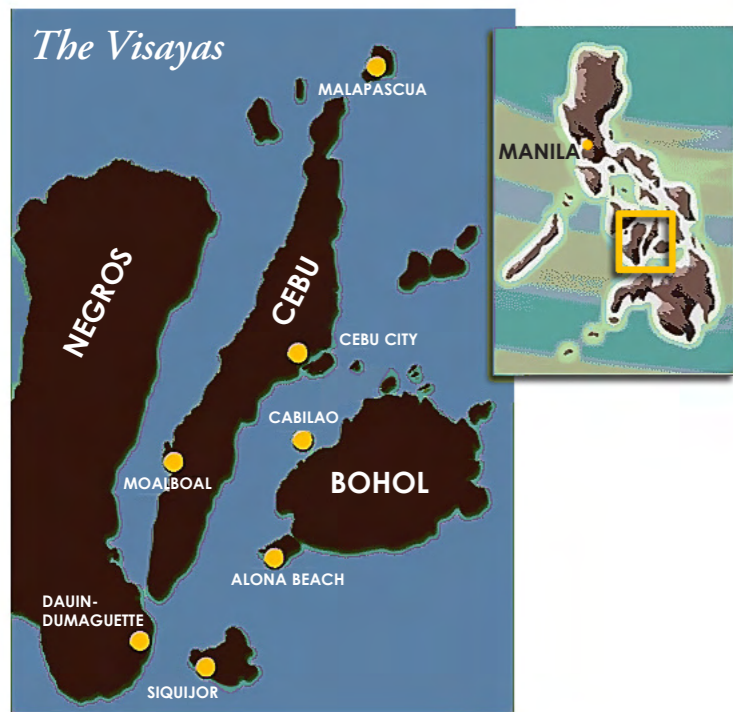
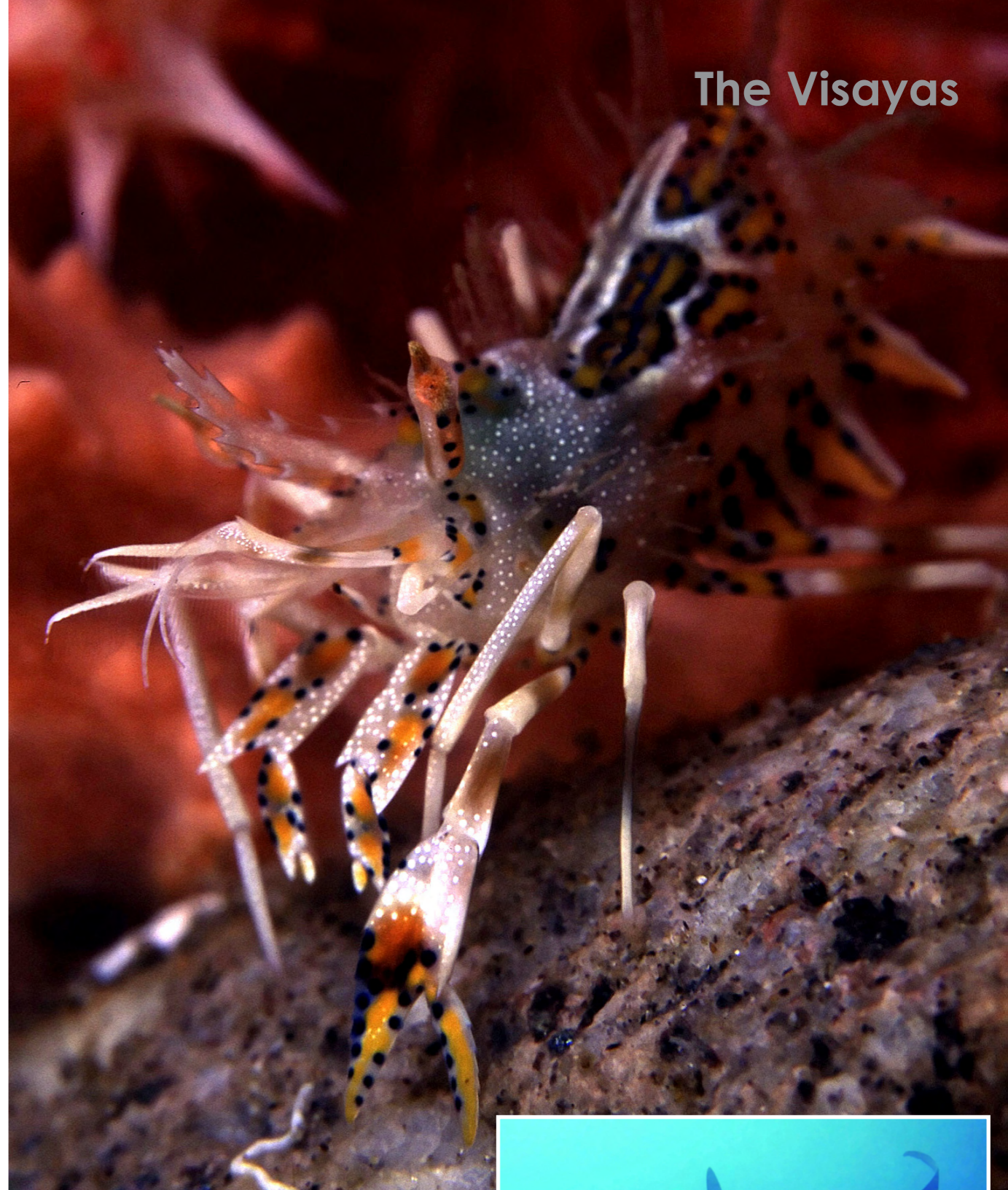


Diving The Visayas

Text and photos by Nonoy Tan





The “Visayas” is a group of islands that comprises the central portion of the Philippine archipelago. A few Visayan islands are popular among travelers, such as Cebu and Boracay; while the majority remain low-profile but nonetheless exquisite. I have been regularly diving in the Visayas during the last six years. I go there primarily to take underwater photographs of marine life, and at the same time enjoy its tranquil ambiance. The diving destinations are all situated in small towns, away from the urban bustle of Cebu City—a metropolis with an international airport and my gateway to the serene islands.

Malapascua Island

Malapascua Island can be reached in four hours travel by land, plus a half-hour by boat northwards from Cebu City. It is not a difficult journey. Roads are mostly paved, and transportation facilities are very accessible. There are several dive sites around the island, but the main attraction is Monad shoal where

there are daily sightings of thresher sharks. Each dawn, the sharks approach from the deep onto the shoal for routine cleaning by small cleaner fishes. The thresher sharks linger around, while divers enjoy the spectacle. Soon thereafter, the sharks head back into the deep. After the early morning encounter with the sharks, the rest of the day

can be spent diving nearby sites that showcase a lush variety of corals and marine inhabitants such as grey bamboo sharks, white tip sharks, snake eels, seahorses, nudibranchs, sea hares, lionfishes, mantis shrimps, and all sorts of crabs. There are at least a dozen dive sites, and that justifies three to four days of diving on Malapascua Island.



ABOVE: The Visayas map; The Philippines map
 TOP: Mating Pair of Nudibranchs, *Kentrodoris rubescens*
 FAR RIGHT: The rare Horned Bumble Bee Shrimp
 INSET: Thresher shark. PREVIOUS PAGE: Picturesque scenes like this one are commonplace in the Visayas

ROLF MEUHLEMAN



Thorny Seahorse, Gorgonian Pandalid Shrimp; Bend Stick Pipefish; Napoleon Eel; Longhorn Cowfish

Cabilao Island

Cabilao Island can be reached in two hours of travel southwards (by land) plus another hour (by boat) from Cebu City. Upon reaching the island, visitors can feel its intense serenity. Life here is extremely laid-back. This atmosphere compliments the exotic nature of the marine life, which makes Cabilao a fascinating place for underwater photog-

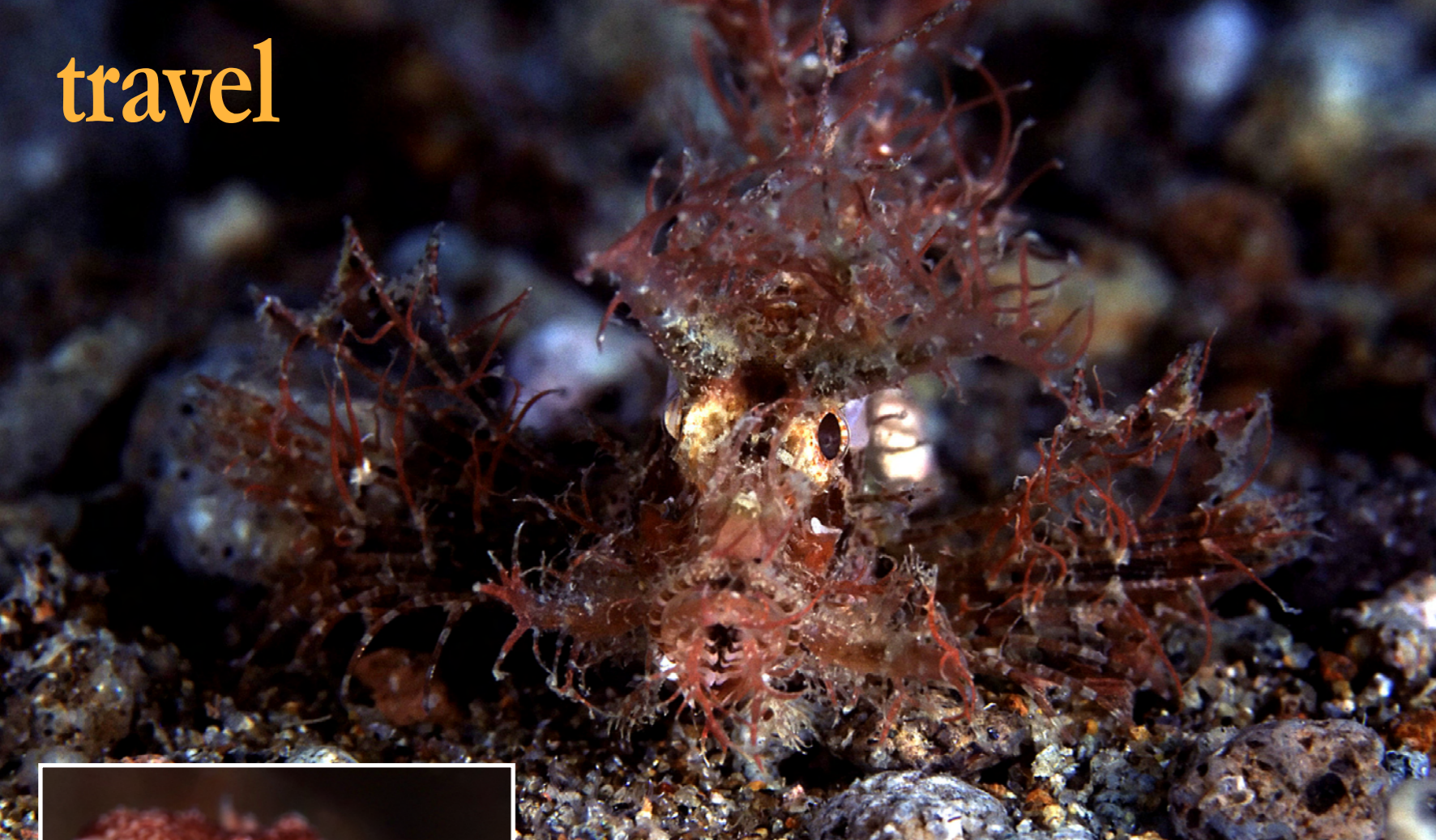
raphers. The popular subjects include the bend stick pipefish, pygmy seahorse, dragonet, Pegasus sea moth, stargazer, cockatoo waspfish, marbled snake eel, etc. These creatures can be easily found with the help of the local dive guides who have an astonishing ability to spot them. There are seven dive spots around Cabilao Island and two to three days stay on the island is ideal.

Balicasag & Panglao

A few hours from Cabilao is the island of Balicasag, which has at least five dive sites. Here, I find an abundance of fish including schools of barracuda and jacks. This is a good place for wide-angle photography. Also, macro subjects abound particularly nudibranchs of the genus *Nembrotha*. Another observation is the unusual plumpness and size of



NEXT PAGE: *Nembrotha* nudibranchs of Balicasag Island are plump. These two individuals of different species are attempting to mate



ABOVE: Ambon Scorpionfish. INSET LEFT: Nudibranch, *Chromodoris reticulata*

main island of Bohol. This part of the Philippines is one of the richest in terms of culture and history. After Balicasag, Panglao and Bohol, the next destination is Dauin.

Dauin

Dauin is a small coastal town in the south-east portion of the Negros Island accessible by boat from Bohol. The travel is about an hour and a half. The town maintains a marine sanctuary where scuba divers come to see bizarre critters such as the Ambon scorpionfish, striated frogfish, horned bumblebee shrimp, flamboyant cuttlefish, mimic octopus, flying gurnard, napoleon snake eel, velvet fish, etc. There is not much

coral cover at Dauin. It is largely sandy. But because it hosts an interesting array of interesting subjects, this site is a favorite among serious underwater photographers and muck divers. Fortunately, the local dive guides here are masters in spotting these creatures. There are a few dive sites close to Dauin that also generate surprise finds of rare critters. Thus, a one to two weeks stay in the area is highly recommended.



Phidiana nudibranchs laying eggs

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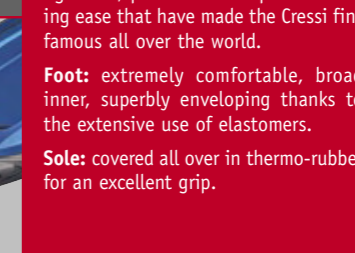
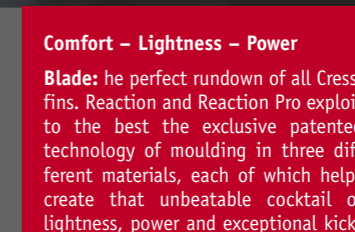
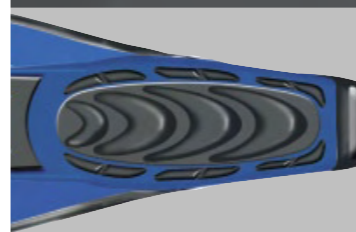
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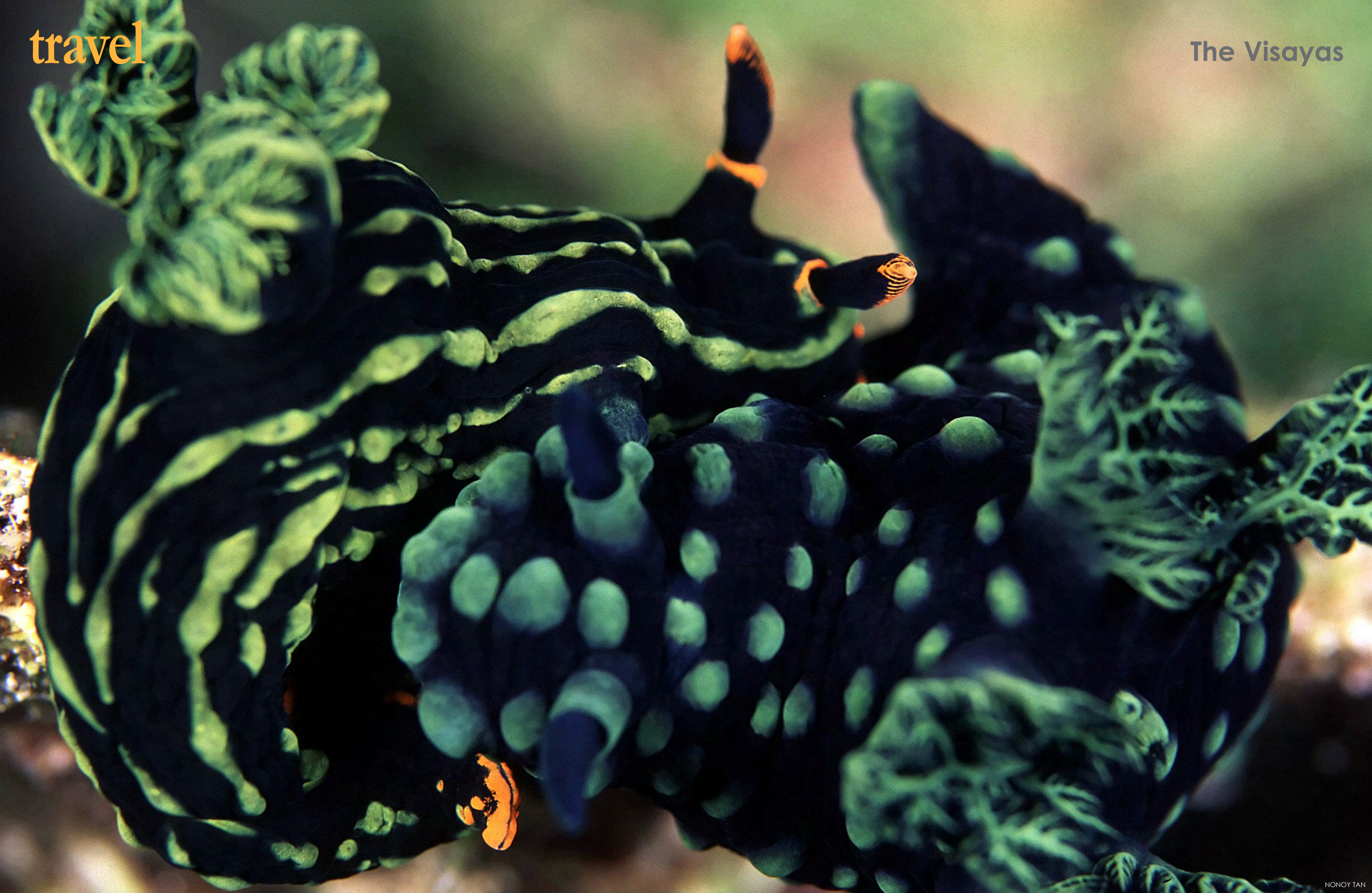
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LEFT: Giant Frogfish. ABOVE: Flying Gurnard. RIGHT: Convict Blenny. PREVIOUS PAGE: Two different species of nudibranchs trying to mate

Siquijor

An hour travel by boat from Dauin is the island of Siquijor. The dive sites around the island also offer excellent macro photography subjects as well as night dives. The least known site is located within an abandoned wharf called "Lazi Pier." It is found south-east of Siquijor Island. The pillars of the wharf that extend to the sea bottom are densely populated by soft corals, tubastrea, and gorgonians. These in turn are home to frogfishes and a wide range of nudibranchs. There are nine other dive sites located at the West side of the island. At low tide each late afternoon, young children approach the ebbing waters to harvest stranded sea urchins. They open these echinoderms in order to expose an internal roe, which is scooped out and eaten raw. Sashimi

lovers like me can also get into the action. The approach of darkness provides magnificent opportunities for night diving as well.

Dauin and the islands of Siquijor, Panglao, Balicasag, Cabilao and Malapascua are a mere sampling of diving destinations in the Visayas. New dive sites continue to be explored, while old and forgotten ones are being rediscovered. The aggregation of many islands and at least 100 dive sites in the Visayas makes it an indispensable itinerary when diving in the Philippines.

There is a wide assortment of dive operators and resorts in the Visayas, ranging from the high-standard to the rugged. As a regular visitor to these islands, I dive with Sea Explorers in Cebu City, because of their professionalism and experience.

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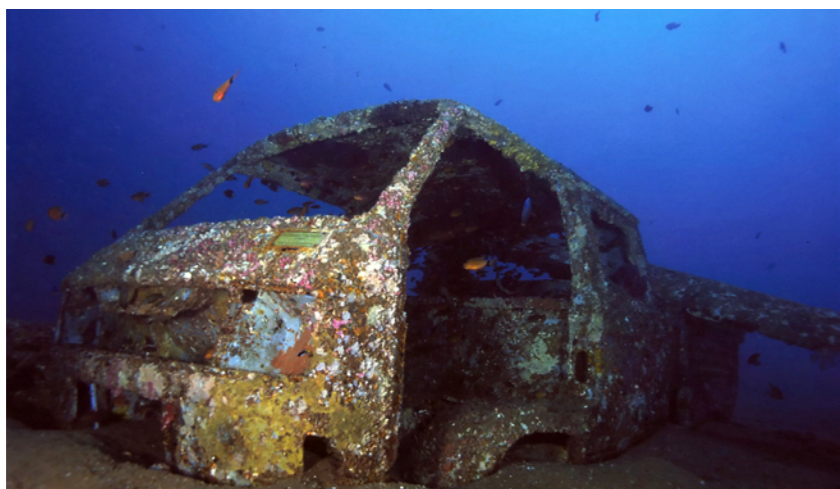
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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: During the low tide, young children enjoy a snack of sea urchin; Bad hair day? No, it's a Striated Frogfish; Artificial reefs such as this vehicle provide shelter for marine life; Cuttlefish



Nonoy Tan



Nonoy Tan is an award-winning underwater photographer based in Manila, the Philippines. For more information or to order prints directly from the photographer, please email: nonoytan@yahoo.com.

Buy Nonoy Tan Nudibranch Calendars, framed prints, t-shirts, mugs or greeting cards at The X-RAY MAG Store and help save the seas. A percent of all sales goes to ocean conservation. www.cafepress.com/xraymag

Dive Info:
Sea Explorers
www.sea-explorers.com
PADI Dive Guides
www.padidiveguides.com
Starfish online dive guide
www.starfish.ch ■

fact file

The Philippines



History During the 16th century, the Philippine Islands became a Spanish colony; In 1898, they were ceded to the US 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 10-year transition. The islands fell under Japanese occupation in 1942 during WWII. US and Filipino forces fought together to regain control from 1944-45. July 4, 1946 marks Philippine independence. 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 US 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. Armed communist insurgencies and Muslim separatists in the south continue to threaten The Philippine Government. Government: Republic; Capital: Manila

Currency Philippine peso (PHP); Exchange rate: 53 peso per US dollar; 63 peso per Euro

Geography Southeastern Asia, archipelago between the Philippine Sea and the South China Sea, east of Vietnam, mostly mountains with narrow to extensive coastal lowlands; Coastline: 36,289 km; Elevation: lowest point: Philippine Sea 0 m; highest point: Mount Apo 2,954 m Agriculture: rice, coconuts, corn, sugarcane, bananas, pineapples, mangoes, pork, eggs, beef, fish Natural resources: timber, petroleum, nickel, cobalt, silver, gold, salt, copper.

Climate Tropical marine; northeast monsoon (November to April); southwest monsoon (May to October). Environmental

issues: Uncontrolled deforestation especially in watershed areas; soil erosion; air and water pollution in major urban centers; coral reef degradation; increasing pollution of coastal mangrove swamps that are important fish breeding grounds.

Population 86,241,697. Percent of population below poverty line: 40%, Ethnic

groups: Christian Malay 91.5%, Muslim Malay 4%, Chinese 1.5%, other 3%. Religions: Roman Catholic 83%, Protestant 9%, Muslim 5%, Buddhist

Language Filipino and English

Decompression chambers

Cebu City Recompression Chamber Camp Lapu-Lapu Lahug . Dr Memerto Ortega. (032) 310-709 or (032) 312-325 (032) 746-652 loc. 2625

Manila (Quezon City): AFP Medical Center at V. Luna Hospital, V. Luna Road, Quezon City Dr. Jojo R. Bernardo Phone: 920 7183 921 1801 loc. 8991

Dive Travel The best time to visit the Philippines is during the period from November to June. Precipitation is lowest during April and May. Temperatures are cooler during December to February (26-27°) and warmer between March and May (29°)

Web sites

Philippines Department of Tourism www.wowphilippines.com.ph
Philippines Convention & Visitors Corp. www.dotpcvc.gov.ph
Historic Churches of Cebu www.ngkhai.com
Bais Dolphin Watching www.wowphilippines.com.ph

Dive Books

Philippines Travel Guide by Jens Peters www.amazon.com ■

Map of The Philippines

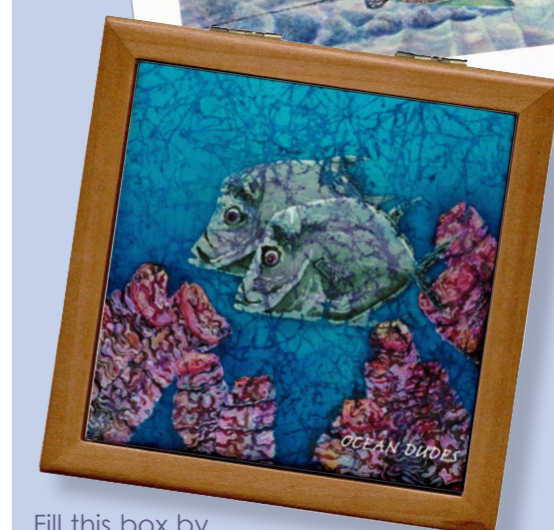


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