



WOW Pilipinas

A recurrent series of articles about the Philippines and its people, places, events and heritage — presented by the **Filipino American Association of Greater Columbia, SC**



A Trip Two Years in the Making:

TUBBATAHA REEF MARINE PARK

A WORLD-CLASS DIVE SITE

by **I.C. Go**



In 2009 while in the Philippines and impressed with the diving in Anilao, Batangas, I decided to visit Tubbataha in 2010 since it is supposed to be the country's best dive site. I waited eagerly for March 2010 to arrive. The marine vessel embarked for Tubbataha but had to return prematurely to port because of engine trouble.

After waiting a year, it was a major disappointment to travel over 20,000 miles to and from the Philippines only to return to the U.S. empty-handed and deprived of a much-anticipated adventure. I did not give up and decided that March 2011 was another chance to see the reef and indeed the second attempt was a success! In all, it took two trips to the Philippines and tens of thousands of miles just to see this legendary reef.

It was definitely worth the wait! Divers from all over the world want to have a part of the action in the Philippines, which truly has world class diving. Tubbataha Reef is a premier example of marine biodiversity and was inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) World Heritage list in 1993. The Tubbataha Reef Marine Park covers 130,028 hectares (approximately 500 square miles).

INTERNATIONAL DIVE GROUP

On board the Expedition Fleet's *Stella Maris* vessel, the dive group was quite international. France, Finland, India, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, and the U.S.A. were represented. The boat embarked from Anilao, Batangas and stopped at two other dive sites, Apo Reef and Cuyo Island, prior to reaching Tubbataha. Disembarkation was at Puerto Princesa, Palawan. This type of diving is known as a *live-aboard* where the divers go from dive site to dive site in a marine vessel. The joke is you only have time to eat, sleep, and dive on a live-aboard.

Many of the divers on board knew of Filipino dive sites that I had never even heard before. I even innocently asked if Malapascua and Moal-Boal were in the Philippines and they are!

- **Sun-Myung Lee**, a diver of 39 years, is the publisher of *Underwater World*--Korea's Magazine for Scuba Divers. It was his third trip to Tubbataha. He said that the Philippines is lucky to have many excellent dive sites in warm water. According to him, the Philippines is a Korean diver's first choice for diving outside of Korea because of its proximity to Korea. There are currently 13 dive resorts in Anilao, Batangas owned by Koreans. A number of Koreans already own dive resorts in other locations in the Philippines, such as Cebu, Moal-Boal, Bohol, and Dumaguete.



A nudibranch in Apo Reef.

Photo by David Archer

- **Joseph Lee**, a diver of 39 years, is the leader or training representative for the National Association of Underwater Instructors (NAUI) in Korea. It was his fifth trip to Tubbataha.

- **Margaret Ong**, a diver of 27 years, is an English diver living in Malaysia the last 40 years. She has been to the Philippines about 10 times to dive. Places she has dived in include Dumaguete, Malapascua, Moal Boal, Sogod Bay, Puerto Galera, Anilao, and Bohol. She is sure she will return to the Philippines to dive once more. The fact the resort she revisits in Anilao is run well keeps her coming back.

- **Cheow Chan Ong**, a diver of 35 years, is a Malaysian who has been to the Philippines over 60 times for work-related visits. He gladly took advantage of the local dive scene during his visits. He feels that there have been improvements in the Philippines' diving industry. People are now more aware about the proper way to handle the animals and conservation issues.

My favorite memories include seeing many sharks during a particular night dive. Seeing turtles frolicking, eating, and even sleeping. It was awesome to see the many different fish in a pristine and undisturbed environment. This is the way marine life should be.



A common underwater scene at Tubbataha.

Photo by David Archer

PROBLEMS

Is all well at Tubbataha? Not exactly. Here are a few problems.

- **I saw garbage.** During my dives I personally retrieved two pieces of garbage—plastic packaging for cigarettes and laundry detergent. The loose non-biodegradable garbage could have originated from passing boats or Tubbataha's ranger station where a group of military personnel are stationed three months at a time to help patrol and protect the waters from illegal activities. (The assignment used to be a year, but the length was probably shortened because being in such a remote place can take its toll on the human psyche.) If you didn't already know, there are already tons of plastic garbage already in the earth's oceans. With the right wind and water currents, mankind's loose garbage could easily travel the waters. (*Note:* The link, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Pacific_Garbage_Patch, describes the enormous amount of marine litter already in the Pacific Ocean.)

- **I heard dynamite blasts.** Colin Swerdfeger, a native of Canada who has been diving for 14 years, was the boat manager on our live-aboard. He expressed his concerns about dynamite fishing. The coral that is destroyed by the dynamite blasts do not grow back. Blasts kills everything caught in the blast and all that remains is a crater-like reminder. The crew suspects the blasts were coming from a nearby island, which is too far for the rangers to reach. Keep in mind that this is a remote location and the rangers only have so much fuel and ammunition. Many of us heard the dynamite blasts underwater during our dives. I noticed at least six. I probably would've heard more had I been listening for the blasts, but I was enamored with the diving.

- **I saw dead coral.** Coral reefs provide shelter to fish, which is important for the safety and reproduction of the fish. Fish is a major source of protein for much of the world's population. Dead coral only hurt the fish stocks in the oceans. Healthy reefs also help limit the amount of carbon dioxide in the oceans.

A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY WITH GREAT DIVING

Let me leave you, the reader, with more reasons to be proud of the Philippines' natural beauty:

- **David Archer** has been diving for 15 years and has logged over a thousand recreational dives. He was on his 8th trip to the Philippines. The Philippines is a beautiful country with great diving and lots of places to explore. It offers good value for the money.

- **Sabrina Meyer**, a French lady living in Hong Kong, was on her 4th trip to the Philippines. She'd been to Bohol, Moal Boal, and Coron to dive. Sabrina would love to return to the Philippines and keep diving.

- Risto Tuomikoski and Jukka Illi are both from Finland and who are first time visitors to the Philippines. The Tubbataha trip was the 2nd leg of Risto's and Jukka's 7-week and 3-week dive vacations, respectively, in the Philippines. Both divers plan to return to the country.

- Yours truly expects to be diving every chance she gets when she goes to visit the Philippines again. When divers talk to each other, the subject of where one has dived is inevitable. Divers who are “in the know” realize immediately how spoiled I am with my diving in the Philippines.

One is bedazzled with the color of tropical fish in Philippine waters. The divers I meet in the U.S. often say that one day they would like to travel to the Philippines. The Philippines is on many-a-diver’s must-see list. ♦



A coral shrimp on a crinoid arm in Cuyo Island.

Photo by David Archer

Reference:

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