

southeast experiences



with Ken Hoppen

With a week and a half's notice I was fortunate to be asked to accompany a tour group to the Philippines. Normally when I go on a trip I am fairly organised in my ideas of where I am going, what I am likely to see, and with a real idea of the photos that I would at least like to get. With a few days away between the go-ahead and the trip, I wasn't sure exactly what lay ahead. Any worries were quickly unfounded, the trip was brilliant.

Flying Philippines Airlines to Manila was the first step, and we were whisked quickly away to the nearby Traders Hotel where we were treated to a high standard of service for the night. The first taste of the Philippines came on a short walk around the nearby streets to stretch the legs, before turning in to prepare for the early start in the morning.

After a fifty minute flight south-west of Manila took us to the island of Busuanga, we were ushered into a van and on our way overland to Coron Town. The end of this half hour trip saw us onto the banca boat and another forty minutes later onto Sangat Island, and its amazing diving resort.

Sangat Island is located in a strait between Busuanga Island on the north-east, and Culion Island to the south-east, the strait being dotted with numerous small islands. In September of 1944, a fleet of Japanese supply ships had moved into the area, fleeing from carrier-based allied aircraft bombarding the main fleet in Luzon to the north-east. The planes followed though, leaving many of these ships here as testimony to the harshness of a war that filled the globe.

The silver lining to these dark days is that the wrecks that are left are a haven for marine life, and of course divers. If you are into wrecks, this is the place!

Our first dive was on the Olympia Maru. I could honestly have spent the entire trip here on this wreck. It is 160m long and 5800 tons, sitting

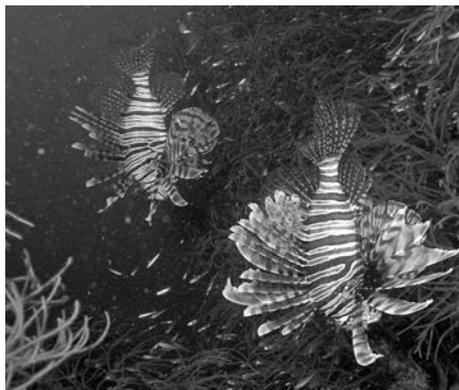
The Philippines Part 1 Sangat Island Resort



The accommodation at Sangat Island Resort is idyllic, with a beautiful beach only metres away, monkeys and tropical birds wandering past, and wreck diving a few minutes from your door.

upright on the sand in 27m of water. Visibility on these wrecks is normally between eight and fifteen metres, but due to the time of the year and the massive rains that had been sweeping the Philippines, we were greeted with about six. The water was warm though, 29°C can't be bad after being used to the 'slightly' chillier waters of southern Australia. This wreck is massive and mainly intact, and upon gaining the deck you begin to get an idea of the size of this sunken behemoth. It is covered in life; sponges, corals, anemones and tunicates abound. The fish life here is prolific. Small-scale scorpionfish abound on the wreck, as do lionfish. Several species of anemonefish can be found, and fusiliers and anthias hover over the wreck, occasionally harried by one of the local trevally. The holds give easy access to the interior, and the wreck can be swum through easily. Unfortunately in one dive it is not possible to see the entire wreck, several dives would be necessary to gain the overall perspective of this amazing ship.

It's not on its own though; there are nine major wrecks to choose from, and a couple of smaller ones. From seaplane tenders, to tankers, to cargo ships, to gunships. From just under the



Two common lionfish hang vertically on the hull of the Olympia Maru, waiting for a meal to swim into the correct position. Many large lionfish live on this wreck.

surface to about 45m, these wrecks will blow you away.

Life at the Sangat Island Resort is as close to perfect as you can expect from a deserted tropical island. The accommodation is brilliant, huts close to the beachfront, on stilts, with their own toilet and shower. A central dining area brings guests together, and there is a bar area with its own pool table to amuse you during the evenings. Monkeys can be seen and heard swinging in the trees (in fact you must keep your doors shut when you are not



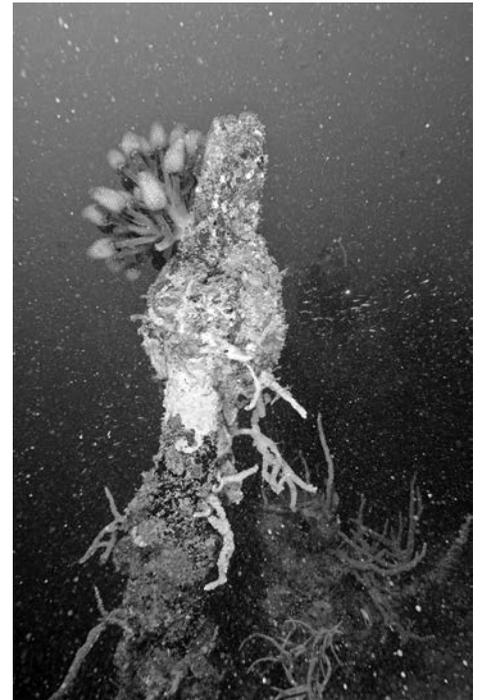
Bunca's are great to dive on, and typically Philippine in flavour! This was shot on the surface interval between dives.



Butterflyfish, anthias and angelfish add splashes of colour to the reef.

in your rooms), and there is ample birdlife to be seen, including the rare Palawan Hornbill. For those of you with honeymoon aspirations, or even second or third honeymooners, there is a separate apartment on its own secluded beach, with the most amazing rock shower, fantastic views, and privacy.

Diving from Sangat is easy, with the majority of the wrecks being a short boat ride from the dock, ten minutes at most. Dives are done from the beautifully Philippine banca boats, or more modern dive tenders. There is a third option too. The resort has its own small live-aboard dive vessel. For two to four divers, this vessel comes with a captain, a cook and a dive guide, and is no more expensive than going on the larger live-aboards that you find around the Pacific. Lots more private though, and you can select your own itinerary



The Olympia Maru is the equal of any wreck dive I have seen.

that can encompass wrecks and dive sites way off the normal beaten track.

Any diver that has enjoyed wrecks such as The President Coolidge in Vanuatu, been to Chuuk Lagoon, or enjoys the ships Graveyard in Victoria should look seriously about a trip to Sangat. Those that like critters are not excluded here. These wrecks abound with colour and life.

The Philippines surprised me in many ways. I was impressed with the ease of travel between locations, the fun-loving and friendly manner of the locals, and the diversity between the locations that I visited. There are many places to see in this huge archipelago, and hopefully I will get a chance to return in the not-too-distant future.

Sangat Island Resort

www.sangat.com.ph

T: +63 919 205 10 98

Allways Dive Expeditions

168 High St, Ashburton, Vic, 3147

Toll Free: 1800 338 239

www.allwaysdive.com.au

Thanks also to Philippine Airlines.

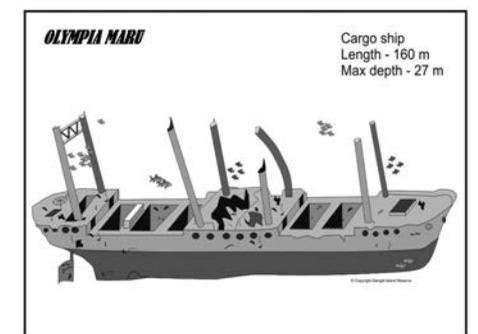


Illustration courtesy of Sangat Island Resort.