

# TURTLE ESCORT

## FAR FROM HOME

We hear names like Tubbataha whispered, before the rave reviews start to trickle in.

**JOHN BANTIN** boards an outstanding liveaboard in the Philippines to learn more

### YOU GOTTA GET LUCKY.

The green turtle seemed unconcerned by my close company and swam with me, with the current, at a gentle pace along the reef.

I took the opportunity to make lots of images of her as we cruised along, until I turned a corner past a coral outcrop and there was a manta, waiting for me and hovering over a cleaning station. There was no other diver in sight.

The manta approached me as slowly as I approached it. Within moments I was on a collision course. I held my breath and the animal took evasive action only at the last moment, when it was within a few centimetres of my lens. It turned sharply towards the surface, and I got the money shot.

I had taken to separating myself from the main group of divers with whom I entered the water, preferring to dive alone. There were 15 other divers on our boat, and they were all cruising along the reef wall. Not me. I was keeping a wary eye out up in the shallows.

It's hard to see a silvery ball at a distance, even when you're enjoying as much as 50m of visibility, but I knew that it was there.

Ranging from 10m-deep to nearly breaking the surface, a ball of 100 or more jack was making stately progress along the reef top, sweeping up other small groups of fish such as surgeons and rabbitfish from time to time.

It was akin to a giant mirror-ball, and was known to be a regular feature

of this end of the atoll. I hugged the contours of the reef, careful not to collide with any coral outcrop, and gradually closed with it.

I tried to take up a position so that the jack would envelope me, rather than approaching them head-on and consequently driving them away from me.

My strategy worked. Soon I was surrounded by silvery fish that swam close by each other and eyed me with a certain amount of suspicion – or was it embarrassment that I had been unintentionally included in their exclusive club?

They enveloped a green turtle that was resting on the coral, too. Normally quite skittish, this one seemed to



accept me as part of the marine population, and allowed me to photograph it in extreme close-up as the silver merry-go-round spun on.

I continued to click away with my camera, flashes sparkling off the mirror-like bodies of the fish, lighting them up in such a way that they became an irresistible draw to a few divers from other boats who were also armed with cameras.

Very soon the arrival and influence of these other photographic predators caused concern within the silvery ball, which began to break up as individual fish took evasive action – and the magic was over.

A hundred nautical miles east of the island of Palawan, in the middle of the Sulu Sea, sit the only two true atolls to be found in Philippines waters.

Further to the west is the island of Mindanao, and to the south-west eventually you'd come to Borneo. It's a remote and lonely place, and not the sort of destination you would want to head for in a boat with only one engine.

The two atolls are mainly submerged, although their tops break the surface at low tide, and one small island has enough room for a few trees, a beach where turtles come to lay their eggs and a solitary lighthouse now being restored.

There is a marine-park ranger station built on stilts on the northern atoll, staffed by rather bored-looking young men.

The area is known as the Tubbataha Reefs. It lies at the heart of the Coral Triangle, the world centre of marine biodiversity, and contains 10,000 hectares of coral reef in which no fishing is tolerated, and boats are not allowed to anchor.

Tubbataha is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and as such is the only purely marine park in South-east Asia.

Because there is absolutely no shelter from bad weather, the season for diving around Tubbataha is limited to a few

months of the year, March to early June, when stable surface conditions are expected.

At this time a few hardy liveaboards make it out there from Puerto Princesa for the benefit of those privileged enough to dive such a remote location.

**ATLANTIS IS WELL-KNOWN** in the Philippines for its two shore-based resorts at Puerto Galera and Dumaguete, but a couple of years ago it decided to buy a very well-equipped liveaboard, formerly the *Truk Aggressor*, and renamed it (confusingly) the *Atlantis Azores*.

Let's make it clear that the *Atlantis Azores* operates nowhere near the islands of the Azores in the Atlantic, but in the tropical Sulu Sea in the Philippines, and I travelled on it to Tubbataha.

With a superb aluminium hull originally built to service oil-exploration

platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, and equipped with twin engines, this is one of the finest liveaboards to be found anywhere in the world.

In keeping with the tradition of Atlantis Resorts, the food on board is made to the highest standards of international cuisine, and the service is second to none.

The engine-room is spotlessly clean, and two water-makers supply more fresh water than could ever be needed for the *en suite* facilities.

*Atlantis Azores* has a massive dive deck, and the copious hot showers found there are the height of luxury when you

climb out of the water after a dive.

You never need to touch your tank once it's set up, unless you're wearing it. Nitrox is supplied by membrane system to a reliable 32%, and the passengers are divided initially into two groups for diving from two RIB tenders.

The Filipino crew of 10 are good fun, and once they know that you are competent in the water, you are left very much to your own devices if you



wish it that way. The captain is American.

Occasional squalls of rain with associated thunder punctuated the periods of fierce sunshine during my week, but thankfully the sea stayed flat-calm.

Imagine diving a coral reef with deep walls where few humans have visited before you, where silvery jack swirl in great numbers up in the sunlit shallows, while grey reef sharks swirl in great numbers in the deep far below you.

Huge tuna, bigger than most sharks, cruise the blue water, while small groups of pretty pompano patrol close to the surface. All the usual suspects of Indo-Pacific life are present.

The gorgonia fans are pristine and numerous and a gentle current sweeps you along effortlessly past endless numbers of grouper of all types, hunting the smaller fishes that huddle around giant barrel sponges. Acres of soft corals sway in the underwater breeze.

The currents around the atolls are quite strange. They are totally unpredictable in that, although by no means irresistible, they seem totally independent of any tides. The current reverses many times in one day, often within the space of an hour.

**IT'S ALL ABOUT HOW** the ocean currents strike each atoll as it rises sharply from the depths. Progress is easy as you get drawn along by the flow. Then, conveniently halfway through the dive, the current often reverses direction, so that you are just as easily brought back to where you started.

Sometimes you find yourself in the clearest of warm water, and at others the water becomes dramatically colder and greener. No one seems able to anticipate what the water might be doing at any time, or where the current-point with all the sharks will be. It's a case of jump in and go with the flow.



**Above:** *Atlantis Azores* at Tubbataha.

**Below:** Green turtle with a shoal of jack.

Whitetip reef sharks appear to be the predominant predators in the depths accessible to a nitrox diver – although they are so skittish that it's difficult to get a close-up picture of them.

There are plenty of turtles too, both green and hawksbill. The latter variety seems to tolerate the close company of an underwater photographer more easily than the green turtles, and it's best to photograph greens when they have settled down for a snooze.

On one dive I followed a group of some 50 juvenile grey reef sharks along the wall, schooling like naughty children, each less than a couple of feet long.

On another, I met a dozen fully fledged adult male Napoleon wrasse, browsing the reef together in a group. I've never seen that before.

Chevron and yellow-tail barracuda form silvery tornados round individual divers lucky enough to be able to insinuate themselves within a group, while the shoulder of the reef is punctuated by small sandy patches where the whitetips lie sleeping during the day.

Bannerfish of various types flutter

in the flow in great numbers, competing only with the redtooth triggerfish that fill the open water like stars on a clear night sky.

Pugnacious titan and yellow-margin triggerfish guard their territories from all-comers, and 100 different types of hard coral sit cheek by jowl.

There is so much going on that it's hard for the underwater photographer to get focused on one subject. Just as you are creeping up on an unsuspecting green turtle asleep in the coral, a large eagle ray passes close by your ear.

I'm sure there are multitudes of great macro subjects present too, but one is simply overwhelmed by the larger animals that constantly distract, and the flowing water makes it difficult to stay in one place for any length of time.

When the *Atlantis Azores* is not cruising the Tubbataha Reefs, Atlantis offers various cruises around the Visayas (embarking at Dumaguete) and Puerto Galera.



## FACTFILE

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Fly to Manila and connect with Cebu Air Pacific to Puerto Princesa in Palawan. British passport-holders visiting for fewer than 30 days require no visa.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Atlantis Azores is an all-inclusive operation, [www.atlantis.com](http://www.atlantis.com)

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ March to mid-June.

**MONEY** ▶ Philippines peso.

**PRICES** ▶ Travelling through Oonasdivers, based on two sharing and including international flights, transfers, and seven nights' full board on Atlantis Azores on the Tubbataha itinerary, expect to pay from £2895pp. [www.oonasdivers.com](http://www.oonasdivers.com)

**FURTHER INFORMATION** ▶ [www.tourism.gov.ph](http://www.tourism.gov.ph), [www.gophilippines.net](http://www.gophilippines.net)

