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Our cover image for this issue is a whimsical painting of Michigan's 1892 Mackinac Point Lighthouse in Mackinac City, Michigan done by Maine artist Virginia Souza. This is the 18th year that Virginia Souza has painted a holiday cover for *Lighthouse Digest*. It is available for purchase in two versions, one with "Lighthouse Digest" on the delivery truck and the other with candy canes instead of the words "Lighthouse Digest." These images and past holiday covers can all be ordered from *Lighthouse Digest*. See the full page advertisement in this issue.

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Apo Reef Lighthouse: Sentinel of the Coral Triangle

**Text and Photography by
Michael Salvatore and Christopher
Weaver (Eco-Photo Explorers)**

The darkness of night on the vast ocean is deep and impenetrable. It envelops all and blankets the world in an inky blackness. It muffles sounds, cools temperatures and closes in. At night on the ocean, the water turns black and the waves are magnified to sometimes terrifying proportions.

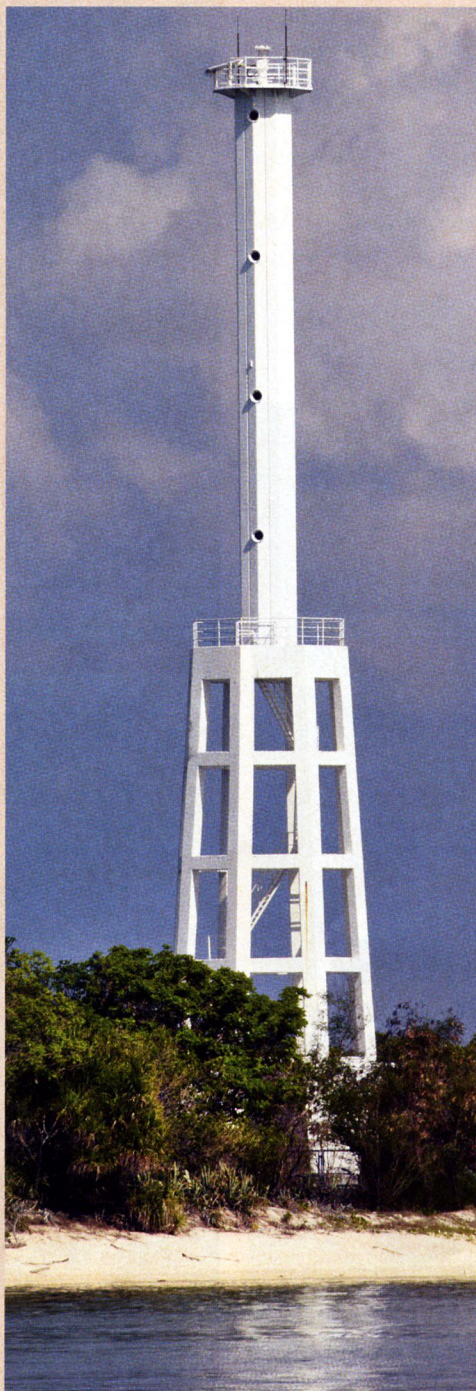
Our boat banged and clanged across the lumpy sea, pounded by unseen waves in the night, tossing and pitching and riding uncomfortably in the restless sea. Below the boat was a limitless ocean, teeming with life and reaching untold depths in this vast stretch of empty territory. Above us, a curtain of stars, billions of pinprick lights winking and shining their starlight from the infinite universe. As the boat pounded its way through the swells, the bright orb of the moon rose above the horizon and its pale white light shimmered on the surface of the sea.

We were alone in this empty ocean, our destination a tiny spot of land far away known simply as Apo.

Suddenly, a blink of light from the limit of our vision. .a flash from a lighthouse far, far away. This was the Apo Reef Lighthouse, and its light was the first sign that our approach was near.

As we motored on, rising and falling in the confused sea, the light from the lighthouse became stronger. Lighthouses have shown the way to safe passage for untold numbers of sailors over the centuries and this beacon was no different. Indeed, lighthouses have always been a source of comfort, a signal of safety and companionship to even the loneliest and most desperate of sailors.

And then, as the first tentative rays of sunlight began to stream over the horizon, we caught our first glimpse of Apo Reef Island. It was a tiny ribbon of bright white sand, encircled by a mangrove forest, fringed with verdant palm trees, and rising only a few feet above sea level. An almost insignificant speck in the wide-open ocean, Apo is home to some of the most spectacular coral reefs in the entire



Although the new Apo Reef Lighthouse is quite an impressive structure, it is a far cry from a typical looking lighthouse and much different in appearance from the lighthouse that it replaced.

world. In fact, Apo Reef is considered the world's second-largest contiguous coral reef system after Australia's Great Barrier Reef and the largest in the Philippines. It covers 67,877 acres and is surrounded by hundreds of miles of water. Apo is truly isolated from the rest of world and for most, a very special place.

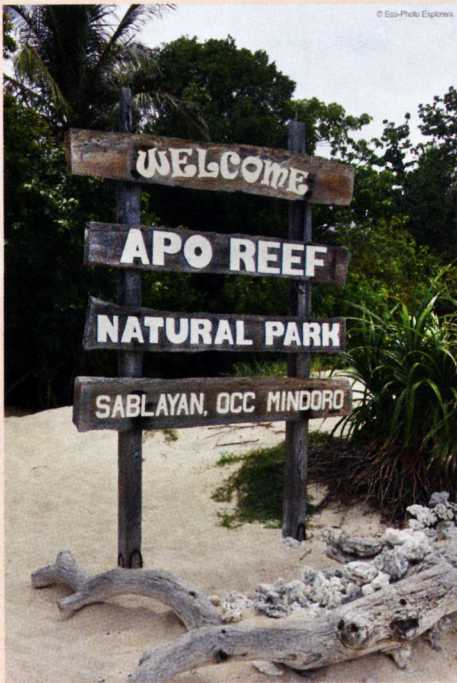
We had crossed enormous distances of turbulent seas to reach this spot, and our only companions were the raucous sea birds, the sweltering sun and the indefatigable lighthouse.

The lighthouse on Apo Reef Island, a tiny island located some four hours by boat from the Philippine province of Sublayan and 12 hours from the island of Mindoro, is actually the second constructed on this site. The first lighthouse was built and first lit in 1906 following the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. Plans for this first lighthouse originated during the Spanish Colonial Period of the Philippines as part of the Maritime Lighting Plan of Spain for the Philippine Archipelago. A steel tower with a third-order light was proposed and by 1896, the tower and lighting apparatus were purchased intact by Spanish authorities from France. Once delivered, these were stored in a warehouse in Manila and remained there while lighthouse construction was halted with the outbreak of the Philippine Revolution and the Spanish-American War.

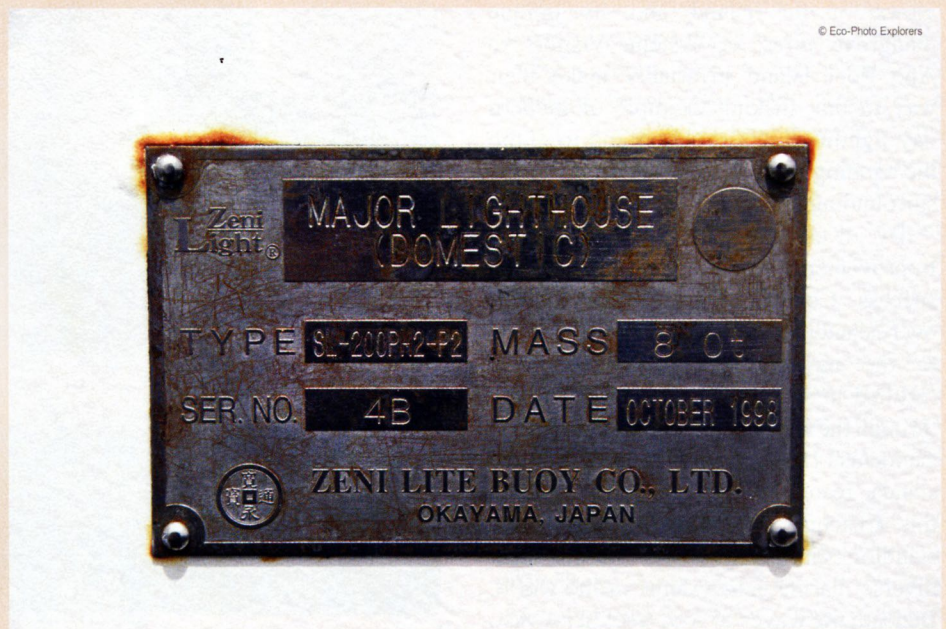
After the Americans took control of this region following the war, the Bureau of Lighthouse Construction decided to continue the construction of the lighthouse on Apo Reef and, with a budget of 65,000 Philippine Pesos (1443 USD), a construction party of 45 Filipinos and 1 American was dispatched in June 1904 to build the tower.

The edifice was 118-ft (36.0-m) tall, making it the tallest lighthouse ever to be erected in the Philippines. The structure was an iron skeletal tower with a central cylinder fortified by hexagonal framework and topped with a lantern room with two lower levels of gallery.

The project involved building



The welcome sign to the Apo Natural Park.



This plaque on the Apo Reef Lighthouse indicates that it was built for the Philippine Coast Guard by the Zeni Lite Buoy Co of Okayama, Japan.



This plaque on the Apo Reef Lighthouse shows that it is the property of the Republic of the Philippines.

temporary housing for the workers, constructing a road from the lighthouse site to the dock landing area and the need to constantly supply fresh water from the neighboring islands, as there was none to be found on Apo Reef Island. After two years, the work was done and the tower was pressed into service.

Over the years, the lighthouse on Apo Reef Island fell into disrepair, as did many aids to navigation throughout the Philippine Archipelago. In the 1990s, the Philippine government began to recognize the importance of an effective system of navigational aids to its aspirations of future economic growth and a project was created to strengthen this system. The Maritime Safety Improvement Project was designed to install or rehabilitate lighthouses, lighted buoys and radar beacons along the Manila-Cebu maritime corridor and was sourced to a group of Japanese companies for implementation. In total, 11 lighthouses were slated for construction and 29 were identified as targets for rehabilitation as part of this broad effort. Apo Reef Lighthouse was included in this plan.

And so, in 1998, the old tower was demolished and a modern, 110-foot tower was constructed on Apo Reef Island. It was built with solar panels to convert solar energy into electricity to power the light, and has a viewing deck about halfway up the tower, which provides spectacular



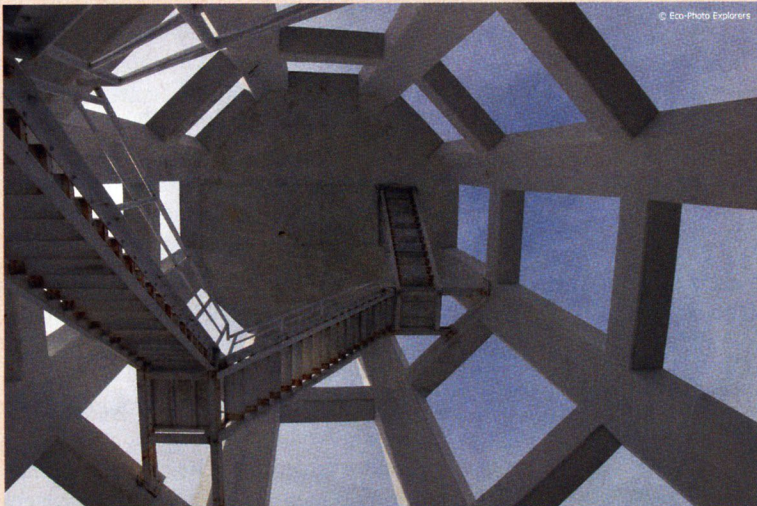
The original keeper's house for the Apo Reef Lighthouse is in ruins. The memories of the lighthouse keepers who lived here have disappeared into the pages of time.

views of the island and its unique mangrove forest ecosystem. Visitors to Apo Reef Island invariably make their way to this striking example of modern day lighthouse construction and to climb the winding stairs to view the beauty of the surrounding area.

By all estimates, the Maritime Safety Improvement Project was ultimately a success. Completed only a few months over schedule, the improvements it made to the navigational aid system have resulted in an increase in shipping traffic through the area and a decrease in maritime accidents. The Apo Reef Lighthouse now stands resolute, guiding ships through this treacherous stretch of water, and standing sentinel over one of the most diverse marine eco-systems in the world. Beneath the waves of Apo Reef lies a vast, almost incomprehensibly beautiful coral



The ranger station for the Apo Reef Natural Park.



Looking up the stairway of the tower at the Apo Reef Lighthouse.



The sea turtle in the waters of the Apo Reef Natural Park is shown with a hitchhiking remora, often called suckerfish.



View from the lighthouse looking out over a Mangrove swamp and the open sea beyond.



Looking down from the Apo Reef Lighthouse.



The waters of at the Apo Reef Natural Park are bursting with many types of underwater life.



The view from the water of the Apo Reef Light and the Bajo Apo Island where the lighthouse stands.

The original Apo Reef Lighthouse was constructed from July 1904 to April 1906 by the United States Lighthouse Service from many of the materials that had been shipped from France to the Spanish government of the Philippines, where they had been sitting in storage since 1896. However, first the Philippine Revolution and then the Spanish American War delayed construction of the lighthouse. The lighthouse was completed when the Philippines was a United States Territory. At 118-feet in height, it was tallest lighthouse ever erected in the Philippines. A 3rd order Fresnel lens shined from its lantern. After years of neglect, the tower was declared unsafe and demolished in the mid-1990s and replaced by the current tower in 1998.

reef system teeming with fish and other forms of marine life. The Philippines lies at the northern part of what is generally referred to as The Coral Triangle, a section of ocean reaching down from this area to Indonesia, Malaysia and Timor-Leste. The Coral Triangle is known scientifically as the center of marine biodiversity and it is the objective of the Philippines Government to balance the need to increase economic activity and development with the responsibility of protecting these environmentally sensitive and valuable waters. The Apo Reef Lighthouse is a critical part of this effort.

After several days of scuba diving and exploring the rich marine ecosystem of Apo Reef, we prepared for our return to Mindoro and the seaside town of Puerto Galera. As our boat began to cut a path through the now glassy surface of the South China Sea, we turned to watch as the gleaming white tower of the Apo Reef Lighthouse began to sink slowly below the receding horizon. We smiled in the knowledge that long after we had returned home, this unique structure would still be on duty, serving sentinel over the Coral Triangle and its lush marine world. We then turned our faces into the wind and felt the salty air of the open ocean.

