

MAGIC TIME *in the* PHILIPPINES

Fact of the day... The Philippines - would you believe me if I told you this beautiful part of Asia is made up of over 7,000 islands? Mind-blowing, right? What about if I told you that 76% of the world's coral species, and 35% of all coral fish, are found in the Coral Triangle? "What's the Coral Triangle, Richard?" I hear you ask.

Draw a line around Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste, the Solomon Islands and all the way back up and around the Philippines, that my friends is the Coral Triangle. The richest and most-diverse waters anywhere in the world, and what researchers believe to be the origin point for most coral species in the world. Hardly surprising then that as the Philippines forms the top third of the Triangle, the surrounding waters are utterly out of this world gorgeous!

One of my favourite things about scuba travel is visiting somewhere new for the first time. That new place buzz is unreal. But revisiting somewhere I love, and experiencing it with people for their first time visit, is hard to beat. Seeing the amazement through their eyes and hearing the 'wows' is so rewarding - and that's exactly what I did on a recent trip to the Philippines.

This was to be my fifth time in the Philippines, and my third to the gorgeous twin resorts of Magic Island in Cebu, and Magic Oceans in Bohol - and I just couldn't wait! February 2019 was the last time I visited these resorts - this was also the time I decided to put together a group trip originally planned to take place in the Spring of 2021 for a group of 20.

Four years, a global pandemic, two reschedules, a number of marriages, circumstance changes, house moves, war and a cost of living crisis later - the group of 20 was whittled down to a hardy ten, and off we set for a much-needed vacation in March 2023!

Richard Stevens finally gets to enjoy his long-planned group trip to Bohol and Cebu in the Philippines, and manages to keep both divers and non-divers entertained

Photographs by Richard Stevens /
Black Manta Photography

Magic Island, Moalboal, Cebu
Unbelievably, and completely unknown to me, only two of the group had ever visited the Philippines before, so arriving into Magic Island Dive Resort on the southernmost tip of Moalboal on the island of Cebu was already a trip of a lifetime for many.

This ten-room, self-contained resort has an almost-boutique feel to it, but without the high prices or ostentatious feel, so as you can imagine the group was really looking forward to the five nights we had planned to spend here. Arriving and seeing so many friendly faces reminded me of that 1980's American sitcom - Cheers! Most people over the age of 40 will remember the show's tune and lyrics, with the line 'sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came', as each member of staff shouted 'Richard!'

Concheng (resort manager) and Jamie (dive centre manager) were still steering the happiest members of staff you will ever meet, and probably explains why their repeat customer rate is just so high, and why so many new customers are flocking to experience some of their magic.

The resort hadn't changed much in the four years I'd been absent which pleased me - I'd been telling my fellow travellers about the bat cave dive centre and the spa room overlooking the sea. Arriving, and showing people around, gave me that coming home feeling that very few resorts around the world offer me. ▶

Did you know?

Mandarinfish are reef dwellers, preferring sheltered lagoons and inshore reefs. While they are slow-moving and fairly common within their range, they are not easily seen due to their bottom-feeding habit and their small size.

Dive boat at sunset



Snorkelling with whalesharks



The inviting bar - perfect for apres-dive



Porcelain crab



Frogfish



Pygmy seahorse



The freeform pool and sun loungers



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This area of the Philippines was hit hard by Super Typhoon Odette in Dec 2021 - the second costliest typhoon on record at over \$1 billion of damage - and despite the resort bearing no lasting scars, you could see the house reef took its toll in protecting the shore line, however, encouragingly there was lots of new growth already, and still teeming with life from an array of nudibranchs in all shapes and sizes through to the many types of fish calling it home, seahorses, and thankfully the mandarinfish are still there every day at dusk putting on their sexy vibrant show of spiralling erotica. I did talk about this in an article from the 2019 trip, and still to this day is the best place in the world I've witnessed the mandarinfish mating ritual. It really is worth travelling just for this!

Now, I want to call out at this point that this trip wasn't just about scuba diving! You might think that's odd seeing as you're reading a magazine about scuba, but this was the first time I was running a trip myself that had a non-diver on it, and I was as determined to make sure they had as good a time as the neoprene junkies.

So often I speak to divers who have non-diving partners, and so often they find it hard to convince them to travel on a

dive trip. If you're one of those divers, then keep reading!

While the hardcore divers were enjoying the delights of dive sites such as Pescador Island with its skull cave and myriad of frogfish, banded sea snakes and amazing corals of all colours and sizes, or the world-famous sardine dive at Panagsama just a 15 minute boat ride from Magic Island's house reef, where you find yourself swallowed by literally millions of sardines rhythmically swaying back and forth, those looking for something different were offered zip-lining, canyoning and the well-known snorkel activity with the whalesharks at Oslob.

The canyoning and zip-lining was combined as a one-day trip to Kawasan Falls - a stunning location about an hour's drive from the resort that is made up of a number of small canyons that end at the bottom to the famous three waterfalls. The zip-lining was optional, but 100% worth it for

the exhilaration - and also saving your legs the extra walk!

The canyoning itself is very easy, and available for most ages - jumping off rocks into the water is entirely up to you, and if there's anything you don't fancy doing then there is also a simple walk route round. The water was fresh and massively welcome from the humid air, but honestly guys, we had literally the best laugh I've had in ages!

We laughed our way all the way down to the waterfalls at the end! If you're wondering whether it's worth a day of non-diving, then take it from me - this is something you have to do on your visit! If you want something less energetic, but just as exhilarating, then the visit to see the whalesharks at Oslob is definitely at the top of your list.

People's opinions have often divided this activity, especially over the organised chaos that some experienced, however, I must say that the process has changed a fair bit from when I last visited, with all divers and snorkellers now entering from the same point, and it seemed a great deal less frantic that I had experienced previously.

Plus, it's worth pointing out that as a non-diver you're going to see a whaleshark! Not one whaleshark but many. How many people that don't scuba dive can say that?

Being eye to eye with the biggest fish in the oceans for a 40 minute period is one of the most-bizarre and jaw-dropping things I've done!

Oh, and remember - these non-dive activities are completely organised and sorted by the resort. You just need to get on the air-conditioned minivan, have fun and come back again - it's as easy as that. And of course, if you're a non-diver and want a more-relaxing holiday then you are more than welcome to spend your days having massages in the spa, lazing around on the sun loungers or heading out on the boat with the divers if you don't mind an hour of silence while everyone is underwater!

There aren't enough superlatives I can use to describe how good Magic Island is. The reefs, diving, and marine life are out of this world good. The resort and accommodation are comfortable and very homely, and the staff are up there with the best of the best. ▶

“ We had the most amazing two weeks at the Magic resorts - peeling everyone away at the end of the trip was a difficult task to say the least! ”

The group leaves with a heavy heart as we head out of Magic Island for the journey over to Magic Oceans, however, it's me with the sly smile as I know what to expect when we get there!

Magic Oceans, Anda, Bohol

The group were so dejected on the journey over to Bohol. Everyone had such an amazing time at Magic that they really didn't want to leave - new friendships formed and underwater moments they'd never experienced before made for a lot of glum faces. Time and time again I had to reassure them of the method in my madness and why we were doing the resorts in this order. Their faces when we arrived - what a picture! Talk about jaws dropping on the floor!

You see, Magic Oceans is the more luxurious of the two resorts. Slightly bigger with 16 rooms - all a smidgen bigger than those at Magic Islands. A larger pool in a fancy design with stunning gardens, and even the dive centre is of a higher standard. More space to move about, larger wash tanks and even a good-sized camera area for guests to ready equipment that even has high-pressure air hoses for guest use to help remove water residue from camera housings before opening them.

After the initial period of all the staff members coming out to say hi and tell me how much they miss me (I swear I almost cried from all the love), the group sat down around the bar with the tasty and customary arrival spring rolls for a resort briefing from manager Evelyn, and a full dive centre

lowdown from Ailyn and Lee Ann, dive centre manager and assistant manager respectively.

Admin out the way and after everyone had sorted their luggage in their rooms and dive kit into the crates outside their balconies, we headed down to the jetty to take in the beautiful shore line in the moonlight, and for me to point out and show off the fireflies that live in among the trees here. The one memory I always had from every trip were the fireflies here in the evenings, and as I suspected it was the first time most people in my group were seeing them. More mind-blown moments ticked off!

Magic Oceans is still operating with three dive boats, all receiving new engines recently making journeys more efficient, quicker and quieter, but the difference compared to the vessels at Magic Islands is the size. The boats here are much larger and provide toilet facilities, areas for seating under cover from the sun as well as lots of space for soaking up some sun rays. ▶



Did you know?

The Philippines has thousands of dive sites and is the perfect destination for gaining and perfecting new scuba skills while enjoying a wide array of underwater life and an easy-going vacation above the water.



Aerial view of the resort



Richard and his hardy group



Macro critters like shrimp are everywhere

There's a large storage area for cameras and bags keeping everything safe and out of the way of divers kitting up for dives too. I remembered all of the dive sites, and most of them were recognisable to me, which again gave me that reassurance of familiarity - but none more than Lamanok!

Lamanok is probably one the furthest dive sites from Magic Oceans (about an hour or so), but what is unique about Lamanok is the utter plethora and diverse range of nudibranchs found here. Never ever in my life have I seen the range in size, colour and shape of these gastropod molluscs.

The small wall dive at Lamanok was so familiar, but what was new to me on this occasion was during the journey back we stopped and moored up at a local beach, had an amazing BBQ (with alcohol as the day of diving was done) and hilariously all joined in on a karaoke session. Now, don't get me wrong, this wasn't a swanky high-tech karaoke bar like I'd find in London, the quality of the production was sketchy and I'm sad to say the quality of the singing from our group was bordering murderous - but my god did we laugh! I do have video evidence of how bad it was, but for now that is staying securely locked away in my phone's camera roll!

We got to see all my favourite critters, and was absolutely thrilled to see the group catching sight of their first pygmy seahorses, tiger shrimps, skeleton shrimps, hairy squat lobster, etc, etc. In fact, it was on almost every dive here that everything we saw was most people first 'anything'! It's not often you can travel to a location and spend the dive seeing things you've never seen before - in fact, there was one species that had evaded me on my previous trips - the harlequin shrimp.

They had been sighted before but when I dived the sites on previous trips, they weren't to be seen that day. But as luck would have it this time, there wasn't just one, but two harlequin shrimps. Perfectly positioned on a wall face going about their business giving everyone plenty of time to see them, and for all the photographers in the group the chance to get dozens of snaps! Happy snappers indeed!

It really was the perfect dive trip and Magic Oceans delivered everything the group wanted to see and more. All of the highlight dive sites were on the itinerary, and of course we need to remember the activities for the non-divers in our lives.

Magic Oceans offers a number of different sightseeing and adventure type days out, from visit to the world-famous Chocolate Hills, zip-lining, quad biking, river cruises, and if animals are your thing, then you can't beat a visit to see the tarsiers - the world's smallest primate, or a trip to see the long tailed macaques, where they will happily pose for photos while they nibble your nuts.

A recommendation from me - go for the Adventure Day. You will get to experience all the best bits, starting with the tarsiers, then the zip-line, followed by the Chocolate Hills, macaques and ending the day thrashing quad bikes or buggies around while the Philippine sun sets - magical day!

We had the most amazing two weeks at the Magic resorts - peeling everyone away at the end of the trip was a difficult task to say the least! If you want a good-quality diving holiday with the options of fun and exciting days out for non-diving excitement, then take my word for it - you won't find much better.

The resorts are both amazing, yet both have their own charm and excitement, with some of the most-attentive staff operating out of each resort I've come across in the Philippines. The chefs in the kitchen are inventive and nothing is too much trouble for anyone, at any time. If you're UK-based and want to experience some of the magic for yourself, then get in touch with the team at Dive Worldwide - they tailor made our group trip, and you won't be surprised to learn that after the unforgettable time everyone had, I've been asked to pull together another for 2025. If you're lucky, you might see us at the beach karaoke bar utterly killing it! ■