

boat was a bit tricky. We saw a gray shark and an immense Maori wrasse. On Cyclone Wall, we saw numerous nudibranchs. We ended both dives early since we were cold, but the dive guides left the water after a few minutes because they were so cold. We went for a twilight dive on the Tufi Jetty. There was a considerable amount of trash. We did see several banded pipe fish, an anemone with two tiny black percula-like clown fish, and a juvenile sweetlips. The best dives were at Bev's Bommie. There was high current and I used a reef hook to stabilize myself. The top of the bommie, at the mooring line, is scrubbed clean by the current. We saw two gray sharks together with two trailing remora. There were also 2 small white tip sharks. The wall was swarming with fish. A beautiful scorpion fish rested on a sponge. We also saw many nudibranchs including several large funeral joruna. I spotted a tiny (maybe quarter to half inch) rockmover wrasse. The dive guides, JT (short for John Thomas) and Evelyn, were enthusiastic and helpful. JT prided himself on calling sharks for us (I have to admit to being skeptical about how effective this is) and finding unusual nudibranchs. He was the one dive guide that stuck with us even when the others had left because of the cold. The boat itself was a bit shabby, with torn upholstery, and there was difficulty starting the motor a few times. The cars for getting a lift to and from diving were in pretty shabby shape as well. The ride to and from the dive shop was so uncomfortable that we took to walking up and down the steep road. The resort itself is a bit of a fortress. Every effort is made to keep local people off the property. Gates open and shut rapidly to let the resort's cars in. There are guards posted at the gate and patrolling the grounds. We

visited a nearby village and were warmly welcomed but heard there were other nearby villages that were not as friendly. The rooms were adequate and air conditioned — important not because it was hot but because the mosquitoes were out in droves. Our room had a deck overlooking the fjords and the view was spectacular. The dining/reception area is comfortable and beautifully maintained. The dinner was consistently delicious and beautifully presented. On Sunday night, they prepared a barbeque out on the large deck overlooking the fjord. This feast included lobster, spicy crab, fish, spicy noodles, fried rice, and local vegetables.

## PHILIPPINES

One can get a great week of diving and accommodations here for roughly \$1000 — much less if you're adventurous — so more North American divers have the Philippines on their radar screen. Major dive areas are concentrated around Batangas, Mindoro, Palawan, and the Visayas. The reefs 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).

**Atlantis Dive Resorts, Puerto Galera November 2005, Lucius "Bud" Foster (elijahsdad@prodigy.net), Duluth, MN.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 76 to 80 F, choppy. I have traveled all over surfing and diving. I have realized that I am safer out of the USA than in it. Truth is, Americans are more likely to be murdered and kidnapped in the USA than in most places we travel to for diving. I believe most people are

fundamentally good and a smile is the same in every language. I arrived in Manila and the Atlantis people had a person waiting for me after I got out of customs. He took me for a 2-hour ride to a large Bangka with outriggers that took me to Puerto Galera. When we pulled up to the dock, the manager was waiting and workers hauled all my bags and camera equipment to my room. The GM gave me the tour and explained how everything worked. Puerto Galera is south of Manila on the island of Mindoro. It is a small ocean town tucked into a bay right on the beach with a sidewalk that goes from one end of the bay on the beach to the other. There are many small dive resorts, bars with loud music, restaurants, little shops selling tourist stuff and what seemed like a lot of young women all with a huge grin on their faces; I could not tell if they were hookers or just really happy to see a man. It is a little beach party town where I spent my first 10 dive days. The diving was good and exceptional for the macro lens and divers who enjoy the small stuff. On my first dive at Sabang Wreck, I saw tons of crinoids, three types of lion fish, a huge black frog fish, school of bat fish, sturgeon fish, ghost pipefish, mantis shrimp, six species of clown fish, scorpion fish, a large seahorse, and these cool little fish that swarmed the bottom that looked like little catfish. At a dive site called "Sharks Cove" where the white tip sharks always seemed to be tucked under a ledge. We took a special trip to Verde Island where the visibility was up to 60' and the diving was full of small stuff and what seemed like curtains and curtains of small school fish. I really enjoyed the resort. The food was great, the pool was clean, my room was cute with stucco walls and bright colored interior design, and

I don't think I spent any more money than it would cost to take a trip the Caribbean. Back to Manila where I took a plane to their Atlantis resort in Dumaguete on the island of Negros, about 150 miles north of Mindano. Dumaguete is quiet, on a private beach surrounded by beautiful palms, and while looking back at the resort from the Bangkas on the water, you see in the distance a huge dormant volcano. The food was excellent. The room was on par with their other resort, clean, comfortable and cozy, and the staff at both locations was topnotch. It was inexpensive. The diving in Dumaguete was topnotch muck diving and the resort shore dive was one of the best I have been to and it is just a bunch of tires home to many critters. At Apo Island, the reef had more varieties of coral that I have seen in one place. It looks like it did thousands of years ago, I'm sure. At both Puerto Galera and Dumaguete the Bangka boats had really no place for cameras except between your feet. Most dive sites were within 5 min. so when you were done back at Atlantis resorts where they have a big fresh water tank to rinse your camera equipment and an excellent indoor designated camera room to work on your camera with computers hooked up for e-mail, etc.

**Atlantis Dive Resort, March 2006, Bill Knoblauch (scubaguy@starstream.net), Lincoln, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 60 Feet. Water: 76 to 79 F, choppy, currents, no currents. The staff is wonderful, and the diving is good. However this trip, the vis was the worse I've seen, but still acceptable. For those who like macro photography, this is the place. Dive guides are attentive and helpful, but if you want them to leave you alone, let them know, but stay within sight of your group underwater.

Largest group that goes out is eight divers with one dive guide. The dive boat is always nearby. The farthest dive site is about 15 minutes away. We were in a group of 15, so we had to eat our meals buffet style. Small groups can order off the menu, plus if one desires something special (not on the buffet table), one needs only to ask. Atlantis has a nice photo/computer room with adaptors for 110 volts. Also have computers available. Photo processing at Fuji is about a 5 minute walk from the resort.

**Atlantis Beach Resort, March 2006, Roger Dennis (rcdennis@pobox.com), San Jose, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. Long flight from San Francisco, refuel at Guam, 16 hours in the air, 20 hours enroute. Left at night, arrived 9:30am, lost a day over the dateline. Long, slow 3 hour bus ride to beach, loaded aboard a double outrigger and 80 minutes later arrived at Sabang, Mindoro. Low tide forced a reloading into smaller boat to get to beach. Nice facilities, rooms w/ AC, good dive operation although we seldom got the 4 dives per day due to slowness of the operation and lateness by some of our group members. Our divemasters required a check dive that afternoon we arrived – we were dog tired with little sleep but we did just fine. Our divemaster, the next day, tended to swim ahead of us near the end of the dive – no way to get her attention if one was low on air. Spoke to her after the dives that day (only 3) and suggested she stay closer to the group. She responded well and no problems after that—Ulrika is a smart 35 year old Swedish girl who only stood 5'1" but handled tanks with the best of them. On a scale of 1-10 (ten being highest) we would rank the overall

diving site quality as a 3 —we are in our young 60s although I had my first tanks on in 1959 as a 15 year-old on Okinawa taking my scuba certification courses. We had a special one-day trip to Verde Island. Due to boat engine troubles, we had to change boats and arrived late. The divesite is a lava sea mount offshore from the island by about 2 miles. We were briefed to stay together and be aware of up/down wellings. In many ways it reminded us of Blue Corner in Palau. On the second dive after lunch they took us back to the same site. Due to the choppiness of the water I refused to dive that one as it looked too treacherous for safe diving. Ruth, my wife, went anyway. The groups came back to the surface but were separated. There was a bad down welling and one of the divers had just finished his 15ft safety stop with 500psi when he was caught and drug downward. One of the divemasters went after him and they finally got out of the down welling but were now over 100ft down from the surface. The diver held onto the divemaster and use the octopus for air as he had emptied his tank into his BC. The divemaster's BC was fully inflated. They made a fast ascent to the surface but did stop at 30ft and 15ft. They were okay but it really shook up the group. The third dive was cancelled. This was definitely a dive for only experienced divers. And even the experienced ones has second thoughts about what had happened and whether they should have scrubbed themselves from the dive. Overall, the diving is okay but no large fish or great coral formations. The boat ride to most sites takes 5-10 minutes so we did get to come back ashore after each dive.

**Atlantis Dive Resort, Puerto Galera, April 2006, John Crossley, Fresno, CA. (jcrossle@csufresno.edu)** Experience:

Over 1000 dives. Water: 79-80 F. This was my forth trip back to the Atlantis Resort. The clean and air-conditioned rooms are nice, with lots of well thought out cubby-hole shelves to put things. Staff are great, the dive operation professional, and the diving excellent for macro photographers. The visibility ranged from 40 to 80 feet. Lots of great macro critters including many types of nudibranchs, mantis shrimps, and several pygmy seahorses. This trip we also saw a huge tuna and a couple big turtles. My fiancé came along to try a "Discover Scuba" course, and her instructor, Allen, was masterful. She went on three dives led by Allen or Rufo (one of the best macro critter finders I've seen), and they did a great job with her. There are many restaurant choices near the Atlantis Resort and I try to get the "full-board" option just half the time because their restaurant is their only weak link. I hope their new chef is as good as Jake, the chef at the Atlantis in Dumaguette. That's awesome food at the Dumaguette Atlantis.

**Atlantis, July 2006, Roger Dunton (dunton@bigfoot.com), Scotts Valley, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm, choppy, no currents. Main road (really a walking path) runs through hotel. Lots of vendors hawking their wares, but not allowed into resort. Nice ambiance inside resort. Good pool with waterfall. Clean, attractive rooms. Excellent service. Very friendly, happy staff. Hour long massages for \$10-\$15. Lots of diving (4 boat dives per day available plus optional night dive). No beach diving as all the town's and resort's boats are tied up on shore with lots of boat traffic. Lots of good small stuff. No bigger stuff. The closer you got, the more you found. Close sites within a couple of minutes from shore.

Corals were relatively healthy, but not colorful. Viz was weak (40-60', sometimes 80'). Overall, a good bargain. Lots of frogfish, lionfish everywhere, leaf fish, nudis, etc.

**Atlantis, July 2006, Eldon Okazaki (eokazaki@juno.com), Sunnyvale, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 81 to 83 F, calm. Few biting insects for 5 of 7 days; maybe Vit. B-1 works to keep biting insects off. The resort was good; natives friendly. Staff at resort and diving were service-oriented w/ or w/o tips. Most of the staff try hard to please you. Head man of diving is Rudy who is popular with German and other divers; he's also good divemaster. Resort has racks for 35 divers but they are expanding. During the weekend, the resort was at least ½ full. Food was tasty and good if not gourmet every meal. Diving was good at Apo island; Apo island reminds me of Fiji diving with colorful soft coral and lionfish.; others thought local diving was good. Marine life is unusual compared to Hawaii, Mexico and Caribbean diving. Travel in May or Sept. when air fare is low — \$579.

**Atlantis Dive Resort, Puerto Galera, September 2006, Joel Snyder (jms@opus1.com), Tucson, AZ.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 25 Feet. Water: 79 to 85 F, calm, surge. A friendly, high-service quality resort. Everyone made a serious effort to learn your name and was helpful at all times. Dives were 4 x a day via 5-10-minute boat ride. Currents varied from "none" to "Whoa.." Limits on bottom time of 50 to 60 per dive were not too bad given that we were doing 4 dives a day. Rental gear no problem, but no computers. I rented a wet suit, but the water was so warm that I didn't use it after the first dive. Puerto Galera is 2.5 hours by

minivan + 50 minutes by boat from central Manila (arranged by resort with great efficiency!); if you are going to go direct to resort and not tour Manila, pick an overnight hotel near the airport as you have to drive past airport to get south to Puerto Galera/Mindoro Island. Rooms are spare; ask for one of the 4 "executive rooms" if you want more space and a private/semi-private balcony. Be prepared for lots of stair climbing! My rate included meals, but you could go a la carte since there are many restaurants within 5 minute walk of the resort. Diving was typical of S. Pacific with lots of lionfish, frogfish, clownfish, many soft corals. Few hard corals; lots of reef fish (smaller size). Few pelagics at the sites we visited. Great for video and photo macro. Incredible nudibranch collection everywhere. Facilities for tech divers/rebreathers no problem. He/O2 easily available and expert instruction if you wanted it. Currents (surge really) could be tough for beginners on some dives.

**El Dorado Beach Resort, February 2006, Phil Gans (PGans@PGans.com), Golden, CO.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, choppy. The El Dorado Resort near Dumaguete on the Island of Negros in the Philippines was nice. The accommodations were simple, clean, comfortable and inexpensive. The least expensive were just fine, and you could upgrade to ocean view and nicer accommodations. The beach was dark sand, and you could walk a long ways. There were resorts and squatter houses along the shore. The dive operation was well run, though some of the dive masters were more interested in impressing their owner than providing service. Most guests were Germans and Swiss, and there were not a lot of divers from the USA. They were not as

friendly a group as I have had before, but that may have just been when I was there (or maybe it is just me.) One of the dive masters was from the US. He and the Philippine dive master spoke English. The other dive masters spoke adequate English, but they were more interested in the owner and the German and Swiss guests. Weather was supposed to be good in February, but it was cloudy most of the time, and even rainy some of the time. The most interesting diving was at Apo Island. Boat rides there, and mostly back, were time consuming, and could be rough. The boat was only OK, and could not handle the chop on the way back well. The last few days I took my wind breaker, and was more comfortable. The dives were interesting and fun. The corals and sponges were beautiful. We saw frog fish, scorpion fish, turtles, lion fish, manta shrimp, rock fish, tons of clown fish, occasional barracuda, nudibranchs, sea snakes, and all kinds of reef fish. We got to stay down practically as long as we liked. Of the 16 dives I did, I think that only one was less than an hour. They provide complimentary nitrox. Their prices are reasonable. I am picky on food, and the food at the resort was good and varied. I got a package with all meals included, and I never had a bad meal. I managed to obtain a good fare to Manila, and reasonable fares to Dumaguette. The charges at the hotel for accommodations, food, and diving were low.

**Johnny's Dive and Fun, Secret Cove, June 2006, John Crossley, Fresno, CA.** (jcrossle@csufresno.edu) Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 40 to 100 feet. Water: 82 F. Reaching Camiguin Island is similar to going from Cagayan De Oro to Mantangale, but there is an additional short ferry ride to the island.

There are several resorts on the laid-back island, and I stayed at one of the cheapest, Secret Cove and the primary location of the best dive service, Johnny's Dive and Fun. Rooms were not as nice as at Mantangale, and there were fewer choices on the restaurant menu. I was the only diver for the three days, so I got to dive wherever I wanted. Though a couple dives were just average, the dives I made at "Old Volcano" had the most prolific and prettiest soft corals I have seen in the Philippines; and better than any I've seen in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Palau, or Australia, though not quite as good as several spots in Fiji. Allen, the dive guide, found a beautiful little white frogfish just off White Island, and found other macro critters, including a pygmy seahorse. Overall, Secret Cove is not as nice as Mantangale, but it dives the west side of Camiguin Island that the Mantangale boats don't often get to. Doing both resorts in a two-week package would make a lot of sense and be good diving at fair prices.

**Mantangale Alibuag Dive Resort, January/June 2006, John Crossley (jcrossle@csufresno.edu), Fresno, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 feet (January); 40 to 80 feet (June). Water: 78 F (January); 82 F (June). The Mantangale Alibuag Dive Resort is about a two hour ride north of Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao. A van arranged by the resort is quickest, but a public bus from the city is much cheaper. The Mantangale resort is on a beautifully landscaped hillside overlooking the sea. It has an excellent swimming pool and a children's playground, pool tables, and other amenities. There are 17 clean but fairly basic cottages (with TV and AC) spread across the hillside plus some larger and nicer "executive suites." The restaurant has a variety of choices

and the meals were prepared well. There is also a small dive shop and gift shop. Diving is from one of their 2-3 open V hull boats with shade. Upon request, fresh water was supplied for camera rinse. I never had a dive with more than 4 divers. Some dives were done in the bay close to the resort, or a 45-minute boat ride over to the east coast of Camiguin Island. The dive guides, including the helpful owner, Dodong Uy, were good at spotting small critters and helping with camera equipment. Several dive spots had excellent soft corals, some spots had lots of nudibranchs and other macro critters, some had lots of the usual tropical fish, and some had combinations of everything except big fish and pelagics. Other highlights were sea snakes, frogfish, cuttlefish, scorpionfish, and two pygmy seahorses (at Lapinig). We had a Mandarin fish dive site at dusk, but on this night they were too shy to do their mating dance, though we could see several in the coral rubble. Reasonable price. Two-minute hike up the hillside to the resort after diving. It is easy to fly into Cagayan de Oro from Manila, and the area seems to be safe.

**Philippine Island Divers, SunApartelle, January 2006, Michael Hofman (hofman@jmoyerlandscaping.com), San Francisco, CA.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, choppy, currents, no currents. There were a number of interesting sites, some variety in fish life and good support from the dive organization. Although there are a number of dive operations at this location, they are the most professional we found. We dove for three days with another operation which had a great dive master, but boat operations and captains were terrible (drinking beer while we were diving, one rented boat

couldn't start so divers were waiting for almost an hour for a pick up after a dive). Accordingly, our experience with Philippine Island Divers was completely professional. They were able to supply Nitrox (even found a leak in the seal of the tank before a dive and were able to get another tank within 15 minutes); the divemasters were interested in showing nudis, cleaner shrimp and other special items without being cloying and the support organization was great. Our hotel was away from the beach and was quite pleasant. It had a great pool and each room was a mini-apartment with a complete kitchen and balcony. Stop at the supermarket before you leave the city you fly into for provisions, as there are only small shops by Alona Beach. There are some good restaurants (especially an Italian restaurant on the road to the beach) and other features to make this a nice destination. Manila is not the easiest airport to find food (at any hour) and expect to go through security about 10,000 times. Luggage and customs is also strange ... but the people are great and the country is beautiful! UW Photography Comments: The operation is not particularly set up for UWP, as most divers are not as experienced. No facilities on board the boats and on shore facilities have camera wash with regulators.

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

While difficult to get to, the Solomons are classic jungle islands with beautiful reefs and excellent fish life.

**Dive Gizo, Gizo Hotel, August 2006, Dee (deemickey@mindspring.com), Madison, AL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. We spent a day in

Brisbane, then took Solomon Air to Honiara and on to Gizo. The flights offer fantastic views of islands, reefs and sea. The Solomons exist in a different time and we benefitted from reading Ples Blong Iumii, local history written by Solomon Islanders. (Guadalcanal was in the Honiara area. Kennedy Island, where JFK and PT109 crew survived, is a surface interval near Gizo.) Allen and Rueben, Dive Gizo divemasters, met us at the Gizo airport and carried our bags to the boat for the short trip to town. The Gizo Hotel remains clean and simple, lovely courtyard around the pool, A/C and fridge, no TV. We had a great view across the main street (sand) to the water. The restaurant is good. Take your own coffee press if you don't want instant. No bugs or mosquitoes, just a few gnats at the bath sink. Danny and Kerrie at Dive Gizo are wonderful hosts! They've been there for 18 years and will do all they can to accommodate you. We scheduled 3 dives a day for 5 days. All surface intervals are on out-islands with beautiful beaches. Lunch and snacks provided. Little current and more fish than one could imagine. We did Grand Central Station twice. Jenny at Reef and Rainforest, who arranged our trip, noted Grand Central is one of the best dives she's ever done. We sat at 90 meters at the edge of the wall and watched schools and schools of fish. The school of barracuda covered 150 degrees of our 360 degree view, at least 8 fish deep.. The rest of the panorama was schools of fusiliers, trevally, batfish and others. The Tao Maru is great even if you're not into wrecks, home to a wide variety of fish, critters and corals with many relics of the boat cargo, including a 2-person Japanese tank. Almost every dive started with 30 meters and finished at 10 meters or less,