

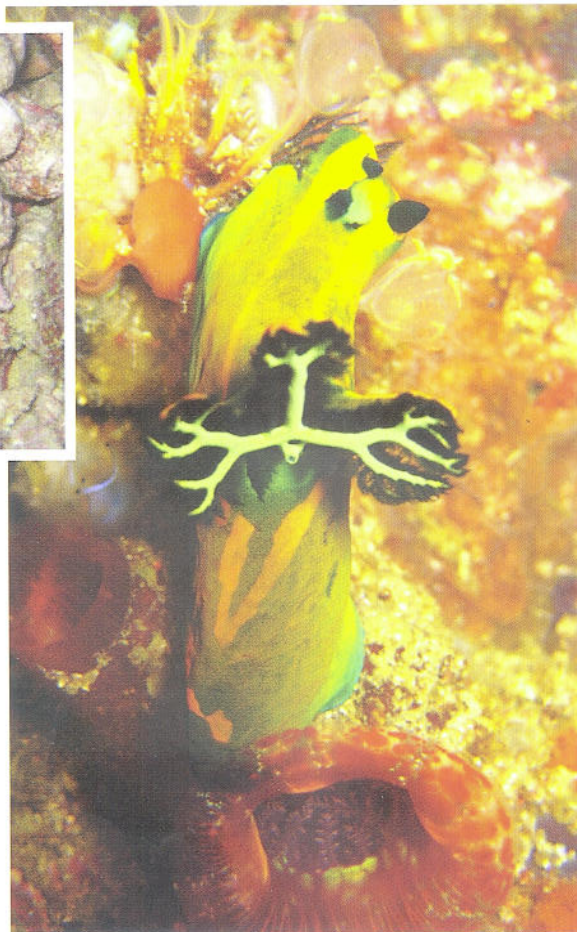
SHAPE Sub Aqua Scuba Diving Club: The Philippines

By Colleen Thompson, NAUI Master Diver (USA-Civ)

When is enough, enough? As far as I'm concerned.....never.

I've experienced diving in Thailand, Turkey, Mozambique, the Maldives twice, and the Red Sea five times; not to mention many practice sessions in the SHAPE pool and too many bleak quarries. I've also experienced NEMO33, the deepest indoor swimming pool in the world located right here in Belgium!

I've lived aboard a lot of boats. On a Chinese Junk, I experienced it in full sail with the sun setting behind me. On a Turkish Gulet, I heard the distinct sound of the adhan echoing off the walls of the mountains. On a not-so-modern boat, the



pump went out and we were without water for several days. (Of course, if this is the worst experience I can come up with, I am very fortunate.)

I've seen amazing things under the water. I've come within hand's reach of a 10-meter whale shark, been surrounded by a pod of playful dolphins, been circled by manta rays with wingspans larger than most rooms, and witnessed the eerily vulnerable feeling of being in the blue with a school of hammerhead sharks. I've stumbled upon a huge jellyfish, vigorously (and foolishly) pet a moray eel, and woken a surprised leopard shark. I've even been genuinely scared by a well-placed cement shark.



Diving has benefited me in other ways, as well. Once, three years ago, I won an all-expense paid vacation for two to Cancun by submitting to a newspaper a picture of myself 18 meters underwater at the wreck of the Yolanda, sitting on a toilet commode, and reading a newspaper. And while in Cancun, what did I do? Went diving, of course! I dove in cenotes (underwater caves) and marveled at the massive underwater stalactites, stalagmites, and immense rock formations.

All-in-all, since I started diving in August 2006, I've amassed 218 dives, spent 158 hours and 33 minutes underwater, met culturally diverse people, eaten culturally diverse food (fish head soup, anyone?), and experienced new sights – both on land and underwater. You would think this would be enough worldly experience and scuba diving, but how can it possibly be enough when there are so many new places to go, new sights to see, and new people to meet? How can I stop going to the Red Sea just because I've been there many times before when every time I go I see new and different marine life? These were my thoughts when I was first in the queue to sign up for

a dive trip to Malapascua Island in the Philippines. Enough was not enough and I had to see what new experiences awaited me. I was not disappointed! Let me do my best to paint a visual picture and try to explain why enough is still not enough!

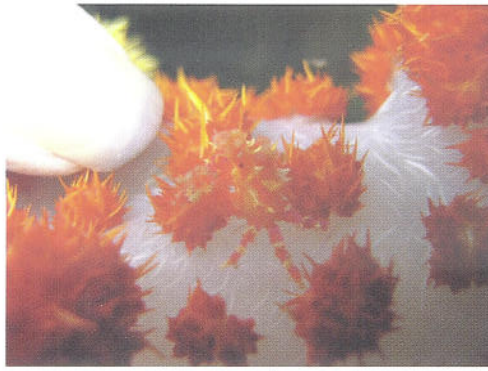
I could describe the tiny (2km by 0.5km) island of Malapascua, one of 7,000+ islands in this archipelagic country located in Southeast Asia. It is situated on the northern coast of Cebu, where, over time, volcanic eruptions have created a rocky and rough landscape that provides underwater areas holding an exquisite, yet delicate, habitat of countless varieties of coral, spectacularly-colored tropical fish, seahorses, nudibranches, and the pièce de résistance, the Thresher Sharks.

I could emphasize how this trip was organized by the SHAPE Sub Aqua Club and consisted of 20 SSAC members and nationalities represented were American (6), French (3), German (3), UK (3), Spanish (2), Canadian (1), Czech Republic (1), and Turkish (1). Diving experience and skill ranged from instructor to newly qualified open water divers.

I could go on-and-on about the plethora and diversity of the Nudibranches, which added a fun "scavenger hunt" element to our dives as we scoured the reefs trying to outdo each other by locating the most colorful, biggest, smallest, and weirdest looking of these slugs.

I could point out how important perspective is when photos show a Pigmy Seahorse clear as day; however, in the water it was smaller than the eraser head of a pencil and excellently camouflaged. Our group clustered the human-sized coral Sea Fan

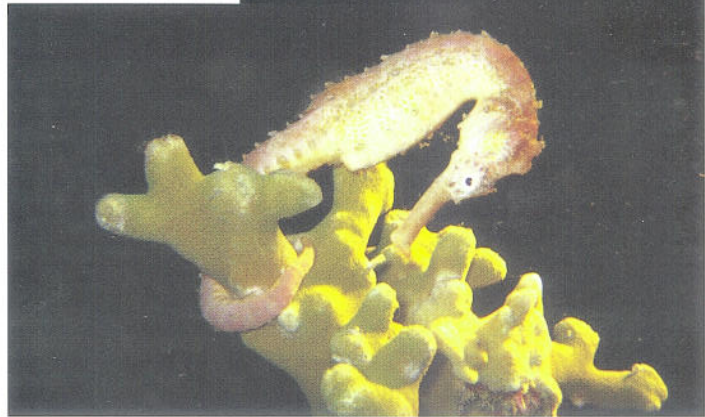
happily scouring and jostling for position in a "dog-pile" (American expression for a rambunctious and playful pile of people, such as you might see at a rugby match).



Imagine the first person to find such a miniscule specimen hiding on a coral the size of a person!

I could tell you about the night dive I spent in complete stillness on the ocean floor staring at a piece of bleak coral, intently watching one male Mandarin fish dart about many female Mandarin fish in his attempt to find the most willing mate. The two of them locked together, spiraled up towards the surface, and exploded in a puff of gametes before they returned separately to the coral to start over their unique mating ritual.

I could paint a picture of the postcard-perfect island we had a beach barbecue on, followed by a very appropriate siesta under a



palm tree, and the oh-so-relaxing beach massages under the moonlight, and the local dish of sizzling chicken, which if served at a local restaurant would warrant the response of the fire team with sirens blaring and horns honking.

I could mention the almost-clockwork evening downpours, the odd-sounding geckos, the lazy cats which seemed to be assigned to each of our bungalows, the fresh mango smoothies and fresh pineapple juices, and even the spa foot treatment of the nibble fish.

I could do all this (which I basically did), but instead, I want to save room for photos of my magnificent, once-in-a-lifetime (or, for me, it has come to be one-in-a-lifetime-at-least-once-a-year), outstanding, color-filled trip to Malapascua Island in the Philippines. Is enough, enough yet? NO! I'm already anxiously awaiting announcement of the next trip; I'm ready for new sights, new experiences, and new adventure!

SSAC has over 60 members and offers SCUBA courses at reduced cost to the SHAPE community. For more pictures of this and other trips, or for more information on the SHAPE Sub Aqua Club, visit their website at www.SHAPESUBAQUA.com or email them at shapesubaquaa@yahoo.com.

