



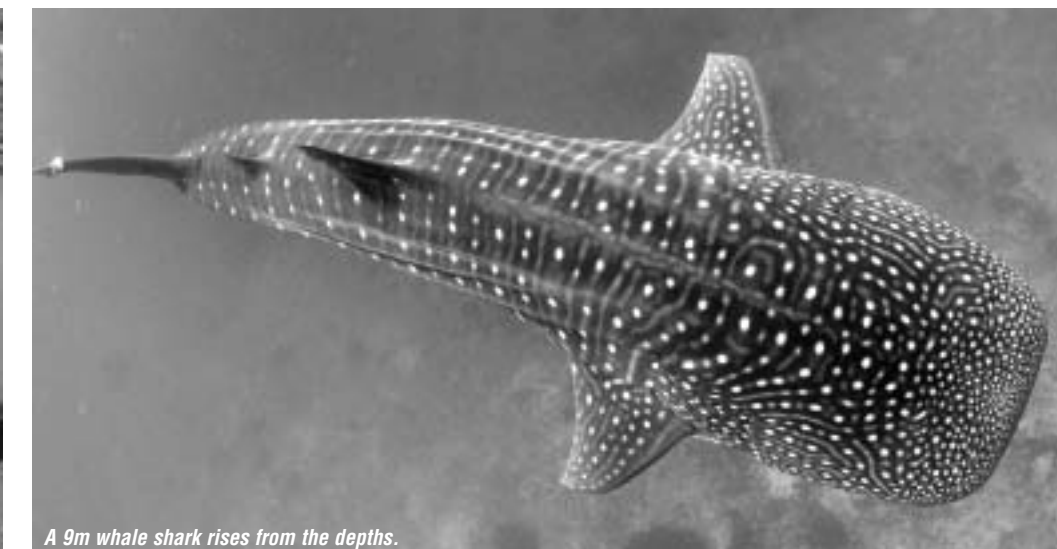
Sogod Bay Scuba Resort on the beach at Sogod Bay.



On the dive boat looking for whale sharks.



Whale sharks are seen in Sogod Bay from November to April.



A 9m whale shark rises from the depths.

# FABULOUS PHILIPPINES

# SOGOD BAY - SOUTHERN LEYTE

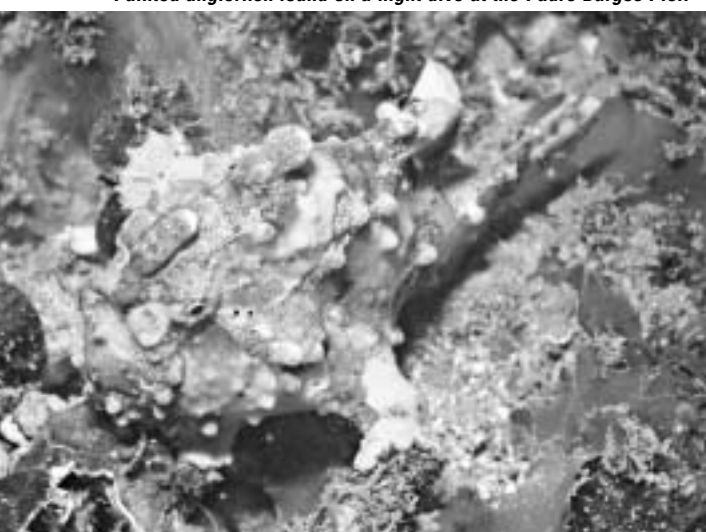


Lionfish at Sunok.



Above: Lovely nudibranch at Max's Climax 1.

Painted anglerfish found on a night dive at the Padre Burgos Pier.



## Part 1



Large barrel sponge at Napantao Fish Sanctuary.



Above: Dive boat wreck in front of the dive resort.



Below: Spectacular mollusc on a night dive in front of the resort.

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**The Philippines has some of the finest diving in Asia. Located at the heart of the richest marine ecosystem in the world, the Philippines is blessed with warm clear water, colourful coral reefs, amazing marine life, spectacular World War II wrecks and is also one of the cheapest places to dive on the planet. So it is a mystery why so few Australian divers have discovered the fabulous Philippines.**

We recently spent three glorious weeks diving some of the best areas of the Philippines, exploring three main destinations – Sogod Bay, Puerto Galera and Subic Bay. The first part of this article will cover the diverse diving we experienced at the little known area of Sogod Bay.

Sogod Bay is located at the southern end of the island of Leyte, in the eastern part of the Philippines. This area has only recently opened up to divers, and is a bit out of the way, but well worth the extra effort to get to.

After flying into Manila, which is a lot nicer and cleaner than we expected and well worth a few days for sight seeing and shopping, we connected with an internal flight to Tacloban, the capital of Leyte. As Tacloban is located at the northern tip of Leyte we had to cross the entire island to reach Sogod Bay. We decided to catch a local bus, a bit rough, but a wonderful experience. This four hour bus trip was quite memorable, with views of mountain ranges, village life, rainforests and lovely coastline.

After a full day of travel from Manila, we arrived at Sogod Bay Scuba Resort at 6pm, ready for a refreshing shower and a cold beer. At the resort, we were greeted by Australian manager Phil McGuire with a couple of cold San Miguel beers. Phil and Englishman Ron Parkes opened

the dive resort in March 2006.

We checked into a comfortable room, enjoyed a nice dinner (the resort has a restaurant), a few more beers, before sleeping to the sound of waves gently lapping the beach, as the resort sits right on the shore of Sogod Bay.

As it was dark when we arrived we didn't really get to appreciate the beautiful location of the resort until the morning. The resort is located right on the beach, barely ten steps from the water, which is deep blue in colour. Following breakfast we were very keen to get into the water, our first dives were to be from the shore, right in front of the resort.

Walking from the dive shop to the dive site takes less than five seconds, and we soon found ourselves exploring a beautiful coral garden at Max's Climax 1. The visibility was easily 20m (we enjoyed 15m to 30m visibility each day) and the water temperature a very pleasant 27C degrees.

Following our guide Joseph, we headed across a sandy slope dotted with brilliant hard and soft corals. There was just so much to see and photograph; nudibranchs, featherstars, sea stars, soft corals and gorgonians, and we were still in 9m of water. Abundant reef fish swarmed amongst the corals, nothing really big, but a huge variety and many species we had never seen before.

The reef slopes to 15m and then drops to 40m; here the corals were spectacular, including many large barrel sponges. The fish were also bigger, including snapper, sweetlips and trevally. We ended the dive back in the shallows investigating all the coral bommies, home to fish and invertebrate species.

There are five dive sites right in front of Sogod Bay Dive Resort, and you could easily spend a week exploring each one. Much of this area is also protected as a marine reserve. We next dived Voltaire's Rock. This site was simply stunning. We followed Joseph down the drop-off to 35m, seeing huge barrel

sponges, black coral trees, soft corals, sea whips and some magnificent gorgonians. Coming back up into the shallows we found several clown anemonefish to keep us entertained, plus garden eels and three turtles. Towards the end of the dive we explored the remains of an old dive boat, scuttled a few years ago. This wreck is now decorated with soft corals and home to groppers, sweetlips and snapper.

In the afternoon we did another dive at Max's Climax 1, this time just staying in the shallows looking for critters. There was a lot more fish about, with the highlight being a lovely banded pipefish.

The next day we joined Phil and the other divers staying at the resort for a double boat dive. Sogod Bay Dive Resort runs a large banca, a very stable local craft that can take up to twenty divers. The crew are all local, with Divemasters Joseph and master critter finder Pedro, leading the dives.

Phil explained that they have over twenty regular dive sites located around the bay and surrounding islands, and are still finding dive sites. For our first boat dive we headed north to Bunga Bend. This was another lovely wall dive, there are a lot of wall dives in Sogod Bay as the bay is over 2000m deep. Lots of colour and plenty of reef fish, but the best part was all the great bommies in the shallows. These were packed with marine life, especially fairy basslets, moray eels, nudibranchs and anemonefish.

Between dives you get treated like royalty on the dive boat. The crew change your tanks, serve drinks and biscuits, and we forgot to mention that the crew load all the gear on the boat before you depart.

Our second dive was on the Malitbog Wreck, which is actually thought to be a Japanese Landing Craft sunk during World War II. This wreck lies just off the town of Malitbog, so the visibility was only 10m, but we still enjoyed a fun dive. The wreck sits in 6m to 18m and is

completely encrusted in hard and soft corals, making it difficult to make out the vessel at times. We were more impressed with the abundant marine life, seeing masses of reef fish, crustaceans, nudibranchs, sea stars, flatworms and several pipefish.

At the end of each day the crew off load the dive gear, strip it down, wash it and hang it out to dry. Five star service at a budget price.

That night we did a night dive in front of the resort. This dive was fantastic, one of the best night dives we have ever done. Going no deeper than 10m we saw a vast array of critters that had our cameras working overtime. We saw basket stars, sea pens, crabs, shrimps, brittle stars, molluscs, lionfish, moray eels and a wonderful variety of nudibranchs. Helen found a snake eel in the sand, but Pedro then top this by finding a cockatoo waspfish. Even after an hour we didn't really want to ascend, but dinner awaited us.

Sogod Bay Dive Resort is located in a lovely, if isolated location. But with its own restaurant, serving wonderful Asian and Western meals, you really don't have to venture far.

Boat dives the next day saw us heading south. We dived Turtle Rock, a pretty reef dive with four huge bommies decorated by a colourful collection of corals. And we did see a turtle. This was followed by a wall dive at Adrian's Cove on nearby Limasawa Island. This wall drops to 40m before sloping off into the blue. More great corals, a few caves to explore and plenty of marine life.

One of the reasons we had decided to visit Sogod Bay is that the area is visited by whale sharks. From November to April, we were there in March, whale sharks gather to feed at the southeast tip of Sogod Bay at a place called Sunok.

After an early start we headed across the bay and down to Sunok. Picking up some local guides, we then cruising off a nearby village looking for dark shapes in the water. It didn't take long to spot the first shark. We

grabbed our snorkel gear, others decided to scuba, while Phil briefed us on the whale shark guidelines. No touching, keep 3m away, no camera flashes and the shark always has right of way.

When the boat stopped in front of the shark we slipped over the side and followed Pedro. With 20m visibility we had a fabulous view when the 8m long whale shark swam out of the blue. We then swam with the shark for the next ten minutes, following it while it swam over the coral reef and into deeper water.

Over the next two hours we swam with two other whale sharks; a 4m baby and a 9m giant. The last shark was only seen by the scuba divers, who reported it was a monster 12m long. This is without doubt one of the best places in the world to swim with whale sharks, at a very reasonable price.

After the whale shark action we did a dive at Sunok Point. This drop-off is a good place to see whale sharks at times, which had us straining our necks, but also has lovely corals and abundant fish life. We saw mackerel, schools of fusiliers and several moray eels.

The following day Pedro took us back to Voltaire's Rock to see the resident pygmy sea horses. It didn't take him long to find their home, a small pink gorgonian. There were two Bargibant's pygmy sea horses, a whooping 20mm long, very hard to see and even harder to photograph. But if that wasn't enough, Pedro then found three ornate ghost pipefish hovering next to a featherstar and a bizarre looking sea moth.

This was followed by a boat dive at Ampo, a pretty coral garden south of the resort. This site has more hard coral species than the entire Great Barrier Reef. We again found plenty of reef fish and were lucky enough to see a clown anglerfish and a splendid Mandarin fish hidden amongst the coral.

That night we jumped into the back of the van with our dive gear and drove ten minutes down the road to explore Padre Burgos Pier. You can only dive this site at night, as during the

day there is too much boat traffic. However, it didn't look too appealing. After climbing down some stairs we were standing in dirty brown water and surrounded by rubbish and weed. Fortunately, once underwater the water cleared to 12m visibility and presented us with a wonderland of fantastic critters.

Swimming over patchy coral and sand on the way to the pier we saw lionfish, crabs, shrimps, sea stars, brittle stars, nudibranchs, leatherjackets and even a painted anglerfish. But it only got better under the pier, which sits in 9m. Here we saw three common sea horses clinging to a sponge, a group of shrimpfish, a lovely yellow painted anglerfish, a sea snake and a variety of sea stars, crustaceans and nudibranchs. Lionfish were everywhere, as were sea urchins, so you had to be careful where you placed your hands. We also saw squid, sea pens, octopus, pipefish, cowries, anemones and a rather large pipehorse. This night dive topped our previous one.

The next day was our last for diving, so Ron took us over to his favourite site, Napantao Fish Sanctuary, on the eastern side of the bay. Fully protected, this dive site is magnificent, and easy to see why it is rated as one of the best dive sites in Asia. We dropped down the wall to 30m, seeing incredible soft corals, black corals, gorgonians, sea whips and barrel sponges. The wall was teeming with fish; millions of fairy basslets, schools of damselfish, surgeonfish, sweetlips, fusiliers and parrotfish. This was the most fish we had seen in the Sogod Bay, and proof that protecting a site from fishing does work. We also saw turtles, lots of rock cod, lionfish and many species of nudibranchs.

For our final dive at Sogod Bay we returned to the area just in front of the resort. We had another wonderful dive and were very sad to be leaving all the critters and coral of this fabulous part of the Philippines.

Information and bookings [www.sogodbayscubaesort.com](http://www.sogodbayscubaesort.com)