

Anda

A NEW 'MUCK' DESTINATION

Nigel Marsh wrote the first guide book to muck diving, and it covered all the main sites across the Indo-Pacific region, however one destination was missing – Anda, in the Philippines – and so he and Helen Rose set off to explore the area

Photographs by Helen Rose and Nigel Marsh / www.nigelmarshphotography.com

Almost a decade ago I wrote the first guide book to muck diving. The book took two years to research and write and covered all the main muck diving sites across the Indo-Pacific region. However, one important destination was missing from the book – Anda on the island of Bohol in the Philippines.

I missed including Anda at that time as there was little information about this part of Bohol, with no dive resorts operating in the area. That has all changed, with the area now having several dive resorts, including Magic Oceans Dive Resort, where we recently visited for a wonderful dive holiday.

Bohol is located in the Visayas region, east of Cebu, and is reached on domestic flights from Manila or by ferry from nearby islands. Bohol is not a new diving destination by any means, as it has always been well-known for its reef diving around the islands near the capital of Tagbilaran. However, Anda is located a two and half hour drive east of the city, in a remote area with lush jungles and a rocky coastline.

Arriving at Magic Oceans Dive Resort, via a narrow dirt track, we quickly realised how remote this area is, as there are no nearby towns with restaurants and bars, so it's a good thing that meals are all included in a package deal. The resort has 16 bungalows arranged around a large pool, plus a spacious dining and lounge area and, of course, a well-appointed dive centre. Arriving in the afternoon, we dropped our bags in our very spacious bungalow, had a late lunch and then gathered our dive and camera gear for the afternoon dive.

The dive centre has nitrox and operates three banka dive boats, so can handle several groups at once. Our guide Lee Ann gave us a quick run down on procedures and then we were off to explore Turtle Point. ▶



Did you know?

Leopard shrimps are mostly found exclusively on colonial sea anemones. They are mostly white in colour with markings of brown/black which camouflages well with its sea anemone host.





Warty frogfish



Harlequin shrimp



Oriental blue-spotted maskray



Longhorn cowfish

Anda has a mix of muck and reef dives, around 30 dive sites east and west of the resort. Turtle Point was a very short boat ride, as it is located right next to the resort's House Reef.

Slipping into the calm blue water it was great to be back in the Philippines with 20 metre visibility and 29°C water. Directly below the boat was a garden of hard corals in only 5m of water, that was covered in small reef fish and invertebrates.

We followed Lee Ann to the edge of the reef where a wall dropped to 20m, then enjoyed a slow drift, admiring all the colourful soft corals, sponges, ascidians and whip corals decorating the wall. We didn't spot any large fish, but did see a wonderful collection of smaller reef fishes, including a great variety of angelfish, butterflyfish, basslets, wrasse, morays and surgeonfish. This may not have been a muck dive, but there were still plenty of great critters, with Lee Ann pointing out nudibranchs, mantis shrimps, candy crabs and a lovely warty frogfish.

Back in the shallows we could see why this site is called Turtle Point, as we easily spotted a dozen green and hawksbill turtles, which all seem to have several large slender sucker fish attached to them. There were also lots of anemones, which were home to western clown, orange skunk, pink, Clark's and tomato anemonefish. At the end of the dive we were joined by a yellow-lipped sea krait that was inspecting the coral for a meal.

The next morning, we had our first chance to see what the Anda muck diving is like at J Edens Place. This site has a sandy slope, with the odd coral patch, in depths from 8m to 25m. Lee Ann and the other local Filipino guides know all these muck sites well and are excellent at finding even the smallest of critters. On this dive Lee Ann found us three warty frogfish, including a baby only 2cm long, mantis shrimps, robust ghostpipefish, banded pipefish, shrimp gobies, sleeper gobies, fire urchins and several snake eels. The small coral patches were also an oasis for small fishes, covered in cardinalfish, damselfish, scorpionfish, dwarf angelfish, tobies, lionfish and morays.

On the morning dives we stayed on the boat between dives and enjoyed fresh fruit and drinks as we relaxed and



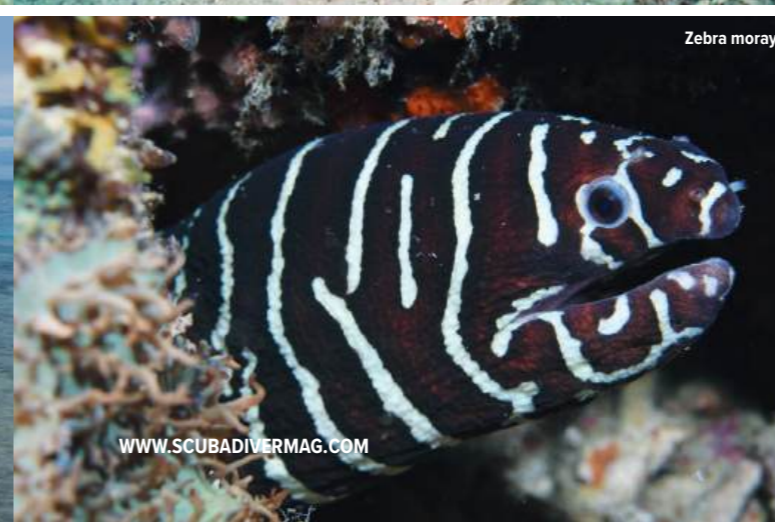
Mimic octopus



Green turtle



Magic Oceans Dive Resort dive boats



Zebra moray

“ This perfectly camouflaged shrimp has the same pattern as the anemones, making them extremely difficult to find. In all our travels we had never seen one of these shrimp, so it was a very memorable dive ”

enjoyed the coastal scenery. The crew like to alternate dive sites, so we next did another reef wall at Birhen Point.

This wall was similar to Turtle Point, with beautiful corals and plenty of reef fish. However, at the base of the wall was a sandy slope with a good population of Barnes garden eels. On the wall Lee Ann showed us a giant frogfish and a group of tiny Bargibant's pygmy seahorses. There were a few larger fish at this site, including batfish, trevally and coral snapper. Turtles were once again abundant in the coral gardens at the top of the wall. Only a few days before a whale shark had been spotted at this site.

Over the next few days we did a good variety of both muck and reef sites, with most sites having a little of both. Other lovely reef sites included Mandarin Garden, where we saw a great variety of colourful nudibranchs and Pygmy House where we saw xeno crabs and muck critters like a fingered dragonet and a Pegasus sea moth. We also did a brilliant twilight-night dive on the House Reef, seeing splendid mandarinfish emerging from the coral to spawn, plus cuttlefish, numerous crustaceans, a rare zebra moray and a pair of harlequin shrimp. However, the most interesting reef dive was at Lumayag Point.

This wall is densely packed with colourful corals, including lots of sea whips, with many of them covered in rarely seen tiger anemones. ▶

We closely followed Lee Ann on this wall as she inspected the tiger anemones, as she was looking for a very rare shrimp. After several minutes of searching, she found the right spot and pointed out a spectacular leopard shrimp. This perfectly camouflaged shrimp has the same pattern as the anemones, making them extremely difficult to find. In all our travels we had never seen one of these shrimp, so it was a very memorable dive.

While the reef dives were fabulous, it was the muck dives we will most remember. Lamanok Island has coral gardens, a reef wall and plenty of sand to explore. Here we saw numerous oriental blue-spotted maskrays and a good variety of reef fish. However, the muck critters included a flamboyant cuttlefish, robust ghost pipefish, nudibranchs, gobies and a giant frogfish. Nearby Lamanok Sanctuary has a sandy bottom where we saw wonderpus, garden eels, flatworms, mantis shrimps and the smallest baby painted frogfish we have ever seen, it was barely 2mm long!

At Dapdap we explored another sandy slope to see longhorn cowfish, sea pens, tube anemones, commensal shrimps, maskrays, goatfish, grubfish, gobies and a small giant frogfish. However, the highlights of this dive were in the shallows where we found a marbled snake eel, two oriental flying gurnards and a rarely seen adult convict blenny. The juveniles of this species are common and seen in schools hovering over sand or coral, but the solitary adults live in holes in the bottom with only their head exposed.



Oriental flying gurnard



Pegasus sea moth



Nudibranchs

“ Over the next few days we did a good variety of both muck and reef sites, with most sites having a little of both ”

Our favourite muck site was Larry's Corner, named after one of the dive guides. This site is only 8m deep and has fine silty sand. Only minutes into the dive we saw the first critter, a mimic octopus. We spent several minutes with this wonderful octopus as it crept over the sand and changed shape several times to look like a flounder. We then found two more mimic octopus and a wonderpus.

Exploring the sand for over seventy minutes we also found bentstick pipefish, pufferfish, razorfish, a great variety of gobies and a tiny cuttlefish. There were also lots of urchins and rhinoceros sea stars, and hiding next to these sea stars were two white hairless hairy frogfish. The guides also informed us that this is normally a good spot to see seahorses and file snakes.

We had a wonderful stay at Magic Oceans Dive Resort at Anda. The diving was superb, but so was the resort, the very friendly staff and the fabulous meals. Doing three to four dives a day we didn't have time to visit the day spa or do a local tour, so we will have to leave that to the next time we visit this lovely part of the Philippines. ■

Want to learn more?

For more information about Anda and Magic Oceans Dive Resort visit: www.magicoceans.online or www.diveplanit.com