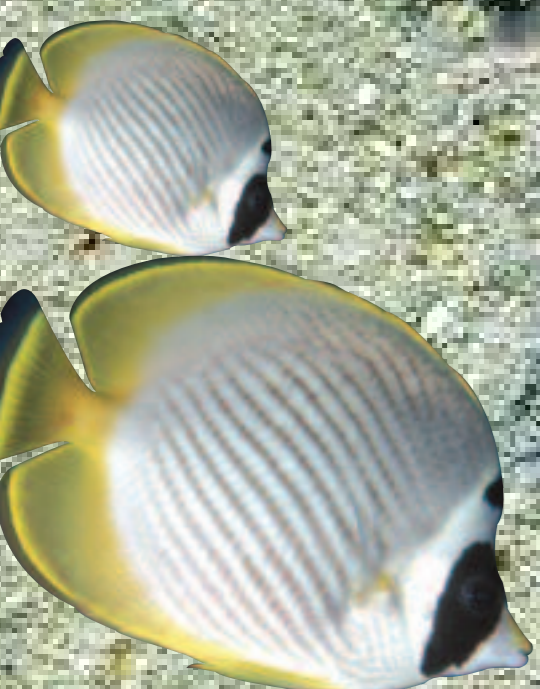


HOUSE REEFS

:: SCOTT TUASON

THESE DAYS, WITH ALL THE PRESSURE PUT ON OUR OCEANS BY OVER FISHING, CYANIDE, DYNAMITE AND OTHER ILLEGAL FISHING METHODS, THE HOUSE REEF HAS BECOME ONE OF THE BEST PLACES TO ENCOUNTER MARINE LIFE AND PRISTINE CORAL.



Facing page: A common stonefish with an identity crisis - it thinks it's a stargazer!

Inset: A pair of eye-patch butterflyfish

This page: A parrotfish begging for a handout with other reef fishes

Inset: A clown frogfish posing in a crevice along a steep dropoff



The term 'house reef' refers to an area of reef usually right in front of a resort that's protected and has been designated as a marine sanctuary. They are guarded by resort owners and/or staff to ensure no fishing and gathering of marine animals occurs. In places like the Philippines, house reefs have become some of the best-guarded spots in the ocean. There are a few existing marine parks in the country but unfortunately, due to the lack of resources for protection from the government, they are poorly managed.

I personally like diving house reefs because they're usually in shallow water which allows for extended bottom time and, with their proximity to a resort, changing tanks and film isn't a problem. I also like the mix of underwater environments which can range from seagrass beds to artificial man-made structures or existing coral heads and bommies. They're usually in areas sheltered from wind and rough seas – currents are normally not a factor, making them a very rewarding environment for photography. This is my guide to some of the best house reefs in the Philippines.

House Reef Dive & Trek: Anilao, Batangas
Established 1994.

Artificial Structures: None

Fish feeding: Allowed

Depth: Three to 18 metres

Description: From the shore to about 100 metres out, the reef is shallow until it drops down to 18 metres. Some giant tridacna clams were seeded along the shallower part of the wall down to around 10 metres. Along the wall at all depths are nudibranchs, ghost pipefish and an array of invertebrates. Schooling off the wall are snappers and surgeonfish and hundreds of sergeant majors. On top of the wall at a depth of five metres, is what most divers will consider the highlight of the dive, where a school of big-eye trevallies reside. On occasion I've seen green sea turtles, cuttlefish mating and a whale shark was even spotted there in December of 2002. This is a great dive for newly certified divers.

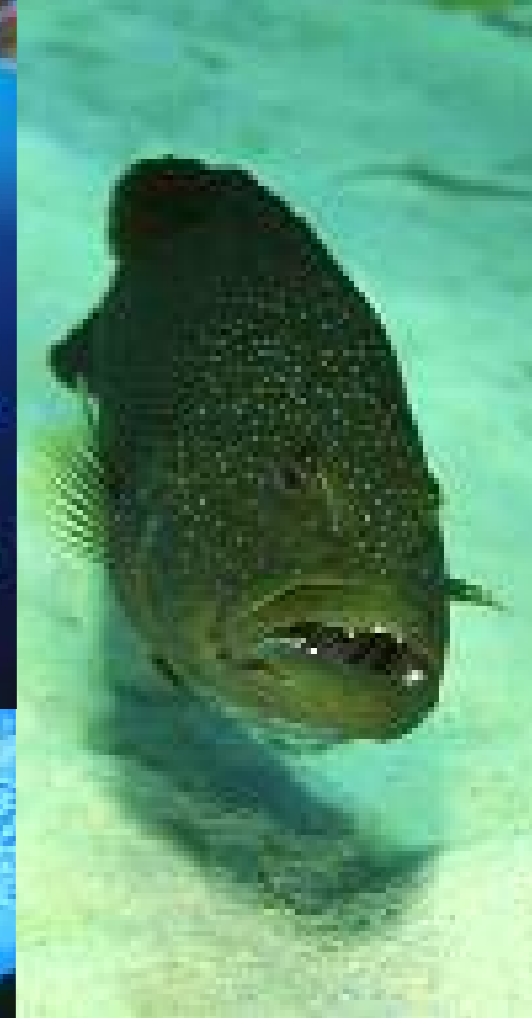
House Reef Club Paradise: Dimakyak Island, Busuanga, Palawan. Established 1989

Artificial Structures: None

Fish feeding: Not Allowed

Depth: Three to 10 metres

Description: This is a great shore entry dive that starts off with a sandy bottom which gradually turns into seagrass beds before finally sloping down to a dropoff. This used to be the best place in the Philippines to see a dugong (sea cow), however since the El Nino of 1998 it has not been seen with the same frequency. Some of the residents of the reef include a school of juvenile big-eye trevally, batfish, cuttlefish and panda clownfish. Because of its proximity to shore I once spent seven hours here photographing mating cuttlefish. I remember this dive very well because of the misadventure I had there. As I came to the end of my roll of film I noticed the camera kept



This page: A friendly flamboyant cuttlefish.
 A school of big-eye trevally, found in only two metres of water.
 Leaf fish portrait.
 Facing page: A common lionfish poses for the camera.
 Portrait of a large crocodile longtom.
 A large golden trevally posing for the camera?
 Sergeant majors and a parrotfish waiting to be fed by a resort guest.
 Last page: A rare sighting of a jeep underwater, now an artificial reef.



winding first 37 exposures, then 38 (I was thinking to myself, how lucky, I have a long roll of film) then 39, then 40 – then I said S*#T! the film didn't catch and I was shooting blanks the whole dive!!

House Reef El Nido: Miniloc Island, Bacuit Bay, Palawan
Established 1984
Artificial Structures: None Fish feeding: Allowed
Depth: One to nine metres

Description: One of the few reefs that can be enjoyed even just on snorkel. There isn't much in the way of coral or terrain, but the fish life is excellent. Large groupers make their home just off the pier and there are anywhere from 10 to 25 huge giant trevally that come in very shallow to feed. Divers have to be a bit careful when feeding these aggressive predators. Aside from the large fish, schools of sergeant majors and parrotfish follow divers all around the reef. Some unusual nudibranchs can be found by divers with a keen eye along the reef floor or hiding among coral rubble.

House Reef Club Noah: Taytay, Palawan
Established 1995
Artificial Structures: None Fish feeding: Allowed
Depth: Two to six metres

Description: Not much of a reef here, mostly sand with some low flat rock formations. It suffered a bit from the 1998 El Nino due to its shallow depth, however the fish life is still very good. The reef is home to many different types of groupers and snappers. Large yellow-spotted trevallies also come around to have a free feed, bullying around most of the other fish. A resident Napoleon wrasse is seen on occasion and will at times come close to divers. Just below the surface of the water are

some of the biggest crocodile needlefish I have ever seen – 1.2 metres!

House Reef Malapascua Exotic Dive
Resort: Malapascua Island, Cebu
Established 2001
Artificial Structures: Two passenger jeeps, banca boat, tyres and bamboo
Fish feeding: Not Allowed
Depth: Six to 12 metres

Description: This is the baby of them all (in terms of age) but in my opinion the most diverse in terms of marine life. It cannot be dived by shore entry, but is only less than a five-minute boat ride to the site. As you descend down the main buoy marker to a depth of six metres, keep an eye out for the resident flamboyant cuttlefish which greets you. You might want to spend some time with it to watch him feed, which is something it always seems to be doing. There's a short swim across the seagrass flats and you arrive at your second underwater landmark, an old bamboo fence. There you should run into a school of about 200 bigfin reef squid. At the time I was there I was treated to a full-on sex show that kept me mesmerised for almost an hour. Evidence of this can be seen on the bamboo structure; thousands of egg capsules cover its base like ornaments on a Christmas tree.

Moving along following another line of tyres takes you to the first sunken passenger jeepney (local Philippine jeep). Inside are hundreds of cardinalfish and on the outside reside several large broadclub cuttlefish. Following another line of tyres leads you to the second jeepney, home to several frogfish and large sweetlips. After crossing over another plain of grass flat you wind up back where you started. While in the seagrass look out for marine catfish, pufferfish, fingered dragonets and snake eels. Chances are that at some point in the dive you will run into (or he will run into you) Dick, a 1.5 metre great barracuda. He normally has a following of three different schools of jack and a small school of rainbow runners. Dick is a cheeky fellow who at times can be a bit intimidating. While shooting the mating squid, he would often charge at me causing the squid to disperse like children off on summer holiday! This dive is so good it must be dived several times.

House Reef Balicasag Island Dive
Resort: Balicasag Island, Bohol
Artificial Structures: None
Fish feeding: Not Allowed
Depth: 3 to 40 metres
Description: This shore entry dive starts out in very shallow water for about 50



GETTING THERE:

DIVE & TREK - Anilao, Batangas

Anilao is located just 120km south of Manila or roughly 2 and a half hours by car. From Anilao it is a 20 min boat ride to Dive and Trek.

sales@diveandtrek.com www.diveandtrek.com

CLUB PARADISE - Dimakyak Is., Coron, Busuanga, Palawan

From Manila it is a 50 min flight to YKR airport via SEA air, from there it is a 30 min jeep ride then a 20 min boat ride to Club Paradise. www.clubpar.com

EL NIDO RESORT - Miniloc Is, Bacuit Bay, Palawan

From Manila it is a 70 min flight to El Nido airport via Corporate or SEA air, from the airport it is a 45 min boat ride to El Nido resort. www.elnidoresorts.com

CLUB NOAH - Taytay, Palawan

From Manila it is a 1 hour and 20 min flight to Taytay via SEA air, from the airport there is a 15 min jeep ride then a 30 min boat ride to Club Noah.

info@clubnoah.com.ph www.clubnoah.com

MALAPASCUA EXOTIC ISLAND DIVE RESORT -

From Manila it is an hour flight to Cebu via Philippine Airlines, Cebu Pacific or Air Philippines, from the airport it is a 3-hour car ride to town of Maya then a 20 min boat ride to Malapascua Exotic. info@malapascua.net www.malapascua.net

BALICASAG ISLAND DIVE RESORT - Balicasag Is., Bohol

From Manila it is a 70 min flight to Tagbilaran via Philippine Airlines, from the airport it is a 15 min car ride to Alona beach then a 30 min boat ride to Balicasag.

www.philtourism.com

AIRLINES

Air Philippines - www.airphils.com

Cebu Pacific - www.cebupacificair.com

Corporate Air - www.corporateairinc.com

Philippine Airlines - www.philippineair.com

SEA Air - www.flyseair.com



metres off shore until you get to a dropoff that plunges down to 60 metres. The wall is covered with giant sea fans and is home to a number of rare critters such as leaf-fish and clown frogfish. A few pelagics like mackerel and tuna often swim along the wall together with the odd reef shark. This wall is also the home to a large school of big-eye trevally. They can be seen schooling off the wall, or sometimes even in the shallow reef before you get to the dropoff. For divers qualified and with the right equipment, at the bottom of the wall at a depth of 60 metres, purple fire gobies can be seen. Please don't try to find them on your own – check with the divemaster if it's possible.

House reefs make a great safe haven for a multitude of reef fish and critters, allowing divers to get up-close and personal with animals that would normally keep their distance. On the downside, fish feeding activities sometimes cause animals to act unnaturally and they can become dependent on divers feeding them. But in a world where being an animal living in the sea can be down right dangerous, it may not be such a bad thing.

