

We had dropped in on Fantasea Reef just moments before, after a two-minute (really) boat ride from the resort's beach. The shallow site is a sprawling, complex collection of hard and soft corals, intermittent sand patches, vibrant colours and loads of life. Today, we were on a mission – the afternoon before, we had found two pygmy seahorses (*Hippocampus bargibanti*), hidden in the branches of a massive red gorgonian fan, the male hugely pregnant (as 'huge' as a tiny seahorse can be, anyway). I had been shooting with a 60mm micro lens and had images of the miniscule creatures, but they were just not quite as close-up as I wanted. Today, I had a 105mm macro and was ready.

We quickly found the place, but to our surprise, someone else had already laid claim to the spot – a gigantic green turtle was rubbing its lovely shell back and forth against the trunk and lower branches of the fan, causing the branches to sway like a tree in a violent wind. Being respectful of the turtle, we tried to find the seahorses without disturbing it. We soon located the head-of-a-pin-small male, but my attempts to focus the 105mm in the turtle-produced gale were both dizzying and hopeless. I looked up at Rodil, my dive guide, and gradually my bemused smile turned to chuckles, then broke into one of those mask-filling bouts of underwater laughter that only divers can truly appreciate.

We waited patiently for a while, until Rodil finally moved over to the turtle to gently push it away, but it resisted, refusing to give up its prime rubbing-post. This went on for a while until the turtle finally relented – although it didn't leave, but kept coming back for another go. I managed to slip into the spot where the seahorse was perched, tail wrapped around a small branch, and, with the turtle watching closely, began shooting.

I remember thinking that a wide-angle lens would have captured an amazing series of images of the turtle in this situation, but... as I mentioned, I had a 105mm on (I did manage a very nice close-up of the turtle's face and one of the nearly metre-long, yellow and green shark suckers on its back, however.) And, oh yeah, I got my pygmy seahorse, yes indeed.

As special as this particular dive was, in my four and a half days of four and five dives a day, from early mornings on into the nights, it was really just one of many special dives. In all my years of diving, I can honestly say that I have never before seen such a remarkable, multitudinous array of exotic marine life – especially unusual macro creatures – as I found around Puerto Galera. Whether on coral reefs, in sandy-muck channels, on grass beds, around an ocean pinnacle off a neighbouring island or even on a nearby offshore wreck – the 30m-deep Alma Jane – every dive was a 'creatures on parade' experience. Given the location, in the heart of bio-diversity for the world's oceans, I

guess this shouldn't have been a complete surprise, but the remarkable richness of the life there... still was. The night dives were, if anything, even more amazing, with something new and exotic seemingly every few moments.

The ease of the diving also made finding 'more' simple to accomplish... with the boats just steps away from the Atlantis Dive Resort's gear lockers, and boat rides generally a matter of a few minutes, doing four to five dives a day was not a strain, with plenty of time between dives for a hot shower, a meal, coffee or tea, camera prep and so on. And, the sharp-eyed dive guides knew their home territory and its resident denizens very well, indeed.

It's difficult to choose a list of favourite sites but, like Fantasea Reef, a number of them stood out. One would be the location of my first dive upon arrival (and a couple of my night dives), an area just minutes straight out from the resort called Sabang (named for the town, Sabang Port and its bay). Averaging 15m and less of depth, it's an area of shipwreck debris, sand and intermittent coral patches, with turtle grass beds toward shore. ▶

Marine life EXTRAVAGANZA IN THE PHILIPPINES

After the delights of Dumaguete, Al Hornsby moved to Puerto Galera and found it defied all of his expectations, delivering some truly unique diving experiences

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL HORNSBY



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My first dive there was memorable – we quickly found a large, orange giant frogfish, and shortly thereafter, one of the creatures on my ‘hoped-for’ shot list peeked out of its lair beneath a small coral head – a large, brilliantly- colored peacock mantis shrimp. It was shy at first, continually ducking back into its hole, but finally it emerged and moved quickly away. I followed slowly, giving it space, but keeping it in sight until it ducked into another hole. As I approached, the bold mantis (they are indeed bold), apparently tired of being followed, suddenly came out, marched across the sand to me and stood up in challenge, allowing me a series of very close images. Just moments later, my guide, Aires, excitedly pointed toward a whitish, pebbled area on the sea floor.. where I could see – nothing. He kept insistently pointing – obviously at something very, very small. I looked more closely and finally saw an exquisite, less than pea-sized, white, juvenile blue-ringed octopus, who made a splendid image.

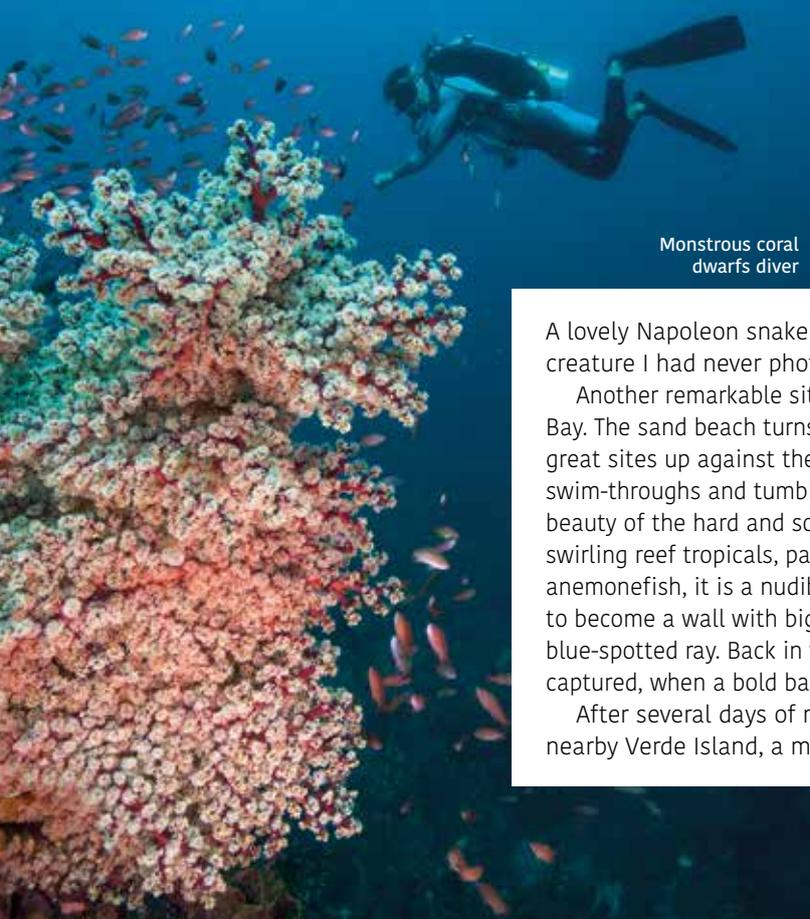
In this same area on night dives, I also photographed – among many others - a lovely fingered dragonette, which went into full display as I approached, two pairs of sea moths, several peacock flounders, an intricately-patterned dwarf lionfish and a large, hairy hermit crab in a huge Triton's trumpet shell, which came marching out of the darkness across the sand bottom, coming right to our lights.



Lionfish sheltering near seastar



Pygmy seahorse



Monstrous coral dwarfs diver

A lovely Napoleon snake eel, head sticking up out of its burrow, was also an exotic creature I had never photographed before.

Another remarkable site was reached by a quick trip around the point from Sabang Bay. The sand beach turns to steep, jungled iron-shore, and Sinandigan was one of several great sites up against the coastline. Underwater, the shallows are a maze of crevices, swim-throughs and tumbled coral gardens, in clear, still water. Beyond the colourful beauty of the hard and soft corals, whip corals (with whip coral shrimp and gobies), swirling reef tropicals, patches of yellow sea cucumbers and many anemones with anemonefish, it is a nudibranch treasure-trove. Down the slope, the drop turns steep, to become a wall with bigger fish, turtles, and many overhangs – one was home to a blue-spotted ray. Back in the shallows toward dive's end, another ‘shot list image’ was captured, when a bold banded krait interrupted its feeding to swim directly to my camera.

After several days of macro, we headed eastward on a 50-minute boat-ride to nearby Verde Island, a mountainous isle that rises out of the sea. Just offshore, the

Lionfish



ATLANTIS DIVE RESORT PUERTO GALERA

For the resort and dive operation, a PADI five-star Dive Centre, the owners' designed goal was 'To create a great resort that makes sure guests don't have to sacrifice anything in their search for the best diving'. They work to provide an all-inclusive offering centred on great service, great diving, modern, comfortable rooms, wide-ranging activities (including a luxurious spa), delicious food and a friendly, well-trained staff.

The resort's 40 rooms, which extend from near the beach up a hillside for wonderful views of Sabang Bay, have full facilities and amenities, including Wi-Fi. Atlantis Dive Resorts and Liveboards operates Atlantis Dive Resorts Puerto Galera and Dumaguete, as well as the liveboard vessel, Atlantis Azores.

www.atlantishotel.com

top of a submerged pinnacle is visible, which provided us two remarkable dives along an area called The Drop-off. On the first, we dropped down to 30m on a brisk current along a steep, gorgonian, soft coral and barrel sponge-blanketed wall, swirling fish surrounding us – including bands of spadefish and a large school of long-jawed mackerel. In calm water around a corner, we saw grouper, snapper, sweetlips and hordes of reef fish, plus several large, green turtles. On our second dive, we stayed more shallow and discovered a brightly-coloured wall area completely covered with soft corals and sponges, home to many fish and several very calm banded kraits nosing about the nooks and crannies.

My most-productive dive, however, was saved for last, my final dive before packing up the gear and heading home. On the side of Puerto Galera away from Sabang Bay are several small islands that create a series of protected, sand-bottomed channels – the sites for muck-diving in its truest sense. One called The Hill is a series of sandy slopes with a winding, 20m-deep channel meandering inbetween. This particular afternoon, a large dive group had just left the resort, and a couple of the guides, having nothing on their dive schedules, asked if they could go along with us. What resulted was unique – the four of us, spaced about ten metres apart in a long line, effectively covered nearly 40 metres of bottom. As we moved along, wagging lights and tank-banging from both sides had me constantly moving from discovery to discovery for a non-stop 75 minutes, even into a long, safety stop. At The Hill, shooting hundreds of frames, I got images of several pairs of spiny waspfish, flamboyant cuttlefish and eggs, an unusual ocelated poison octopus who stood up in a defensive posture (they bite from underneath, of course) on tip-toes for a portrait, three species of seahorse, a goldbar sand diver, an unusual chiagra mantis, magnificus shrimp on tube anemones, a seldom-seen rubrolineata nudibranch, stumpy-spined and reaper cuttlefish, an unusual saddled snake eel... the list goes on, and on – wow.

Peacock mantis shrimp heads for cover



This dive trip was one that takes its place as special, even after so many years of being fortunate enough to dive many of the world's most-celebrated locations. And, as other divers and couples I met at the resort told me, the surrounding town of Sabang Port, a small, bustling, resort-beach village of winding streets lined with restaurants, bars and clubs, was of itself a vacation treat. For me however, I never made it out on the town – with every dive being so remarkable, I could not have been tempted to miss even one. ■

Flamboyant cuttlefish



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Lush topside scenery

