



DIVING INTO THE PHILIPPINES

White tip reef sharks, multi-coloured nudibranchs, scavenging goatfish, schooling trevally and shy frogfish hidden in the coral; meet the locals in the waters of the Philippines *Words Giselle Whiteaker*

OUR BUBBLES DRIFT LAZILY UPWARDS AS WE LIE MOTIONLESS

on the sea-bed, propped up on our fingertips. Tiny cleaner wrasse dart busily between our fingers, unable to distract us as we peer into the cobalt-blue water. We five lie on the edge of a drop-off, the gently sloping reef making a sudden plunge to unknown depths mere metres from where we wait. From the abyss, an immense, dark shape rises over the lip and we tense in anticipation. It's a five-metre long thresher shark, the distinctive arc of its disproportionately-long tail adding power to its muscular frame, as its large comic-character-like eyes dart nervously across the divers eagerly awaiting its appearance.

As a pelagic, nocturnal species preferring deep, open-water habitats, thresher sharks are not commonly spotted. Apart from here. At Monad Shoal near Malapascua Island in the Philippines, the sharks live and hunt in the deep water, sneaking into the shallow waters of the shoal in the wee hours of the morning for a thorough scrub by the cleaner wrasse, who have swiftly abandoned our fingers to attend to the new visitor.

This is just one of the many sites luring divers into the warm water of the Philippines, an archipelago of 7,107 islands with a great diversity of hard and soft corals, and hundreds of species of tropical fish. There's a dive to suit everyone; from technical wreck dives in Palawan to wall diving at Panglao Island, Bohol. "The Philippines is in the 'Coral Triangle' – the global centre of marine biodiversity," explains Andrea Agarwal, manager of Thresher Shark Divers in Malapascua. "The variety of marine life is astounding," she enthuses.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Thresher sharks have a distinctively-long tail; a colourful coral crab; seahorses can be spotted at many of the Philippines' dive sites.



From the tiniest pygmy seahorse up to mammoth-sized whale sharks, the diversity in the water is phenomenal. "The Philippines provides a variety of diving locations," says Huw James of Action Divers in Puerto Galera. "If you like wreck diving you go to Coron or Subic Bay. Sloping reefs and a great diversity of marine life: Puerto Galera, Anilao and Dumagette. Schools of pelagics can be seen at Tubataba Reef in the Sulu sea [and] whale sharks can be seen in Southern Leyte."

Add to that the beaming smiles of the locals, the ease of inter-island transport, and the stunning white-sand beaches, and there are few better places to dive than the Philippines. That's what keeps the bubble-makers coming back for more.

Etihad Airways launched flights to Manila, Philippines in February 2006. ●

TOP FIVE DIVE SITES IN THE PHILIPPINES:

MONAD SHOAL, MALAPASCUA:

It will involve pre-dawn diving, but thresher shark sightings are almost guaranteed here. Hammerhead sharks and mantas also make the occasional appearance to thrill early-risers.

THE CANYONS, PUERTO GALERA:

This is an advanced drift dive, often subject to ripping currents. Ranging between 15-30 metres, the aquatic life includes Hawksbill turtles, sweetlips, snapper and schools of batfish. Also watch for banded sea snakes.

USS NEW YORK, SUBIC BAY:

Built in 1891, the *USS New York* served in the Philippine-American war, the Chinese revolution and WW1 until she was scuttled to prevent her guns falling into the wrong hands. The wreck is pretty much intact, and easy to penetrate, apart from the engine room which is still largely unexplored.

PESCADOR ISLAND, MOALBOAL:

Time it right and the marine park of Pescador Island in Cebu becomes home to a giant school of sardines; hundreds of thousands of them. These in turn attract predator fish such as barracuda, jacks and tuna.

IRAKO, CORON, PALAWAN:

Possibly the best wreck dive in the Philippines, the *Irako* is a Japanese refrigeration ship. Big groupers, schools of tuna and yellow fins, lion fish, and scorpion fish live around this wreck with a couple of sea turtles also calling the crumpled metal superstructure home.