

ATMOSPHERIC WELCOME



They take good care of the coastline in Dauin, and it shows in the quality of the diving, says **SAEED**

RASHID. He reckons that in terms of critter-diving alone, it can give even Lembeh Strait a run for its money

HAVEN'T BEEN EVERYWHERE in the Philippines, but from what I've seen travelling the country is much like the Jeepney trucks you find in every town – bright, colourful and a delight for all your senses.

The underwater world equally doesn't disappoint, from the biggest fish in the ocean to the smallest nudibranch, with something for everyone.

The Dauin coast of the island of Negros offers a feast of diving delights, from the rarest of critters through schools of jackfish to majestic whale sharks, and with an average water temperature of 27-30°C, you're spoiled for choice.

I stayed at Atmosphere, an exclusive, plush but friendly resort in the tranquil setting of beautifully manicured lawns overlooking the sparkling water of the Bohol Sea. The accommodation can only be described as sumptuous, and with what I estimated to be a staff-to-guest ratio of 4:1, your every need is catered for.

The resort turns 10 this year, and where some other, younger resorts have started to show their age rapidly, Atmosphere still looks new and fresh.

This probably has something to do with the fact that the owners, British couple Matthew and Gabrielle, live on site and take a hands-on approach to the day-to-day running of the resort, often to be seen walking around with clipboard and tape measure trying to improve things!

During my stay, the resort went from



Above: Giant frogfish seems to hold up the reef at Pyramids.

being quiet to almost empty to completely full, but apart from mealtimes and the obligatory happy hour at the bar you wouldn't really notice any difference; everything ran like a well-oiled machine.

THE LOVELY THING about the coastline here is that it is unspoilt, protected by Filipino law under which all beaches are public. Resorts can't build on them and steal the views for themselves.

Even stronger local laws along the Dauin coast also mean that it is impossible for resorts to build piers and jetties, so the coastline remains more natural. These

local laws stretch to the diving, whereby all divers must be accompanied by a guide who holds certification from the mayor (so sorry, no solo diving) and diving in the marine parks can take place only during certain hours of the day.

The Philippines, like many other parts of South-east Asia, sits on the "Ring of Fire", which means that there is always a volcano close by.

The black sand or, in the case of the Dauin coast, slightly grey sand, shouldn't put you off, because the diving is anything but grey, and actually provides a dramatic backdrop for a photographer like me. 📸



Most diving along this part of the coast is on these grey-sand slopes, with beach-entry possible for many of the dive-sites.

Atmosphere also has three boats: two modern speedboats and a bigger traditional-style boat. Extra vessels can be hired by the resort for larger groups, so you always have access to wherever you should want to go.

Local dive-guide Richard asked me what my favourite critter was, because he really wanted to find it for me. I told him that I didn't have one, and no checklist of things I really wanted to see, but just enjoyed each dive for what it brought me. I did however mention that I had never seen a "Shaun the Sheep" (*Costasiella kuroshimae*) nudibranch, and he smiled and said: "No problem!"

All the way along the Dauin coast there are small marine reserves. Atmosphere Resort sits right in the middle of one of these, so its house reef is in excellent condition, and my first dive was there.

We walked in, put our fins on and as soon as I ducked my head under Richard called me over to show me what looked like a yellow grain of sand, indicating that it was a nudibranch of some sort.

It wasn't until I put my macro lens on that I started to make it out, but I still couldn't see it properly until I zoomed into the photo on the back of the camera and realised that it was an Oxynoe bubble snail, one of the smallest critters I have ever seen.

Richard clearly had amazing critter-spotting eyes, and he went on to find me critter after critter throughout the dive. He told me later that there were even more that he had seen but hadn't shown me.



As a photographer, I was pleased that he didn't try to show me a new animal every few minutes, because there are only so many things you can photograph on one dive successfully.

The house reef truly had lots to offer. At one point I was "in the zone", photographing one of the many frogfish, when I heard Richard shouting in his regulator. I looked up and was shocked to find that I was face to face with a sea snake, one of many that inhabit the area.

I could tell that Richard found it very funny that the snake had made me jump

Top left: Pygmy seahorse hidden in its seafan home.

Above: Atmosphere, hidden gem on the Dauin coast.

Top right: A turtle-headed sea-snake pops out from a rock to see what's going on.

Right: Easy to see why it's called the "Swedish" sheep nudibranch

Far right: Tiny "Shaun the Sheep" nudibranch with eggs.

so much, and he was still giggling to himself when we exited the water.

Shaun the Sheep had eluded us, but Richard promised that we would find him next time!

TRUE TO HIS WORD, on our next dive at San Miguel in the shallows on the seagrass, there on the back of a leaf were two small green dots. I realised at this point why I had never seen Shaun before – these two were so ruddy small, and I had been looking for something much bigger. Like the Oxynoe, you can only really



appreciate the beauty of these creatures when you zoom into your photo on the back of the camera and understand how they got their name, looking just like the children's cartoon character.

We descended deeper, passing more patches of seagrass, and Richard appeared to be searching for something. At about 15m he found what he was looking for.

This time I could see it with my own eyes but it wasn't green like the last one. This was a bright yellow and blue nudibranch, also called "Sheep" but of the Swedish variety. These nudis were much bigger and more colourful, and if I'm honest much easier to photograph. If you don't have a super-macro lens, make sure to carry a



magnifying glass, or you'll miss these fun little guys, which are a delight to see.

Maybe it's the world we live in now, but the thing that really stood out on my first few dives with Richard was how little he would hassle or manipulate the wildlife.

On my travels, I'm often confronted with guides who want to please you and will deliver photographic subjects right in front of your lens. As a photographer, too often I come across images that are clearly set up – critters that have been chased from their holes or transported to a more attractive location just because it makes a more striking image.

We know it goes on, but this is a practice that needs to be discouraged, and it was great to see that Richard did none of this, pointing out animals, sometimes suggesting a good angle but with no bothering, fiddling or teasing.

Later Richard told me that it was written into the guides' contracts that they do not hassle the marine life and I say well done, it's refreshing to see!

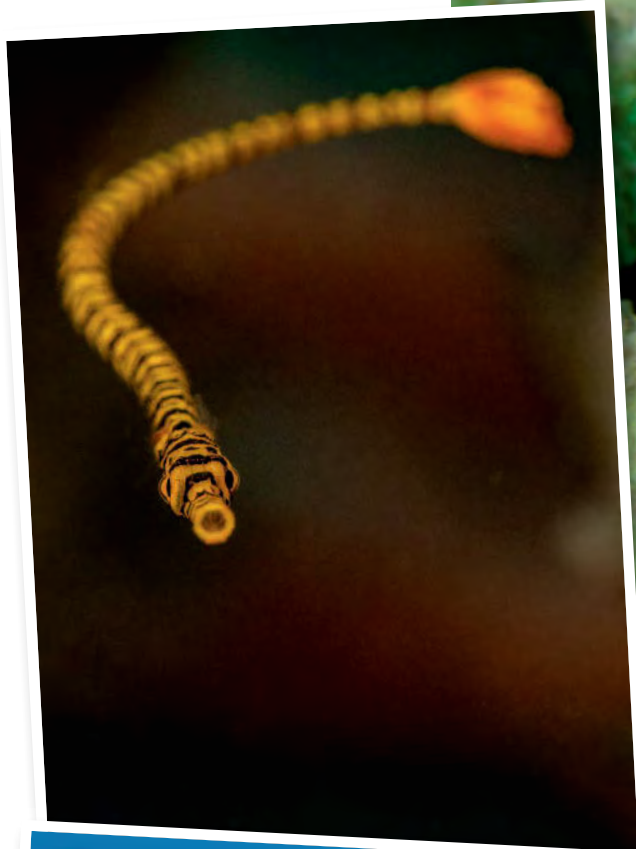
THE CRITTERS I FOUND more abundant than any others during my stay at Atmosphere were frogfish. They were everywhere – black, brown, orange, yellow and everything in-between. There were so many that even I, with my well-known dodgy critter-spotting eyes, found a couple. In fact I ended up asking Richard not to show me any more unless they were unusual or in a very good position.

I think on one dive I counted eight, which is really good going.

This area is well-known for frogfish, and because of this it has attracted to the resort a resident marine biologist, Daniel, who specialises in these weird and wonderful critters. He has even written a PADI Frogfish speciality, which you can take on your stay – now that's very cool.

The next day was my chance to visit Apo Island, which is home to about 1000 people and well-known for its green turtles. Our trip started early, because





Above: A moray eel enjoys his morning freshen-up from the local cleaner wrasse.



Left, from top: The beautiful colours of a banded pipefish; green turtle nestled in the reef at Apo Island; where schooling jack are a highlight.

Below: A pair of ring-tailed cardinalfish – the one on the left shows damage from hook-and-line fishing.

all boats need to go via the coastguard station so that the numbers of visitors to the island can be logged. As soon as they had counted everyone on board, we were off.

Even though the wind had picked up, it still took only just under an hour to sail to the island. On the way, Richard told me that the famous schooling jack that hang around there hadn't been seen for a while, but because each day was different you never knew what you might see.

In view of the weather conditions we decided to dive on the eastern side of the island. Lo and behold, as we dived in we instantly came upon the large group of schooling jackfish that I had really wanted to see. This school at about 17m was so huge that I couldn't fit all the fish into one frame, even with my fisheye lens.

Swimming through the middle of this immense body of fish was an incredible experience as they closed in on me, blocking out the light from the surface and disorientating me by isolating me



Above: Jack cruising over colourful crinoids at Apo Island.

Above right: Porcelain crabs like to hide under anemones.

Below: Damselfish darting around a gorgonian.



If you're not a lover of snakes then sorry, you're not in luck here. On my two dives around Apo Island I saw more sea snakes than I have seen anywhere else.

There really is nothing to worry about, however, because, like most other animals in the sea, they are really not bothered by your presence.

THIS COASTLINE lacks the fringing reefs of other areas of the Philippines I have visited, but the sandy slopes with large coral patches are still very full of life.

I was told that my visit was at the tail-end of the main critter season, which normally runs from February to June, but what I saw didn't seem to me to be typical of low season, with fish and critters in abundance.

I would go so far to say that on my visit I saw more than on some trips I've made to the muck-diving hotspot of Lembeh Straits – controversial statement, I know!

The lack of coral has encouraged the locals to build some artificial reefs. Sites such as Cars and Pyramids have had concrete blocks, tyres and even the odd shipping container sunk to give life a headstart.

Some of these installations date back 30 or 40 years and show signs of very healthy coral growth. A few of these sites are outside the marine reserves, and the locals are allowed to fish them.

Although I did see fish with hooks and line in their mouths, there doesn't seem to be much effect from this small-scale, net-free fishing.

Thalatta in particular had abundant life around the wreck of an old car and was teeming with cardinalfish. I wished I had taken my wide-angle lens to capture the impressive sight. This did prove to me that artificial reefs really do work, and will even support some subsistence fishing.

The coast here seems to be clear of much of the plastic waste ravaging the rest of the world at the moment. I'm not saying it's not here, and perhaps the currents were going in a different direction or there had just been a large-scale clean-up, but it did seem unusually free of rubbish.

The Philippines is currently ranked third-worst in the world for discarding its plastic into the sea, so there is a problem here.

When I had the chance to visit a local school in the town of Dumaguete during my stay, I was heartened to see that the children were just as switched on to the problem of plastic waste as children in the UK, providing hope for the future.

My take on the Dauin coast is that it has almost everything you'd ever want to see. There was better visibility than I expected; super-colourful explosions of fish-life and some very cool critters to boot.

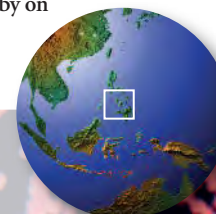
Just about the only animal I didn't bump into under water was a whale shark, but I saved that experience for my off-gassing day and a short trip to Cebu – and that's another story... [coming soon!]

from my surroundings.

All too quickly the current picked up, and we were forced to leave the school behind and carry on with our planned drift-dive.

As we were carried on over the reef and past a couple of the famous green turtles, it was easy to duck in behind a head of coral to get a closer look, and they didn't seem to mind me being there either.

Fish were abundant here, darting about, and I spotted a few jack whizzing by on their way to join their mates in school.



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Philippine Airlines operates daily international flights via Manila to Dumaguete, philippineairlines.com. The resort is 30 minute car-ride from the airport

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Atmosphere Resort & Spa, atmosphereresorts.com. The PADI 5* dive centre offers up to five dives a day, free nitrox and has two boats and a resident marine biologist.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Being equatorial diving is possible all year round, but the main critter season runs from February to June, with the rainy season from June to October.

MONEY ▶ Philippine peso.

PRICES ▶ Flights with Philippine Airlines from £650. A week's stay on full board with a 10-dive package (including nitrox and marine fees, two sharing a suite) would cost around 82,725 pesos (roughly £1200) per person.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ itsmorefuninthephilippines.co.uk

