



Pictured: Batfish on a wreck intentionally sunk for the benefit of divers.

TRIANGULAR TREASURES

JOHN BANTIN heads for the island of Mindoro, where an Atlantis resort provides a gateway to diving that seems almost casually world-class



THE ROUTE FROM THE JETTY at Sabang Beach takes a narrow path that meanders between Filipino traders' stalls, shops, cafes and bars crammed together like an ant-heap. It presents a scene that would do justice to any Indiana Jones adventure. It's a place teeming with humanity, a hive of activity where people hang out anxious to make a few pesos. It makes the Philippines capital Manila seem like a spacious metropolis.

The shadows are deep. Occasional foetid smells and the babble of a local language that includes English and Spanish words, but is otherwise unintelligible to the untrained ear, adds to the oppressiveness of the tropical heat.

The Filipino people seem to have a love for rock & roll music of the early 1960s through to the end of the '80s, so that while your eyes take in this very unfamiliar scene, your ears are tuned to the likes of Eric Burdon's urgent rendering of *House of the Rising Sun*. Everyone can speak English if they need to, and the written word in the Philippines tends to be in our language too, making it very easy for English-speakers to get about.

PUERTO GALERA IS ONE of the oldest Spanish settlements in the Philippines. It is positioned on the north coast of Mindoro, which is itself separated from the island of Luzon (where Manila is located) by the Verde Island Passage.

It takes about an hour to cross by *bangka* boat. Sabang Beach is part of Puerto Galera.

Stumbling along behind my guide, I was wondering what I had let myself in for when suddenly, positioned in among this chaos of third-world improvisation

and absence of town-planning, I saw the Atlantis Resort. It was an island of logic in an ocean of Asian hustle and bustle.

I don't normally write too much about the accommodation I enjoy, but this sense of contrast leads me to explain that the Atlantis Resort, owned jointly by an American, Gordon, and a Brit, Andy, is built on a series of levels that pile up the hillside from sea-level, in a style that I can describe only as Fred Flintstone.

In fact I was assigned Suite Flintstone B, with a terrace overlooking the beach.

They had built the resort so that it appeared to be carved out of rock, yet the fully equipped apartments with their patios sit among mature tropical gardens, the pool is an oasis, the spa is staffed by beautiful Filipina girls, and

A RESORT BUILT IN A STYLE I CAN ONLY DESCRIBE AS FRED FLINTSTONE

the hotel's modern stainless-steel kitchen turns out some of the best food I have eaten in any hotel, at any price.

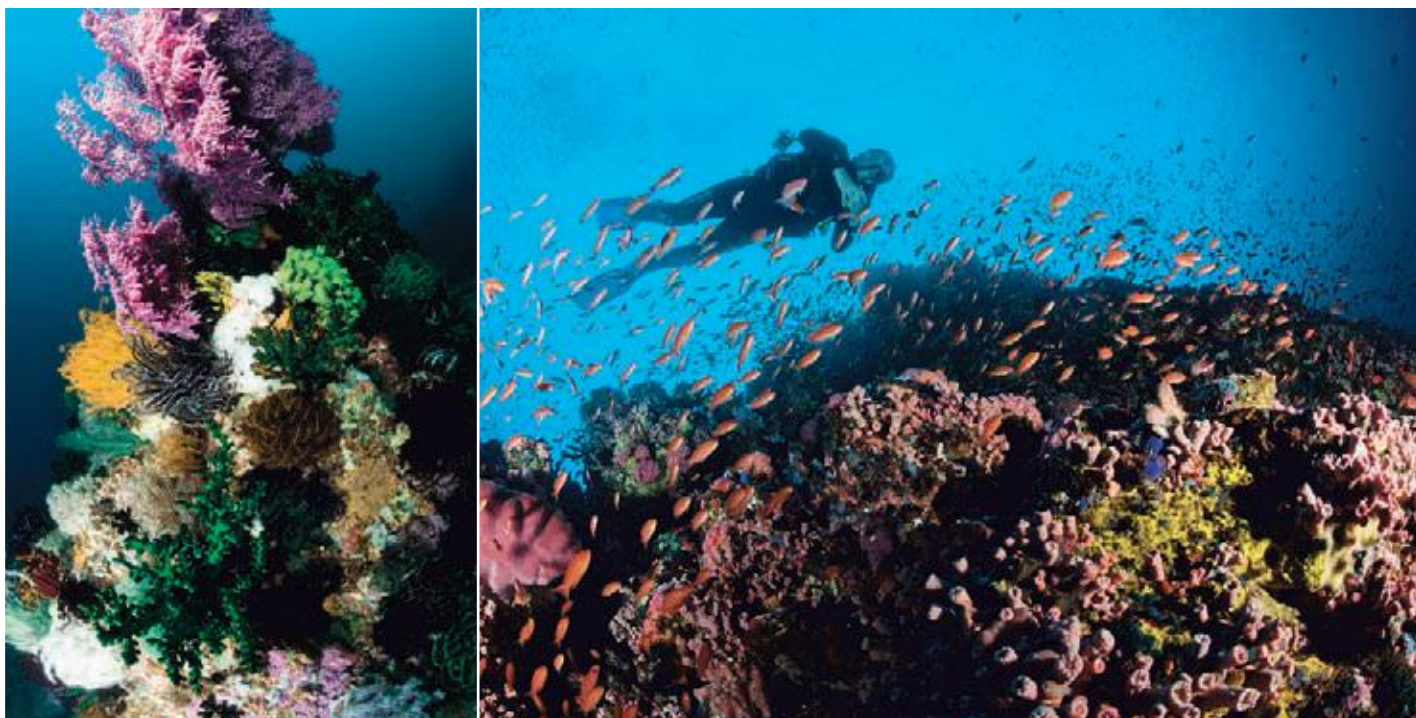
It's the first world perched incongruously in the midst of the third.

I went for a walk. The receptionist warned me that in one direction it was a bit seedy. I couldn't remember which, either before or after!

If my description concerns you, bear in mind that most Filipino people are incredibly friendly and will bend over backwards to help a foreigner – and we foreigners certainly stand out.

It's a matriarchal society. The women are very confident and the men, without exception, put their chairs back when they get up from the table.

Nothing is too much trouble when it comes to helping, and this carries over into the on-beach dive centre. Put



something down, and invariably a young Filipino will pick it up and carry it for you.

I asked a local why this was, and was told that people were so grateful for what Caucasian-looking people had done for them during World War Two that it had become ingrained in their character.

At the same time, the population is predominantly young so few Filipinos remember any war, let alone WW2.

The dive centre is as modern as the resort. It has a camera-room, classrooms, equipment shop, nitrox by membrane-system, numerous dedicated freshwater rinse tanks, showers and hundreds of recently purchased tanks in various sizes.

A diver doesn't have to lift anything but his own body. Everything is done for you by willing and intelligent hands.

All you need do is to don your wetsuit and walk a few metres to the boat.

These boats are *bangkas* for the longer rides or quick little launches that can drop you at a dive site within three or four minutes of embarkation.

I have to say that I was unimpressed by

my initial dives, after having travelled so far around the world.

First I made a couple at sites where the boulders were smothered in featherstars out feeding in the middle of the day. All very colourful, but there are only so many rocks that I can look at without getting bored. The crinoids waved their arms enticingly, but the only exciting thing they were likely to do was to get inadvertently stuck to my wetsuit.

My boredom threshold was completely revised once my guide took me to the wreck of what was an inauspicious freighter sunk for the benefit of divers.

Inauspicious it might have been, but it was packed with massed bands of batfish. A gentle current flowed over the wreck, and I was able to cruise back and forth, taking pictures, while the batfish arranged themselves in an ever-varying tight group. It was as if they knew they were there for a team portrait.

I found it ironic that some of them had taken up the rusty colour scheme of the wrecked vessel itself in an effort to look the part, but I wasn't fooled. You're batfish and I can see you!

MY NEXT DIVE WAS AT a nearby headland where the current really ripped. All sorts of bigger fish hung out here but when the borrowed regulator I had on test caused me to imbibe enough water to make me throw up repeatedly, I had to call it a day and abandon the dive.

With this in mind, I visited more leisurely muck-diving sites where seahorses were 10-a-penny, rough ghost pipefishes as common as bits of stick, little frogfishes had commandeered every available bit of sponge, and flamboyant cuttlefish

Above from left: Crinoids, sponges and hard corals adorn the rocks; *Anthias* at a Verde Island reef.

Below: Courting mandarinfish.

dodged about seemingly without a care in the world.

The high point of my local dives was to go out at night to hang around in the dark for that moment when 100 tiny mandarinfish made their appearance, Scuttling around in the coral rubble and performing a momentary *pas de deux* in open water they tantalised, seen by the red light of our lamps, yet usually frustrated anyone trying to capture the exact moment with a camera.

My local guide and I settled down at what he thought was a likely spot while it was still light, and waited for night to fall.

The pretty little fish scuttle about under the rubble until the moment when, like so many sparrows around a bird table, they dart out and make momentary contact with a potential mate, do the deed a few inches off the bottom and scuttle back into hiding as quickly as they appeared.

I concentrated on what was





happening in the pool of red light from my aiming lamp, and eventually there they were. You have to be quick to get a picture.

I leant in to frame up a possible subject and clashed heads with three or four other divers who had apparently gathered round my red light in the darkness. You need a red light to see mandarinfish in the dark.

Bangkas are unique to the Philippines. They are narrow canoe-like vessels with high prows and sterns that draw very little water and can be driven right up onto the beach. To stop them from falling over they employ wide outriggers of bamboo poles, lashed together with fishing-line.

You could be forgiven on your first encounter for thinking that they were no more than a collection of firewood and bamboo poles held together with string. The whole thing is pushed along at speed

by a truck engine drummed into service but, remarkably, *bangkas* make very good dive-boats.

They are as close to water as an American canned lager, yet incredibly stable. And because they draw so little, they can pick up a diver almost anywhere, however close to the reef, unless he's already strolled ashore for a beer.

The water of the Verde Island Passage is flushed by currents from the South China Sea, making for exhilarating drift dives and fabulous visibility at times.


I dived on a reef close to Verde Island itself and can honestly say that I saw a greater number of fish than perhaps I have seen anywhere else in the world. All the usual suspects were there, including jack and banded sea-snakes.

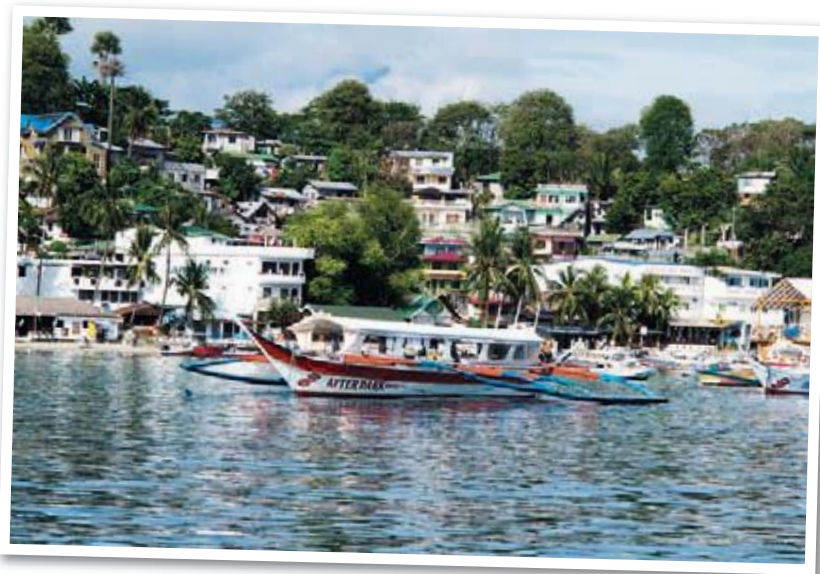
My biggest problem was focusing on

Above: Green turtle sleep among the green corals of Verde Island.

Below: Sabang Beach.

one subject when so much else was going on. How do you photograph a colourful octopus posing in its full repertoire of appearances when you suddenly notice a couple of stonefish lying next to it? Or stalk an oriental sweetlips for a picture when you get so easily distracted by a horde of giant trevally? How do you choose which green turtle to concentrate on when you stumble across five roosting in the corals?

The area close to Puerto Galera was designated a Man and Biosphere Reserve of UNESCO in 1973 and has some of the most diverse coral-reef diving in Asia, located as it is at the very heart of the celebrated Coral Triangle. That initial featherstar dive shouldn't have had me worried – the diving here is exceptional. 



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Fly to Manila and connect by road and boat to Puerto Galera. British passport-holders visiting for fewer than 21 days require no visa.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Atlantis Puerto Galera Resort, www.atlantishotel.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round, but December to July is best.

MONEY ▶ Philippines peso

DIVING SUITABLE FOR ▶ Nitrox-certified divers.

HEALTH ▶ No malaria is reported.

PRICES ▶ John Bantin travelled at the invitation of Atlantis Resorts and tour operator Oonasdivers, which can offer a package that includes international flights, transfers, seven nights' full board (twin share) with up to five dives a day from £1850. www.oonasdivers.com

FURTHER INFORMATION ▶ www.tourism.gov.ph

