

SHAPE Sub Aqua Club: On the hunt for sea slugs!

By Colleen Thompson (USA-Civ)

Like a kid in a candy store, like a child in a sweetshop, surrounded by many tempting sights, it was difficult to decide which one to look at first. I darted here – a tiny, vibrant blue-rimmed one with opaque purple tentacles. I darted there - a pair of purple ones with their yellow plumes and orange tentacles swaying in the current. With so many extraordinary colors and so many varied and striking forms, I was overwhelmed with the choices. I was in a state of utter fascination. I was in Anilao, Philippines, with 19 other members of SHAPE Sub Aqua Club (SSAC) on the hunt for sea slugs

Sea slugs?! Really?! Who would travel all the way to the Philippines to see slimy, icky, sea slugs? To those who have never been scuba diving, the idea of looking at a small and helpless slug-like, bottom-dweller might seem like a boring prospect. However for scuba divers, the picture is much different. These little, riotously-colored creatures bejewel the ocean floor, catching the eye like glinting diamonds in the rough. Nudibranchs (pronounced “noody-brank”) might seem so small and helpless and, well, icky. Yet, a closer look reveals quite the opposite.

Taking the expression, “you are what you eat” to the literal level, when a Nudibranch eats a poisonous sea sponge or mouthful of sea anemone stingers, instead of getting sick or dying, the Nudibranch safely stores these poisons in its own body. Then if another animal tries to eat the Nudibranch, that animal will get a mouthful of sponge poison or anemone stingers. Displaying bold tones



△Life is very good.

and bright colors warns predators that they taste bad or are poisonous. Boring? Icky? Not at all!

While there is always much excited chatter amongst divers about huge whale sharks and manta rays, the humble Nudibranch also has legions of fans who know that every now and again they may be lucky enough to find one that they have never seen before and may never see again. This breathtaking, astounding species, sporting some of the most fascinating shapes, intricate patterns and mesmerizing hues found on any critter floating in our blue planet, are what caused the candy shop frenzy and drew us to the Philippines. I was happy and excited to be diving in the area of the Philippines well-known as Nudibranch heaven.



△Bobtail Squid.

And, as if the candy shop was located next to a pet store filled with aquariums, our thrills were more than doubled by the array of macro (small) and muck (muddy) critters that abounded in the warm waters of the Batangas Bay, off the South China Sea. Every reef and juvenile fish imaginable seemed present in Anilao. Shrimp, crabs, small squids, and cuttlefish were more plentiful than almost anywhere else I've dove. Pipefish and seahorses were also fairly common. We saw frogfish on nearly every dive. Wonderpus, Blue-ringed, and Coconut octopus were also seen.

We dove four times a day, which is normal for a dive trip, but these four dives were different. Normally, the dives last for 50-60



△Coconut Octopus lodging in a can at the dump.

four dives were different.



△Pigmy Lionfish.



△Haribo-type Nudi looks yummy enough to snack on.

Underwater photos by Angelo Leone (CAN - Civ)



△Fingered Dragonet.

minute each. At Anilao, dive time is not limited and significant time can be spent in the shallows. Many of our dives were well over an hour long, with most dives lasting 70-80 minutes. My longest dive was 97 minutes. In total, I completed 19 dives and accumulated 23 hours 03 minutes underwater, but it seemed like mere minutes. On each dive there was so much to see. One dive in particular stands out. Our dive guide took us to dive the Anilao dump. This is where the town's people had dumped larger trash items into the ocean just off the town shore. We were skeptical, at best, but our guide had not led us astray so far, so we jumped in. Our



△Riotously - colored jewels of the ocean floor...



△Nudi covered with finger - like appendages used for eating, breathing, and defense.



△Not all Nudi are colorful and small.

first impression was that we had landed back in Belgium in the chalk quarry we often use for training. The topography was brown and murky. There was a scattering of tires and old appliances. Not looking forward to a long, boring dive, we half-heartedly and with dragging fins, followed our guide. As our diving-eyes adjusted to the lack of color, we started spotting amazing things; a Pigmy Lionfish with brilliant blue fins, a Sea Moth with powder-blue fins, two Fingered Dragonets, vibrant sea urchins milling about. Our dive guide was showing us so much in rapid-fire succession that we were having trouble keeping up. A Decorator Crab well camouflaged by sea moss took our guide several attempts to get us to see it.

On the surface and back at the rustic resort, we excitedly recounted our day's finds; comparing checklists and identifying

newly discovered (to us at least) marine life. We celebrated Kitty Plompen's diving milestone of 200 dives with a cake aptly labeled (proverbially tongue-in-cheek), "200 dives and still alive." Over beautifully prepared Filipino dishes of freshly caught fish, pork sweetened in pineapple sauce (hamonado), meat in tomato sauce stew (kaldereta), juicy ripe mango, and sweet shaved ice milk with coconut (halo-halo), we detailed our feats of the day, feeling quite like, you guessed it, excitedly exhausted, sticky-handed, and bellyaching, kids in a candy shop.

SSAC is a SHAPE Group II activity and has over 70 members.

NAUI training and certification is offered to the SHAPE community at reduced cost by volunteer instructors. For more information, visit www.shapesubaqua.com.



△Kitty shares her 200th dive cake.