

GOING DUTCH

FOR FRANK VAN DER LINDE, THE DIVE SHOWS MUST BE LIKE LIVING IN A GOLDFISH BOWL. PEOPLE HOVER, WAITING THEIR TURN TO SPEAK WITH HIM. SOME HAVE A QUESTION, JUST AN EXCUSE FOR THEM TO GUSH ABOUT THE GREAT TIME THEY'VE HAD DIVING FROM HIS FLEET, AND HOW THEY'VE JUST BOOKED TO GO AGAIN. THEY SHOULD REALLY TALK TO GLEN AND KAREN, WHO'VE DONE SIX TRIPS ON HIS SOUTH EAST ASIAN ROUTES AND HAVE SIGNED UP FOR A SEVENTH. WITH FREE NITROX AND FREE BEER, IT'S A HEADY MIX AND I CAN'T WAIT.

Having spent a week rediscovering my skills with Asia Divers in Puerto Galera, the banca outrigger deposited me at Anilao early. Chris the cruise director met me, one of those people you feel you've known forever, not just for five minutes. Over the next hour the rest of our party arrived. Three Sammarinese plus Paulo made up 'Team Italy', we had Swiss, Dutch and Germans too, plus Mik, a friendly Yorkshireman with killer sideburns.

The standard of service is off the scale. It starts when I look for my bags before boarding the tender to take us to the waiting *Philippine Siren*, 40 metres long, ironwood and teak, sleek and white against the blue. Everyone's kit has already been transferred onboard. It's a little disconcerting at first; if it's not chained to you, and you're going to require it – fins for example – then someone has put them by the dinghy deck five minutes before you even consider doing it. I decide to just let go and trust the crew.

The first afternoon brings a briefing of what-is-where. As the owner is Dutch, there's recycling facilities aboard, including a can crusher to minimise space in the appropriate receptacle. Even the ring pulls of soda cans are collected to be reconstituted as wheelchairs. There's also a preview of our underwater safari before we settle into superb cabins and prep our equipment on the spacious, orderly dive deck. Everyone gets a drawer for small items, there's large bins for the cameras, and Chris points out how much time we'd spend rinsing our wetsuits after 40-odd dives – there's a crew member to do that for you.

After sunset we meet the crew and instant cult hero Chef Jimmy produces dish after

dish from his tiny galley, presenting the first of many meals with gusto and aplomb. He's increasingly cheered to the rafters as we strike an immediate rapport with the man who will ensure we won't go hungry.

Everyone retires early, but I'm drawn to the front of the boat where Jimmy – minus his chef's hat and apron – has stuck a plastic bottle onto a broom handle as an improvised 'microphone' and is singing along with the rest of the crew with the Chief Engineer on guitar. They've just been bought a new song book and are practising under a full moon. Jimmy's in a wig and leopard skin pants.

The bell tinkles a little too early; the first dive isn't very appealing when your cabin is so snug. A cat's lick in the ensuite and I head aft for tea, toast and briefing. Chris makes an often-forgotten valid point about diving etiquette; photographers don't have first crack at the critters simply because they have a camera. There are divers who see the presence of twin strobes as ruining a dive before it's even started, and underwater photographers, passionate about their black art, sometimes lack the self awareness to fully appreciate this. The nature is there for everyone equally, though you suspect on this trip there'll be so much to see there's no need to queue.

We form three groups and the crew helps us into the shuttle tenders for the sprint to Secret Bay. At first it seems nondescript; a few deserted bancas line the shore a stone's throw away as we roll in to the bottom at six metres, sloping down to around 20m. The sand looks like dirty demerara sugar, with just a few isolated anemones. But the seabed is packed with critter action around eight to 12 metres. I've never muck dived before but am won over instantly by the curios



Barracuda Lake, Coron
Critters smother the Lusong gunboat
Halimeda ghost pipefish star at Anilao
Frog fish

H E SAWYER © 2012

THE PHILIPPINE SIREN

on show. I discover a facet of the sport that many people rave about. I didn't appreciate the buzz until I tried it myself.

We zigzag back and forth and life just seems to appear. There's a frogfish. There's another right behind, the pair 'walking' along the bottom in slo-mo like pensioners racing to the shops. Lionfish, sure. But brilliant blue behind their spines? Filipino guide Philip uses his nudibranch pointer to highlight a clump of emerald algae. There appears to be a five centimetre long piece detached,

frogfish, flamboyant cuttlefish, which I swear have arrived from another planet; , and an all too brief encounter with a dazzling mantis shrimp posing on the open sand, before it senses the impending arrival of 'Team Italy' and scurries away under a rock. If you've watched *Crustacean Wars* on YouTube, you'll know these critters don't retreat, but on this occasion common sense prevails.

As night falls I kit up for the fourth and final dive of the day. Most are sitting this out in preparation for dinner, but no one's

'feels' around outside their 'Des Res', a broken upturned rice bowl. A small clownfish flits in and out of a tin can home, the still attached lid providing a secure door. At least some of the rubbish we carelessly chuck in the sea is much appreciated, although I decide to snag a plastic bag in mid water which is unlikely to benefit any lifeform here. Philip guides us to seemingly invisible stargazers, who spring to life under the shifting sand, their huge topside bucket mouths gulping mechanically for any passing morsel. It is worth drawing attention to the cabin

After three days of fascination in Anilao, we travel overnight, the ship gently rolling and creaking. We moor up in bright sunshine to start three days diving on Apo reef. The underwater landscape is beautiful. There's 30 metres plus of clear blue to marvel the panorama. Decorated dropoffs adorned by Technicolor reef fish unfurling like oriental banners to the depths, and the cruising sharks around the 25m mark. Here currents will satisfy adrenaline junkies and those who enjoy big fish and shoaling action, but there's always one dinghy on station at all times

lapping the hull, taking in the assembled aquarium cast, each circuit seeing something we missed last time around, including two blondes, and a pair of purple seadragon, which Chris says is a form of nudibranch. These 'worms' grow to a certain size, then photosynthesise.

For hardened wreckies Coron is still worthwhile, but you might consider extending your stay in the Philippines to include Subic Bay, where not only can you enjoy the mega armoury of the scuttled WWI destroyer, the USS New



hanging motionless. Then I see it has an eye and a bristly snout. The creature and I stare at each other for a long time. As a wreck diver I can tell you the best two dozen rust buckets round the world within recreational limits, but I'm acutely aware I'm now looking at a species that until this moment I never knew existed...

"What was the little green floating thingy?! How cool was that?!" An unseen hand unzips my wetsuit, drinks appears magically, my tank and kit is whisked back to its station – there goes my camera into the soak bin... "Halimeda ghostpipefish", replies Chris, who turns out to be an enthusiastic self taught marine biologist in his spare time. My wetsuit is taken the second I get myself out of it. Showered and changed, I hit the reference books in the salon to gen up on *Solenostomus halimeda* before Jimmy stuffs us full of breakfast.

The day's other dives take us to healthy shallow reef packed with morays, painted

eating until we get back, so it seems a good chance to have a look at life down there after lights out. And 'Team Italy' are bound to ensure there's plenty of action. Besides, the dive brief shows a discarded tyre lying in the mud at six metres, and that constitutes a wreck in my book.

Night diving is still a thrilling experience, even in such shallow water, and whilst Secret Bay affords unlimited dive time, there's a dinner bell pending, so we have an hour. But what a 60 minutes it is. Please, please, please, just leave me behind. Pick me up in a fortnight. Chris tells me later the site is nothing in daylight, but under the Filipino stars everything comes out to play. The bottom is silty with patches of seagrass, so particles float in the torch beams stirred by inevitable fin cycles, but the bottom crawls with puffers and porcupines – one a perfect steampunk golf ball. Another first for me. A small coconut octopus, a patterned hem of neon blue and black rolls past, scouring the seabed, another

notes for guests – we're reminded that most aquatic critters are completely defenceless against divers, so though it's wonderful to see stargazers in action, to fully appreciate their camouflage and ambush feeding habits, stimulating their behaviour should be done just the once.

As we're about to end the dive, we come upon something quite capable of taking care of itself. The head protruding from the bottom looks like a moray, just not quite as comical. Mean eyes, sharp teeth, suddenly there's an explosion of muck and the serpentine 'thing', well over a metre long, torpedoes through the light beams towards me. "Woah!" I take evasive action and we call it a night on 59 breathtaking minutes from the first to the last. Back on deck I want to know what in blue blazes that was? Philip grins: "Crocodile snake eel." We gather for dinner; I'm still wondering why some wag of a marine biologist would add a crocodile prefix to something that already sounded terrifying.

until everyone's recovered, a practice applauded by experienced divers Angela and Eric, neither of whom are a day over forty. We leave Apo in style under the cobalt blue sails, spending a leisurely Sunday afternoon serenely lording the sea. Pure unadulterated class.

Coron brings the chance to re-stock the bar with Bacardi, signals for our mobiles, and something completely different – the sunken Japanese merchant fleet, casualties of the US dawn air raids of 24 September 1944. If you don't like wrecks, don't worry. Because of the salvage carried out post-war, the focus of dives here is on the marine life that inhabits these artificial reefs, rather than the actual steel they adorn, although you'll still get to see the bulldozer thrown in the hold of the atmospheric *Kyogo Maru*.

The wrecks we explore lie within 30 metres, with the Lusong Gunboat resting in just 10m totally smothered in hard and soft coral, which allows a gentle dive

York, but can take in the waterside museum curated by Brian Homan, which features many artefacts he recovered from the wrecks at Coron during the 1980s.

There's still treats in store for us, with a twilight dive on the Twin Peaks site for the elusive mandarin fish hidden away inside the areas of broken coral around eight metres, and a live-forever moment on the last morning with the inland Barracuda Lake.

It's an absolute dream of a dive, but it's a nightmare to describe, because I'd never do it justice. So if you ever get the chance, do this, trust me. The dinghy drops us at the foot of a limestone mountain, where we climb up the wooden stairs, our equipment portaged ahead for us. We pass through the cavity in the stone teeth and descend into Tolkien-world. Barracuda Lake is technically a karst – that's a limestone sinkhole to you and me – the walls run sheer towards jagged battlements piercing the sky,



Octopus patrols the seabed at The Lighthouse, Anilao

Crocodile fish inhabit the wrecks
Coral adorns the wrecks of Coron

Diving the wrecks
Bulldozer inside the hold of the Kyogo Maru
Flamboyant cuttlefish
Team Italy A-OK



Dive briefing; Philippine Siren under full sail

foliage clings on, and for the first time since I stepped aboard the *Philippine Siren* I can hear birds.

The lake is mirror flat, gin-clear visibility from the convenient stage where we suit up, our anticipation echoes round the natural crown. Descending to the centre of the lake we pass through a visible thermocline around 10m from the fresh water into the blue middle layer, which is considerably warmer, saline, and the best part of 40 degrees. My feet are simmering nicely by 18m, but my head is

now boil-in-the-bag as I start to cook in my 3mm wetsuit. I signal to Mik, sensibly attired in tee shirt and board shorts, that it's too warm for me, and he heads off to find Team Italy who are probably looking in vain for the lake's namesake at 40m. I return to the cooler clear water and hang alone, gazing up at the surrounding cliffs, the small gobies and catfish suspended in the sky, my thin stream of bubbles merging with the clouds. I take pictures inside this perfect goldfish bowl, then let the camera hang, aware of the futility of trying to capture the magic of

the experience. It's my last dive of the trip, but it's been brilliant from the moment I leafed through the brochure and smelled the luxury and quality seeping from the pages. Worldwide Dive & Sail have delivered. And then some.

H E Sawyer was a guest of Worldwide Dive & Sail.

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