

SHOAL ON A ROLL IN MOALBOAL



It's a cast of thousands that makes the tiny island of Pescador a must-visit Philippines dive site, but the whole of the nearby Moalboal peninsula is packed with diver treats, says STEVE WEINMAN

WE'VE BEEN TAKING IT EASY, drifting gently around the tiny island's steep wall, aware that we're enjoying the starter but that the main course can't be far away. There's no rush; Pescador is a case of delayed gratification.

The wall drops to 60m or so, then gradually slopes off into the hundreds. We're up at about 20m now. Looming from the wall is a big pink frogfish, perched awkwardly among a crop of pink and blue tube sponges draped with worm-like white and orange sea cucumbers. The arrangement puts me in mind of a gargoye on a cathedral buttress. We take it in from all angles, then move on.

Before we reach the shallower ledges to the north-east, something starts to happen. Small clouds are swirling ahead. Gradually they grow bigger, until suddenly I'm looking up to realise I'm already in the midst of the action.

Sardines are darting in all directions – thousands on thousands of them!

My head is darting in all directions, too, taking in the scale of this phenomenon. The synchronised fish

are constantly morphing into fantastical shapes – ribbons, giant footprints, a whale, plumes of smoke, a vast balloon. There are showers and explosions of light as they swerve in formation or crash away from the main group, daylight catching their flanks. It's nature's own screensaver.

I become aware of the dive-boat – it has moved round to meet us as we've dived clockwise around Pescador.

For a moment a smaller school of sardines beneath the hull appears to mimic the boat's shape before breaking away into new formations.

You'd expect bait in such enormous volumes to attract predators, and I can see small patrols and the odd individual jack, tuna and snapper cruising for snacks. The sardines of Pescador move up from the deeps each day, and have been doing so for the past three years. How often do divers get the chance to see such a sight on a regular basis?

"Thresher sharks come here from time to time, too," Arie Hoogendoorn tells me. The Dutch diver and his partner Desiree Pullens run the aptly named Magic Island dive resort at





Moalboal on the mainland. “They have been filmed – it’s incredible to watch. They whip their long tails and you can actually hear the crack.”

The sonic boom created by that whipcrack stuns the sardines.

“The sharks turn back and curve this way and that, picking up the fish,” says Arie. “But we don’t really advertise the threshers, because if people come expecting to see them, they might feel disappointed. The sharks are here only from time to time.”

Impressive honesty, especially as I note a few months later that another Moalboal dive centre is claiming to be seeing threshers regularly at Pescador.

There are some dozen operations in

Moalboal, but long-established Magic Island appears to be prominent, not least as a leader in local environmental and social initiatives.

We’re diving in the Visayas area of the central Philippines. Pescador lies a short boat-ride off the Moalboal peninsula, which is located in the south-west of the large island of Cebu.

If you want to see threshers, head for Cebu’s other diver magnet, the island about five hours’ drive north that has become synonymous with these rare sharks – Malapascua.

That’s what I did, and enjoyed manta action and much else into the bargain, but that’s another story.

Thresher sightings at Pescador would be a wonderful bonus, but you don’t need them to make Moalboal your goal.

Even without the sardines, this would be a stand-out location.

After an hour’s interval, we’re back in the water to photograph dive-guide Manuel with the sardines – on the reef plateau below the boat and back down off the walls.

Eventually my camera battery gives up, and I’m pleased simply to hang out and enjoy the shape-shifting spectacle.

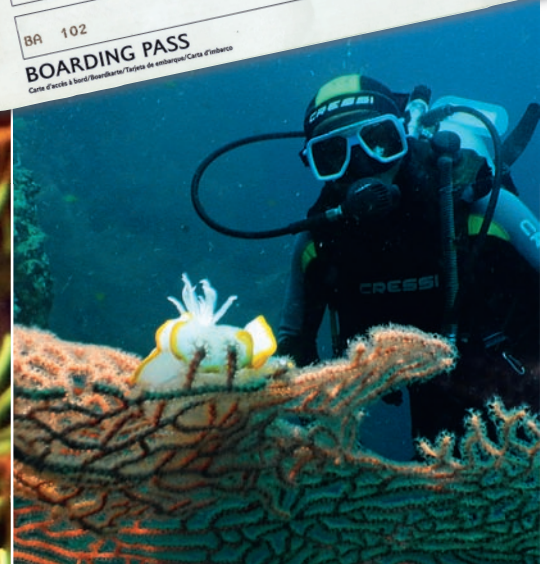
WE DRIVE BACK OUT to Pescador that same evening to circumnavigate the whole island in a night dive that enters my hit-list with a bullet.

The sardines can no longer be seen, but the frogfish is still standing sentry and the walls, their hard and soft corals, sponges and delicate anemones glowing with colour under our lights, host a rich collection of night life.

As the fish settle down to rest, out comes the crustacean army, coral crabs and shrimps of all kinds. One characterful crab is dragging an enormous security blanket of yellow sponge around. A clown frogfish, gaping morays, countless exotic

Pictured: Dive-guide Manuel watches as some of Pescador’s sardine nation form into a sphere. He gets to see this every week – and whatever predators come looking for food.

Left: Divers board one of the Magic Island banca boats for the short trip to Pescador, which lies a few kilometres away.



expect any number of field days, and not just off Pescador but all over Moalboal.

The Magic Island resort is built on a slope looking out over the sea and has 10 small but comfortable cottages.

There's a bar, a tiny spa, a pool and wi-fi. The lifestyle is land-liveaboard, guests of many nations enjoying the chance to mingle and compare notes at the long table at meal-times.

Arie and Desiree's dry humour and boundless enthusiasm are infectious, the food is tasty, with ample choice, and the friendly local staff make the living easy.

The dive centre is thoughtfully designed and makes use of two *bangka* boats, this being the distinctive Philippines outrigger design that looks to have been styled on a lionfish and provides outstanding stability in all conditions. Not that sea conditions are anything but benign during my four days in Moalboal.

DIVE EIGHT SITES other than Pescador, all from the boats and along the reef that fringes the peninsula to north and south of the resort. Dives tend to last an indulgent hour or more.

I'm taken with the muck-diving at Goby Point, an area of sand largely innocent of coral but an apparent magnet for unusual creatures.

Manuel and I disturb a star-gazer here. Usually all you see are the eyes, the McDonalds arch of a mouth and perhaps its red lure as it waits for passing prey, but out of the sand it turns out to be a very bulky fish.

It digs that bulk back into the sand impressively fast.

Dragon seamoths, *aka* pegasuses, scoot around the bottom, while their

Above left: An ornate ghost pipefish tries to blend in against a background of yellow crinoids

Above right: Nudibranch on a gorgonian on the unmissable Sanctuary wall dive.

Left: Frogfish at Pescador.

Below: Mating mandarin-fish ignore a peeping tom.

cousins the dragonets are happy to stay put for inspection. A banded sea snake lunges at me when my lens gets too close for its liking, and a cast of dozens of ghost pipefish, snake eels, scorpionfish *et al* make the dive a joy.

It's usually just eagle-eyed Manuel and me on the dives, but one of the boatmen, Nelson joins us below sometimes – no dive-kit needed, because riding a cylinder like a bucking bronco works a treat. It's an interesting cross between freediving and scuba!

Desiree eagerly collects sightings of that popular but tricky quarry of macro photographers, pygmy seahorses. The tally seemed to be seven at one point during the week, but they come and go.

If a youthful pygmy makes it to one of the Muricella seafans that alone can sustain it, turning pink/red or yellow/orange to match its host, Desiree reckons its life expectancy is only a matter of months, though I have to say I've found nothing to confirm this.

A little orange specimen at the Fish Feeding site (I'm assured that there is no feeding) proves a challenge to get

nudibranchs – something claims my attention at every moment. Whenever Manuel kindly points out some interesting animal, he has to drag me away from something else.

Someone trains a light skyward to reveal a huge jellyfish pulsating above us – then a green turtle puts in an appearance. It's all aboard the night train. Photographers especially can





into focus, particularly as its tiny body seems quite reflective and lacking in tubercles. Another dive, this time at Tongo Point, also centres on a search of yellow pygmies. The one we find, despite its youth, looks remarkably like Homer Simpson's dad.

The boat takes us out, but the site is near enough to the dive centre that we can take our time and make our own way back under water.

The wall dives are a treat, but best of all is Sanctuary on the northern side of the peninsula, featuring a lush forest of huge gorgonia reaching down to about 40m. It's good to take in the big picture here but you never know what you might find hiding in those branches – on this occasion an *Ardeadoris egretta* nudibranch posing on top of one provides a photo opportunity.

But I'm hardly prepared for the sheer variety of creatures in attendance as we return along the top of the wall – several peacock mantis shrimps looking menacing on their thresholds, porcelain crabs and purple hairy squat lobsters

posing in vast anemone meadows, and a firework-like ghost pipefish trying to be inconspicuous against a background of yellow crinoids. I note a pair of eagle rays as we prepare to take our leave.

On another deep wall we stop to shoot tiny wire-coral crabs perched on their flimsy perches above the void, and a red and yellow frogfish.

In holes in a small cavern are a pair of electric fileclams. Only on video can you see that between their brilliant red tentacles the pale blue lips that surround the mantle seem to crackle like tiny electrical charges. For good measure, an enormous green turtle is parked further along and makes no effort to budge on our approach.

CORAL TRIANGLE LOCATIONS are not complete without a mating mandarinfish night dive, and Badiot is the local hang-out for these lusty little creatures.

The two of us arrive early, and settle in beside their acropora coral maze of a home at about 10m to wait for nightfall.

Mandarinfish are already about but I'm intrigued by a large bobbit worm wandering, uncharacteristically, along the top of the coral. Usually these *Alien*-lookalikes lurk in holes in the seabed, grabbing passing prey with such ferocity that they sometimes chop them in half. If this one is hunting in the open, it doesn't seem to be having much luck.

Larger fish in the coral, careless of the bobbit danger, observe the mandarinfish antics like peeping toms, although when, after almost an hour, the mandarins


finally start their explosive ascending-together coupling trick, it's all over very quickly. That's coral sex for you.

There is even an aircraft wreck to see at Copton Point, sunk by Magic Island almost 20 years ago. Visiting this bare-metal shell of a plane with broken wings is one of the few dives on which we have a bit of current to contend with.

A turtle abandons the fuselage as we approach. We hang around the wreck, then go with the flow over the wall and battle a bit returning to watch seamoths and mantis shrimps on the top.

It's always tempting to get in close with mantis shrimps because they stay put, but you do get that uncomfortable feeling that they might punch straight through your lens at any moment.

In case you hadn't guessed, I'm sold on Moalboal, and Magic Island delivers its treasures brilliantly.

This holiday recommendation is one I can make with confidence. 

Above: Remains of an aircraft at Copton Point.

Left: Brilliantly coloured soft-coral crab.

Above right: Bulbous stargazer out of the sand.

Below right: Homer Simpson's dad?

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Steve Weinman flew Cathay Pacific to Hong Kong (12 hours) and on with Philippines Airlines (three hours). No visa is needed under three weeks. The airport transfer arranged by Magic Island takes 2-3 hours. You can explore Moalboal by hiring mopeds or ordering a tri-shaw.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Magic Island Dive Resort, www.magicisland.nl. There are three boat-dives a day, plus night dives. Nitrox, PADI training and specialities are all available.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round. Water temperatures range from 26-29°C, and the climate is driest and warmest from November to May.

MONEY ▶ Peso.

HEALTH ▶ Cebu is malaria-free. Deco chamber in Cebu City.

PRICES ▶ Ultimate Diving provides a seven-night package, with flights, B&B accommodation (two sharing), transfers and 10 boat-dives for £1099 pp. A 10-night package with 15 dives costs £1269pp. Half-board upgrade £16pp per day, full-board £22. www.ultimatediving.co.uk, 0800 112 3275

FURTHER INFORMATION ▶ www.wowphilippines.co.uk

