

tips, this was a refreshing change. We were delighted to tip generously for all that had been done.

THE PHILIPPINES

Major dive areas are concentrated around Batangas, Mindoro, Palawan, and the Visayas. The reefs here are among the most diverse in the world, supporting more than 2,000 species of fish (the Great Barrier Reef, by comparison, supports around 1,500). Divers find inexpensive accommodations and diving, splendid critters, and plenty of divers from other countries.

Atlantis Dive Resort, September 2004, Bill Knoblauch (scubaguy@starstream.net), Lincoln, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 90 Feet. Water: 72 to 74 F., calm. The people are friendly, food was very good, and I loved the diving. We flew out of LAX and were lucky the plane was only half full so didn't need a fuel stop in Hawaii. But, the flight is 6 hours. Upon arriving in Manila, we caught a bus to Batangas (about a two hour trip), where we then boarded an outrigger boat for a one hour ride. We were pooped when we arrived at the resort. The resorts staff greeted us warmly upon arriving, taking our luggage off the boat. Check-in was relatively painless. Not too much large critters to shot. Macro photography was excellent. Dive boats are not set up well for photographers, but, it only takes 5-10 minutes to get to all dive sites. The resort has computers and TVs so one can easily view digital work. Print film and slides

can be processed in town at reasonable cost, with about one-hour turnaround. There is a separate rinse tank for cameras and computers.

Atlantis Dive Resort, November 2004, Bill Knoblauch (scubaguy@starstream.net), Lincoln, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 68 to 72 F., choppy, surge, currents. I was there two months earlier. Was this trip as good? No. I went with a group of about 60 divers. I prefer smaller groups where everyone gets to know each other. We had to eat our meals buffet style. The quality of the food was not as good as my September visit (but still good), but in September, we were able to order directly off the menu. The dive operation worked well with our large group. Air and water temperatures to be somewhat lower than normal, plus it did bring rain and plenty of wind. Not too much large critters to shot. Macro photography was excellent. Dive boats are not set up well for photographers, but it only takes 5-10 minutes to get to all dive sites. The resort has computers and TV's so one can easily view digital work. Print film and slides can be processed in town at reasonable cost, with about one-hour turnaround. There is a separate rinse tank for cameras and computers.

Atlantis Dive Resort, January 2005, Mike de La Chapelle, Bellevue, WA. Six members of my family (including 2 non-diving parents) spent one week at each of Atlantis' two resorts in Puerto Galera and Dumaguete. We booked an all-inclusive dive package from World of Diving (www.worldofdiving.com) which included 6 days x 4 dives/day,

all transportation, meals and accommodations. To get to Puerto Galera from Manila we took a 2 2 hour van ride to Bantangas on the southern end of Luzon island, and then a 1 hour boat ride to Sabang (near Puerto Galera) on the northern end of Mindoro Island. The beach front resort is in the middle of Sabang, a small but bustling coastal town. The main path for the town goes right through the resort that provides lots of people watching but causes guests to be subjected to aggressive hawking from street vendors. Being in town is convenient for shopping and night life (a bit seedy) but the small beach in front of the resort gets lots of foot traffic and the water in front of the resort is shallow, dirty and busy with boat traffic, making swimming or snorkeling undesirable. The rooms are nice. The masonry furniture, light fixtures, etc. are built into the room resulting in an appealing cave-like appearance. The air conditioning was excellent but the shower provided inadequate hot water and there was no hot water connected to the sink. Our second floor room had a nice deck with a view of the pool. Only the upper story rooms have water views. We took all our meals at the Atlantis restaurant, which served good tasting and reasonably priced dishes, and the waiters were excellent. Drinks were inexpensive. I would rate the local diving as good by Pacific standards (which is to say far better than anything in the Caribbean), but not excellent, due to the lack of big fish (over-fishing). Plentiful, varied and colorful hard and soft corals and sponges. Excellent assortment of small and medium sized reef fish, nudibranchs, etc. Very

short boat trip to dives sites (5 minutes typical). Boat returns to resort after each dive (handy for photographers who might need a battery or flash card change) Only one shark sighted in 20 dives. Visibility typically less than 60'. Few walls, caverns, etc. Did not have to revisit dive sites, although we did request returns to Canyons. Extra fee for an all-day dive trip to Verde Island underwater reserve that was well worth the hour-long boat ride in each direction. There is good wall diving and caverns here, more abundant large fish and better visibility. Atlantis' Philippine-style outrigger boat was used for the Verde Island trip, but it was not well suited for diving. There was a bamboo strut located behind where divers were expected to perform a back roll entry. To avoid it, divers were required to perform a side roll off the boat. A serious head/neck injury awaits anyone who forgets and does a normal back roll. We did all of our local diving using a conventional skiff with outboard motor, which made water entry and exit both easy and safe. The dive operation is well run, and the facilities are excellent (Nitrox is available but most dives are shallow). They have a dive shop with reasonable prices, and they have facilities for digital photography (editing, CD burning, battery chargers, etc.). Pedro our dive master was helpful but allowed us a lot of latitude to do what we wanted underwater. Week #2 — Dumaguete; We repeated our boat/van trip to return to Manila from Puerta Galera. Then we took a Cebu Air flight to Dumaguete on the island of Negros and then an hour-long van trip south to Dauin, where the Atlantis

resort is isolated and remote along a lightly developed and sparsely settled section of coast consisting of mostly small fishing communities interspersed with a few large new homes and resorts. There is a nice brown sand beach in front of the resort with good snorkeling/swimming. There is also an artificial "house reef" in 40 feet of water that provides a good night dive. Local boat dives are minutes from the resort and divers are returned to the resort after each dive. Repeated all the local dives, including a bad one called "The Cars", which consisted of a Toyota SUV chassis and a small pile of rubble. On most dives we spent roughly half our bottom time on reefs in 40-80 feet of water and then spent the remainder searching the shallows and eel grass for abundant frogfish, sea horses, leaf fish and many exotic animals. The divemasters were adept at spotting these creatures. The underwater topography was flatter than PG with no walls or caverns, just the occasional coral bommie. The visibility rarely exceeded 60 feet. Water was 82 deg F compared with 78 deg F in PG. Atlantis makes frequent dive trips (for an additional fee) out to Apo Island, a 45-60 minute boat ride from the resort. These 3-tank day-long boat trips are well worth it — we went out to Apo Island 2 days in a row. Half the island is an underwater reserve with excellent diving offering walls, caverns and varied terrains. Big fish are more plentiful. The corals in the shallow areas are absolutely pristine, with great abundance, variety and color. The dive facilities at Dumaguete are smaller (no digital photo room, dive shop or Mitrox) than PG, but adequate. All diving is done with

Philippine style outrigger boats, which do not make particularly good dive platforms. The more than ample crew do a good job helping divers get in and out of the water from the high-decked boats, but water entry and exit is a still a bit unwieldy. Normally the crew puts out a plank or ladder for passengers to access the boat while beached on shore, but once I jumped off the boat onto rocks just below the water line. I haven't been able to walk on the heel of my foot since. The lead diver master, Mike, was organized and competent. Vernie, an excellent dive master who was helpful in pointing out interesting creatures without forcing us to follow him. Resort is beautifully landscaped, has nice, comfortable rooms with large decks, a nice pool, and gourmet quality food prepared by chef Jake (food at Dumaguete was significantly better than PG). Climate control in the rooms was good, but little or no hot water in the shower. Dumaguete management required us to sign for every dive, meal, trip, etc., even though we were on all-inclusive package. The fees for diving in the marine sanctuaries can add up (they are charged on a per dive basis). I wouldn't mind so much if the sanctuary status was strictly enforced, but we saw fish traps and fishermen laying nets. Bill for incidentals not included in package was much higher at Dumaguete. Both Atlantis resorts offer good diving and a good value.

Atlantis Dive Resort, March 2005,
Don Paschal (dgpdiver1@aol.com),
Orlando, FL. Experience: Over 1000
dives. Vis: 30 to 100 Feet. Water: 74 to
80F., choppy, currents. Dive and resort
staff most accommodating. The rooms

were comfortable and the food was great with many choices. The diving here does not lend itself to big animals, but the diversity of animals is incredible. Frog fish, pipefish, flamboyant cuttlefish, mantis shrimp, ribbon eels and tons of variety. Best to think macro when photographing here, but then again some of the frog fish are the size of cats. One afternoon I was the only diver and they did not hesitate to take me out for two dives. UW Photography Comments: Shot both video and still. Land facilities were excellent, with separate rinse tanks, a dry room with work stations for working on cameras with transformers and both 110v and 200v receptacles. Computers and televisions for digital. They accommodate my still photos with E-6 drop off each day in town. No facility on boats for cameras.

Atlantis Beach Resort, May 2005,
Roger Gray, Annandale, VA. Experience: 300+ dives. Vis: 15 to 65 ft. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm and flat. Atlantis Puerto Galera resort is not in Puerto Galera, but in Sabang, built into the hillside. The resort will pick you up at the Manila airport and take you first by air-conditioned van to Batangas, then transfer you to a boat to the resort. You get off at the dive rental and briefing area. An open bar is at the water's edge. There is no beach, just low tide sand. Some of the close-by towns have beaches. Across a small sidewalk is the main resort, dining room to the left and check-in is straight ahead. Just past the check-in is a camera room for charging batteries and drying your cameras. Also the room has computers to go online. Just past the camera room is training rooms for scuba classes. Across from

the training room is two pool tables and just behind them is a swimming pool. Most rooms are a fair climb up the stairs. They do have a few rooms at a lower level about 5 steps up, if you have problems with stairs. The rooms are large and spacious; the beds are firm but comfortable. The layout of the room gives you plenty of space to spread out your stuff. It has a TV and a small fridge. The AC works well, and the room also has a ceiling fan above the bed. You can do 4 day dives and 1 night dive. You are assigned a cubbyhole for your small gear and hangers for your BC and suit. The staff will set up your gear after you do it the first time for them. They will have all your gear loaded on the boats for you. No boat has more than 6 divers plus the divemaster. All dives but 2 of the deep dives were 50 minutes to 1 hour. Or 2 minutes to decompression timed by your computer. You have your choice of boats for every dive, so you do not dive the same sites over and over again. They have over 30 dive sites up to 100 feet or 30 meters to choose from. They have also 10 deeper dive sites for the tech divers. They teach the deep tech diving. All the divemasters are good at spotting small critters. The coral reefs are in good condition. The soft coral is outstanding. There is some small damage to some of the hard coral. There are vast quantities of small fish. Of course there are no large fish, but that is true almost everywhere now. We found a large variety of octopus including a "mimic" and a "blue ring," moray eels, different nudibranchs. Large numbers of frogfish were on the wrecks. Seahorses were in the grasses just off the resort.

The resort has a dive package of 4 dives a day; for those divers who cannot do that, it would be cheaper to pay for each diver — about \$25 US per dive. The night dive runs about \$30 US. Also the resort runs a 3-tank dive to Verde Island for \$30 US. The dive site is outstanding. The resort will take you out even if nobody else signs up for the diving. I had my own dive boat and guide twice. Overall the diving is outstanding. You can also get a meal package if you don't want to try the local places to eat. The food at the restaurant is good and if you do not see anything on the menu that you like, the cook will do his best to make something for you. The best-run resort I have been to in 23 years of diving. If you don't play pool or drink, there is nothing to do at night. The few places they call discos are where all the bar girls are, so they are not really discos. The dive resort provides a general tip box for the staff so you do not have to try to tip individual staff if you do not want to. My trip was booked with worldofdiving.com.

Calypso Dive Center, Pinjolo Villas, June, 2005 John Crossley, Fresno, CA.

When you fly to Caticlan from Cebu, be careful about your baggage limits, both check-in and carry on, because of excess baggage fees. From Caticlan there is a poorly managed boat service to Boracay. I waited inside a cramped little boat with limited ventilation for 20 minutes on a hot sunny day, while the ferry crew stood by waiting to cram a few more bodies on board. On my return, I paid a couple extra dollars and took a private ferry shuttle. Boracay is mostly a beach resort and not a dive destination. It has lots of choices for lodging and diving,

many of which cater to the Korean market who smoke constantly and talk loudly while the nightly entertainers at the beach bars try to sing. Lots of shops, bars, parasail boats, and other entertainment. Calypso probably has the nicest dive operation on the beach, with a nice little pool, restaurant, and bar. Pinjolo Villas had very nice rooms about three blocks back from the beach so it was not as noisy as the beachfront resorts. Calypso also has some rooms next to the dive center but they were smaller and noisier. The Calypso Dive operation was pretty good, using large bancas at the beach. However, they ran as much as an hour late while we waited for beginners to finish their pool lessons. We had a separate divemaster for the experienced divers. Most dive sites had only 40 to 50 ft. visibility and pretty mediocre diving. Boracay has lots to offer for a beach vacation, but not so much to offer a serious diver.

Oasis Resort, June 2005. John Crossley, Fresno, CA. SeaQuest Dive Center arranged my transfer back to Cebu from Moalboal, and a fast ferry from Cebu to Bohol, where the Oasis Resort provided ground transfer to their resort on Alona Beach. Oasis, Sumisid, and SeaQuest are owned and managed by a Dutchman named B.J. The Oasis Resort is nicer than Sumisid, has a pool, and sits on a nicer beach in a beautiful setting of palm trees. It costs more, but is a good value. The restaurant has lots of choices. There are good restaurants up and down Alona Beach, and more bars and entertainment and shopping. Water averaged 84 and visibility was 60 to 80 feet. Bohol has excellent sites for macro critters. Arco Point had two

red pygmy seahorses, a yellow ornate ghost pipefish, many nudibranchs, eels, clownfish, and two sea moths in the sand. Other sites had several types of frogfish, coral crabs, cleaner shrimps, ghost pipefish, and more. I saw at least one ornate ghost pipefish on every one of my seven dives. The dive staff does a good job of finding critters. A more distant site, Balicasag Island, had nice soft corals, a school of large barracuda, nice sea fans, a school of jacks, and of course the ghost pipefish. Fun day tours of Bohol: some ancient churches, a scenic river trip, and the "Chocolate Hills" that look like Hershey's kisses in the late afternoon sun.

Sumisid Lodge, June, 2005 John Crossley, Fresno, CA. This trip was organized by SeaQuest Dive Center (www.seaquestdivecenter.ph), which operates both the Sumisid Lodge in Moalboal, and the Oasis Resort, on Alona Beach in Bohol. Seaquest arranged all the transfers, lodging and diving at a great price. Sumisid Lodge is on a funky little strip of beach in Moalboal, a 3-hour car ride from Cebu airport. It's got small dive resorts, restaurants, shops and bars. The beach is not great for nondivers. Sumisid Lodge is on the beach, with 11 basic, clean rooms, five of which have AC. The chef does an excellent job with fresh fish dinners with several other choices available. Their mango shakes are super. Staff is friendly and helpful. The dive shop is small with decent rental equipment. You can leave your gear in the shop overnight. They use two wooden pangas to get to nearby dive sites, and it was never crowded. We went out at 9 am and 2 pm, but they will go more often if you want. Water

averaged 82 and visibility 40 to 100 feet. The best dive sites were on Pescador Island, with nice soft corals, sea fans, schools of Jacks, and good tropical fish selection with an occasional frogfish and turtle. Sites closer to the resort had good variety of macro critters including mantis shrimp, lionfish, nudibranchs, clown fish, etc. We had four black and white banded sea snakes on one dive.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

There are a couple small dive operations on the out islands and a couple large live-aboards, but the beautiful reefs and good tropical fish life (some bigger fish too) are worth the long trip. Outside Honiara, the people are friendly and visitors are again traveling freely.

Dive Gizo, Adventure Sports, Gizo Hotel, July 2005, Richard Haines (haines2430@msn.com), Colorado Springs, CO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F., calm. The flights there are carefully orchestrated, so if you miss one connection, you might find yourself hanging around for an extra day or two or seven. The Gizo Hotel is the best place on the island. Rooms are plain but clean, comfortable, with lots of room, and it has a small pool. There isn't a phone or TV, but each room does have a fridge, and our room was air conditioned. The staff is friendly. All the fresh water is rainwater, collected off the roofs and stored in cisterns. Bottled water is available and runs about 50 cents (US) to a dollar at the hotel. Meals and drinks are charged to your room. Sodas are about