

# THE PERFECT MIX

ALAN WIGGS

> IN THE 1980s THE CORAL REEFS OF THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS WERE OFTEN TAINTED BY UNSUSTAINABLE FISHERIES PRACTICES AND THE ARCHIPELAGO LOST FAVOUR AS A MAJOR DIVE DESTINATION. BUT ACTIONS TAKEN BY BOTH THE FILIPINO GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY GROUPS LED TO ESTABLISHING A HUGE NETWORK OF MARINE PARKS. THE FIRST WAS APO ISLAND MARINE RESERVE IN 1982 DUE TO THE PRODDING OF NEARBY SILLIMAN UNIVERSITY. NEARLY 30 YEARS LATER, THE TRANSFORMATION IS INCREDIBLE AND THE PHILIPPINES AGAIN SHOULD BE ON EVERY DIVER'S WISHLIST.

I was leading a group of 42 divers – Open Water Course candidates, snorkelers, and sun worshippers – on our first trip to the Philippines. I was unsure what to expect and images of overcrowded Manila, rubbish in the water, throngs of locals noisily plying their wares were uppermost. I also envisioned the bustle and press of Bali, the sights and smells of North Sulawesi's Manado, and the crowded harbour of Singapore. Mmmm...

I was so wrong. I found a pristine paradise with thriving coral reefs and gorgeous palm-draped beaches. I didn't expect the wet season to deliver nine days of sunshine with gentle breezes and calm seas. This was one of the most amazing dive trips in my 30 years' of exploring the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

My interest in the Philippines was piqued by reports of Apo Island, reputed to have some of the best diving in The Philippines, and a recently built resort nearby. It was 30 minutes south of Dumaguete in the Central Visaya Islands. The resort was completed in late 2008, so everything was still new and neat as a pin. The first

day at a new destination normally brings a few niggling concerns as the group settles in but by lunchtime on the first day I knew we had a winner. But how good would the diving be? It had been hard to source reliable reports about PI diving – opinions varied widely, depending on when and where they'd dived.

Any concerns faded only a few metres from the restaurant when we entered the 29 degree water for a shore dive. Visibility was well over 20 metres as we traversed an interesting mix of grey sand bottom with delicate hard coral bommies that attracted myriads of small reef fish. Mere metres from shore we swam with green turtles, stalked some young solitary great barracuda and found the first of many frogfish on this trip. There were several species of clownfish, various juvenile butterfly and angelfish species, and the odd banded sea krait nosing around the coral gardens. We ranked this as one of the best house reefs we've dived. And 200 metres further north at 'Bahura' is a reef of broken corals with literally hundreds of resident mandarin fish.

< Painted frogfish, Apo Island  
Inset - A decorated horny oyster on colourful ascidians.  
> Apo Island is surrounded by healthy hard coral reefs protected with Marine Park Status.  
> Mantis shrimp were seen on most dives  
> Daniel Howard Jones plus hawksbill turtle buddy. The turtle crunched coral for 20 minutes while we worked every angle.







▲ Apo Island lacks nothing for colour and fish life - here a coral grouper swims through basslets and damselfish.

▲ Spotted garden eels make a tentative appearance.

▲ Steve de Neef, photo pro at Atmosphere, videos the dive in HD on his DSLR.

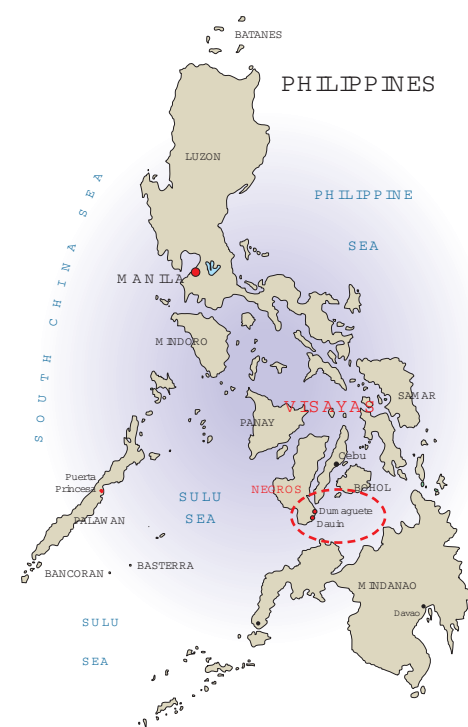
One of the biggest assets here is the varied diving – many sites are only five minutes from the resort. The Davin (pronounced 'Darwin') coastline is dotted liberally with dive sites extending south to the tip of Oriental Negros at 'Guinsuan'. Dives in this area consist of gentle drifts along sand and coral slopes. The diversity and density of life here verges on the ridiculous! One seawhip, in the space of less than one metre, concealed ghost pipefish, commensal shrimp, and a weird type of seawhip crab I've never seen before. The grey sand slopes crawled with nudibranchs, and blue ribbon eels would vanish, retreating in panic. Small schools of silvery shrimpfish rose from the seagrass, nosing back down again in a weird swimming action, while schools of striped catfish tumbled over the rubble.

Macro lenses got a huge workout as our dive guide Lors showed us crinoid clingfish, porcelain crabs and bubble coral shrimp. Frequently we'd drift over coral bommies massed with colour and life, decorated liberally with yellow, black or white crinoids and red seawhips whilst every ledge seemed to harbour spot fin or dwarf lionfish. Overhead, schools of fusiliers and the occasional big bumphead wrasse cruised the reeftop. I

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dived Ginsuan twice; this is one of the best photography sites I've ever seen. I can't detail the nearly 20 sites along the Davin coastline in this space, but another standout was 'Sahara Deep' near Dumaguete. The dive starts at 27 metres on an artificial reef system consisting of an old Kombi van, some pyramids of car tyres and a small multi-cab. Just about every starfish harboured its own matching imperial shrimp and both ghost and robust pipefish were spotted. Elaborately decorated juvenile emperor angels were few while Moorish idols and their imitators, the pennant butterflyfish, neared plague proportions.

The safety stop right under the boat yielded some incredible finds. All around us, meadows of garden eels swayed, while the grey sand oozed with tiny drab black nudibranchs and whiskered goatfish. Juvenile peacock razorfish not much larger than a fingernail drifted hopelessly out of control, occasionally diving for cover into the coarse substrate. Lors tapped on his tank and I slipped on



> A porcelain crab unfurls its fishing mittens.  
> Blue ribbon eels swayed and slithered from their sandy burrows.  
> Seawhip shrimp were common along the Davin coastline.

a macro lens as he pointed out what looked like a strand of spaghetti curled around a stem of seagrass. I thought "You must be kidding...!" Zoomed to the max, the focus sharpened on a little pygmy pipehorse, almost impossible to photograph in the gentle surge.

These dive sites are typical of the Davin coastline – a mix of muck diving interspersed with healthy coral reefs, abundant varied fishlife, rich biodiversity plus the odd turtle and sea krait. At 'Davin North' we spent 20 minutes up close and personal with a grazing hawksbill turtle that seemed totally unfazed by our presence.

But for me the 'jewel in the crown' is Apo Island, a 20-30 minute cruise on the resort's 84 foot banca, a superb dive platform. Apo dives tend to be run as a triple dive with lunch which gives some time ashore to explore the island, but the resort dive operation is happy to do it as a double if you want to return to the resort for a massage. We had 20-25 metre visibility as there was a fair amount of drifting plankton. But the trade-off here is the abundant life that barrage of nutrient supports.

The must-do dives here are Coconut Point and Cogon – both are drifts where you fly over some of the healthiest hard coral gardens on this planet. The fish life at both sites is amazing, with masses of colour and movement generated by schools of fusiliers, red-toothed triggerfish and basslets. And although soft corals were few, the reefscape is covered in colourful crinoids, anemones and barrel sponges – the colour at Apo would be hard to beat anywhere. Scribbled filefish, large sweetlips and monster titan triggerfish were quite common – I hadn't expected as much big stuff – and like most dives sites, one or two hawksbill and green turtles were seen.



Both Cogon and Coconut Point have resident schools of big eye trevally – and who doesn't enjoy being in the middle of a whirling school of a thousand pelagics? The boat follows the drifting divers and as the currents are localised these are quite safe dives for all experience levels. Divers are guided in very small groups so it's easy to stay in contact with the guide. Apo was so good that, despite my new Canon flooding on its sixth dive, all I was really concerned about was the memory

card – thankfully the data was intact!

The Davin coastline is a very comprehensive dive location. It has an incredible variety of dive sites, with both muck and blue water coral dives of the highest quality. We're already booked in for 2012 – and it might be time for you to visit the Philippines as well!





Golden damselfish colour matches the abundant yellow crinoids on the coral slopes of Apo Island. Victoria, a superb 84 foot banca is a wonderful dive platform.

**OUR RESORT:** Atmosphere is a resort built from the ground up by divers, for divers. Everything possible has been hard-wired in for your comfort and safety. The facility is PADI 5 star, and the resort manageress Gabrielle Holder frequently runs IDCs. We had four students complete PADI Open Water, four others blazed through Advanced Open Water and a large contingent

earned Nitrox certification. The dive centre is brilliant – a large meeting area with dive site maps, critter ID posters and a whiteboard for briefings. The cleverly designed gear storage area is secure and drains well with separate washing baths for each gear component. Divers each have a

storage cubicle with a crate for mask, fins, regulator and BCD with ample

hanging space.

Everything is carried aboard and set up for each dive by the boat crew. Don't come here if you don't like being spoilt – if you have some weird fixation with rinsing and hanging up your own gear, then you may struggle! You may also be embarrassed to have no fewer than three crew kitting you

up – supporting tanks and putting your fins on for you while you idly wait at the dive platform! Post-dive there's hot face towelettes spiked with cologne followed by platters of fresh mango and papaya. The most frequent comment I heard about the resort staff was "They can't do enough for you!"



> **LINKS:** Atmosphere Resort [www.atmosphereresorts.com](http://www.atmosphereresorts.com) [awiggs@tps.vic.edu.au](mailto:awiggs@tps.vic.edu.au)

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