

Animal **Magic**

An invitation to visit the Philippines on a unique three-centre trip, sees Frogfish Photography's **Nick and Caroline** heading to Anda, Bohol, in search of fantastic creatures and magical underwater encounters.

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OCATED IN ANDA on the island of Bohol, Magic Oceans Dive Resort is off the beaten track and has been built in a way that is truly sympathetic to its lush surroundings. Upon our arrival, we were made to feel at home, with a

warm greeting and a very welcome cold drink after our journey by road and sea ferry from their sister resort, Magic Island.

Our dive gear was

quickly whisked away to be stored in the dive centre, while we unwound in our spacious room, preparing our photography gear for the following day. Our first real impression of the place was just magical: the sun starting to set in front of our room, silhouetting birds swooping over the pool, as they tried to catch small insects for supper. We met our fellow divers at the picturesque bar for a pre-dinner drink, and they shared stories and tales of the diving we could expect over the next few days. ➡



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IMAGE
Top and Above: Magic
Oceans Dive Resort, Bohol.

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Eager anticipation for our first morning underwater meant we were up early to get ready. The dive centre is large, with plenty of space for each diver to set-up their gear and camera equipment. We were pleased to spot a prominent and eye-catching poster, setting out the best diving and underwater photography practice to help protect the resident pygmy seahorses.

At this resort a team of staff carry out all the heavy lifting, and so all we had to do was stroll out to the boat with our cameras and sit and listen to the morning briefing. For us, this trip was going to be all about the critters - the little stuff that can only be found in this part of the world. This area is well known as “macro-heaven,” and is one of the best spots for this style of photography, with a host of much sought-after marine life to look out for.

Having been introduced to our guide, the first question he asked us was “what do you really want to see?” Inevitably, we both replied in unison: “Shaun the Sheep”! To our surprise he quickly replied, “no problem” and duly promised we would see them at the very beginning of our first dive here. We were



IMAGES

Top: Divers getting on the boat in the morning. **Left:** Shaun the Sheep nudibranch are abundant but very hard to see as they are so small. **Below:** A diver explores a beautiful coral covered wall.

absolutely overjoyed, as we had never seen one before and are big fans of Nick Park’s cartoon namesake, whose Latin name, just for the record, is *Costasiella kuroshimae*.

So, into the warm water we plunged, dutifully following our guide as he scoured the foliage on the sandy seabed. Within a couple of minutes, he was signalling to us that he had found what we had requested and pointed down to a small, bright green leaf. We peered down but saw nothing and shrugged to signal that we had absolutely no idea what he was pointing at, apart from a small green leaf!

Looking a little frustrated that these two biologists had no idea about the size of our requested critter, he took his metal pointer and gently laid it down with the tip pointing at a tiny dot on the leaf. We were still somewhat confused; surely this unassuming dot was not what we had wanted to see? ➔

THIS AREA OF THE PHILIPPINES IS WELL-KNOWN AS "MACRO-HEAVEN." IF YOU ARE A "NUDI-NUT" THEN THIS IS THE PLACE FOR YOU!





We could barely see it at all as it was so minuscule. At first, we even pointed our cameras at the wrong end, only to be gently guided to the front by our patient guide. Through our camera lenses we could finally see this, now iconic, nudibranch that is so full of character and we decided to spend most of the rest of the dive trying to get a decent photo.

During the surface interval we thanked our guide for finding Shaun and then asked him to concentrate on slightly larger critters that we might be able to focus on more easily. On the next dive, we drifted along a colourful wall inspecting each piece of coral to see what camouflaged

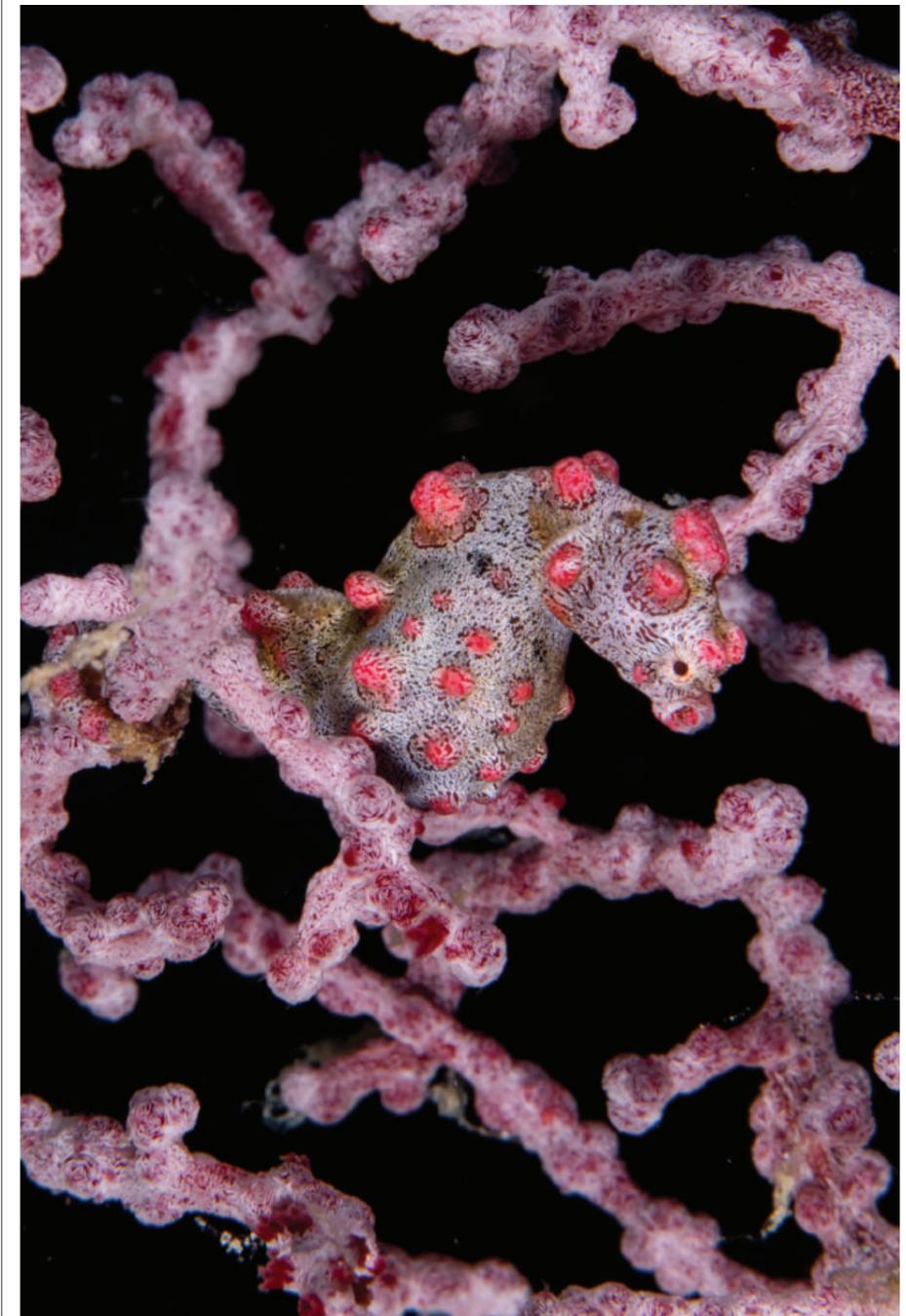
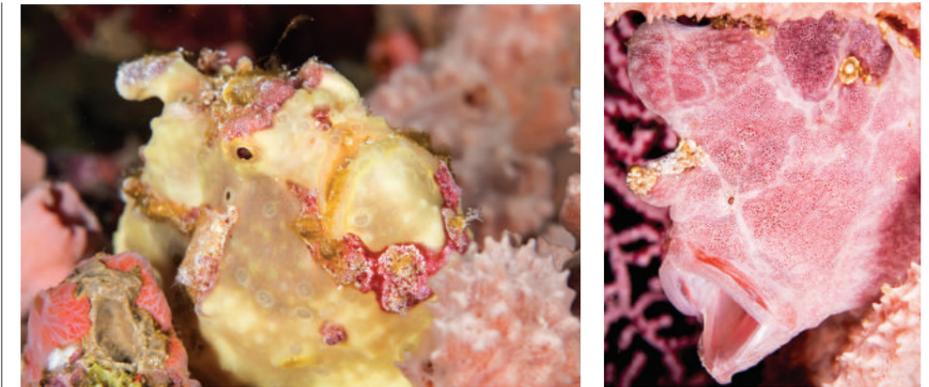
marine life might be hiding within.

Frogfish of every colour and hue were waiting patiently for their prey to edge close enough for a strike, and anything resembling prey seemed entirely unaware of the killer's presence. The coral was in superb condition too, making this easy-going drift dive a real pleasure.

Over lunch, back at the dive centre, everyone was buzzing about their morning dives and we all decided that it would be great to pack in a night dive that day too. Some divers sat out the afternoon dive to have a bit of relaxation time, but we decided that we would indulge

ourselves in as much diving here as possible and went out for the afternoon dive too. We were delighted we did, as we found a pink pygmy seahorse on a sea fan – a rare treat for us.

As the sun started to fall, the divers gathered to get ready for the night dive. A night dive in places of high diversity like this are usually well worth joining in on, but this dive was to prove something very special. As soon as we were in the water, divers were trying to attract each other's attention to point out what they had found. The weird and wonderful crustaceans and cephalopods come out at night and soon a Mimic Octopus had ➔



IMAGES
Top left: Turtles laze about on the top of the reef.
Top, left and right: Frogfish of every colour and hue can be found here. **Right:** Pygmy Seahorses are a favourite subject here.

On the next dive, we inspected each piece of coral to see what camouflaged marine life might be hiding within.



been spotted. Then, a creature very close to our hearts was spotted – the Hairy Frogfish! The hour we spent underwater just flew by, with never a dull moment, and a host of amazing creatures enjoyed by all. It was truly one of the best night dives we have ever enjoyed and as we all still had air in our tanks, an hour really wasn't enough.

Magic Oceans have a selection of three dive boats, built with the traditional outriggers of a Filipino Bangka. They are all spacious to dive from and you will surface to find fresh fruit, hot drinks and water,

as well as fresh water rinse tanks for your camera equipment. The design of the boats means that sun worshippers have plenty of places to relax in the sun between dives, but for those looking to keep in the shade there are covered areas too.

Our second day of diving brought us more nudibranchs than we ever thought possible, all in a small area at the base of a coral-encrusted wall. Sea slugs of every colour and size were being pointed out faster than we could capture them on our sensors. We could, very easily, have spent the whole day here,



IMAGES

Top: Amazing creatures become visible on a night dive. **Above:** The weird and wonderful critters you can find include the Orangutan Crab. **Left:** Beautiful nudibranchs come in many colours.

and would have needed to in order to be able to do justice to all the amazing species that we found. If you are a “nudi-nut” then this is the place for you!

Another change of pace saw us slowly drifting along the top of a shallow reef, where turtles seem to spend their days lazing on the soft coral. Every few metres we would encounter another one, and sometimes we were lucky enough to see up to four or five in a single reef vista. The turtles were completely unfazed by us approaching to take their photo.





CHINA
Hong Kong

South China Sea

Philippine Sea

Seahorse

Turtle

Philippines



TRAVEL LOG:
Bohol Island, Philippines

Flights
We flew with Philippine Airlines to Cebu but there are other options including a direct Heathrow to Manila service.

Transfers
Magic Resorts organise transfers between their resorts. We went by ferry (around two hours) and private car. You can fly between islands, but this means you have fewer diving days.

Top Tip!
Get the most out of your trip by brushing up on your critter ID and photography skills before you go.

Water temperature
The water stays between 26 - 29° all year round.

Currency
Peso. Credit cards are accepted at the resorts with a small additional fee.

Favourite non-diving activity
Chilling out with other divers at the bar and swapping stories of your diving days. We didn't get the chance but if you have time, visit the Tarsier Sanctuary.

Favourite place to eat/drink
In our short stay we only ate at the resort, but the food and the atmosphere were both great!

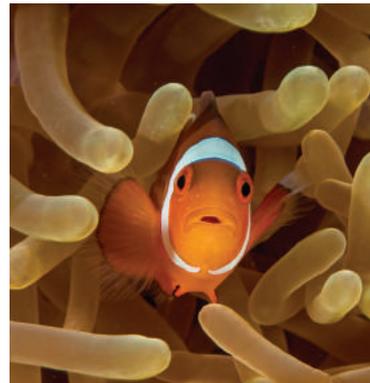
Final Word!
This is a fantastic destination for critter lovers.



IMAGES
Above: The accommodation is situated around the pool. **Right:** Anemonefish are hard to resist.

One of the joys of staying at Magic Oceans is the friendly nature of the resort. Meals are held together, with all the divers sitting at a large table, chatting about the dives of the day and what their favourite moment or creature was on any given dive. The staff will also join in and sit down to eat and converse with the guests. Another bonus is never having to worry about the food. With one vegetarian and non-seafood eater we can be difficult customers, but the staff always got it right with wonderful and varied meals. In the evening, a post-dinner drink at the bar is the perfect way to finish the day.

Alas, we only had a very short time staying at Magic Oceans Dive Resort, but in that short time we packed in some fabulous diving with colourful reefs patrolled by turtles. We got to see our Shaun the Sheep nudibranch, along with a host of other sea slugs we had never encountered before. We had a simply stunning night dive, and we also ticked off a host of cool critters that divers are always happy to see including the



wonderfully-named Wonderpus Octopus, pygmy seahorses, a host of different frogfish, and a plethora of crustaceans.

The ocean here really is teeming with amazing marine life, the team of staff are helpful and friendly, and we made lots of new friends amongst the divers too. In fact, we liked it so much, that we have arranged another Scubaverse trip back to Magic Oceans in March 2020. Why not join us? ■

MORE INFORMATION
Join Nick and Caroline when they return to Magic Oceans for a Magic Photo Experience in March 2020. For more information contact sales@diveworldwide.com

www.magicoceans.online
www.itsmorefuninthephilippines.co.uk