

Do you believe in magic? **STEVE WEINMAN** finds that diving in a soon-to-be-better-known part of the Philippines casts a spell both by night and day

PARTIAL TO ANDA'S ABRACADABRA



Above: Larry (left) and the *bangka* crew from Magic Oceans.

Left: Harlequin shrimps are fussy eaters – they consume only starfish. They are sometimes even thought to feed their prey to keep it alive for eating later.

Below: Hey BRO – this greater blue-ringed octopus was spotted during a night-dive on the house-reef.

SO WE SIT ON THE WALL waiting for the sun to sink low enough, which it does at around 5.30, and slip into the water with that sense of gentle excitement that a night-dive never fails to induce, for me at least.

The creatures that come out by night are wasting no time. It's like driving into a tunnel, and your satnav shifts to night mode. First to shuffle across the sand and settle on a broccoli coral is a mantis shrimp, followed by a red blob with horns and a yellow blob with eyes – the first a nudibranch, the second a juvenile boxfish.

Another juvi, a sweetlips, flip-flops uncontrollably from perch to perch as if intoxicated.

Soon it's a free-for-all – hermit crabs in a variety of hard and some soft-shelled homes and a coconut octopus that,

unusually, seems to be lacking one; and several sleepy-looking cuttlefish, but then they always look sleepy until they strike, as one of these does, at a passing morsel of supper.

There's a pair of little red scorpionfish, and a much bigger tasselled one with its belly wedged tightly into a cradle-shaped coral. A fat red fish-head protrudes from the sand (still not sure what *that* was), and decorator crabs resemble pearly kings, dressed to impress after adding brightly coloured mineral fragments to their garb.

An hour passes, we're completing a meandering circuit of the house-reef that has brought some exciting new character to light just about every other minute, and then there it is, the unexpected headline act – a blue-ringed octopus not thrilled to have been observed and

fluctuating between cream and canary colouring, its rings growing more, then less distinct, like those targets in an optician's eye-test.

I had thought this BRO the star of the show until, as if to score a late winning goal, the biggest nudibranch of all comes flapping by. The brilliant red Spanish dancer disappears into the night and on that note it's time to surface, bid a very good night to Magic Oceans' house-reef, *aka* Magic Point, and make for the lights by the steps.

After a hard day's diving (hard, who am I kidding?), it can often be tempting to pass on the prospect of a night-dive and head for the shower, the bar, the restaurant and the pleasures of the evening catch-up.

But that's probably a mistake, certainly at Magic Oceans in Anda, where the night-dives, like the one I've just compressed into a few paragraphs, can be even more epic than those in daylight. And that one wasn't exceptional, just typical.

A WORD ABOUT ANDA itself. It's a name worth remembering, and is part of the largely unspoilt Philippines island of Bohol.

The Philippines archipelago is vast and full of diving promise. Covering 116,000 square and highly biodiverse miles, it includes no fewer than 7600 islands, a few of them extremely large, most small.

The diving hotspots so far established – how many must still await discovery? – are scattered, but many can be found in the central set of islands, the Visayas.

At the heart of the Visayas, its Central region consists of the islands of Cebu (well-known to divers visiting Malapascua and Moalboal), the smaller Siquijor



and, to the east, Bohol.

Anda, a region based around a town in Bohol's south-eastern corner, is the easternmost part of the Central Visayas, and is surely poised to become another classic Philippines diving hotspot.

There are only a handful of dive operations there, and while I can't speak for the others I can confirm that Magic Oceans is a class act.

More years ago than I had thought I stayed at its older sister-resort Magic Island in Moalboal, and not only loved the diving but the resort's boutique style, where guests of different nationalities are gently encouraged to mingle by the friendly Dutch owners.

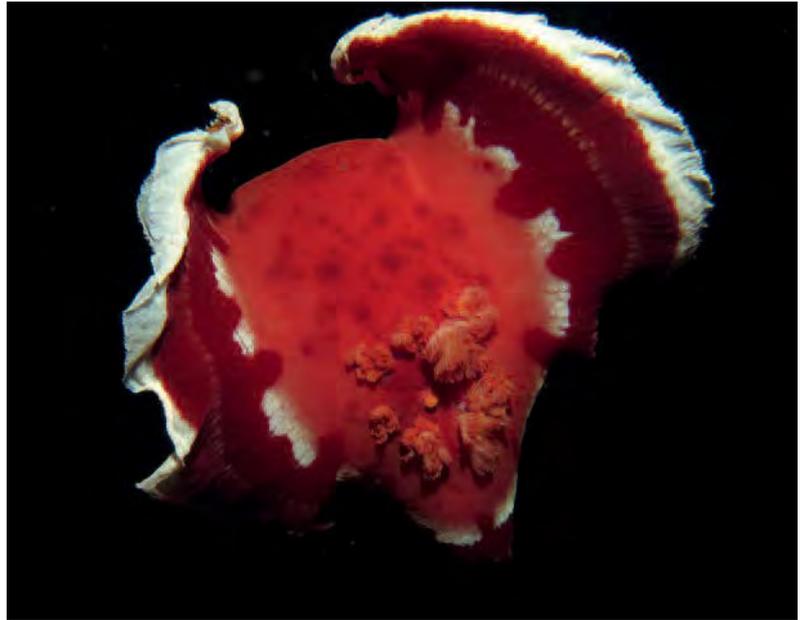
The same ethos applies at the relatively new and more modern Magic Oceans.

Not that I could really judge the mingling, because I was visiting at the very start of low season in early June, when the weather can become a tad more fluid, and, purely by chance, soon became the only guest in the place.

The previous week it had been busy with a group of 22. By the time I arrived I was able to do a bit of mingling with four other guests from various parts of Europe for a day or two, and then they moved on (something I said?). I was all

Right: A Spanish dancer in full flight is a spectacular sight – the biggest of all the nudibranchs at up to 60cm, unlike most of its relatives it's able to swim when seeking new sponges on which to prey.

Below: A large number of green turtles hang out on the reef top at Turtle Point and are generally unconcerned about divers.



alone – well, apart from the 45 or so staff.

As the lone guest I should have felt conspicuous, with a responsibility to act as a sort of multi-guest. However, much as I enjoy mingling, was I complaining? With a personal dive-guide in the shape of the brilliant Larry (my eagle-eyed buddy on the night-dive and every other dive), three boats with fine crew on hand,

fun-loving resort manager Eef Thurlings, a great chef and his team, and lots of other people it was a pleasure to spend time with?

You can bet I wasn't complaining (and by the way, I did just ask for the chef's recommendation at mealtimes rather than insisting on a choice). I'm sure it was more fun for me than for the resort, but they didn't show it and I felt privileged.

Obviously I could have indulged myself and made a racket at night, with no other guests to disturb, but I resisted that temptation easily enough, pored over my photos and went to bed early (for me, that's before midnight).

DON'T PROPOSE TO TRAIPE you through the dive-sites one by one and catalogue the many creatures I saw (even though I just did exactly that with the house-reef night-dive, one of many sites I could have picked to kick off this feature).

It's especially tempting to get into critter-catalogue mode in Coral Triangle hotspots in which the animal cast-list can be jaw-dropping, as it was in Anda, but it would be easier to tell you what I didn't see (flamboyant cuttlefish, anybody? I'm sure they were there – I was probably just looking the other way at the time).

Nor do I usually tend to be a wishlist type of diver, instructing the guide on what I expect to see next day. Just as I don't consider a hill-walk on which I fail to see a golden eagle a waste of time, so I'm generally happy to take dives as they come and see what turns up – it's the surprises and happy accidents that make diving the joy it is.

The blue-ringed octopus was an exception. I had mentioned to Larry that I'd never seen one, but had then forgotten about it, and had been amazed when he delivered one at the last minute on that night-dive, like a conjuror producing a





dove from his sleeve (though keeping a BRO up your sleeve would be a seriously bad idea).

If I made it sound as if all those night visitors had just appeared before my very eyes, it was Larry who had made sure I noticed them.

What you need to know about the diving at Magic Oceans is simple. The *bangka* outrigger dive-boat is moored in sheltered water just off the steps, close to the spacious and well-equipped dive-centre, which is itself close to where you breakfast.

You wade out to the boat to which your assembled kit has already been taken, though they may well have finished building a retractable jetty by the time you go, so getting on and off will be even easier.

Drive left (east) towards Anda town to find an astonishing range of critters at the various sand-channel sites there, or head west and into the bay for gentle drifts on the Wonderwall, finding more critters and decompressing on the reef-top in coral pastures awash with large turtles.

There are some 30 named sites between Pogaling to the west and the excellent Lamanok Island, which we visit twice, in the other direction. Currents are generally on the mild side. Sound good? It is.

Stable, spacious *bangkas* are always a pleasure to use. Climb back onto yours after the dive, refresh yourself with the



Top from left: A wunderpus; Kubaryana's *nembrotha* – even by Coral Triangle standards there is a bewildering variety and abundance of nudibranchs at Anda sites.

Above: Larry's previous, slightly dowdy, mimic and wunderpus lure.

Below from left: A peacock mantis shrimp hunts in the open at Laconak; a warty frogfish waits for prey to come its way at Coral Gardens.

sweetest mangos and pineapples you've ever eaten, scroll through your pictures, check your fresh tankful of nitrox and go back for more. What could be simpler?

I'll tell you what's even simpler – forget the boat and enjoy the Magic Oceans house-reef, day or night.

Anda is the sort of place where

photographers will have their hands full deciding which way to turn. At some sites such as Laconak you'll find more nudibranchs in more colourful garbs than you thought existed, and not all tiny ones but those big enough to let you know which way they're pointing while you're still at a distance.

You can then position yourself accordingly, and avoid photographing another slug's backside.

Ghost pipefish, beloved of snappers, are commonly encountered, both the ornate variety that's so difficult to separate from its frondy background and the robust ones – we found three of those together on one occasion, a male and two pregnant females, according to Larry.

Some species are rarer. Larry knew where to find a single elusive harlequin shrimp, the photographer's friend, and as luck would have it this shy celebrity was busy trying to upend a brightly decorated specimen of the starfish they like to eat.

But everything else seemed to be in generous supply. Tiny shrimps present themselves photogenically on bubble corals and anemone tips; pugnacious mantis shrimps peek out of their holes.

Every whip or wire coral had its resident xeno crab or gobies – great for black backgrounds. There are frogfish everywhere if you have an eye for their giveaway fins, from tiny red-and-yellow clowns to huge grey-pink gargoyles guarding the wall – and one bright orange specimen the size of a fingernail.

SEAHORSES ABOUND – big ones out on the white sand at the sandy sites such as those facing Anda town, and pygmies in numbers on sea-fans at the start of the gentle drift-dive to the west that takes you from Wonderwall to Turtle Point, not far from Magic Oceans.

That dive, which we did several times, is astonishing. It's one thing to start a wall-drift with a shoe-in pygmy photo-op (five shots maximum, as per a code of conduct), but when you have numerous diversions along the way, including large soft corals enjoying the current, and can decompress at a site like Turtle Point, it's something else entirely.

I would venture to suggest that the

reef-top, with its beautiful hard corals and green turtle population grazing in unruffled tranquility, would qualify in many parts of the world as a prime attraction in its own right. Here, it's more icing on an already tasty cake.

You want mimic octopuses? They are shy, and we had more success with the very similar but more golden-coloured wunderpuses.

Larry, I'm pleased to note, didn't resort to scooping them from the sand as I have seen attempted elsewhere – his technique was one of patient seduction, waving a homemade rag octopus on a fishing line gently above a barely visible hole in the sand until the wunderpus, presumably driven into a state of sexual frenzy, was tempted into the open.

We did spend a very long time trying to tempt a mimic out in this way, but with very limited success.

After this, Larry concluded that his bait was "not very good" and went away to make himself a more petite and perhaps less intimidating replacement.

I saw it later, though not in action under water, and am confident that he knows what he's doing. I wasn't worried about the shyness of the mimic – several extrovert wunderpuses made my dives.

Needless to say, you'll find yourself tripping over anemonefish. And I saw a pair of seamoths, the beautiful little armoured fish that trundle across the seabed on their splayed pelvic fins, always in single file, hoovering up small prey

through their long snouts – sadly, yet another species endangered by Chinese pseudo-medicine.

THE DIVING WAS CONTINUALLY absorbing, but just in case I should get bored (as if!) the staff at Magic Oceans worked their socks off to entertain me, keen to show me how divers on their deco day or non-diving partners might enjoy themselves on Bohol.

And that too was invigorating. I felt rejuvenated as we took quad-bikes up into the high hills overlooking some of the eastern dive-sites, and later into the famous Chocolate Mountains, resembling a landscape made up of milk-chocolate mallows as far as the eye can see.

We zip-wired 100m up over the Loboc River (which we later travelled down on a floating restaurant). We made 7m jumps into a water-filled sinkhole, enjoyed more nocturnal magic as we marvelled at trees full of fireflies in the mangroves, photographed the tiny indigenous tarsirs and fed the cheeky macaque monkeys.

Bohol really is a lot of fun, and Eef and his staff keep the action spinning along.

It was also good to see that while the resort was quiet the landside staff-members who wouldn't normally get the chance were undergoing their basic scuba training in the pool, to make it that much easier for them to understand the guests' needs (and for fun too, of course).

I started this feature on a night dive, and I'll brush lightly over the obligatory

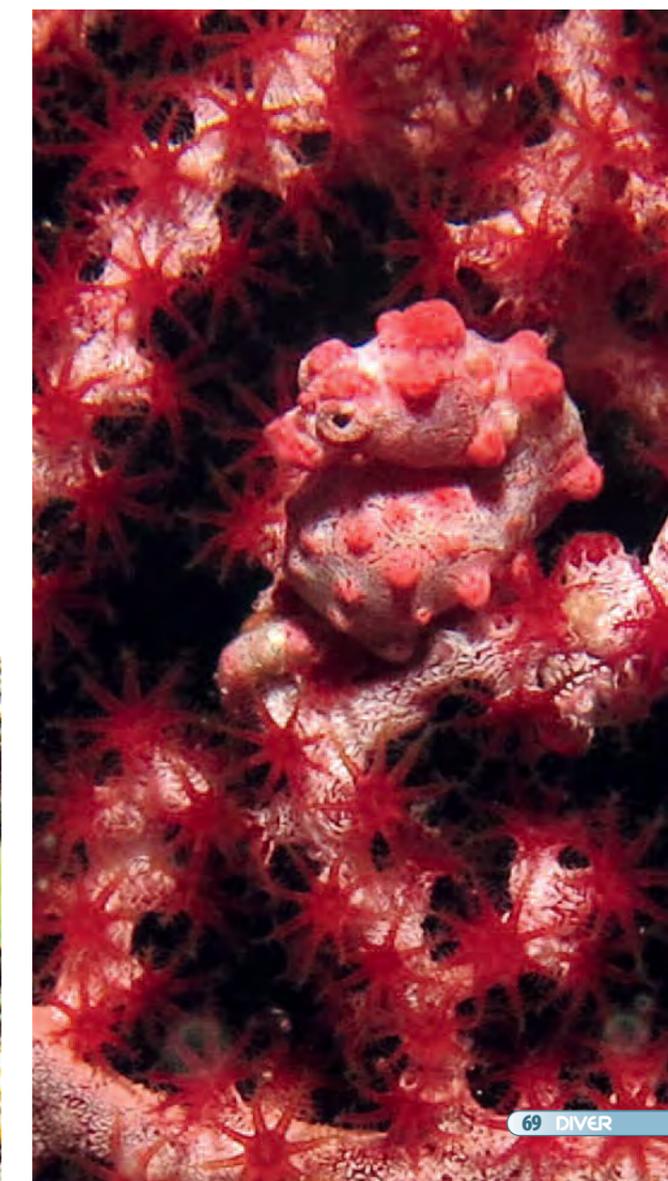
Clockwise from top left: Should be a devil scorpionfish but it's the tasselled variety; a Sarasvati anemone shrimp in bubble coral.

Below: Bargibanti pygmy seahorse, one of a number occupying a single seafan.

Below left: A mandarinfish, but not in the mood for love.

mandarinfish evening dive (the dragonets were there but not doing their explosive mating dance – and why should they?) to end on another night-dive that left its mark on me.

It was at a site called J Eden near Anda town, one we had enjoyed very much by day. After hours, it turned out to be cephalopod heaven, with not one but two wunderpuses (one tiny) and a mimic octopus, none of which required much coaxing to throw the sort of delicate shapes I could happily watch for hours.



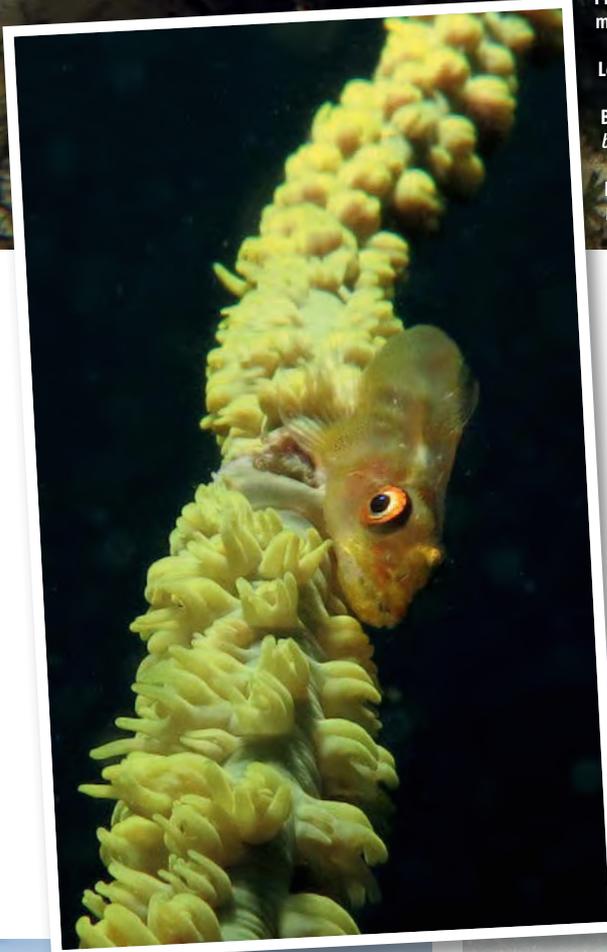


Pictured: Squid in full display mode at J Eden.

Left: A tiny wire-coral goby.

Below left: One of the *bangkas*.

Below: Staff training in the Magic Oceans pool.



There were small cuttlefish, too, and a tiny white octopus that grabbed Larry's pointer; two beautifully coloured bobtail squid, and of course many other creatures that weren't cephalopods at all.

Towards the end of the dive we drifted into a grassier area of sand, and from the darkness emerged two large reef squid.

As I fired from a distance they proceeded to come closer and closer and embarked on a spectacular display which, it became clear, was a response to our lights and strobe flashes.

Anything we could do electrically, they could do better. One would blush a

deep red while the other turned pearly white, as ribbons of psychedelic colour streamed the length of their bodies. Then they'd swap roles.

The more I fired, the more they responded – I was captivated by them.

They aren't the most exotic creatures but this was an encounter that stuck in my mind, as an interaction rather than an observation.

Sadly, fishermen learnt long ago and to their advantage that squid respond to lights, but that night it was just for fun.

Which is what Magic Oceans and Anda is all about. My suggestion is to go for it!



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Steve flew with Philippines Airlines, overnighting in Manila. You may get cheaper flights (hotels near the airport cost about £45) but it's a long, slow journey. Magic Oceans provides road transfers from Tagbilaran airport on the south-west coast of Bohol. An alternative is to fly to neighbouring Cebu island and transfer by road and ferry.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Magic Oceans Dive Resort, magicisland.nl. The bungalows ranged around the pool can accommodate up to 35 divers and are clean and comfortable, with their own wi-fi. The dive-centre is spacious and well-equipped and nitrox is available.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round. December to April are the driest months and considered high season for tourists but rain at other times passes quickly. Water temperature ranges from 26-29°C, peaking in July. July to December is typhoon season but Anda rarely suffers.

MONEY ▶ Philippines peso

PRICES ▶ Dive Worldwide offers a 10-day package with flights via Cebu and transfers, twin-share cottage with breakfast and 15 dives each at £2195pp, diveworldwide.com

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ ismorefuninthephilippines.co.uk

