


Kind of Magic

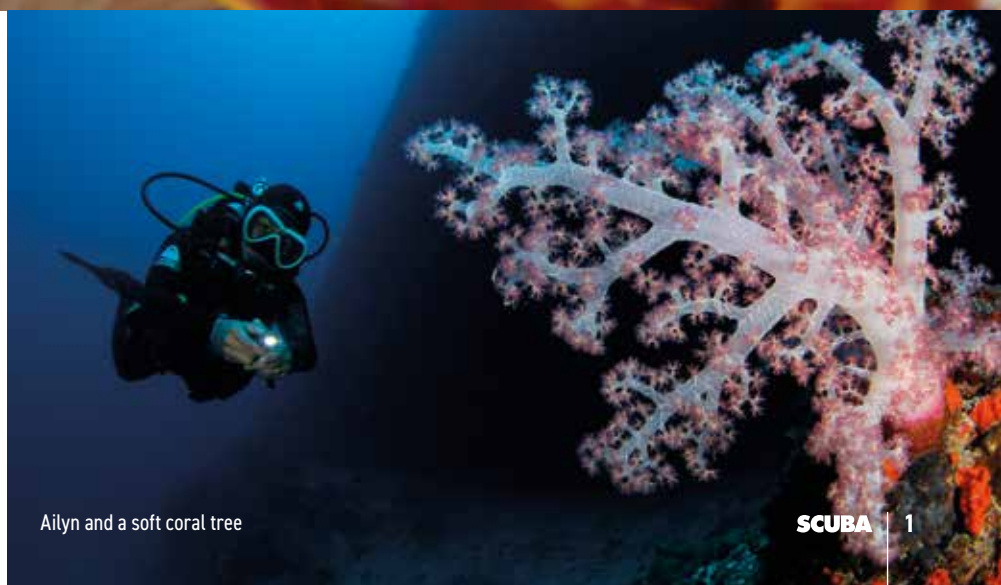
SCUBA Editor Simon Rogerson goes in search of strange creatures on the Philippine Island of Bohol



A soft coral cowrie, about 1cm long

Ah, the enduring appeal of a dedicated diving resort; all the finer things of life in one boutique package. Barefoot luxury at a price that flirts with your finances, but falls short of taking you to the cleaners.

All of which brought me to Magic Oceans Dive Resort, on the island of Bohol in the central Philippines. There's a resort enclave in the south, but we're avoiding the fleshpots and turning our gaze to the peninsula of Anda on the east coast, a rural area where tourism is only starting to gain a foothold.



Ailyn and a soft coral tree



Aerial view of Magic Oceans; the jetty has since been completed

“I hope you don’t suffer from vertigo,” grinned the resort’s co-owner Arie Hoogendoorn as our car swung off the dirt track and teetered briefly before tipping down a ridiculously steep concrete road and into the resort. A cluster of bungalows fringed a welcoming pool, while an adjacent group lined the coast itself. Arie and his wife Desiree Pullens are experienced hosts, having run resorts in the Philippines since 2015. Magic Oceans is very much their vision, from the style of the 16 bungalows and the capacious dive centre to the gecko-themed décor of the dining area. It’s a treat for the senses.

Great and small

So, to the diving. With the resort facing east into the Bohol Sea, heading south yields lush coral walls and reef tops, while the sites to the north are mixed habitat – rubble, seagrass meadows and sandy slopes. Critter country.

We started by heading south to one of the nearest marked sites, a drift through coral gardens and walls called *Turtle Point*. I was diving with the dive centre manager Ailyn Sevilla, who carries out her role with the sense of fun that typifies the Philippine spirit. On the deeper sections of the wall, she posed for photographs next to some lovely soft corals, then led me to the shallows to look for turtles.

We must have drifted past at least 20 big turtles, mostly greens but with a few hawksbills to test my identification skills. Some of them fled at first sight while others slumbered, allowing a cautious approach. One of them opened his eyes and gazed at me languidly, stretching out its neck to inspect his reflection in my camera’s dome port.

We dived these southern sites for a few days, while the wind favoured that direction. All the while, the guides turned



Feeding porcelain crab

Impassive gaze of the crocodile snake eel



Small octopus on the night dive, species unknown



up all manner of coral creatures, from tiny scorpionfish to whip coral shrimp, looking like tiny armoured vehicles as they navigated the intricate polyps of their habitat.

The coral walls were dominated by trees of black coral and purple sea fans, the preferred habitat of the *Bargibanti* pygmy seahorse. They really are miniscule – small enough to sit on a finger nail, very tricky to spot against the jumbled background of the fan coral. The seahorse mimics the closed polyps of its host coral, and is impossible to find for all but the tutored eye. On several occasions, a guide pointed one out and I managed to glimpse it briefly before losing it in the folds of the fan coral.

Colour of night

The siren call of dinner and a well-stocked bar is usually enough for me to cry off a night dive, but Magic Ocean’s house reef really comes alive at night. I dived it on three occasions, the first with resident instructor Larry Magbanua, who managed to find eight different octopus, including the tiny, toxic blue ring, *Hapalochlaena lunulata*.

Equally strange was a reptilian snake eel, its bright red features looming out of the sand like some monster from the Alien films. On our second dive (with Ailyn) we relocated the same fish, but our dive lights attracted seething swarms of anchovy that blotted out the scene.

Sometimes it seems like the ugliest fish are the most prized by underwater photographers, but Magic Ocean’s house reef is also home to the beautiful mandarinfish, *Synchiropus splendidus*. An ultra-shy member of the dragonet family, it spends most of its life hidden in the inner world of hard coral, emerging at dusk for an intricate spawning ritual. Thanks to their vivid colours, they are much sought after by photographers – a bright blue body with swirling orange stripes and a greenish tinge to the face. An excellent colour palette for a pair of pyjamas.



Blue ring octopus, not amused



A mating pair of mandarinfish



Electric clam, *Cetenoides ales*



Green turtle in repose



Whale sharks at Lila

If you want to see these psychedelic love bugs, you need to start your night dive just as the sun is setting. Then stake out the *acropora* coral in the fading light until the elusive fish emerge, 'walking' around the coral on their outsize pelvic fins. There's a 10-minute window in which to catch this ritual, which culminates in a mating duo rising together and a tiny, triumphant puff of sperm and eggs. You need to use low-powered lights with a red filter, as the amorous dragonets are so sensitive to light.

Great and good

The rich water and currents of the Philippine archipelago support a sizeable population of whale sharks. Rather than hunting them for meat and fins, communities such as the village of Lila, a

90-minute drive from Anda, have begun feeding their sharks. Fishing outriggers take up position just offshore, scooping baitfish and other treats into the water.

Diving or snorkelling with habituated animals is a divisive subject. While some favour a more natural encounter, others point to the conservation value in communities having a vested interest in protecting their megafauna.

In the absence of any evidence suggesting the sharks are being injured or diverted from their normal behaviour, my personal view is such feeds can be a positive experience for both shark and human, as long as they are carefully administered.

We received a final brief on safety and proximity rules, then stepped into the



True clown anemonefish

shallows for the 10-minute swim to the site. The first time we tried this dive, we had five sharks swimming up and down, occasionally pausing to have a gulp of fishy water close to the outrigger.

Not for the first time, I was reminded that fish have unique personalities. While some of the sharks maintained a distance from the divers, others were obviously curious, and two were up for some fun. In the past, I had viewed whale sharks as passive grazers of the water column, but these guys were players. Time after time (and in fragrant disregard of the distancing rules) they swam directly at the divers, lunging upwards at the last moment to allow a plume of bubbles to break over their underside. An open circuit Jacuzzi.

Perhaps the most surprising behaviour came from a mischievous young male, who couldn't resist chasing one of our divers once he had her in retreat, even mouthing

(gently) at her fins. It sounds like horrific encounter, but it was completely clear to all present that this was just boisterous, mildly naughty behaviour. Despite the excitement, the sharks ensured they didn't bump into us, though you did have to watch out for their scything fins.

Ghosts of Lamonoc

The furthest of Magic Oceans' dive sites is Lamonoc Island, a 45-minute boat journey north of the resort. It appears an unassuming place, but there's plenty of evidence to suggest it was once Bohol's 'cradle of civilisation', with some signs of ancient burials, tales of banished witches and animal sacrifice that persists to this day. There are even some examples of Stone Age paintings created by smearing hematite (red iron oxide) on the limestone walls.

Such ancient practices gave way to the present day belief that Lamonoc is haunted. No-one lives there permanently, but shamans still visit the limestone caves to sacrifice chickens for a relative's health, or ask for a bountiful harvest.

Underwater, hazy visibility enhanced the eeriness of the place, but it was bristling with small animals. Specifically, this was nudibranch country; we found about 20 different species over our two dives. The slug spotters were in heaven, and I set to work photographing the many-coloured molluscs.

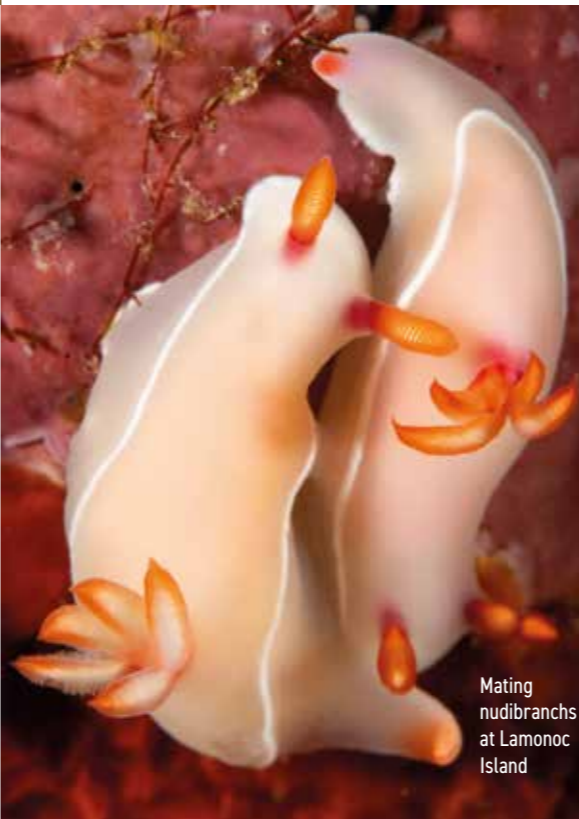
The same dives yielded frogfish, porcelain crabs and a pair of black and white crinoid shrimps meeting 'face-to-face' on a feathery arm of their host. These are the moments I live for, when the sea allows you a glimpse of its magic, something to carry with you and treasure. The ghosts of Lamonoc had given their blessing.



Crinoid shrimps enjoy a friendly moment



All seeing eyes of the mantis shrimp



Mating nudibranchs at Lamonoc Island





This barrel sponge is covered in Lambert's worm sea cucumbers

Essentials

Getting there: Fly to Bohol's new international airport via Manila. Alternatively fly to Cebu, overnight in a hotel and then catch a ferry across to the port of Tagbilaran on Bohol. Costs vary across the calendar from £800 to £1,200. We'd recommend Singapore Airlines or Philippine Airlines, but you need to shop around for a deal and route that suits your needs.

Topside: If you can, allow a day or two to explore Bohol's land attractions. There are river cruises; you can visit a tarsier reserve; waterfall hikes and the famous

Chocolate Hills. You can speed across a muddy circuit on an all-terrain vehicle or take a zip wire across a vast river gorge.

Resort: Magic Resorts via reservations@magicresorts.online or phone: **+63 9695329439** (WhatsApp available) or check out the website: www.magicresorts.online for more information. Return transfer from local airport, a 10-night stay in Magic Oceans including daily three-course dinner and a 15-dive package available from €1,945 (£1,701) per person based on two sharing. For bookings before April 2023, there is a special offer of €1,735 (£1,517) for the same

package. Customized packages are available.

Tour operator: Dive Worldwide [diveworldwide.com 01962 302087] can arrange tailored packages with flights from the UK, with transfers, land tours and hotel layovers if necessary.

When to go: Bohol has a tropical rainforest climate: warm, humid and rainy all year round.

High season is December to April, but you can dive year-round. With water temperatures around 27-30°C, a 3mm wetsuit or a rash vest will be your friend. Topside, it's all very informal – t-shirts, shorts and a hat to protect you from the sun. ●



Fishermen's bangkas at Anda



One of Magic's spacious dive boats, at Lamonoc