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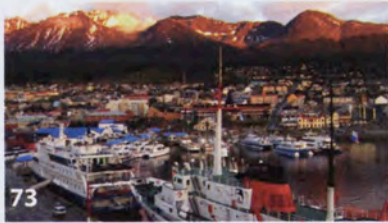


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# DIVER

incorporating  
**UNDERWATER  
WORLD**

Published monthly by Eaton Publications,  
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**NEWSAGENT:** If you prefer to buy **DIVER** over the counter, place an order with your newsagent now? All newsagents can obtain the magazine, but in case of difficulty please notify the Circulation Manager at the above address.

**DIVER** (ISSN-0141-3465) is published monthly by Eaton Publications, Periodicals Postage Paid at Jamaica NY 11431. **USPS no. 22517.**  
US agent: Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA.

**US POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to **DIVER** Magazine, C/O Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA.

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Puerto Galera and Verde Island are jewels of the Philippines, say **MICHAEL SALVAREZZA** and **CHRISTOPHER P WEAVER**

**T**HE MOVEMENT WAS barely perceptible. Did we see it or were we mistaken?

One of the first indicators of middle age is diminished eyesight, but even with the best vision this would have been becoming a real challenge. Sitting on a sandy bottom in an increasing current at about 30m, we were scouring a large pink-coloured seafan.

Carefully examining every inch of the contorted branches, we looked for the slightest movement – and there it was! After an excruciating search and with the help of our dive-guide Warren we now locked in on our quarry: a pregnant pygmy seahorse, perfectly camouflaged to match the host seafan.

The wait was worth it as we composed several images before leaving this tiny creature in peace and continued our dive along the reefs near the town of Sabang.

**THE PHILIPPINES**, with its 7000 islands is the world's second-largest archipelago and is located in the heart of the Coral Triangle, the epicentre of biodiversity in the world's oceans.

We were there to explore the vibrant reefs of Puerto Galera in the Oriental Mindoro region, and to visit one of the most spectacular dive-spots in the area, Verde Island.

On our first dives, near Sabang, we were delighted to find healthy coral outcroppings and a dizzying array of dazzling reef fish. For example, at a dive-site known as Monkey Beach we were enraptured by the playful antics of the numerous species of anemonefish we found there.

A little further east, Sinandigan Wall introduced us to a large hawksbill turtle and a robust cuttlefish, plus a plethora of vividly coloured nudibranchs and other tiny macro subjects.

The reefs of this area are also home to countless crinoids, which come in seemingly endless varieties and colour patterns. We were surprised to see that at times they appeared to blanket the bottom.

Although they are usually found crawling on the bottom or along coral heads, divers will occasionally see crinoids swimming in mid-water. Be careful as you swim near these critters – they love to hitchhike on unsuspecting

divers who accidentally brush against them!

Speaking of things to look out for, we wondered if there were any real marine dangers in the Philippines. Divers will undoubtedly spot venomous lionfish and poisonous stonefish lying in wait on the reefs. Occasionally a banded sea snake will slither between divers, a well-known marine predator that can kill a man with its bite.

None of these creatures has any interest in harming human beings, however, and if they are given the right measure of respect, divers have nothing to fear.

But the most fearsome creatures on the reefs are unlikely ones. Get too close to the lair of the resident damselfish or the black Clark's clownfish, and divers risk an attack. These small reef-dwellers, measuring no more than 7cm in length, back down for no-one!

You might think that a 6ft diver blowing noisy bubbles and flashing a bright strobe would intimidate these fish, but you would be mistaken. Indeed, linger too long and the fish will rush you and if necessary, bite!

That's what happened to us. We overstayed our welcome and a black Clark's clownfish charged us at lightning speed. Trust us, getting bitten on the tip of your bare ear hurts like hell, so be respectful. There may be a horror movie to be made about giant mutant damselfish in the future.

**WE WERE STAYING AT** the Marco Vincent Dive Resort on White Beach in Puerto Galera, a Mediterranean-inspired property with 38 spacious and well-equipped rooms and three restaurants.

Guests are met by staff at the airport, taken to the port at Batangas and ferried to Puerto Galera, which takes about 90 minutes.

Marco Vincent Divers is the adjacent PADI centre and has two dive-boats: the 12m *Lady Merci* and *Big Beth*, an impressive 25m vessel that can take up to 28 divers on dives to Verde Island, Puerto Galera and remote locations such as Anilao. Nitrox is available.

A night-dive at a site known as La Laguna Point brought an encounter with the flamboyantly coloured but incredibly shy mandarinfish.

# INTO THE EPICENTRE

Pictured: It takes a sharp eye, or a good guide, to find the expertly camouflaged pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*).



**Above:** The mating of the mandarinfish (*Synchiropus splendidus*) is a highlight.

Descending to about 8m, we settled on the bottom near a pile of coral rubble as the sun was setting and began a long vigil, waiting patiently for the amorous fish to begin their mating ritual.

It took a while, but after about 45 minutes of stoic observation the urge to mate took precedence over the reticence of the fish, and we witnessed the dénouement of their proceedings.

The trick, of course, is to compose, focus and properly expose an image in the dark of night of an event between two fish no more than a couple of centimetres long, and that lasts no more than two seconds!

Note to underwater photographers: use a focus light with a red light or red filter. Bright white light usually frightens or disturbs marine life that ventures out

after dark, but the red light adds stealth for observing and photographing shy critters and fish such as these.

**BESIDES REEFS SWIRLING** with marine life, divers visiting this area can also explore interesting and photogenic shipwrecks.

In March 2003, a 30m Philippine cargo vessel named the *Almajane* was intentionally sunk in about 30m depth. This steel-hulled ship sits perfectly upright and is now resting quietly on a sandy bottom near La Laguna.

Before its sinking the ship was cleaned of debris and dangerous objects, and is very safe to penetrate for divers with the right experience. They will find resident sweetlips, as well as schools of batfish, snapper and jack, all making the *Almajane* their home.

About an hour's boat ride from Puerto Galera is Verde Island. We knew that this was a special place the moment we dipped our masks under water.

At Verde Island Drop-off, one of the premier dive-sites in the entire region, we were transfixed by the clouds of brilliantly coloured basslets that swarm

**Clockwise from below:** Nudibranchs, like these Tyson's *Risbecia* dorids, keep macro photographers busy; the second dive-boat at Marco Vincent is the comfortable *Lady Merc*; myriad anemones and anemonefish can be found in these waters.





**Above:** Framed by colourful crinoids, this broadclub cuttlefish (*Sepia latimanus*) tries to remain inconspicuous.

**Right:** The 'flashes' of the electric file-clam (*Ctenoides ales*) are mesmerising.

**Below:** Christopher Weaver closes on a large barrel sponge.

over the coral heads, along with numerous red anthias.

Verde Island is where the Coral Triangle's biodiversity is on full display. Everywhere we looked, we encountered different varieties of fish.

The sloping reefs were cloaked with an assortment of corals, and squadrons of surgeonfish fluttered in the current, while hawkfish, cardinalfish, blennies and gobies peeked out from every nook.

Butterflyfish flitted around the coral heads searching for food, but it takes a sharp eye to find some of the tiny frogfish and expertly camouflaged reef critters that make this area their home.

We were thrilled to find and photograph many species of beguiling shrimp, crab and other invertebrate life.

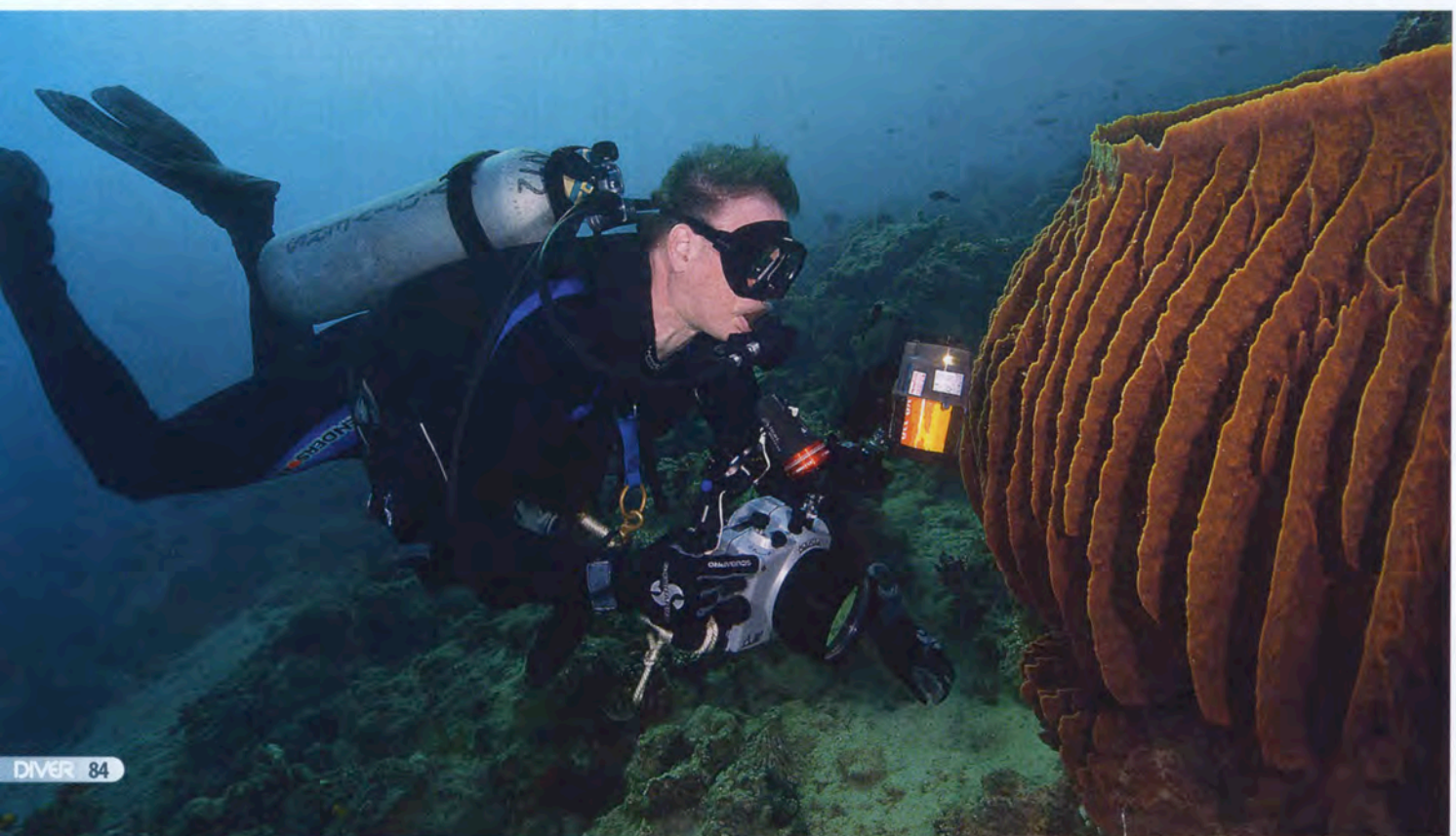
The electric file-clam is one of the more unusual denizens of these coral



recesses. Tucked beneath a ledge, we found several of these mesmerising bivalves, with their blazing red mantles and long flowing tendrils, but it was their flashing white pattern that drew our attention.

This clam uses a thin strip of highly reflective soft tissue along the outer edge of its mantle and exposes this briefly to create the appearance of a flashing light.

Our final dive was at a site known as Secret Bay. While much of our diving





in this region found us exploring lush coral gardens, riotous reef walls and shipwrecks, Secret Bay is a true muck-diving experience, and one not to be missed.

Swimming along a nondescript sandy bottom, the treasures of the Philippines slowly reveal themselves. Nudibranchs with ridiculous colour schemes are the first to appear. Next, we spot upside-down jellyfish pulsating on the bottom.

An orangutan crab lies in wait in a small pile of coral rubble; under another is a mantis shrimp, ready to clobber its next prey. A tiny shrimp is perfectly hidden along a whip-coral frond.

Other species of delicate shrimps can be found on the undersides of tubeworms and small anemones.

Starfish, sea-urchins and flatworms are the welcoming committee to a fascinating encounter with an ornate ghost pipefish.

Our tanks eventually ran low on air and we had to leave this special spot. We had only been scratching the surface of what this special corner of the world has to offer and plan to return – who knows what treasures we will encounter?



**Top left:** Hawksbill turtles abound in these waters.

**Above:** Lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) lying in wait on the wreck of the *Almajane*.

**Left:** The ghostly remains of several small wrecks can be found off the shores of Sabang Beach.

**Below left:** Shipwrecks transform into artificial reefs and support a wide range of marine life.

**Below:** The dive shop is a few steps away from the resort at Marco Vincent.

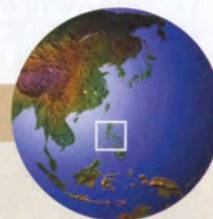


Visitors to any area, including Puerto Galera, should take some time for topside experiences.

The staff at Marco Vincent can arrange for zip-wire tours, treks to volcanoes and waterfalls, and visits to WW2 sites, including Corrigedor Island, home to a fascinating war memorial and museum.



## FACTFILE



**GETTING THERE** ▶ Flights from London Heathrow into Manila.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Marco Vincent Dive Resort, [www.mvdive.com](http://www.mvdive.com). El Galleon Beach Resort / Asia Divers, [www.asiadivers.com](http://www.asiadivers.com)

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ There are two seasons, wet (May-October) and dry (November-April). April and May are the hottest months. In December and January, temperatures moderate, with less humidity. Typhoons can occur between July and October.

Yolande struck the southern regions in 2013 but Puerto Galera and Verde Island were unaffected.



**MONEY** ▶ Peso but US dollars widely accepted at resorts.

**PRICES** ▶ Original Diving can offer a package to Puerto Galera from £1450pp for seven nights' B&B staying at El Galleon with Asia Divers, including international flights, land and boat transfers and 10 boat-dives with full equipment, [www.originaldiving.com](http://www.originaldiving.com)

**TOURIST INFORMATION** ▶ [www.tourism.gov.ph](http://www.tourism.gov.ph)