

Extract from Diving Southeast Asia (Periplus Action Guides) Moalboal & Pescador

A Small but Superb Site Away from the Crowds

One of the original dive centers of the Philippines, Moalboal owes its popularity almost entirely to scuba diving. A few steps off the beach from the main resort area of Panagsama lies a reef which is home to a wide variety of marine life. The ubiquitous fan corals and gorgonians are, of course, very much in evidence, as are sponges and crinoids, nudibranchs and several different species of shells. There are sweetlips, tangs, gobies and lionfish all over the dive site. A little careful exploring will usually reveal some interesting shell life too.

Tongo Point, at the south end of the beach, is covered with little cracks and caves, home to soft corals and many tropical reef fish. Anemones and clownfish, nudibranchs and a host of other invertebrates make this a popular photographer's dive. Visibility can be changeable, depending on the weather. A great dive for novices and a popular second dive.

An underwater "island" named Sunken Island lies about a 45-minute banca boat ride away. Really an underwater mountain, Sunken Island is reached after descending through blue water for 27 meters before reaching the peak. There is often a strong current here too, so this really is not a dive for amateurs but for those who are up to it.

Sunken Island is an outstanding experience. Large pelagics cruise by all the time; we saw several king barracudas, a lone tuna, two manta rays and a whitetip shark as well as groupers, snappers and a huge shoal of Talakitok, or jackfish, on one 25-minute dive last year.

Pescador Island

But the jewel in the crown of Moalboal's diving is tiny Pescador Island. About 2 km offshore, Pescador has been described as "a different dive every

five meters." It is quite possible to circle the island on a shallow dive. Utterly superb drop-offs, buttresses and impressive overhangs are the main features of this site, with a shallow reef running around the island. Between 22 and 25 meters is a large, funnel-shaped structure of about 15 meters, called the Cathedral. When the sunlight hits it in just the right position, the corals and sponges are dappled with beams of light, making it a beautiful sight.

Lionfish, snappers, groupers, scorpionfish and sweetlips are found at every depth, and on deeper dives whitetip sharks and hammerhead sharks are not uncommon, especially between the months of November and April. Less frequently, tiger and thresher sharks put in an appearance. The gorgonians are perhaps less profuse than one might imagine, but there is a lot of black coral around, as well as sea fans, sponges of all types and nudibranchs. Divers often see Spanish dancers wriggling their way sensually around the reef.

Pescador takes on a totally different perspective after dark and it is a favorite local night dive.

Nearby, Badian Island is another spot worth visiting, though the marine life is neither as prolific or as exciting as Pescador and Sunken Island. However, whitetip sharks are quite common, and you may well see a banded sea snake or two, together with the inevitable anemones and sponges.

The communication revolution hasn't quite reached this sleepy little hamlet yet, so it's best to arrive and plan your dive outings when you get there. Whatever you may end up doing, rest assured that Moalboal is sure to satisfy even the most jaded diver, and has the advantage of excellent off-the-beach diving of a quality which few other dive areas in the Philippines can match.

-- Heneage Mitchell