

# May 2001

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### The Philippines ... What Happened Was !!



Diving in the UK over Easter has always been a bit of a hit and miss affair. Tempestuous winds, incessant rain, Siberian water temperatures and Stygian visibility that can only favour the Braille readers amongst us ... not exactly inspirational stuff. This year we decided to take the more sensible option. And so it was that 14 very audacious Adventure Divers gathered at Heathrow, destined for the tropical climes and warm waters of the Philippines. Our final destination was to be the remote fishing town of Coron, nestled in the far southwest corner of this sprawling archipelago and home to no less than a dozen Second World War Japanese Imperial Navy wrecks. Sounds idyllic ... but first we had to get there !!

A thirteen hour flight, with enough in-flight entertainment to keep your average hyperactive adolescent on uppers fully occupied, took us to Kuala Lumpur. A few early morning (or was it late night?) beers and then we were off again to our next destination, Manila. However, a "technical problem" left us stranded on the runway for almost 90 minutes and meant that our connection with the once-a-week ferry from Manila to Coron was "tight" to say the least. At Manila we rushed to our awaiting transfer buses and arrived at the ferry terminal with just minutes to spare ... or at least most of us did. Somewhere between the plane and the port Kevin Codling had vanished !! There was no time to look for him and we had to board in the hope that he was safe and that Mark Bush, our representative from Dive Right, would find him and get him on a flight down to Coron. Once on board, fanciful dreams of comfy cabins were quickly eradicated. To be frank, Our Lady of Lippa, complete with chickens and an assortment of livestock, was more refuge-boat than ferry-boat. Nonetheless, we made ourselves as comfortable as possible for the 12 hour crossing ahead.

As day broke we arrived in Coron and disembarking from the ferry it soon became apparent that your average Filipino has all of the organisational skills of a typical dive centre owner !! Somehow dive gear and divers all managed to make it to the resort and then on to the dive centre. We were diving with Dive Right, an American owned and operated facility, which was relatively well organised by Filipino standards. For most of our dives we would be using Nitrox to maximise our

time on the wrecks and the fills were reasonably priced at \$9. Our dive boat "Kon Tikki" came in the form of a traditional Banka canoe, complete with outriggers and Nissan engine. Although the vessel proved to be neither fast nor particularly reliable, it was spacious and supported a variety of interesting and often bizarre entry techniques. Diving conditions in Coron Bay were variable. Visibility was between 5 and 15 metres on the outside of the wrecks but once inside (providing that you were first in) the viz was infinite, making for some superb penetration dives. Even at 40 metres the water temperature was a very comfortable 30 degrees and for once decompression was a pleasure. All of the wrecks were buoyed and as currents were seldom an issue ascents and descents were a doddle (provided that you could manage to hold on to your mask for the entire dive !!)

Most of the wrecks that we explored had been commercially salvaged during the 1960s and as a result the engine rooms were cavernous and easy to penetrate. Removal of the prop from many of the wrecks also provided some of the best (and tightest) swim-throughs that I have ever experienced. Amongst the most memorable of the wrecks was the Akitsushima, one of the few true warships amongst the Coron wrecks. Sitting in 38 metres of water, a huge crack along her deck close to the stern allowed for easy penetration. Once inside, with the light filtering down from above, you found yourself floating in an awesome cathedral full of shimmering glassfish. The Olympia Maru, at 25 metres, proved to be another firm favourite. Penetrating the wreck via a small blast hole in the bow, it was possible to swim the entire length of the wreck, exiting through the propeller shaft ..... if Disney World had a wreck diving theme ride, this would be it !! For myself, the I rako, sitting at 43 metres was the most challenging. Largely intact, this 150 metre provisions ship offered some fantastic penetration possibilities, including ventures deep into the undisturbed engine room (careful monitoring of air supply is essential !!).

Coron was not all about wreck diving however, and the quality of the corals and the variety of aquatic life was pleasantly surprising. Nudibranch spotting became a popular pursuit with encounters often running into double figures on a single dive. Giant puffers, groupers, turtles and batfish were common place. Clownfish, angelfish, lionfish, scorpion fish and huge jellyfish were present on almost every dive. However, the most memorable dive of the trip has to be Barracuda Lake. This crazy and spectacular dive begins with an arduous climb up and over sheer and extremely sharp volcanic rock, but it is well worth the exertion. The scenery around the lake is quite simply breathtaking, towering rock faces dropping down into crystal clear water and beneath the surface the terrain is positively lunar. However, it is the dynamic changes in water temperature that make this a unique experience. At the surface the freshwater is around 30 degrees but beyond 10 metres this turns to saltwater and the temperature rises dramatically to 38 degrees !! The thermocline is clearly visible and swimming along with your head in cold water and your body in warm water is very strange. During our tour I was also lucky enough to spot the "king of the lake" ... a 4-foot barracuda !!

Despite a sometime frustrating lack of organisation and a less than friendly encounter with the locals (for which I am sure that the copious quantities of rum consumed played a large part), it was a truly memorable and most enjoyable trip. A big thank you to everybody who made it so much fun: **Touché the Brave, Elvis, Beaver, Big Rob, Jimmy the Jellyfish, Big Brother Neil, Kevin, Mad Iain, Ross, Little Neil, Nina, Jim and Janis.**

## The Next Big Adventure



For more than 50 years, the Mergui Archipelago, a chain of over 800 islands in the Andaman Sea, which lies to the north and west of Thailand, was off-limits. Since 1997, however, the Burmese authorities have given permission to a handful of dive boats to enter these largely virgin diving waters. So, if you fancy experiencing truly world-class diving on untouched reefs, read on .....

Departing Easter 2002, MY Genesis 1 offers the ultimate in luxury liveaboard accommodation and our 10 day dive safari takes in some of the finest diving that Thailand has to offer. Dive sites include:

**Similian Islands**—These 9 small islands have a reputation as one of the world's top ten dive destinations, largely because they offer a great variety of marine life. Aside from coral walls and deep dives with huge sea fans, barrel sponges and big fish, the bottom topography is also fantastic. Large granite boulders lie jumbled together, providing interesting swim-throughs, canyons, archways and caves. From February to May, when the nutrient rich water causes planktonic blooms, manta rays and whale sharks are common.

**Richelieu Rock**—A massive rock pinnacle that is know worldwide as **THE WHALE SHARK MAGNET**. The plankton concentration here is often so high that the amount and variety of fish and coral is bigger here than anywhere else on Thailand's west coast.

**Burma Banks**—A collection of elevated shelves dropping sharply away to depths of 300m. The tops of the banks rise to within 15m of the surface. Reef fish are plentiful but the real thrill of diving here is watching out for whatever might emerge from the deep blue. Oceanic visitors are common with all kinds of sharks, including hammerheads and whitetips.

Sounds appealing ... well hurry, there are just 2 places left ... £250.00 secures your spot.

**Taking It Easy**



It's a strange thing, but you can almost hear the collective groan that any boat-full of divers will give at the sight of an approaching underwater photographer. It's as if they think the camera-wallah is going to somehow put a crimp in their day, slow them down or faff about and generally get in the way.

I say it's strange, because no one can deny that recreational scuba diving is an equipment intensive sport. And let me say right now that I'm not talking here about those gadget-freaks amongst us who absolutely have to have the latest gizmo and then take everything into the water at once - usually after boring the bejeesus out of everyone within spitting distance. Anyone who goes scuba diving, be it abroad or in British waters, has to have a modicum of equipment and a fair-to-middling idea of how it all works; but they certainly don't have to leap over the side like last year's Christmas tree, trailing all sorts of wonderful devices in their wake. All they have to realize is that their enjoyment of the dive will be enhanced by using whatever gear they have in the appropriate manner.

Well, I am here to tell you that it is (or should be, anyway) exactly the same for the underwater photographer. There's no earthly point in paying for the latest camera system, complete with bells and whistles, if you either don't need it or don't have a clue about how to use it. Like everything else in life, **SIZE** is not as important as **TECHNIQUE** - and believe you me, I am now just about old enough to be thankful for the fact...

You can hire a perfectly good underwater camera and strobe (see Ray or Lesley for details and availability), and with a couple of days' tuition and practise you can bring back memories of your dives that are not only unique but also immensely satisfying: "I took that shot when we went to the Red Sea!", or "That's my buddy So-and-So", or "You can really see the marine growth on the stern of the wreck in this one", etc., etc.

And don't let anyone fool you into thinking that it's as difficult as some folk make it look! There are really only two types of photographers: those who just want to come back up with a picture to record what they saw, and those who want to take photographs that pay due heed to the laws of proper focus, exposure and composition. You can hire basic 'point and shoot' cameras which do almost all the hard work for you, or you can go to the other extreme and carry a piece of kit which allows you full creative control over all aspects of the creation of a decent shot.

Like scuba diving itself, it's entirely up to you, - most people just want to get under the surface

with as little hassle as possible, while others want to extend their skills and knowledge towards the more technical side of things. Personally, I've always tried to keep away from too much hard work and strenuous effort – but that's just me, a naturally lazy git and a dive bum to boot.

On that happy note, then, let me introduce you, to a purpose-built underwater camera that keeps photography fun, which is what it's supposed to be, after all. (Why do so many people feel it has to be hard work?!) It's made by Sea & Sea, and comes in their distinctive solar yellow casing, and it's called the MX-10. It's what I would call an entry-level camera, ideal for anyone starting out on the underwater photography road, while nonetheless more than capable of taking excellent pictures and photographs.

And now, a quick apology – I'm going to have to use the dreaded F-word. If the Golden Rule of this game is to **KEEP THE WATER ON THE OUTSIDE OF THE CAMERA**, then the MX-10 has to be one of the easiest cameras on the market today to maintain in a dry and working condition. There's only one bit that requires opening – you've got to put the film in, haven't you? – and once that is safely done, you shouldn't have to worry overmuch about **flooding** (– there, I've used it). There's also a dedicated strobe light that comes with it and fixes directly to the camera body with a clever little clip and which incorporates its own infrared signalling system. The beauty of this is that you don't therefore have to have a trailing sync lead between strobe and camera – another area often prone to **floods** (I just don't care, do I?).

So, there you are, on the bottom, camera in hand; what could be easier? Well, here's where we're in danger of straying into the minefield of Technique, and that's too big and varied an area to encompass in one short article. What we can say, with some confidence, is that the MX-10 provides you with every facility you might need to take decent pictures – and it can be used on land as well, so that any unused film can be run off in the bar that night (it even has its own integral little flash). One camera, good for above and below the waterline: I like things that are that versatile, and which mean that I have less to stuff into my kitbag.

It's a rugged and reliable camera, and is practically foolproof (steady on, Pat – have you seen some of our divers in action?!! Ed.) **if used properly**. (That's better). It automatically winds and rewinds the film, has a fixed shutter so that you don't have to worry about adjusting shutter speed, and has a built-in metering system for accurate exposure control. It does virtually everything for you except press the button and make dinner, and if anyone knows what my cooking's like, then they'll more than appreciate that fact.

Now, there's one other, very important facility which the MX-10 has and which many much more expensive machines don't; you can change the lenses on this Sea & Sea camera underwater. Just think of that for a minute. You're all set up to take a photo of your buddy when you see a pod of dolphins appear behind him, and they want to play. As quick as a flash, you whip out your 20mm, Wide Conversion lens and stick it on the front of your camera's fixed 32mm lens, instantly allowing it to 'see' a greater area and focus on bigger subjects more closely. Or, once the dolphins have gone, perhaps you notice a pretty piece of red coral that's just begging to be photographed. Off comes the Wide Conversion lens, and on goes the Close-up kit which even incorporates a pair of framing arms to make sure that what you want to shoot is in focus and correctly-positioned. (Adventure Divers have both these attachments, and I would highly

recommend them to anyone thinking of hiring an MX-10 for a weekend or longer).

And now, just for the sake of badness, take a quick squint at the photographs on these pages. The porthole shot shows my buddy exploring the Stanegarth at Stoney Cove: this is a wide angle shot. The others are close-ups, and taken in the Red Sea. They all work for me because they satisfy the demands I made of both subject and camera equipment, but please don't run away with the idea that every shot you take underwater will be exactly what you had in mind when you pressed the shutter release! There's still that old bugbear 'Technique' to be taken into account, which is why it's a mistake to think that any diver with a camera must automatically be taking roll after roll of magazine-quality photographs. Like a lot of things in life, the key to underwater photography is practise, and I can tell you from experience that the more you try, the luckier you will get.

**Words and Pictures by Pat Morrissey**