

DIVERSITY IN DUMAGUETE



If you're going to spend a holiday taking marine-life photographs, you might as well go where the subjects are abundant, diverse and weird enough to fascinate.

JOHN BANTIN heads for the Philippines and goes all macro



Pictured: Mr & Mrs – giant pipefish roam the seagrass in pairs.

IT'S AMAZING HOW we can get excited about a really odd-looking little creature, something you wouldn't give a second glance to if it was anything but rare, but that's the Ambon scorpionfish.

When you accidentally come across one of these strange creatures stumbling across the sand, you can understand where those Chinese painters of dragons got their ideas from. Its shape is nothing short of insane, as is its remarkable colour.

It looks so oriental. You would never expect to see one off Studland Bay or Camber Sands. We don't have such exotic creatures around our coast, but then, this is the Philippines.

Ambon scorpionfish are not in any hurry. They pack a poisonous punch in their spines that will see off any would-be predator. If trodden on by an unwary person, they can cause death. And they

really are pretty ugly. They are often found in pairs on the ocean floor, on dark sand and among debris.

The Atlantis Resort at Dumaguete on Negros Oriental is about an hour's flying time to the south of Manila, in the Philippines, on a local airline. It uses the same formula for its operation as its sister operation in Puerta Galera, with fabulous food, an on-site spa and superbly comfortable guest bungalows.

You never need to lift a finger to go diving. Everything is done for you.

Its beach location is out of town, but the resort has its own colourful Jeepney, complete with chrome adornments, for rides into an urban area full of motorcycle-driven rickshaws.

Jeepneys evolved from adapted Willys Jeeps left by the US Army after the war. It's straight into a real Filipino experience the moment you're picked up from the airport, although your driver might ask you your opinion about what's happening at Chelsea FC

or Manchester United. They're mad about English Premier League football.

So once you've settled in and got used to the unadulterated luxury of the place, what's there for divers?

The macro-life lover is well served directly off the beach with everything you could imagine. Ornate ghost pipefish and rough ghost pipefish appear to frequent every clump of seagrass and there's plenty of that. They hover around in pairs.

Seahorses roam around out in the open too. Frogfish may be small but there are plenty of them, and I never had to share one with another photographer when I was underwater there.

That might seem surprising, because everyone who turns up to dive comes with a macro camera. The resort has a fabulously spacious and well-equipped camera-room and a skilled resident underwater photographer to give advice when it's wanted.

There are nudibranchs too abundant to count, many of them as big as any



garden slug, but of course much more colourful. They roam the coral outcrops with other colourful minutiae of the marine world.

Leaf-fish clutter the blackish sand. It's like an English autumn garden down there!

The seagrass is also home to giant green and brown pipefish, swimming around in pairs. These can be up to a foot long. I had a high old time chasing around after a couple before I got a shot of them, neatly posed as husband and wife.

As for cephalopods, I felt that mimic octopuses and wonderpus stopped being exotic within a day of me arriving. They seemed almost common.

Even the snake-eels appear to be more colourful there, as they poke their ugly heads up out of the sandy seabed, from where they ambush their prey.

One dive site is nothing more than an old car driven into the water off the beach, but it has become a magnet for all the little creatures that frequent these waters. While I was there a big old green turtle was dozing next to it. I have no pictures, however – I was equipped for super-close-ups at the time.

If you want to see something larger, you can take a day trip on the resort's *bangka* boat over to Apo Island. *Bangkas* are shallow-draught vessels with narrow hulls held up by bamboo outriggers to stop them from falling over.

They are primitively constructed ☞



Pictured: What is it? An Ambon scorpionfish, of course!

Top left: The Atlantis Jeepney is far from discreet.

Above left: Another member of the scorpionfish family – this one is a cockatoo waspfish.





and usually make use of what looks like a truck engine to propel them through the water, but because they are so light they go pretty quickly. Of course, they can go right up to a beach and prove ideal for diving because they can pick you up virtually anywhere there's water.

At Apo Island you will find water so clear that you can see for 100m, and the reef is thick with big barrel sponges and immaculate corals.

You'll also see more green turtles than you can shake a stick at.

Each one finds its own favourite place to roost among the corals and sponges, and at times the underwater

photographer gets confused as to which one to concentrate on. I saw up to five at any one moment, snoring away the daylight hours.

If you're diving locally, you'll enjoy tasty lunches in the restaurant of the resort. If you've been out for the day you may have enjoyed a meal cooked over a fire. You take a shower and enjoy a reviving massage before battling with your conscience about what you'll eat for dinner. Everything is made as easy as possible for you.

The Filipino people are incredibly friendly and are proud of their service ethic. I would just suggest you bone up on

Above, clockwise from left: A banded sea snake; seahorse; flamboyant cuttlefish.

Below left: A pair of mandarinfish go through their evening mating ritual.

British Premier League football before you go so that you have a chance of keeping up with the conversation!

As for the travel arrangements, it is the Atlantis Resorts' policy to meet you on arrival at Manila Airport and escort you every step of the way.

The Filipino sense of fun is reflected in the fact that the local airline crews conduct general-knowledge quizzes for the benefit of passengers during the flights to Dumaguete from Manila and back.

A stay at the Atlantis Resort in Dumaguete will suit those divers who want to stroll out from their bungalow with a macro camera and enjoy a leisurely time recording images of the weird and the wonderful. Enjoy! 



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Fly to Manila and connect via Cebu Air Pacific to Dumaguete in Negros Orientalis. British passport-holders visiting for fewer than 30 days require no visa.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Atlantis Resorts. www.atlantishotel.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round, though December to August is recommended.

MONEY ▶ Peso.

PRICES ▶ Oonasdivers offers a package that includes international and domestic flights, transfers, seven nights' full board (twin-share) with four dives per day and two day trips from £1795pp (June - August), www.oonasdivers.com

FURTHER INFORMATION ▶ www.tourism.gov.ph

