

## DESTINATION

By Gunther Deichmann



# *Puerto Galera* ~ Treasures Above and Below

Panoramic view of Puerto Galera and beaches,  
with Sabang Bay on the left upper side.

Pink Squat lobster (*Lauriea siagiani*)

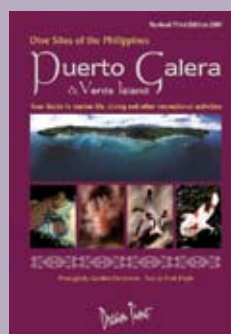


Situated on the northern peninsula of Mindoro Island, approximately 160 km from Manila, is Puerto Galera. One of the oldest Spanish settlements in the Philippines, the city was founded in 1572 and became the first provincial capital of Mindoro Island.

As early as the 10th century, Chinese, Malay and Indonesian merchants were already frequent visitors. Puerto Galera — the Port of the Galleons — was an excellent port for Spanish Galleons seeking refuge from heavy seas and typhoons. In fact, yachts cruising the South China Sea today still stop at Puerto Galera.

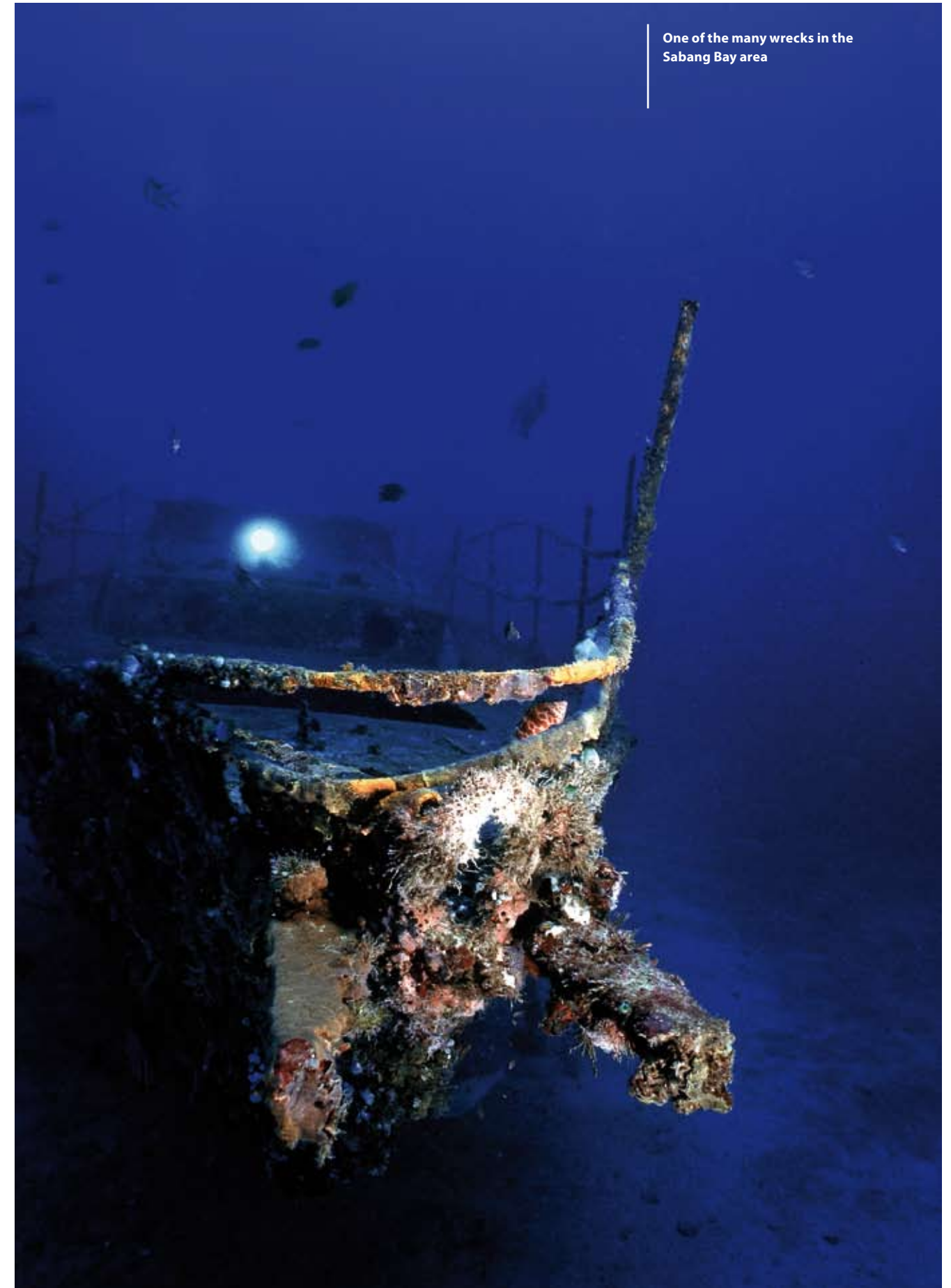
The Verde Island Passage that separates Mindoro Island and Luzon is well known for its spectacular, exhilarating drift dives. Flushed by currents of up to six knots, the passage is deep, with waters so clear that a fantastic variety of underwater flora and fauna stands out immediately.

The diversity of hard and soft corals, along with hundreds of species of tropical fish life, makes Puerto Galera one of the most popular dive destinations in the Philippines. The five-kilometre stretch of world-class dive sites is a protected area and marine sanctuary. Visibility ranges from 10 to 30 metres, sometimes even better depending on water temperature, current strength and wind direction.



**COMING SOON!**  
**Dive Sites of the Philippines**  
— **PUERTO GALERA & VERDE ISLAND**  
A guide to marine life, diving and other recreational activities. Includes a map of all dive sites and environs.

Stay tuned to the Philippine-Micronesia Alliance blog for details.  
[www.alliancediving.com/blog](http://www.alliancediving.com/blog)



One of the many wrecks in the Sabang Bay area



Cuttlefish (*Sepia sp.*) at Monkey Beach

Most dive sites are within a few minutes' boat ride from dive centres. Whether you're a beginner or an experienced diver, or looking for technical and trimix dives, there are sites suitable for all levels of diving ability. Day trips to the outer islands such as Verde, Chicken Feather and the Maricaban Islands can be organised. These island sites offer spectacular reef walls and pinnacles.

The islands have recently become something of a Mecca for photographers, thanks to the regular appearance of pygmy seahorses, sea moths, harlequin ghost pipefish, frogfish, leaf fish, stargazers and more types of nudibranchs than is possible to list here. Particularly popular with regular visitors to Puerto Galera are

The Canyons and Hole in the Wall — two consistently great dive sites.

The Canyons, which usually finishes on a large coral-encrusted galleon anchor, is home to large schools of yellowtail snapper, sweetlips, rabbitfish, batfish and emperors, as well as the usual abundance of smaller reef fish. With frequent sightings of manta rays and thresher sharks in the area, there's arguably no need to go anywhere else! The Hole in the Wall is a rock formation that offers a unique and picturesque swim-through.

The best diving conditions around Puerto Galera are usually from April to September, as water temperature reaches 29°C, with the seas at their calmest and visibility at its best.

In December, water temperature can sometimes drop to as low as 22°C on deeper dives due to thermoclines. Typhoon season stretches from the end of July to late November, with lots of wind, rain and choppy seas, but there are enough sheltered areas in Puerto Galera for diving during this period.



a.



b.

- a. Diver swimming through the Hole in the Wall
- b. Mandarinfish were discovered in the area only four years ago. Just ask your dive guide for the best location to see these colourful fish.

## The Bay of Critters

Diving the shallows of Sabang Bay early in the morning may sound like a chilly proposition, but for underwater photographers, it's a dream come true — especially when everyone else is asleep, perhaps recovering from the previous night's merrymaking. With the entire bay to yourself, you'll discover an amazing collection of life, from microscopic critters to the odd turtle swimming in the sea grass, all at a depth of three to four metres.

For example, one morning before coffee and breakfast, I spotted a miniature red-and-black frogfish, tiny dragonets, juvenile leaf fish, a white V octopus, and just before I ran out of air, a huge green turtle. Wow!

You can also do the same dive in the late afternoon by starting at 20 metres from the Sabang wreck area and then drift with the current, finishing back at the shallows, only five minutes from Asia Divers and El Galleon Beach Resort. To top it off, you'll be back for that cool sunset beer at the resort's Point Bar.



a.



b.



c.



d.

- a. Marbled Stargazer (*Uranoscopus bicinctus*) spotted during a night dive
- b. A rare encounter with a white V octopus at four metres depth
- c. Robust ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus cyanopterus*)
- d. Coleman shrimp pair (*Periclimenes colemani*)

Photo: Mark-Lee Deichmann

*Kapalai*

No matter where we build our world-class dive resorts, we always emphasise Mother Nature's needs, and that of our divers, first.

So, long before the decision was made to give Sipadan a breather by disallowing overnight visitors, we had already begun building other resorts where the interests of divers and conservation are unified.

For instance, at Lankayan, turtle hatchlings find a place of refuge, while at Kapalai, our low-touch approach means we ship everything in and out, trash and all, to minimise any impact on our splendid coral reefs.

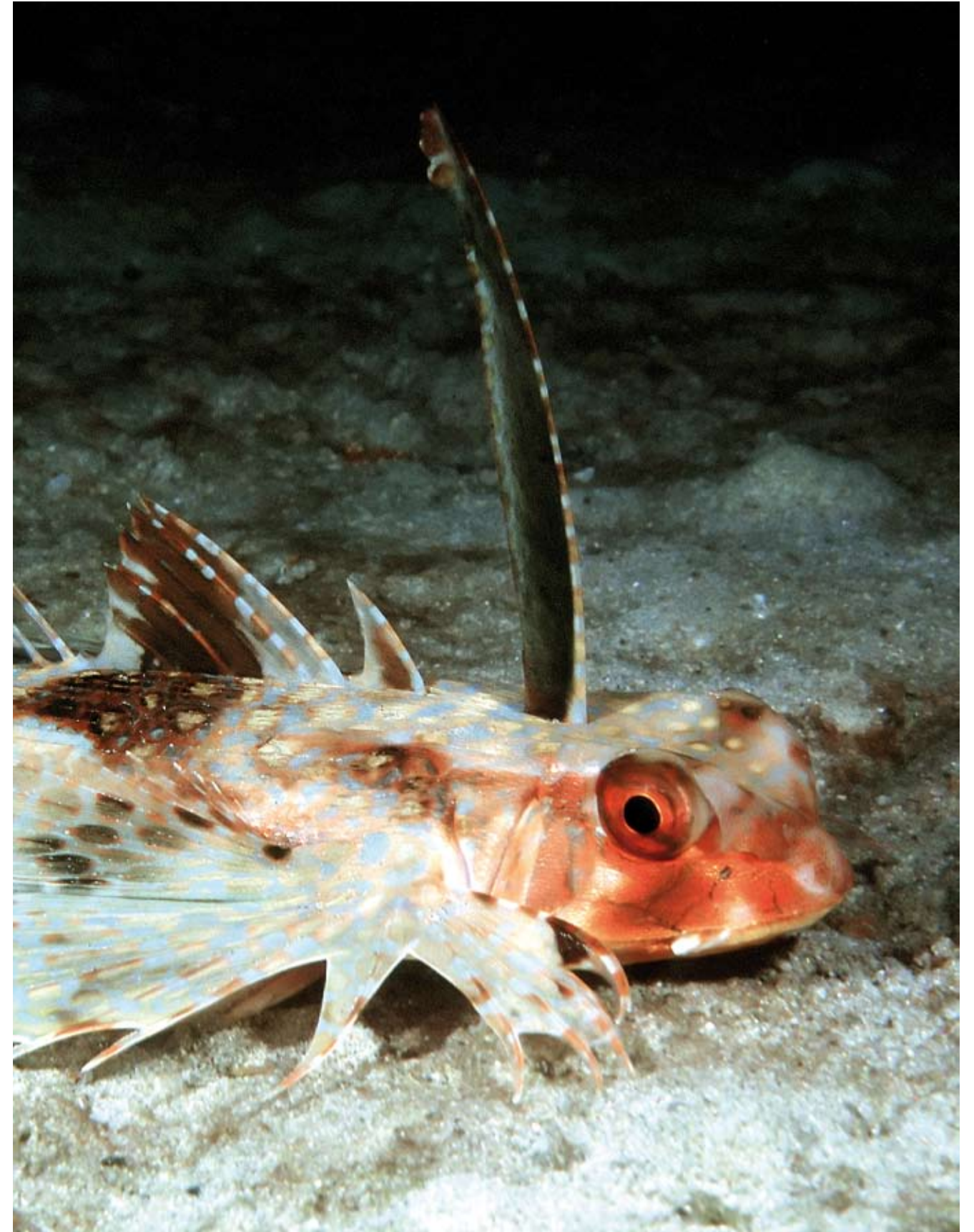
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*Lankayan*

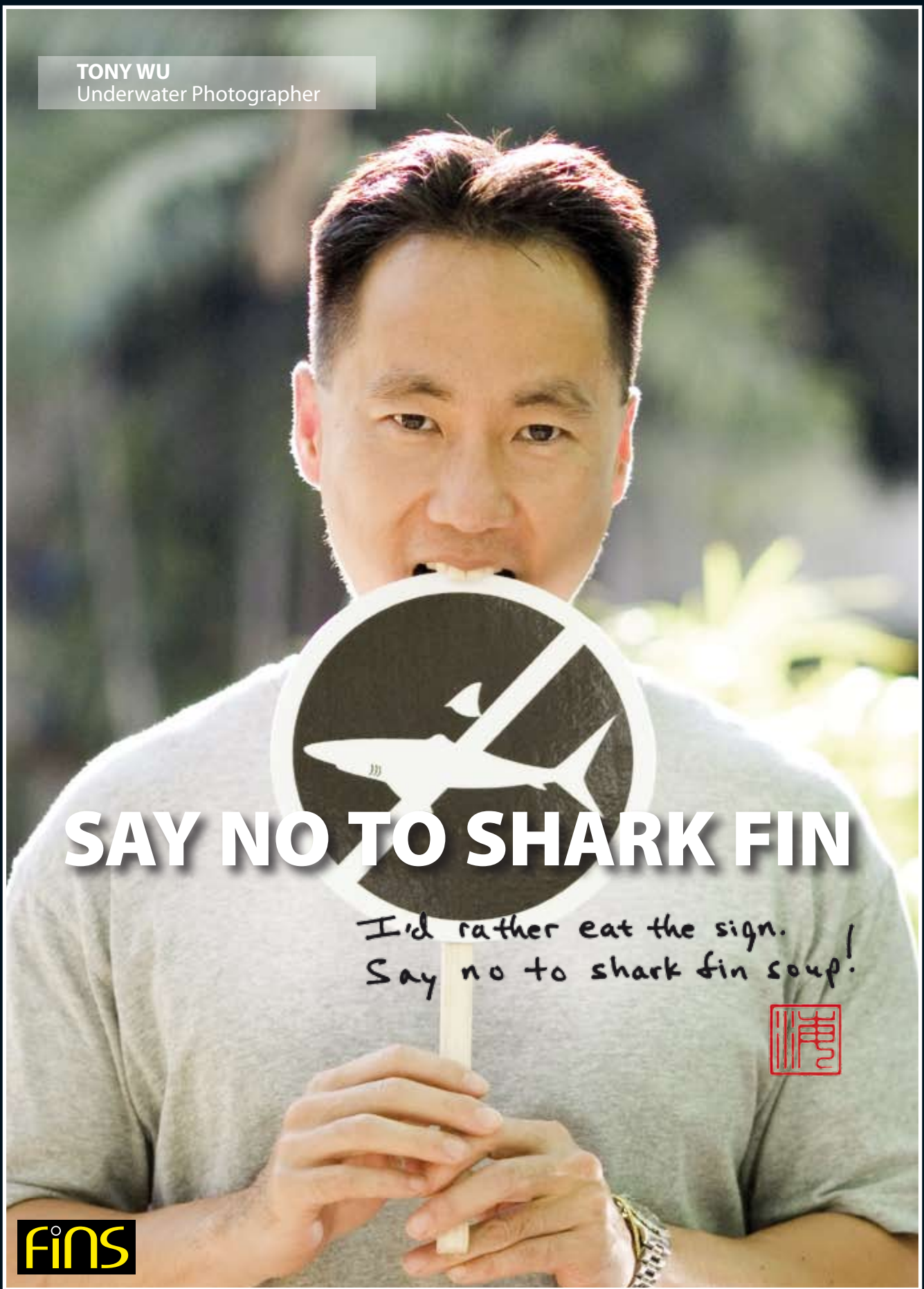


Nudibranch feeding on a tunicate



Helmut gurnard (*Dactyloptena orientalis*)  
encountered on a night dive in Sabang Bay

TONY WU  
Underwater Photographer



# SAY NO TO SHARK FIN

I'd rather eat the sign.  
Say no to shark fin soup!



All employees and shareholders of fins have chosen — we abstain from consuming sharkfin.

## The Joy of Juveniles



a.



b.

a. Juvenile barramundi cod (*Cromileptes altivelis*) near Hole in the Wall  
b. Juvenile harlequin sweetlips (*Plectorhinchus chaetodonoides*) look quite different from the adults.

When divers visit reefs, we're accustomed to seeing a myriad of tropical reef fish, ranging from the large Napoleon wrasse to tiny gobies in the sand. We identify fish primarily by colouration and body design.

However, as juveniles, many fish have remarkably different characteristics from their adult forms, which often makes it much harder for us to identify juvenile fish than adults. The reason for this situation is simple — it's a survival strategy.

Once juvenile fish settle onto the reef, they're extremely vulnerable to predation. Even top predators themselves are easy prey when they're young and small. Survival for most fish then, is often a question of making it intact through this vulnerable juvenile stage. Many juveniles dwell in protected areas like mangroves and inner lagoons, using camouflage to evade detection.

A number of fish species go through drastic changes as they transition from juvenile to adult form. My personal favourite is the Napoleon wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*). Most divers are excited when they see this large fish, but swim right over the juveniles without a second glance. I have fun watching their reaction when I point out the juvenile version to divers; their eyes inevitably light up in disbelief.

The next time you're in Puerto Galera, spend some time in the more protected areas looking for fish. Finding them in their juvenile colour patterns is a treat and gives you even more reason to go diving.

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## LAND ACTIVITIES

The picturesque beaches, coves and excellent diving at Puerto Galera have attracted divers since the early 1980s, but it's worth pointing out that Puerto Galera also offers exciting land activities and diversions to occupy visitors of all ages and interests.

Most dive centres and resorts organise a variety of other watersports, such as sea kayaking around coves and islets, water-skiing, windsurfing, and also snorkelling trips either separately or in conjunction with selected dive trips.

Puerto Galera is also a good place to explore the mountainous interior of Mindoro Island. Trails have recently been established and are suitable for all levels of experience and fitness.



Monitor lizards are quite common on the island of Mindoro.



- a. Many of the resorts in Puerto Galera offer traditional massage service for their customers.  
 b. The spectacular Tamaraw Falls, surrounded by lush rainforest

One of the hikes, planned along the Tabinay-Talipanan Trail, is an easy two- or three-day walk through the forest, and offers panoramic views of the Verde Passage and Batangas Bay.

Mountain biking is also taking off as a major sport in the area. Several routes have been set up, of which the most popular is the 50-kilometre ride to Calapan along the coastal road, passing Tamaraw Falls and a number of beautiful, secluded beaches.


You can also camp in one of the many deserted coves around the island. Day-trips via four-wheel drive vehicles or jeepneys can also be made to the majestic Tamaraw Falls, passing through the traditional villages of local Mangyan tribespeople (with a local guide, of course).



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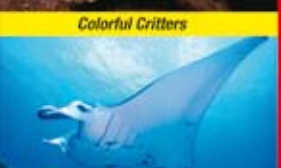
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a.

b.

For visitors interested in the culture and history of the port, a good place to visit is the Excavation Museum (part of the Philippine National Museum). Chinese influence on the area, from the days when Puerto Galera was on the main trade route with China, is obvious from the artefacts on display, such as pottery and sculptures from the 9th century.

The well-established Puerto Galera Yacht Club is open to guests, as is the nine-hole Ponderosa Golf Club, located in the mountains southwest of town. There's a tremendous view of the harbour and Verde Passage from the club, which is situated 600 metres above sea level.

In the late afternoon, after a day of diving or exploring the countryside, enjoy the sunset with a drink in one of the many beachfront restaurants and bars. On White Beach, there are informal beach volleyball games for the energetic, while hammocks are available for those who would rather relax.

- a. Coconuts and more coconuts!
- b. Mangrove roots hold together the coastline and provide shelter for a variety of animals

## Mindoro's Mangroves

By Lee Goldman, Marine Biologist

The island of Mindoro has a healthy mangrove forest along its coastline, which is invaluable to the marine biodiversity in the area. There are approximately 65 species of mangrove distributed throughout the world, and in tropical environments, mangrove communities flourish in shallow mud flats.

Mangroves comprise the transition line between the terrestrial environment and the oceans. They're extremely beneficial to the animals of the coastal waters

as well as the coastlines themselves. Mangroves act as nurseries for many reef fish. They also provide a service for coral reefs. Reefs require clear, nutrient-rich water, and mangroves act like a filter, sifting out sediment from the land. Mangroves also help absorb some of the energy created from wave action, which helps prevent coastline erosion.

Mangroves have only one real problem — encroachment by people. Coastal real estate is always in demand and

years ago, developers eradicated entire stretches of mangroves to accommodate new housing projects without considering the negative impact on marine life. These days, increased global awareness of the importance of mangroves for fish populations, coral reefs, birds and the coastline has helped bring about a change in attitude. People from many different backgrounds and interests now work together to ensure that mangrove communities survive and thrive.





a. Little girl and fruit stand at the market area of Puerto Galera  
 b. Painted frogfish (*Antennarius maculatus*) in the shallow waters of Sabang Bay



Good restaurants and bars serve international cuisine at reasonable prices, and the nightclubs of Sabang Beach will have you partying until the early hours. The best hang out for divers is the famous Gecko Bar at La Laguna Beach Club and Dive Centre or the Point Bar at Asia Divers. Both have great music and awesome cocktails. If you'd prefer a quiet evening, then venture to Captain Gregg's in

Sabang or pick one of the many other restaurants available to you in the area.

With a mix of local laid-back charm, fun and great diving, you can't go wrong at Puerto Galera. Enjoy bountiful marine life on every dive, and wonderful service in between. Legend has it that once sailors visit Puerto Galera, they always promise to come back. ☺

**SPECIAL THANKS** to the following parties for their assistance in preparing this feature: Action Divers, Blue Horizons Travel, Captain Gregg, Coco Divers, El Galleon and Asia Divers Beach Resort, Fisherman Cove, La Laguna Beach Club and Dive Center, The Philippine-Micronesia Alliance, Philippine Travel Manila, Portofino, and Sabang Inn.



Gunther Deichmann

**FROM THE AUTHOR**

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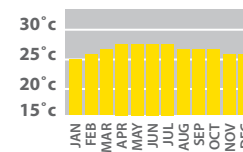
"Puerto Galera as a dive destination is fantastic. There's easy diving with a tremendous variety of critters beyond imagination — a world-class showcase of marine biodiversity and an underwater photographer's dream. I've been diving here for almost 15 years, and Puerto Galera still has a surprise in store each time I visit."



From Manila, Puerto Galera can be reached via regular bus service to the Batangas, after which arrangements can be made for pick-ups to different resorts. Alternatively, make prior arrangements with your resort to book a private van from Manila to one of the beaches in the Batangas area to catch a boat ride to your resort.



Tropical climate, with preferred diving conditions from April to September. Typhoon season usually starts at the end of July and lasts to the end of November. A 3mm suit or equivalent should be sufficient.



Holders of Hong Kong and Taiwan passports need special permits from Philippine embassies or consulates in order to enter the Philippines. Visitors from most countries are permitted to stay for up to 21 days without a visa, but it's best to check the list of applicable countries prior to departure. International departure tax from Manila is 550 Peso, payable in cash only. As the amount is subject to change, it is advisable to check current rates before travelling.



Domestic GSM network and international roaming. Internet access is widely available at internet cafes. Some resorts have Wifi.



220V, 60Hz

**PLUGS**



Philippine Peso, but US\$ are widely accepted. Major credit cards are accepted in most places. Tipping is optional. Standard practice is 10% for an appreciated service.



A certificate of vaccination against yellow fever is required for visitors coming from infected areas, but apart from that, there are no other vaccination requirements. Repellent to keep mosquitoes at bay in the evenings is recommended.



GMT + 8 hrs

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