

**Leave nothing but smiles
Take nothing but memories**

April 30 – May 8, 2006



Lai

“...the local time is now quarter to eight in the evening and the ground temperature is 33C. On behalf of the crew, thank you again for flying with us and welcome to Manila...”

Humid, chaotic and insanely congested at all hours, Manila is everything one can expect of a big city in the tropics. However, you will be very much mistaken to assume that all of the 7,000+ islands that constitute the Philippines are the same. As close as 3 to 4 hours away by bus and boat, there stretch a quiet group of beaches with little resemblance to the capital. Shunned by most sun worshippers and family vacationers, Puerto Galera, fondly nicknamed PG by regulars, draws schools of divers from all over the world.



With intensifying tourism investment over the last 15 years, human dwellings are pushing further and further out into the sandy beach area. Now, waves practically flap onto doorsteps in high tide. The most crowded of the three beaches, Sabang, is a labyrinth of matchbox establishments bursting with souvenirs, beachwear and aromatic food items. Another notable delicacy of this area is call girls, who possess the uncanny ability to balance materialism with Catholicism.

100 meters from shore and 15 meters from the surface, miraculously, there is nothing but purity. The only way to describe the sensation of looking through the goggles is to call the experience overwhelming.

Bouquets of rust-red soft corals perched on antler-shaped, chalky hard corals with electric blue tips cover the ocean bed. Tiny but fearless and territorial, clown fish propel themselves from their hiding place amongst waving tentacles to fend off any trespasser over their coral. From a distance, they can almost pass for orange bullets.

Certain species prefer to swim together, usually of similar sizes but quite varied in colouring and marking. There is one kind that is jet black from fin to gill, except two symmetrical white circles on its shiny back, making it look like it is en route to a tea ceremony in formal kimono attire. Another groupie is a teal fish with fuchsia contour lines. Starting from lip liners, distinct streaks of fuchsia cover the scaled body, giving it an aqua-dynamic appearance.



Octopuses are a bit shy, they prefer hiding in nooks and crannies and pretend to be a part of the rock. They are not at all amused if you tickle their tentacles, any one of the eight. A loner by design, box fish are a lovely sight to behold. They are eager to make friends but have to struggle to keep floating let alone keep up with other more

nimble fishes. They can be usually spotted wobbling near the bottom, waving frantically and gasping for air.



Of course, there are mean ones too. The slithering body of a sea snake forms a dizzying confusion of black and white rings. Extremely poisonous and fast, the only saving grace is sea snakes are endowed with tiny mouths and can only sink their teeth into earlobes and the flash connecting the thumb and forefinger. When a two footer glides by, it is best not to find out how big its mouth really is.

Equally poisonous are frog fish. Despite the name, frog fish have nothing cute about them. Still and camouflaged, they install themselves between corals like a blob of melting rubber and wait for the moment to chomp into any innocent prey. As the PADI book advises, “If it is too pretty, too ugly, or doesn’t run away, don’t touch it.”

As every diver can attest, it is like telling a child not to touch toys to tell a diver not to touch aquatic life, especially when you are feeding them with bananas. Fishes like bananas, go figure! Before given the chance to even kneel properly on the sand, fishes are circling around to investigate. With each piece you peel away, the fish density increases and pretty soon, a fish eclipse is formed. While the little ones take cautious nibbles and quickly dash away, the larger and experienced ones bully their way through and try to monopolise the feeding station. Meanwhile, you can feast on the beauty of your surroundings.



(One word of caution, banana peels react differently in salt water and can produce poisonous liquids as they decompose. As a responsible diver, pick up the trash before exiting the water so that our children, our children’s children may enjoy such spectacular sights as well.)

Between two wrecks, there also lives a happy turtle. He likes to zip by divers with that nonchalant mask on. One second he is there, the next, he is a flying saucer in the distance. However, no diving experience is complete without being in close proximity with a shark. At 27.3 meters down, the water temperature drops considerably but suits sharks’ liking just fine. Flat-nosed and contemplative, the 1.5 meter long junior white tip suspends under an overhead cave looking rather benign, even innocent. This is the sleeping spot for four white tips in the PG area and

instructors issued verbal guarantees before the dive that sharks only feed at night. Right!

Before the shark encounter fully sinks in, a strong current sweeps across and takes the unsuspecting entourage for a ride. Without even planning or realising it, the canyon unveils its splendor in front of us. Magnificent fans of coral in orange, red and pink the size of a dinner table shelter fishes of the most stunning brilliance. Everything is at peace, yet it is impossible to describe the scenery. Everyone is in awe, yet it is impossible to describe the emotion. This is the creation of a higher realm, for its perfection, for its harmony, for its simplicity. I broke the first rule of all diving instructions, I stopped breathing.

