

Philippines

KEEPS GETTING BETTER



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Driving a little south of our resort, we discovered Secret Bay. The dark sand beach leads to a slowly descending pebble strewn slope, followed by a seemingly barren seabed. Heading west we found a flat scrappy area of sponges and algae that were camouflage for the smallest, whitest frogfish we had ever seen. The divemaster assured us these thumbnail size creatures never got any bigger. We spotted a seahorse, fire urchins, squat lobsters, jawfish, mantis shrimp and just too many juvenile fish to identify.

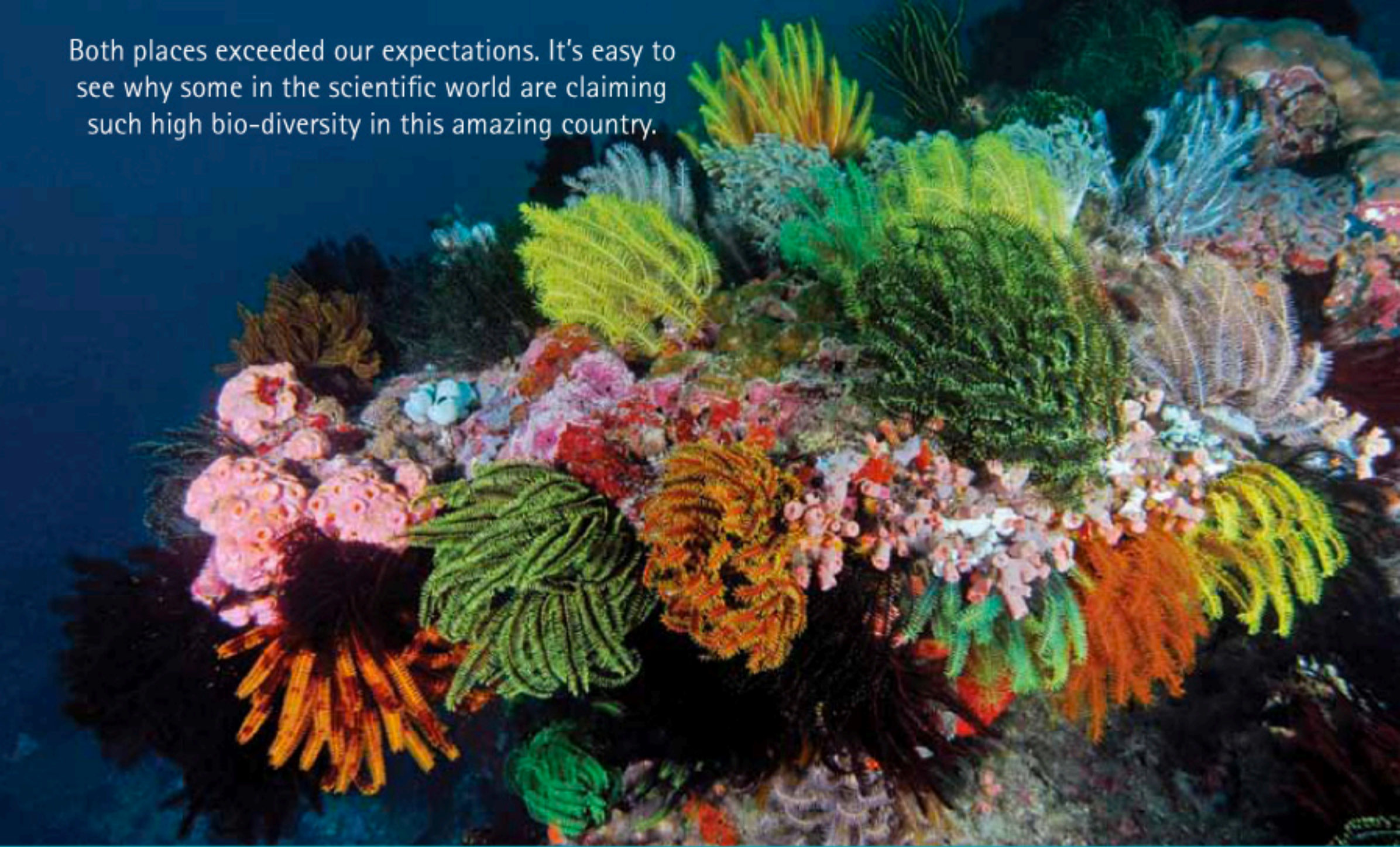
For the next dive we headed towards the eastern side of the bay. Although the profile was similar and the marine life consistent, at depth we discovered streams of bubbles percolating up through the dark seafloor. These hot water vents indicated there was volcanic activity in the region but we felt we had chanced upon the inspiration for a jacuzzi. The critters were absent - perhaps it was too warm - so we headed back up the slope to find some incredibly beautiful and unusual nudibranchs. The rest of our finds started to look like a fish ID book with dragonets, lots of commensal shrimp and goby partnerships, sea snakes, tiny octopus, cowries, squid and masses of mantis shrimps.

Our first time at the Philippines, we would sit at the end of each day – toes buried in the sand, cool glass in hand – and discuss why we had never been before? The diving was wonderful, yet we had evaded the country for years. When we heard that a long-term academic study had tagged the area around Puerto Galera as having some of the highest levels of marine bio-diversity on the planet, we planned a return trip. We felt we had to choose two destinations to make it worthwhile and decided to temper our curiosity about diving around lively and up-tempo Puerto Galera with a stop at lesser-known Anilao a short distance away.

Getting to this part of the Philippines is via Manila and easy enough but there are some fiddly road and boat transfers. The small town of Anilao nestles on a narrow coastal strip of Luzon Island. It's about a two and a half hour drive and a favoured haunt for weekend divers from Manila but doesn't feel busy as the hotels are spaced out along the hilly coast. We missed our first few days of diving here due to bad weather.




Both places exceeded our expectations. It's easy to see why some in the scientific world are claiming such high bio-diversity in this amazing country.



Too soon it was time to head south and across the Verde Island Passage to Puerto Galera on a local ferry. Approaching Sabang Beach we could see clusters of hotels, bars, restaurants and shops tumbling down the hillside until they reached the bay. It's a lively town that attracts lots of divers. Once in the water we realized why - beneath the surface are a whole raft of dives in as many different styles. The first dive of the day would be on a wreck, the next a reef and by mid-afternoon, it would be a critter hunt.

The dive that surprised us the most was the *Alma Jane*. On the edge of Sabang Bay, this old cargo ship was scuttled in 2003 and settled upright at 30 metres. A 60-ton, 35-metre-long steel-hulled cargo ship built in 1966, little remains to indicate her past working life. *Alma Jane* is an impressive artificial reef attracting a huge number of pelagic fish. Dropping to the rudder we met a school of curious batfish then, ascending, there were schools of fusiliers, snappers and golden rabbitfish. A lone lionfish was shadowed by a solitary flutemouth and both followed us around the hull. A few minutes away, another cluster of three small wrecks sit scattered across the seabed. There are some curious finds on them like a really enormous giant frogfish.

A short distance from Sabang, Giant Clams is home for seahorses - and we were delighted to see several on arrival - while at Shark Cave, a deep dive where young whitetips are regularly seen in a cavern, there was just one loner. Our favourite dive turned out to be Boulders and all because of one very special find. Entering beneath an almost vertical cliff wall where a series of large boulders broke the surface, we discovered some of the most interesting terrain around this coast. Boulders nestle close together, forming winding paths that lead to the level base of the site. This rubbly area is coated in sponges, hydroids and algae and is the spot to go searching for thorny seahorses, peacock razorfish, nudibranchs and young cuttlefish. However, the event of the trip happened as we ascended to the boulders where we watched our divemaster go crazy. His victory dance over, he showed us a stunning, if rather unimpressed, blue-ringed octopus.

We were disappointed to have lost our first few days diving, but we were amazed at what we did get to see in Anilao. Puerto Galera was just as we expected and without a doubt, both places exceeded our expectations. It's easy to see why some in the scientific world are claiming such high bio-diversity in this amazing country. 

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