



Vitamin Sea

The Philippines offers far-flung destinations that can only be reached with a mask and fins. Whether you are a family looking for an underwater odyssey, a scuba enthusiast intrigued by remote shores or a rookie freediver in search of some guidance - we've got you covered

WORDS: Philippe Langrish

It would be a major undertaking to explore all 7,100 islands that make up the Philippines. But it's worth making a start. Beneath this nation's rich oceans lies the most exquisite sites and incredible creatures. Here's a guide to just a few of the top places to visit and the most memorable experiences that will help you embrace the lure of the sea.

Best for: underwater photography

The southern divers' haven of **Anilao** is where walls of fan coral hide exclusive enclaves and sunlight dances on sparkling reefs. And The Verde Island Passage – which is easily accessed from this coastal town – is the epicentre of the world's most biodiverse marine life and home to over 300 species of resilient coral. This sweet spot is regularly listed as hosting the world's top destinations for macro photography, including Secret Bay, Basura, and The Pier.

It is in Anilao where scuba instructor, underwater cinematographer and *National Geographic* contributor Robert Suntay set up Studio H2O ([facebook.com/studioh2o](https://www.facebook.com/studioh2o)), which offers courses in underwater cinematography and photography.

With so much affordable digital technology now on the market, now is the best time to channel your inner David Attenborough and try a lesson or two.

Studio H2O requires students to have taken their advanced diver course or have more than 50 dives under their belt. An introductory course lasts for two days and includes four dives, post-dive lectures and feedback sessions. Students can be hosted at a beach house or they can stay at one of the nearby resorts.

Getting there: Anilao is located just 125km away (three hours by car) from the capital of Manila.

Best for: freediving

This back-to-basics sport began as a necessity for the Bajao fishermen of Mindanao (the second largest island in the country's archipelago) eager for a lucrative catch. Today, AIDA

(l'Association Internationale pour le développement de l'apnée), the world's largest association of freedivers, is based in the Philippines and offers certified courses at four levels. There are no requirements to take the course other than being in good health.

Led by Carlo Navaro, the ManuMano group (manumano-diving.com) is also located in Anilao and offers AIDA introductory courses for those curious enough to go beyond the limits of snorkelling. Like any sport, there are risks. However, the course takes students a step at a time with a 'go slow and steady' mantra.

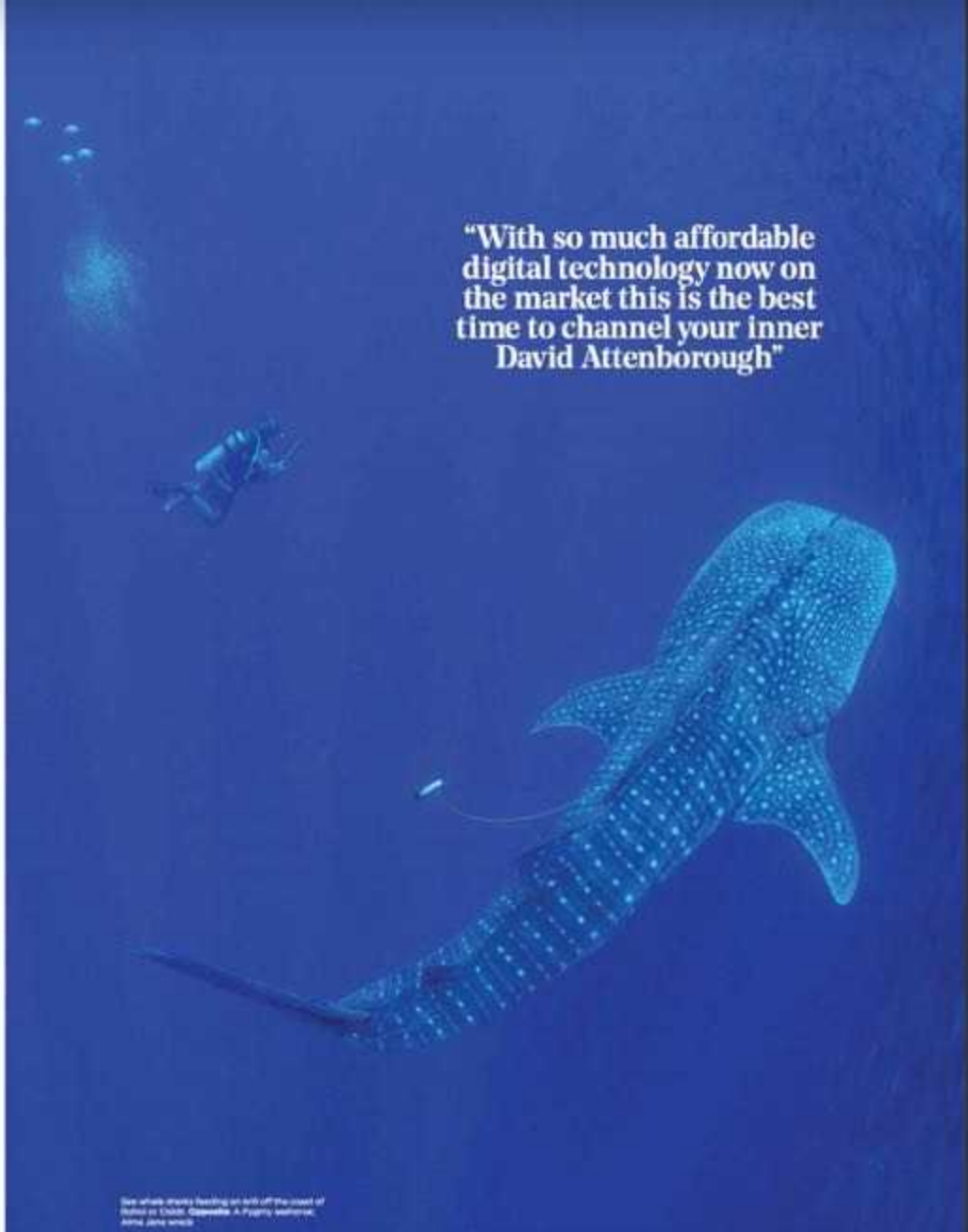
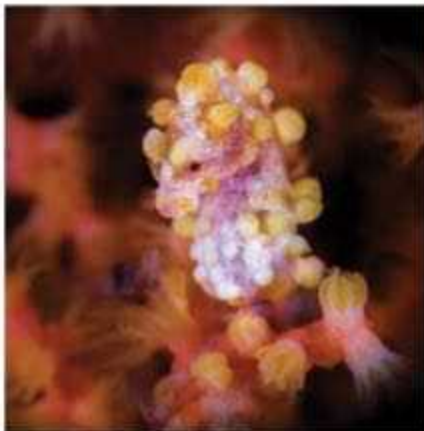
An introductory freediving course teaches breathing, relaxation and finning techniques to maximise time under the waves. Incredibly, some students have managed to quadruple their breath-holding time after only one day.

Best for: wrecks

Puerto Galera is another diving hub offering a number of shipwrecks, sloping reefs, underwater canyons and soft coral walls. The five top dive sites there are Canyons, Alma Jane, Monkey Beach, Manila Channel and The Boat Yard. The latter is perhaps the most famous site. It's a muck dive, which begins at a small wreck and takes divers across a sandy bottom to discover sea slugs, frogfish, cuttlefish, mimic octopus and a variety of shrimp. This site is much sought after by macro underwater photographers for its array of cute rare critters.

Sightseeing under the ocean is to be taken at a gentle pace. The oceanic architecture of Puerto Galera's wrecks, such as Alma Jane, is where the best eye-candy is to be found. Divers are invited to swim in and out of cargo openings to catch a glimpse of frog fish on the upper decks, bat fish below the hold and snapper circling the stern.

Getting there: Puerto Galera is about an hour's boat ride away from the fishing port of Batangas, which is a short drive from Anilao. The twisty road that connects these towns is lined with beach houses and dive resorts from five-star luxury to rustic retreats.



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See whale sharks feeding on fish off the coast of Palawan in Puerto Galera. A Puffin butterfly, Alma Jane wreck.



Best for: budding marine biologists

For a family-centric underwater odyssey, stay at Atmosphere Resort in Dumaguete on **Negros Island** in the Visayas.

'Kids Cove' activities are offered for younger guests and they can enrol in half-day creative workshops while parents head out on the dive boat. At the end of the day the children will be brimming with pride, showing off their 3D turtles and numerous paintings created while parents explored the depths of Apo Island.

The resort also offers unique two-hour marine biology sessions with Daniel, the resident marine biologist. Everyone instantly warms to his surfer charm, laid-back ease and encyclopaedic knowledge of the world according to Nemo. And there are marine talks for adults to learn about the habits and habitats of creatures seen during the daily dives. Relaxing in the balmy evening air, with a cocktail in hand and sharing salty sea stories rounds off the perfect family adventure. **Getting there:** Flights from Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport to Dumaguete's Sibulan Airport take just over an hour.

Best for: dolphins and turtles

Practise your underwater photography skills around the sites of **Balicasag Island**. Take an early morning bangka boat excursion with Pamilacan Tours & Transport Services from Alona Beach on Bohol Island to watch the pods of dolphins make their morning rituals. Once the kids have had their fill of Flipper head to Black Forest for a chance to capture oodles of turtles munching on sea grass.

Tropical Divers (tropicaldivers-alona.com) is a trusted dive centre located beside the cliff-top resort, Amozita on Panglao Island - which is connected to the main island of Bohol by a bridge. Add to your repertoire of target marine life images by scheduling a trip with them to Oslob where graceful whale sharks feed on krill.

Getting there: Fly to Bohol's Tagbilaran Airport from either Manila or the neighbouring island of Cebu.

Best for: snorkelling

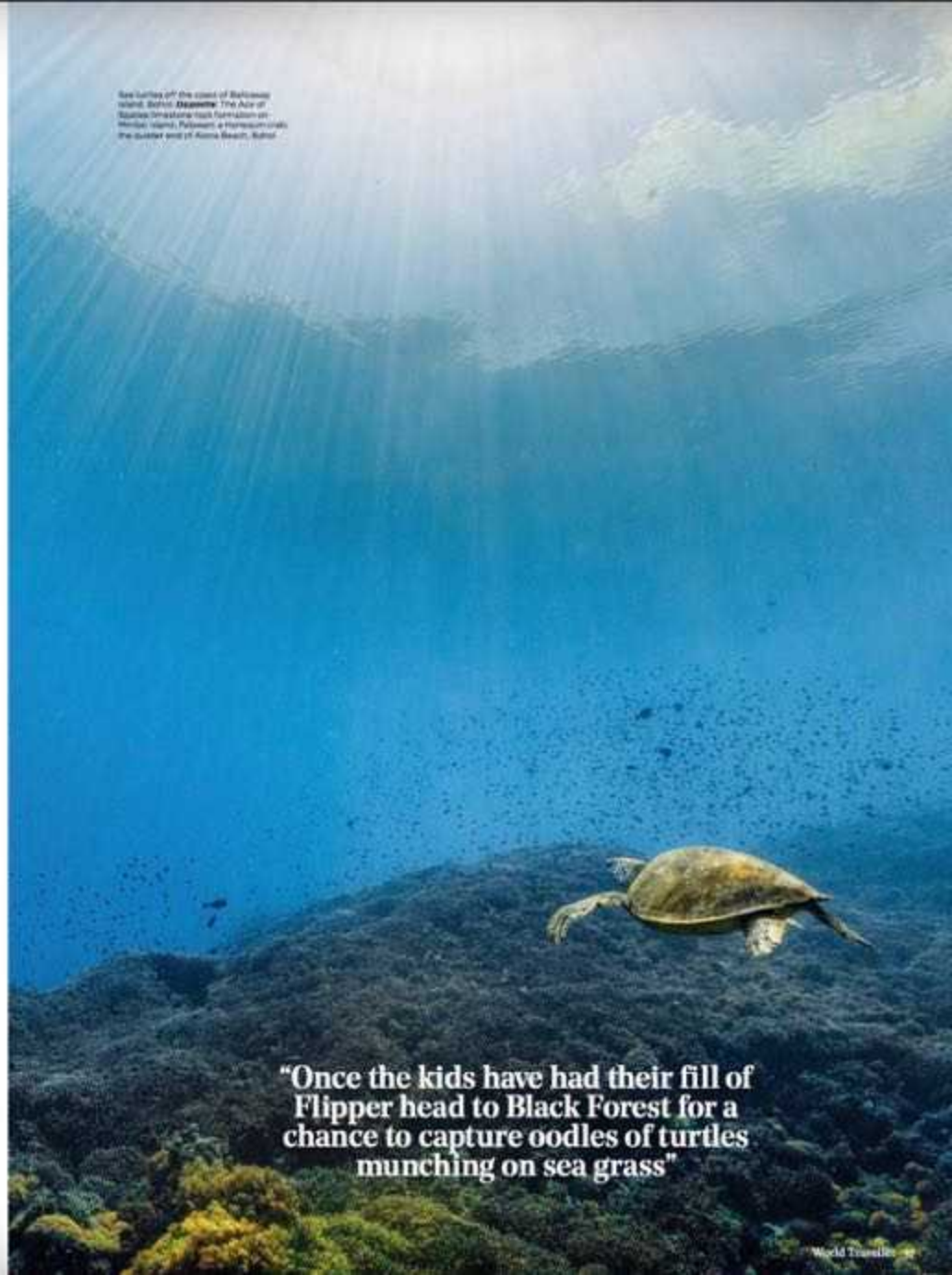
As impossible as it is to visit all the islands in the Philippines, it's as tricky to pick a best one. However, Club Paradise Palawan on **Dimaqui Island**, Coron regularly tops the list. The island's house reef is an ideal spot for freediving and these protected waters are most famously home to the elusive dugong. With barely a current, strong swimmers can circumvent the island, while children accompanied by their parents are invited on guided snorkelling tours, where the keen eyed guides know where to sniff out resident turtles and manta rays.

Getting there: Book a flight from Manila to Busuanga Airport. Then it's a 20-minute drive to Decalachao followed by a 30-45 minute boat ride to Club Paradise.

Inspired to travel? To book a trip, call +921 4 316 6666 or edit@natatravel.com



Sea turtles off the coast of Balicasag Island, Bohol, Philippines. The Ace of Spades, Simalunga Rock formation on Manila Island, Palawan & Palawan Island, the sunset view of Alona Beach, Bohol



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