

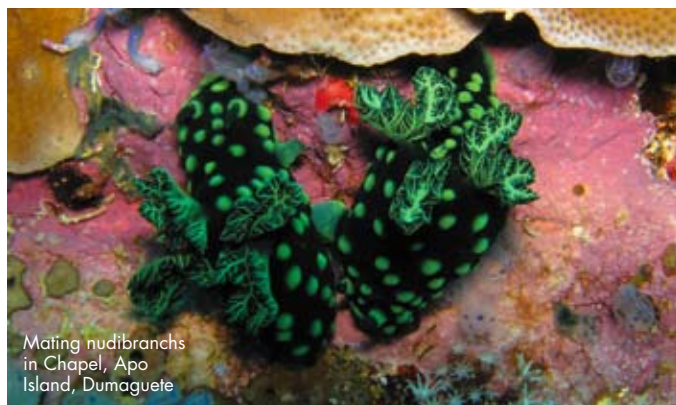


School of anthias in Mantigue Island Sanctuary Camiguin

# Take A Dive

Avid diver and photography buff, journalist **James Loyola** takes us on a tour of the five best dive spots in the country as well as the five spots coming up on divers' radars

The Tubbataha Reefs Natural Marine Park has always been the most famous and most desired dive site in the Philippines, overshadowing other world-class dive sites within the country's rich waters. In recent years, though, many dive spots have begun to make a name for themselves and luring in more divers to sample their pristine delights, especially with the recognition of the Philippines as the center of world marine biodiversity. Coming up with a list of top sites in the country is difficult, as many more sites are being discovered. But here's a list to get you started. I've divided the list into the five most popular spots and the five "secret" sites (well, not so secret now!). See you in the water!



Mating nudibranchs in Chapel, Apo Island, Dumaguete

## THE TOP FIVE DIVES

1. **Dauin Beach and Apo Island** (Dumaguete). The black sand of Dumaguete's Dauin Beach contrasts sharply with the powdery white sand of Apo Island, which is just 20 minutes

away by boat. Both sites attract a lot of divers who are drawn by the rich diversity and the interesting contrast of the two.

Apo Island is known for its marine sanctuary, which is a showcase around the world for how well the coral reefs have been rehabilitated. It is also famous for its wild drift dives for advanced divers in Coconut Point and Cogon Point where one can see endless schools of jacks and the occasional Napoleon wrasse while riding the ripping currents.

Dauin's volcanic sand makes it ideal for weird and unusual critters that underwater photographers rave about, such as flamboyant cuttlefishes, devil stingers, Pegasus sea moths, frog fishes, and ornate ghost pipefishes. Its numerous marine sanctuaries and the famous Ducomi Pier also boast nudibranchs, large turtles, seahorses, as well as large schools of jacks and pompanos. Stay at Bahura Resort and Spa, which offers divers some pampering after a long day's dive.

2. **Club Paradise, Coron** (Palawan). Coron is known for its World War II wrecks that lie within recreational diving depths. These wrecks used to be a fleet of Japanese supply ships found by American planes hiding among Coron's islets. Visibility among the wrecks is not as clear as other sites in the country, but there are few places in the world where one can get to so many WWII wrecks in just a small area. The wreck with the clearest waters is Kyokuzan Maru, which lies near Club Paradise. Here you can find broken rice bowls and remnants of army jeeps inside the ship's hold.

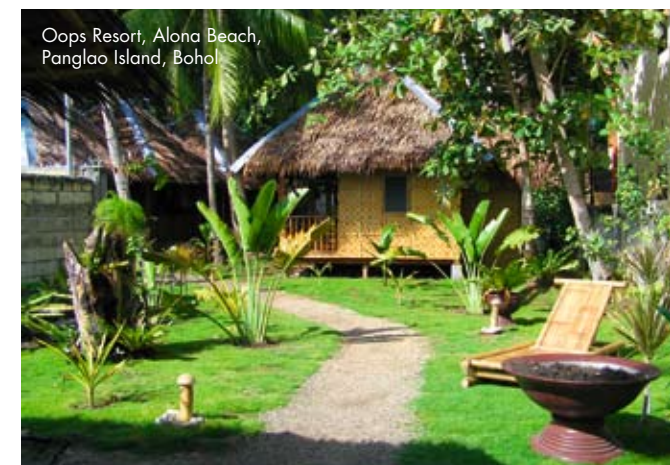
Club Paradise's house reef, a playground for giant green turtles and the occasional dugong, is another favorite. It is full of unusual creatures such as jawfishes incubating eggs in their

mouths, blue marble stingrays flitting in the sand, cuttlefishes, lobsters, squids, and giant clams.



3. **Balicasag and Cabilao Islands** (Bohol). Balicasag Island is the better known of the two since it is more accessible from Alona Kew White Beach Resort in Panglao. A marine sanctuary, Balicasag is surrounded by pristine waters and good coral growth. A favorite dive spot is Black Forest, which almost always has swirling schools of hundreds of jacks or barracudas that envelope divers and give them what I call a *National Geographic* moment.

On the other hand, Cabilao Island used to be famous for hammerhead sharks, which have long been fished out. The island is now known among underwater photographers for its huge fan corals, home to three species of pygmy seahorses. Rare mandarin fishes, nudibranchs, and a host of other creatures can also be found here. Hire the sharp-eyed Filipino dive masters from La Estrella and Polaris resorts to help you spot these well-camouflaged underwater denizens.



4. **Puerto Galera and Verde Island** (Mindoro). The two most popular sites closest to Manila, Puerto Galera and Verde Island across the channel offer a range of experiences for divers of all levels. This is why many divers from the US and Europe have relocated here, making it the best place in Asia for training in technical diving.

Puerto Galera offers wrecks and drift dives for technical and advanced divers. Canyons is the most famous site for sighting big sweetlips, snappers, jacks, groupers, and Napoleon

wrasse whenever there is a ripping current. Also famous is Sabang Wrecks, especially at night, since these provide recreational divers and photographers a variety of interesting and colorful nudibranchs, flying gurnards, flamboyant cuttlefishes, seahorses, and eels

The Verde Island Channel has been named the center of world marine biodiversity and is now the focus of conservation efforts by First Philippine Conservation Inc. This is the source of most of the fish larva that feed the world's seas, thus big fishes can be seen along the sea walls of San Agapito and the notorious Washing Machine, where giant trevallies and potato cods cruise along its strong currents.



5. **Anilao** (Batangas). Many underwater photographers agree that Anilao is the most underrated dive site in the country. Many divers from Manila earn their certifications here and its waters are among the most used in the country. While many scoff that it lacks lush walls, and big fishes like sharks are rare, its sites are actually among the richest sources of colorful nudibranchs that have been drawing the attention of professional and amateur underwater photographers from overseas. One of these sites, Basura—which used to be a garbage dump—and its sandy slopes do not attract many divers who prefer coral growths. But here, sharp eyes can spot rare creatures such as ornate ghost pipefishes, harlequin and coleman shrimps, zebra crabs, fingered dragonets, and seahorses.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY JAMES LOYOLA

**THE TOP FIVE SECRET SITES**

1. **Solana Secrets** (Anilao). Solana Bezo Resort is a high-end resort that caters mostly to foreign divers and photographers. Over the years, its managers Joel and Adrien Uichico have been exploring the waters in Anilao not frequented by divers, searching for rare creatures for which divers go all the way to Lembeh Strait, Indonesia to see. The result is a growing list of Solana secret sites that offer demanding photographers rich targets such as hairy frogfishes, mimic octopus, wonderpus, nudibranchs, pygmy seahorses, sawblade shrimps, ornate ghostpipes, flamboyant cuttlefishes, and the blue-ring octopus.



Solana Bezo Resort, Anilao, Batangas

2. **Super Macro** (Davao) Davao's dive sites have been subject to abuse by destructive fishing methods in the past. Many divers consider its dive sites mediocre, except for a couple in Talikud Island, which are washed by strong currents. However, avid underwater photographer Carlos Munda is out to prove that the most ignored sites usually offer rich rewards—he is now setting up Samal Underwater Photographers Resort (SUPER) to guide local and foreign photographers to sites that host rare macro creatures such as boxer crabs, frogfishes, harlequin shrimps, pygmy seahorses, wonderpus, coleman shrimps, and the rare ocellate octopus. He is still searching for the elusive blue-ring octopus.



Porcelain crab hiding in anemone, Samal Island, Davao

3. **Camiguin Island and Medina Bay** (Misamis Oriental) Camiguin is better known for its waterfalls, rock climbing, and white sandy beaches but there is also great diving here and in relatively unknown Medina Bay, Misamis Oriental, which is a ferry ride away. Most dive operators in the area such as the biggest, Johnny's Dive N' Fun, which operates mainly from Paras Beach Resort in Camiguin and Duka Bay Resort in Medina Bay, offer dive tours around Camiguin, Mantigue Island, and Medina Bay. The waters here are very clear and offer divers vistas of healthy corals, schools of jacks, pygmy seahorses, flathead crocodile fishes, nudibranchs, and coleman shrimps. Duka Bay also prides itself with dive shop owner Eddie Yap's patented reef rehabilitator, which are unique artificial reefs that speed up the rehabilitation of a damaged area from 20 years to just five to 10. It's been getting international recognition for its effectiveness in making damaged sites viable again.



White Island, Camiguin

4. **Sogod Bay** (Leyte) Sogod Bay in Southern Leyte is popular with foreign divers and recently with local divers as it offers good chances of swimming with whalesharks. Sightings are seasonal but Sogod Bay offers superb year-round diving in its pristine reefs, which have bountiful corals that are home to big fishes such as jacks, sweetlips, and snappers, as well as rare sea moths, pygmy seahorses, nudibranchs, and clown frogfishes. Among the best sites is off Padre Burgos Pier, which yields lots of interesting creatures during night dives.



Sogod Bay Scuba Resort, Southern Leyte

5. **Camotes Islands** (Cebu), **Saranggani Bay** (General Santos City) The Camotes Islands group is an emerging tourist destination offering pristine beaches, a lake, caves, and great diving. The unique thing about Camotes is the amazing night diving with so many Flashlight Fish. You can turn off your torch and just watch the spectacular show at Cloud 8 dive site. Most of the sites are wall dives with a few slopes, including Johnny's house reef at Tulang.

The dive sites in Saranggani Bay are being explored by South Point Dive's Paul Partridge who has made the province his home. The dives here are wall diving with two offshore reefs. There are also other offshore reefs but logistics is still a problem. South Point Dive's house reefs offer beautiful hard coral gardens, some turtles, and lots of fish action, plus a crevice called Abyss that goes all the way down. Offshore, divers get a good chance to spot big fishes such as sharks, tuna, and other pelagics. ■



Bearded scorpionfish at Duka Bay, Medina, Misamis Oriental



Swirling jacks at Twin Rocks, Anilao

**Diving Checklist**  
HOW TO GET TO THESE PLACES

1. **Dauin Beach and Apo Island:** Air Philippines (airphils.com), Cebu Pacific (cebupacificair.com), and Philippine Airlines (philippineairlines.com) have flights to Dumaguete. Bahura Resort and Spa Kilometer 19/20 Maayong Tubig, Dauin 6217, Negros Oriental, tel (35) 425-2054/53. Manila booking office: Cruise Island Adventures Inc., rm 405 Metrostar Building, 1005 Metropolitan Avenue, Makati City, tel (2) 890-6778, bahura.com

2. **Club Paradise, Coron:** Air Philippines, Asian Spirit (asianspirit.com), Cebu Pacific, PAL, and Seair (flyseair.com) all service the Manila-Palawan route. Club Paradise: From Busuanga airport, there's one hour of land travel before you transfer to a 30-minute boat ride to Club Paradise, on Dimakya Island. clubparadisepalawan.com

3. **Balicasag and Cabilao Islands:** Cebu Pacific and PAL fly to Tagbilaran, Bohol. Or take the ferry from Cebu to Bohol. Alona Kew White Beach Resort, Tawala, Panglao Island, Bohol, tel (38) 502-9042, kewbeach@mozcom.com; La Estrella Beach Resort Cabilao Island, Loon, 6327 Bohol, tel (38) 505-4114, laestrella.de/englisch.htm; Polaris Beach and Dive Resort, telefax (38) 505-4118, (+63918) 903-7187, polaris-dive.com

4. **Puerto Galera and Verde Island:** Take the South Luzon Expressway to Batangas pier. From there, take a ferry either to Calapan, Mindoro or those bound directly to Puerto Galera. You can hire a *banca* (outrigger) from Puerto Galera to take you to Verde Island.

5. **Anilao:** From Manila, it's about two and a half hours land travel to Anilao. You can take buses from Manila or go by private car. Solana Bezo Resort, San Teodoro, Mabini, Batangas, tel (2) 848-5788, (+63917) 300-1086, divesolana.com

6. **Super Macro:** Most major domestic airlines have flights to Davao. To get to Samal Island: From Agdao, catch the Island City Express bus, which goes to the island via ferry from Sasa pier. You can also opt to just catch the ferry from Sasa pier. Or book accommodations in the many resorts on the island, most of which have their own ferry service.

7. **Camiguin Island and Medina Bay:** Only Seair flies to Camiguin. But you can catch a ferry from Cebu or Cagayan de Oro. Johnny Dive N' Fun, tel (88) 387-9588, johnnydive.com; Duka Bay Resort, Medina, Misamis Oriental, tel (88) 331-2288, dukabayresort-hours.com

8. **Sogod Bay:** Cebu Pacific and PAL have daily flights to Tacloban, Leyte. From Tacloban, there are public buses to Lungsodaan, where most dive resorts are. The trip takes about three to four hours. Or there are ferry services from Cebu to either the Bato or Hilongos ferry terminals. From there, it's about one to one and half hours away from Padre Burgos Pier.

9. **Camotes Islands:** From Cebu, there are daily trips from the ports of Danao City and Mandaue City Quano Wharf via motorized outriggers, and Cebu City Pier 2 (ferry boat). Some Mactan-based charter companies also offer flights going to the islands.

10. **Saranggani Bay:** Cebu Pacific and PAL have flights to General Santos City. From Davao, General Santos City is about two and half hours' drive. South Point Divers, 219 First Ave., Guinoo Subdivision, General Santos City, tel (83) 301-3483, (+63920) 914-9259, southpointdivers.ph

For recommended tour packages, try Lakbay.Net, tel (2) 517-6655, e-mail travelife@lakbay.net.ph