



*The Philippines'*  
**Anilao**

— *Best of Both Worlds*

Text and photos by Steve Jones





Jacks, schooling above Twin Rocks



Anilao's offshore dive sites come alive as the current streams over them  
PREVIOUS PAGE: Stunning seascapes are part and parcel of Anilao diving

**The Philippine destination of Anilao has been described as the “center of the center of marine biodiversity” yet until now has largely remained unknown to European and American divers. This charming location has even more to offer than staggering critter life.**

The water beneath me literally boils in a plethora of purple as anthias dance in the mild current. Beneath them the reef known simply as Beatrice

is encrusted so densely in brightly coloured crinoids that hardly a single centimeter remains unoccupied. The scene is simply stunning, yet I am in a destination known for its critter life rather than stunning seascapes. It would seem that Anilao is indeed a destination with multiple charms, with reefs awash with colour and sandy shorelines that crawl with the weird and the wonderful.

Peculiarly, Anilao has managed to remain largely off the tourist map outside of the Philippines until very recently. Social media has played a large part in generating interest in this area, with images of rare marine life



*Hypselodoris emma nudibranch*





Coleman shrimp (above); Frogfish can be found in a range of colors (left and top center inset)

taken by a group of dedicated photographers, drawing in more image-makers like bees to a flower. Word started to get out that this place was special, with it being described as “another Lembeh Strait”—that Indonesian destination famed for its high density of weird critter life. High accolades indeed!

**Hidden charms**

Our Bangka, an outrigger style boat, motors along down the beautiful coastline towards “secret bay”, which is not really so much of a secret anymore as this site has already become renowned for its critter life.

At first it appeared somewhat lunar-like, but it didn't take long before the sharp eyes of the dive guide zeroed

in on inhabitants that my own eyes would have missed. He started with a species of shrimp I had not seen before, but after only a few clicks of my camera's shutter, his enthusiasm distracted me toward his second subject, a painted frogfish. He started pointing out critters quicker than I could photograph them—obscure species of scorpionfish, unusual crustaceans and more variety of nudibranchs than I think I've ever seen on any one dive. Every rocky outcrop on this otherwise barren looking seabed seemed to host an entire micro-ecosystem, and a 90-minute dive was not long enough.

After an hour on the boat, we dived again on the same spot and were rewarded with a whole new range of

Anilao's seascapes perfectly compliment the outstanding critter life







THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE): Some of the resident octopus population include wunderpus, blue-ringed octopus, coconut octopus and day octopus

species. It's difficult to imagine a more productive dive site, yet, as our boat sped back towards Aiyandar Beach and Dive Resort, I know there were more than 50 in the region waiting to be explored.

**Together alone**

This destination is commonly referred to as Anilao, however, the dive resorts actually spread for miles up the coastline from the small Anilao village in a way that doesn't make the place feel at all overcrowded. In fact, other than excursions, most holidaymakers tend to stay within their resorts.

This is a quiet place where relaxation is the name of the game—there is no evening social scene, other than what's going on within the resorts. If you are looking for a vibrant evening life, best look elsewhere, for this destination is one

where you can either switch off and relax or get totally immersed in the diving—or, of course, do a bit of both.

Anilao village has a shallow seabed in front of the beach covered in sea-grass. This is the sort of dive site I would avoid in most destinations, but when in critter rich territory, this sort of site can be surprisingly good.

Sure enough it was not long before we soon found mimic, coconut and wunderpus octopus. Tiny and vulnerable looking filefish hovered cautiously amongst the sea grass whilst species of shrimp scuttled between burrows, using discarded human cans to hide behind, cans which were themselves occupied by sheltering fish.

Every hole, whether man-made or natural, became a shelter as dusk approached—being caught out in the open at night may not have a happy ending as the predators such as snake







Striated (hairy) frogfish (above); Berry's Bobtail squid (inset); Thorny seahorse (right)

eel and the grotesque bobbit worms start to emerge from their daytime refuges.

### Origins

I was surprised by what I was seeing. I'd heard Anilao was special but hadn't expected this—the quality of muck diving here was simply off the scale.

But how did this place remain a secret for so long? It is within easy reach of the capital, just a three-hour drive, depending of course on traffic (and Manila is particularly famous for its traffic!) and with international flights landing throughout each day, it must be amongst the easiest of the long-haul destinations to reach.

Dive Operator Marco Santos of Aiya-

nar Beach and Dive Resort commented, "For most Manila divers, Anilao would be their first underwater experience. We learned here, our first and most of our underwater experiences and our love for the ocean was brought about by Anilao, but it is the influx of foreign divers, marine biologists and the knowledge they have brought with them that has led to this place—that we thought we already knew—now starting to show us so much more."

It was that growing realization amongst the scientific community that Anilao was special, that led to marine biologists such as Dr Terry Gosliner beginning their surveys of the area, documenting the huge biodiversity.

The species count of nudibranchs



Life competes for space on every square inch of this reef





Anilao and the nearby Verde passage has the highest nudibranch biodiversity in the world so far recorded

"Every dive here is like somebody has reshuffled a pack of cards, as we keep finding new species even at sites we've dived many times before," said Gosliner. Over half of these are new species that have not been recorded

anywhere else. He describes this area as the "Apex of the Coral Triangle" and he and many of his colleagues consider it the most remarkable place they have ever seen.



**Sombrero**

A boat ride to the outlying islands of Sombrero and Caban, brings us to some of the most spectacular seascapes in the area. Since they are swept by strong currents, diving on the submerged reefs here has to be timed carefully.

Clear blue water washes over reefs that

Seascape on one of Anilao's outlying reefs

and their relatives alone now stands at a staggering 863 in Anilao and the nearby Verde passage, and that number is still rising! This is the highest on the planet.







Halimeda ghost pipefish; Banded Tozeuma shrimp (top right); Emperor shrimp (right)

are ablaze with orange and purple anthias against a backdrop of the brightly coloured corals, creating an epic rainbow-like scene.

I found that the contrast with the muck dives near the shore couldn't be more pronounced, emphasising the appealing diversity in the diving conditions here.

World class critter diving and stunning seascapes can be found amongst a huge variety of dive sites that are suitable for beginners to advanced divers and photographers will simply be in heaven in this A-List destination.

**Guardians of the reefs**

Overfishing has proved to be a huge problem in the Philippines, yet in



Anilao, it was recognised over 20 years ago that the reefs needed to be protected.

The first significant moves to conserving the area came in 1991 with the setting up of three Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the stretch of water that separates the mainland from the island of Maricaban. Known as Cathedral Rock, Arthurs Rock and Twin Rocks, these three MPA's are-



Ornate ghost pipefish

Bigfin reef squid





Batfish on the Dari Laut wreck (left); Healthy soft coral growth adorns Anilao reefs (far left)

Anilao



maintained by committees of local villagers, who have really taken governance of the reefs to their hearts and keep the areas under constant watch, ensuring no fishing or anchoring in the protected areas.

Dive tourism helps in other ways as well, as many fishing boats instead now carry divers. Twin Rocks is a great example of a well-preserved reef, covered in large corals and sponges interlaced with schooling snapper and a resident school of trevally that stretches seemingly to the surface.

Indeed, finding the balance between long-term sustainability and short-term gain will continue to be a challenge for the Philippines. However, the rest of the world has also failed on a

far grander scale to yet get to grips with this dilemma.

It is a great credit to the villagers in this Philippine province that they have proved that with proper stewardship, enough food can be harvested, but the communities as a whole can still reap the benefits that dive tourism can bring. Anilao is truly a destination that offers the best of both worlds in so many ways. □

*The author gives special thanks to all the staff at Aiyandar Beach*



*and Dive Resort (aiyanar.com) and Terrence Gosliner, Ph.D, Senior Curator, Department of Invertebrate Zoology, California Academy of Sciences. More of Steve Jone's work can be seen at [www.millionfish.com](http://www.millionfish.com)*



Snake blenny; Black-finned snake eel (top)

Flamboyant cuttlefish (above); Devil scorpionfish ((right)







TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Hawksbill sea turtle; Skeleton shrimp; Ambon scorpionfish

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Fly to Manila. Aiyandar Resort is a 2.5 hour car journey from the airport, and the resort can arrange transportation any time of day or night.

**Visa Requirements:** Not required for stays of up to 30 days (29 nights)

**Currencies:** U.S. Dollar and Euro are widely accepted. Recommend changing some cash to Philippine Peso at the airport ATM.

**Land Tours and Excursions:** There are excursions to nearby hot springs, waterfalls and volcanos available.

DIVING INFORMATION

**Experience Level:** Anilao is ideal for both

beginners and more experienced divers

**Best Time to Dive:** All year, with November to June being regarded as the best months.

**Air Temperature:** Normally 25-34°C. During rainy season, 23-28°C.

**Water Temperature:** Most of the year, 28-30°C. During January and February, it can drop to 25-28°C. Note: I was there in April and definitely needed a 5mm suit and hood—a 3mm would have been inadequate.

**Rainy Season:** July to October

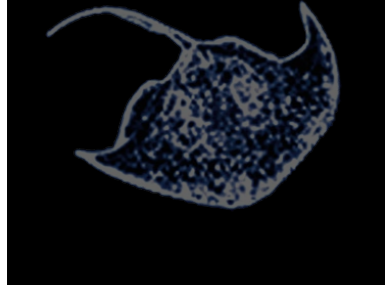
**Security:** As all around the world, be careful with your valuables and remain street smart. □

This reef explodes with colorful crinoids





# fact file



## The Philippines



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK,  
U.S. DEPT OF STATE, SCUBADIVEPHILIPPINES.COM

**History** During the 16th century, the Philippine Islands became a Spanish colony; In 1898, they were ceded to the United States following the Spanish-American War. The Philippines became a self-governing commonwealth in 1935 under elected President Manuel Quezon who had to prepare the country for independence after a ten-year transition. The islands fell under Japanese occupation in 1942 during WWII. U.S. and Filipino forces fought together to regain control from 1944-45. Philippine independence was declared on 4 July 1946. A widespread rebellion of the people forced President Ferdinand Marcos into exile after 21 years of rule in 1986 when Corazon Aquino was installed as president. During her presidency, there were several coup attempts, which affected political stability and economic development. In 1992, Fidel Ramos was elected president who enjoyed a presidency marked by greater stability and progress on economic reforms. The United States closed its last military bases on the islands in 1992. President Joseph Estrada, elected in 1998, was impeached on corruption charges and was succeeded by his vice-president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who was elected to a six-year term in May 2004. The country was one of the few relatively unaffected

by the 2008 global financial crisis. Benigno Aquino III was elected president in May 2010. Armed insurgencies and separatists in the south continue to be threats. Government: Republic. Capital: Manila

**Geography** The country is comprised of an archipelago located in Southeastern Asia, east of Vietnam between the Philippine Sea and the South China Sea. Its terrain is mostly mountainous with narrow to vast coastal lowlands; Coastline: 36,289 km; Elevation: lowest point: Philippine Sea 0m; highest point: Mount Apo 2,954m.

**Economy** The nation's economy fared better than most after the global economic and financial downturns because of several factors: less exposure to affected international securities, decreased dependence on exports, recovery of domestic consumption, large payments from several million overseas Filipino workers, and a fast growing business outsourcing industry. As a result, the Philippines has gained several upgrades in its sovereign debt credit rating, making financing its deficits with domestic and international markets easier. While current administration have increased social spending and infrastructure programs, long term challenges

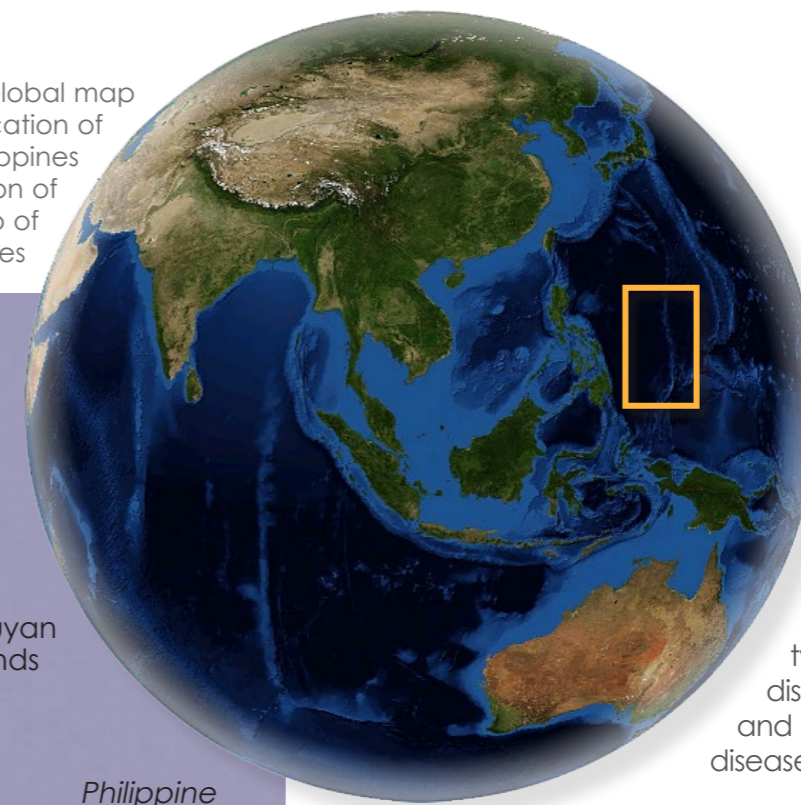
still remain in battling poverty, unemployment or underemployment, governance reform and improving the judicial system, infrastructure, regulatory predictability, and attracting greater local and foreign investment by increasing ease in doing business in the country.

**Climate** Tropical marine. The north-east monsoon occurs November to April, the southwest monsoon occurs May to October.

**Environmental issues** Challenges include soil erosion, uncontrolled deforestation, water and air pollution in major urban areas as well as coral reef degradation and increasing pollution of coastal mangrove swamps.

**Currency** Philippine peso (PHP). Exchange rates: 1USD=44.97PHP; 1EUR=56.71PHP; 1GBP=72.92PHP; 1AUD=39.27PHP; 1SGD=35.26PHP

RIGHT: Global map with location of the Philippines  
BELOW: Location of Anilao on map of the Philippines



**Health** Please consult your health department for the latest information. There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A, and typhoid fever; vectorborne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria; and water contact disease such as leptospirosis (2013)

### Decompression Chamber

Batangas Hyperbaric and Wound Healing Center  
St. Patrick's Hospital Medical Center  
Lopez Jaena St. Batangas City 4200  
Tel. +63-43-723-8388

### Links

Philippines Department of Tourism  
[www.wowphilippines.com.ph](http://www.wowphilippines.com.ph)

### Population

107,668,231 (July 2014 est.) Ethnic groups: Tagalog 28.1%, Cebuano 13.1%, Ilocano 9%, Bisaya/Binisaya 7.6%, Hiligaynon Ilonggo 7.5%, Bikol 6%, Waray 3.4% (2000 census) Religions: Catholic 82.9%, Muslim 5%, Evangelical 2.8%, Iglesia ni Kristo 2.3%, other Christian 4.5% (2000 census) Internet users: 8.278 million (2009)

**Language** Filipino and English

**Security** Please consult your state department for the latest information. In the past year, there have been reports on activities against foreigners by terrorist or insurgent groups based in the area of Mindanao Island, the Sulu Archipelago and the southern Sulu Sea.



Pink-eared mantis shrimp