

Luzon to Visayas

Liveaboard Adventure in the Philippines

Text and photos by Mattias Sellin. Aerial photo by Ivan Torres





Cobrador Island, just north of Romblon, offered absolutely world-class coral reef diving (above). A clownfish lives in symbiosis with its sea anemone, where it receives protection from larger predatory fish, thanks to the anemone's poisonous tentacles (previous page).



IVAN TORRES

Solitude One liveaboard is perfectly suited for a long adventurous cruise through the Philippines (above); Giant frogfish on reef with sponges (right)

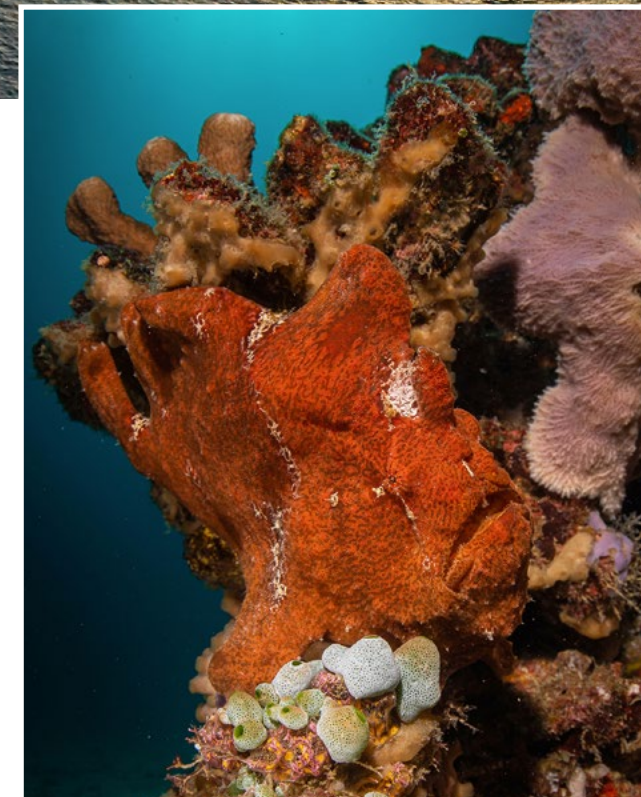
Once a year, the *Solitude One* liveaboard makes the 800km journey from Anilao down to Surigao in the Philippines. Along the way, it stops at several superb, remote dive locations, including Verde Island, Romblon, Ticao, Malapascua and Southern Letye. On this dive cruise, one can dive with whale sharks, thresher sharks and manta rays, or do super-macro underwater photography and even black water dives. Mattias Sellin has the story.

The dinghy glided slowly over the coral reef in the crystal-clear waters. Fellow guests and I stepped ashore on a small uninhabited island, whose beach made me think of the Leonardo DiCaprio film *The*

Beach. Afternoon snacks on the fore-deck of the liveaboard had been exchanged today for food and drinks on this deserted sandy beach. Laughter and music mixed with the sound of the waves. I dug my feet into the chalky-white sand and looked out over the waters to the liveaboard. It would be our home during the 13-day dive cruise—a journey that would turn out to be “one of a kind.”

Getting there

After a 12-hour flight, a night in Manila, and three hours in a minibus, it was finally time to board the liveaboard *Solitude One*. The route we were going to take was called the “Luzon-Visayas Cruise.” It covered an impressive distance of 800 km, from Anilao down to Surigao. Once in Surigao, the liveaboard would stop for annual service before moving on to the dive season in Palau.

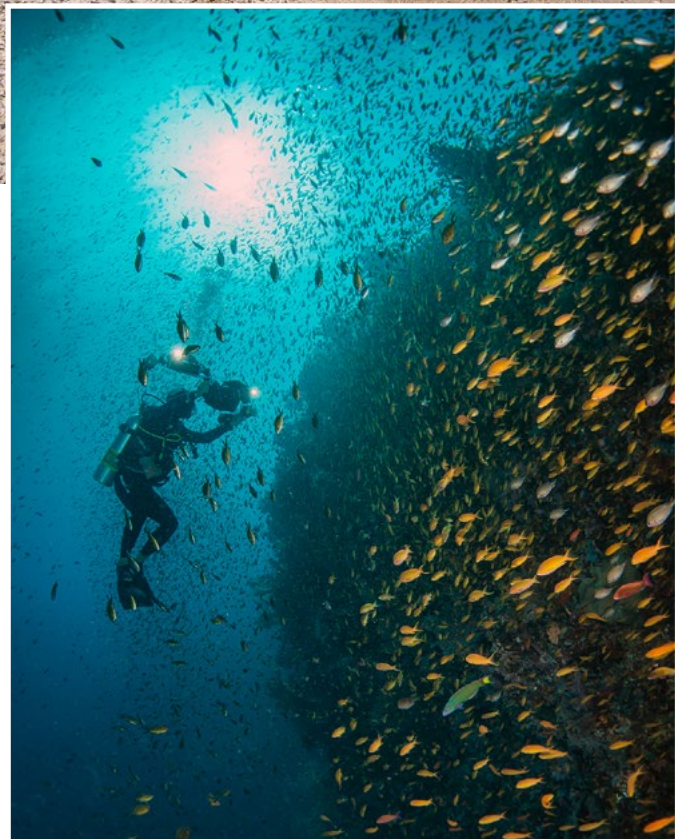


This transit trip takes place only once a year and includes well-known dive locations such as Verde Island, Romblon, Ticao, Malapascua and Southern Letye.

Diving

The first stop on the trip was Verde Island, known for its strong cur-





Going on a liveaboard trip in the Philippines means an opportunity to visit many beautiful islands and beaches (above); Napantao Reef—an absolutely fantastic reef, which is surrounded by strong currents and lots of fish (left)

this time of year, the winds in the afternoons were too strong for the small bangka boats. For us on board the liveaboard, this meant that we had the reef completely to ourselves.

Diving here was exciting; the sea currents were really noticeable. The coral reef sloped down to a depth of 30

rents and rich fish life. The San Agapito dive site consisted of a seamount with three peaks, one of which reached all the way to the surface.

The site was popular on day trips from Puerto Galera. We were here in October, and at

m and was covered with corals and reef fish, namely anthias. Down in deeper waters, there were larger gorgonian corals, and out in the blue water was a large shoal of big mouth mackerel. At first, they kept their distance; before long, they

passed between us divers.

The safety stop was carried out at one of the peaks on the seamount. The reef here was covered with yellow ahermatypic cup coral, which seemed to thrive well in the strong currents. All too soon, the time allotted for the dive neared its end, and the dive guide sent a surface marker buoy (SMB) to the surface. We released our contact with the reef and quickly drifted together with the current into the big blue. The underwater world of the Philippines had given us a warm welcome.

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Diver with skunk anemonefish on anemone at Lapus-Lapus in Ticao (left), a dive site described by the liveboard cruise director, Pernilla, as heaven or hell, due to occasional strong currents. On our dive, it was fortunately calm and heavenly; *Cyerce nigra* sea slug, Romblon (top centre); Yellow pygmy seahorse, *Hippocampus bargibanti*, Gato Island (centre); Reefs of southern Visayas were healthy, with an incredible number of fish (top right).

52m-long steel liveboard boat, built to withstand long journeys across the open sea. The vessel has room for 22 passengers. The cabins are spacious and well equipped. I had my own cabin with a bunk bed, small desk, TV and a large toilet with separate shower.

The aft deck offers plenty of space for each diver. Most of the dive equipment conveniently stored in a drawer directly under the bench. The boat has a large camera room and a lovely jacuzzi on the foredeck. The daily dive briefings were carried out in a large, air-condi-

tioned salon. Here, we also found the boat's perhaps most important component: the coffee machine. Several times a day, it served steaming hot coffee from freshly ground beans.

The actual diving was conducted from two smaller dive boats, or so-called dinghies. Everything on board the liveboard was well organised and worked flawlessly during our stay.

Romblon

After a night cruise, we woke up in the middle of the Romblon Canal. When I

looked out over Logbon Island, I realised that we had gone a long way from the usual tourist routes. There were no other charter boats for as far as the eye could see, and the white sandy beaches, without sunbeds, were a real paradise.

Romblon was known for the manufacture of marble products but has in recent years become popular as a new underwater photography mecca. Photographers from all corners of the world make a pilgrimage here to photograph the rarest species. Among other things, I had come here to see three

specific nudibranchs: *Cyerce nigra*, *Cyerce bourbonica* and *Melibe engeli* (the latter species is also known as the ghost nudibranch).

The first dive site of the day was called Sea Horse Hotel. On the way out in the dinghy, we enjoyed the mirror-bright sea and radiant sun. As I made a last adjustment to my equipment, I heard a voice from the water's surface below.

"Wow! Do you see how blue the water is? It's absolutely magical!" exclaimed Lance, a happy American who was already in the water. I then did a back-

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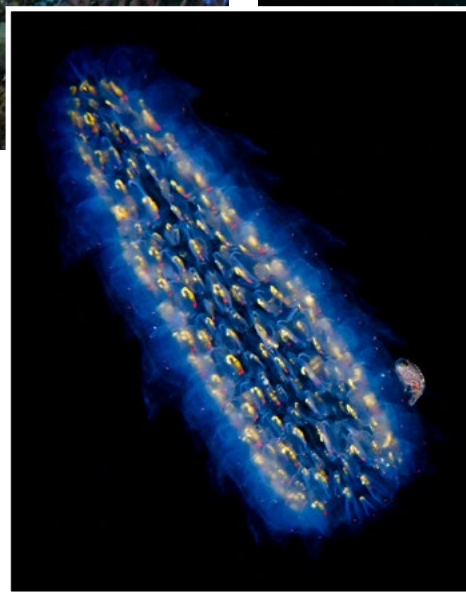
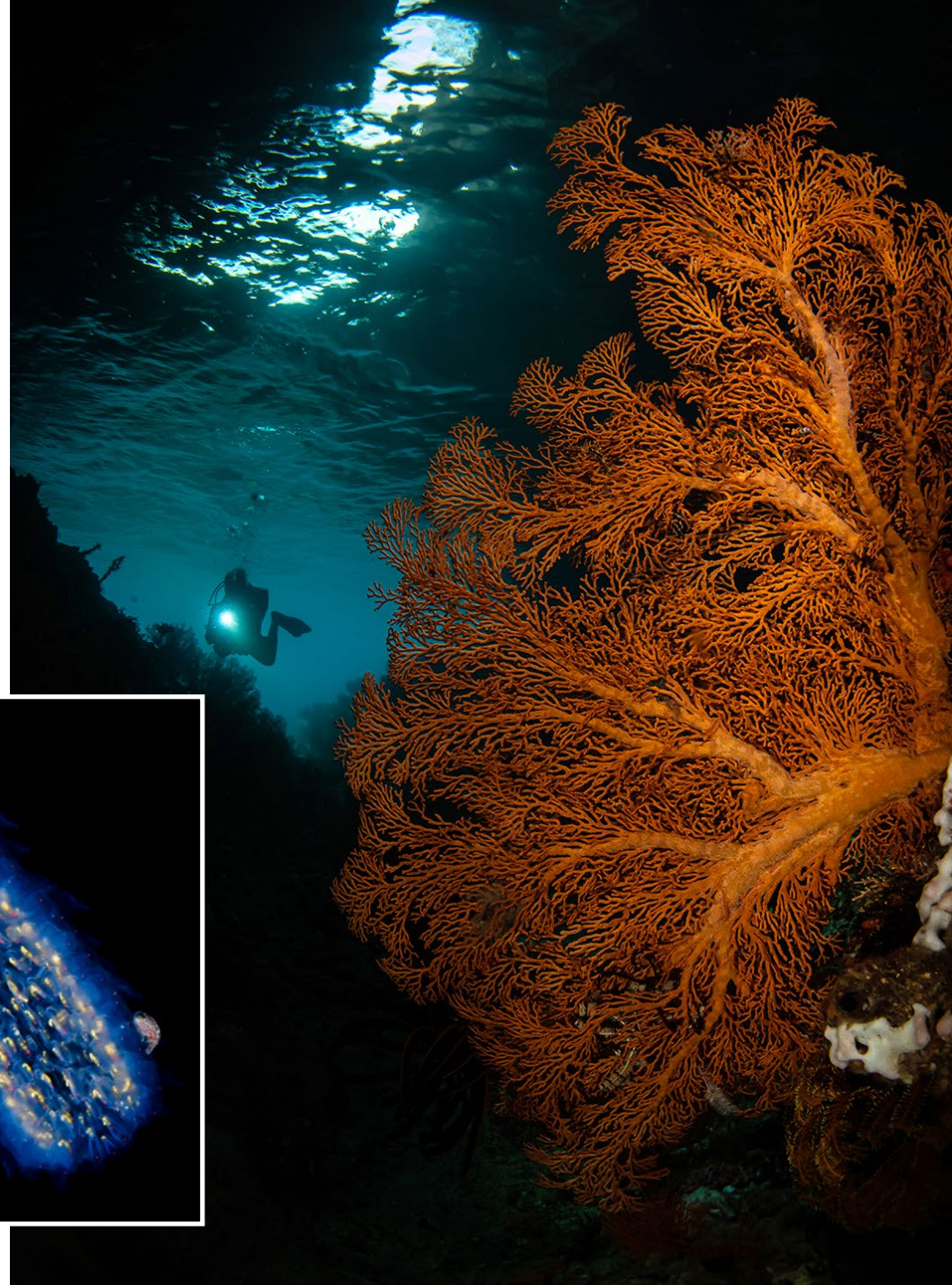
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The coral reefs at Limasawa in Southern Leyte offered casual diving in coral gardens that never seemed to end (above); Snake Island, South Ticao—an incredibly beautiful area that also has a lot of small caves (top right); In black water dives at Romblon Canal, I got to see species I had never seen before, such as this fire salp, with a hitchhiking crayfish catching a free ride on it (right); Bobtail squid (left), *Euprymna scolopes*, are found almost exclusively on night dives. This fascinating species can control how much it “glows.” It does this with the help of a bacteria called *Vibrio fischeri*, which lives in symbiosis with the squid.

unusual Lembeh seadragon. This creature’s anatomy is very special; it has a head reminiscent of a pygmy seahorse and a body resembling a pipefish.

Black water dive

A hot trend in the dive industry is black water dives. The purpose of this type of diving is to see deep-water species at different larval stages, drifting around in the sea currents, far from land, at night. We did two such dives in the Romblon Canal. This would be a completely new experience for me, and a cer-

tain excitement arose before the dive.

“You will love this, Mattias, I promise,” said fellow diver Cat Pipet soothingly before the dive. Cat was an underwater photographer from Thailand, who was happy to share his experiences.

The preparations for the evening’s activity were rigorous. A downline was attached under a buoy, and powerful lights were fixed to the line at different depths. The light from these lamps would serve as visual references below the surface. When I broke the water’s surface

and started to sink downwards, complete darkness engulfed me. When I pointed my lamp downwards, the bottom was not visible, there was only endless darkness. Then, we first hit the bottom at a depth of 60 m. The only reference was our descent line, which at this time was disconnected from the boat. We now drifted off into open water, together with the ocean currents.

I stayed close to the line and pointed my torchlight all around me. In the dark, marine species

emerged that I had never seen before. Many of these species made me think of transparent 3D creatures from a James Cameron movie. “What in the world is this?” was the thought that most often popped into my head.

After 60 minutes, we returned to the surface. What an experience! Cat was right, this was definitely a new dimension of night diving that I really liked.

Next stop

It was time to leave Romblon.



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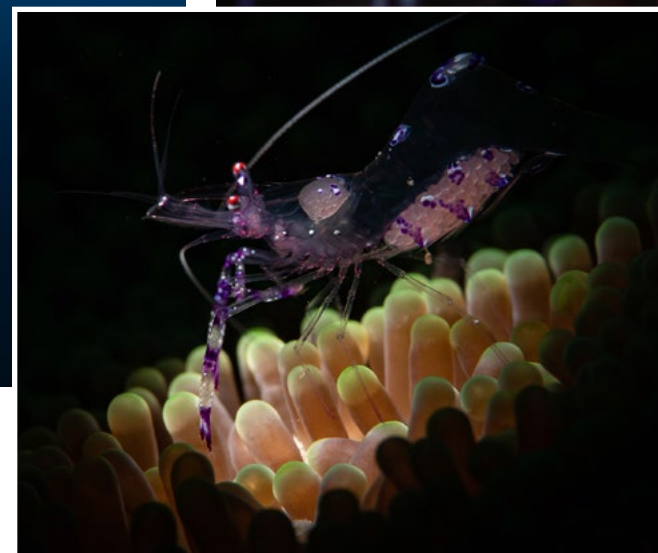


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Fantastic soft corals, Bobby's Wall, San Miguel Island, Ticao (above)

Coleman shrimp are well hidden in a fire urchin. The larger one is the female, which can grow up to 2cm (above); Ghost shrimp at Romblon (left); *Hypselodoris apolegma nudibranch* (right)

the Ticao Pass. The dive site Bobby's Wall was named after the local

Before our cruise to Ticao, we stopped at Cobrador Island to dive on the coral reef. The North Rock dive site was characterised by a cliff that jutted out of the sea. Below the surface, we were met by a wonderful underwater landscape full of rock formations and a swim-through covered with soft corals. We saw sea slugs, anemonefish and a number of curious sea turtles.

As our dinghy approached to pick us up, I heard a familiar English voice. "Don't pick me up yet; just let me lie here and enjoy life for a while." It was fellow diver Adam, who apparently needed some extra time to digest all his impressions.

stop time, but right now, on the cruise between Cobrador Island and Ticao, life was absolutely perfect.

guide from Ticao, who first found the site. During the dive briefing, we were informed that one would often see Coleman shrimp here, inside fire urchins, which is a type of sea urchin. The Coleman shrimp was a species of shrimp I had never seen before.

When we came back to the surface, it was to a completely mirror-flat sea. We were completely alone—there was not one boat, as far as the eye could see. On the cliff near us, a flock of birds nested at sunset.

Back on the liveaboard, we were met again by the fantastic staff who, after each dive, served us a cold beer or hot towel. This evening, they had also served up drinks and fried bananas by the jacuzzi on the foredeck. I enjoyed my drink and gazed out over the sea. I have seldom wished I could

We often say that we do not have time for different things. The question should instead be: What do we want to do with the time we have?

Bobby's Wall

The dive area around Ticao is large and unexplored. We spent the first day here at the island of San Miguel, which was located at the mouth of

Once down on the reef, it did not take long before we saw many fire urchins. I examined each of them carefully, but with no luck. Fifty minutes of diving went by, when finally, my luck changed. On a rock wall,

well hidden among the poisonous thorns of a fire urchin, I saw two Coleman shrimp. The larger of the two was the female. I took some quick photos and enjoyed a short time with them before starting my ascent to the surface, with a big smile on my face.



Bubble coral shrimp in bubble coral





Philippines



Small whale shark off Sogod Bay, Southern Leyte (far left); Reef mantas at Manta Bowl, Ticao (above and right); Joshua Rambahinarian, a researcher from the Large Marine Vertebrates Research Institute Philippines, gave lectures on board and guided dives at Manta Bowl (left)

Manta Bowl

Ticao Island's most famous dive site is Manta Bowl. It is an underwater plateau between 10 and 30 m deep. Encounters with reef mantas are common here. Exactly what attracts them to the area is unclear. One big reason is probably

the ever-present currents that bring plankton-rich waters from the San Bernardino Strait and make it easier for the mantas to hover when they need to be cleaned. By turning against the current and hovering, the cleaner fish can access the manta in a simple way, without

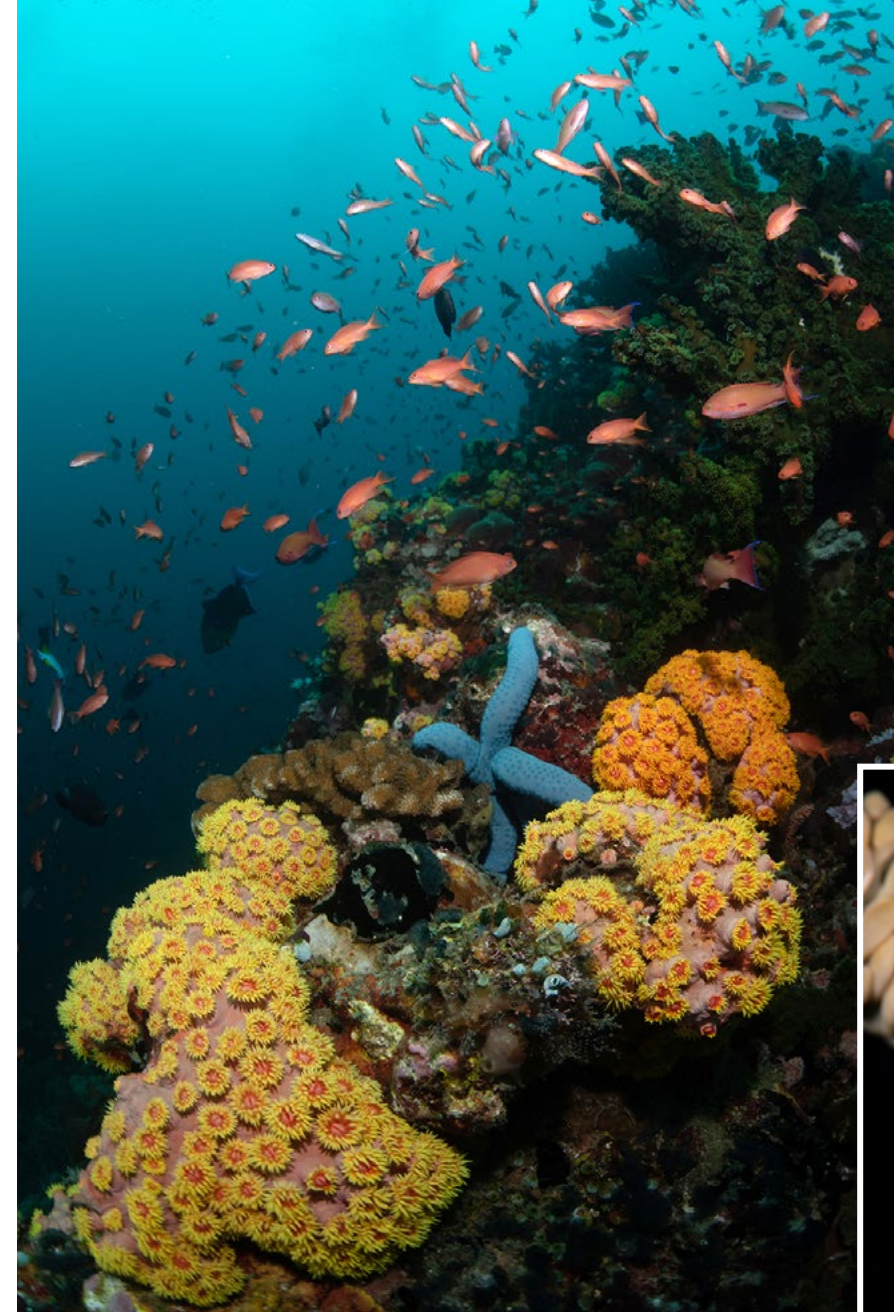
the manta having to move. Prior to our days at this site, we had the honour of having Joshua Rambahinarian, a researcher from the Large Marine Vertebrates Research Institute Philippines, on board. He helped both as a guide during the dives and lectured about his work in the evenings. It was a rewarding and interesting arrangement, which resulted in our trip becoming even better.

Navigating below the surface at Manta Bowl was not easy. It was like one big plateau with a few boulders here and there. The currents were relatively strong during some dives. To keep air consumption down, we used reef hooks that were attached to the bottom while we observed the mantas. Most of the time, we ended up in positions where we could observe the mantas from the side. Before our last dive here, I decided to try to get a picture of a manta from above. Towards the end of the dive, I started to gently ascend into the water column. I absolutely did not want to scare away

the manta. Once I was right above it and looked down through the viewfinder of my camera, I realised just how big it truly was. I had to move even farther upwards to be able to get the whole manta into the frame. As I frantically fought to stay put in the current, in order to get the perfect shot, I looked down enviously at the reef manta, which barely seemed to need to move to withstand the strong currents.

Fresh fruits, chocolate cake Days on board the liveaboard seemed to be accelerating at a furious pace. Was it Monday

or Tuesday? What did it matter, when fantastic macro diving on healthy reefs was replaced by magnificent encounters with reef mantas? Much of our time was spent recovering between dives, charging cameras and strobes, and enjoying the excellent service on board. The crew always did their utmost to make everyone happy. For meals, fresh fish, fried shrimp, grilled meat, and more were served—all in a well-functioning buffet. The whole party was usually rounded off with delicious desserts, which were a delight for both the eye and the taste buds. My favourite dessert quickly



Thresher shark at Monad Shoal (above); Coral reef garden with cup coral, blue sea star, and cloud of anthias (right); One evening on board the liveaboard, a storm moved in (top right). From the boat, we quietly sat and enjoyed the sound of the rain and saw lightning dance across the sky; Whip coral shrimp on whip coral (lower right inset); Tiny goby on soft coral (left)

row we would wake up to yet another new dive site.

Thresher shark

Despite the cup of freshly brewed coffee, I still felt groggy after the early morning wake-up call at 4:45 a.m. “Good morning! Welcome to Monad Shoal,” said the local dive guide from Malapascua who had just boarded. No dive school or liveaboard was allowed to conduct dives here without a local guide, who monitored the diving. The rules were thoroughly explained. No strobes or lights, and no gloves or stickers. We were also not allowed to cross the lines or ropes that served as barriers to the cleaning stations.

Monad Shoal is located about 8km from Malapascua.

The area is unique in that it can almost guarantee an encounter with a thresher shark.

The thresher shark is a large shark with a robust body. It can be almost five metres long, and just over half its length consists of its long tail fin. Its large eyes are well adapted to be able to see better in the dark.

Exactly why these sharks, which normally thrive in deep water, always return to this plateau, is unknown. However, it is clear that this site is a cleaning station for them. Every day at dawn, the sharks come across the plateau to get their skin, mouths and gills cleaned of parasites.

We left the liveaboard and

went by dinghy for the short distance to the downline. The advantage of diving from a liveaboard was that we were always first at the site. The dive centres in Malapascua were 30 to 40 minutes away from Monad Shoal by motorboat.

When we got into the water, the sun had not yet risen above the horizon. It was ten minutes before we saw the first shark. It came swimming in from the sea and swept along the reef edge. In total, we saw four different individuals, all at a distance. At the end of the dive, there were many dive groups in the water.

When we returned to the surface, I counted 18 boats, which meant that there were approximately 100 divers at the site. There were far too many people for my taste, and something we had previously managed to avoid during the journey.

Close contact

Before our last dive at Monad Shoal, we wanted to try something new. We exchanged the early morning dive for an afternoon dive, which took

place after the local divers had gone back to Malapascua.

When we got into the water, we had the whole place to ourselves. The visibility was better than

it had been before, and what was most gratifying was that the sharks were still there. Now, they came so close that we could clearly see their big eyes peering at us.

After 45 minutes, we started ascending to join the rest of the divers. We stopped to watch a whitfin reef shark lying under some rocks. When I turned around, I saw that my dive partner Pernilla was constantly staying a little deeper,



Redeye goby at Romblon (above); *Halgerda malesso* nudibranch pair (top centre); *Phyllodismium* sp. nudibranch at Ghost Wally in Romblon (left); Soft coral reef garden with schools of anthias and cardinalfish (far left)

peering out into the blue. But a few other divers and I were starting to run out of air and had to go to shallower depths. When I looked down at Pernilla again, I saw that the rest of the group had gathered there. In front of them was a large thresher shark; they were having a close encounter of the highest degree.

The shark swam calmly back and forth in front of them, just a few metres away. Unfortunately, I was too far away and had too little air to really take part in the encounter. The joy of the divers afterwards, however, could not be missed. During the safety stop, Cat performed some form of underwater dance, which made Patrick Swayze's performance in the film *Dirty Dancing* seem boring.

"I had a good feeling there at the end of the dive; I did not really want to go up yet," said Pernilla, when we were on board the boat again.

She was definitely right; that feeling resulted in a fantastic encounter and a magnificent dance!

Napantao Marine Sanctuary

Unfortunately, all good things come to an end, so did this trip. Fortunately, the best was saved for last. The final days were spent down in South Leyte—an absolutely fantastic and unexploited area. Just when we were about to board our dinghy before our first dive here, I heard somebody yell: "Whale shark! Whale shark, right below us!"

It did not take many seconds before all the divers on our boat were snorkelling in the water with the young whale shark. Then, a person from the group dived down towards it. The water was deep blue. The whale shark and the diver were beautifully framed together, with the sun's rays streaming down through the water. I valued this kind of moment highly; it was completely

unexpected and occurred on the animal's own terms.

We performed six completely magical dives here. The reefs were healthy and thrived all the way to the surface. The number of fish in the water was incredible in some places. Once again, divers with other dive operators were absent, something that had been a hallmark of this journey.

However, there was one dive site we visited which will always be in my heart: Napantao Reef, off Panoan Island. This site was truly amazing and captured me in a way I just cannot explain. I cannot remember the last time I felt such euphoria during a dive as I did here.

At the outer tip of the reef, the currents were really strong. I tried to stay here as long as possible to enjoy the beautiful reef and the thousands of yellow reef fish (primarily anthias). While the strong currents tumbled me around

in the water, thoughts rushed through my head. I wished that all divers, at some point in their lives, could experience such a healthy and lively reef. After a while, I stopped taking pictures and just enjoyed the view instead.

Thirteen days on board the live-aboard *Solitude One* had come to an end. Friendships had been forged for life and fantastic experiences had been shared. When I reminisce about this liveaboard journey, it is with great gratitude for what we had experienced. It was truly a "one-of-a-kind" trip! ■

Mattias Sellin was born and raised in the northern part of Sweden. Being close to nature has always been an important part of his life. The camera is always in his hands on his adventures. He is a frequent contributor to several publications, and his passion about the sea and wild animals is something he shares with his family.

LIVEABOARD IN THE PHILIPPINES

GEOGRAPHY: The Philippines is an archipelago with more than 7,100 islands and a total area of about 300,000 sq km. There are over 6,000 species of fish and 76 percent of all coral species in the world can be found here. It is a perfect area to visit with a live-aboard.

POPULATION: Approximately 94 million inhabitants (Wikipedia)

LANGUAGES: The two official languages are Filipino and English.

DIVING: It is possible to dive all year round in the Philippines. The most common is so-called land-based diving, but for those who want to visit several dive areas, going by liveaboard is a very simple and practical way to do so. Decompression chambers are located in Manila and Cebu City.

WEATHER: The Philippines has two seasons. The dry season extends from December to June, and the wet season, from July to November. Between July and October, it is typhoon season in the country. We were here in October-November, and it rained only one day.

RELIGION: 92% Christian.

TIME ZONE: GMT + 7

ELECTRICITY: 220 volts, Type C outlets/sockets

CURRENCY: Philippine Peso (PHP)

INSURANCE: Good dive insurance is recommended for all diving. This can be especially important on a liveaboard, as transport fees to professional medical facilities can be extra costly. ■

