

DIVE NEWS & EVENTS DIVE SITES

Trevally, Barracuda, Tuna and Sharks. Diving the Rock at Cauayan, Philippines

CALIFORNIA DIVER – MARCH 28, 2020



The dive team descends

The Sulu Sea in the Philippines is home to one of the most pristine marine reserves in the world: The Tubbataha Reefs Marine Preserve. Here, for a few select weeks a year during its short season of access, divers can find reefs bursting with colorful corals and teeming with myriad marine creatures. Precipitous walls are adorned with large sea fans, massive barrel sponges and dazzling soft corals. Prowling these deeper waters are ocean going giants: Trevally, Barracuda, Tuna and Sharks. And roaming the drop-offs are the largest fishes of all, the giant Whale Sharks.

Words & photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver

Tubbataha, and all of the Sulu Sea, sits in the middle of the Coral Triangle, a stretch of ocean that is considered the center of marine biodiversity in the world. Bordered to the west by Palawan, to the east by Mindanao and to the south by the nations of Malaysia and Indonesia, the Sulu Sea is a veritable wonderland of ocean life.

As divers, we enjoy the thrill of discovery and the excitement of exploration. After a weeks' worth of magnificent diving in the Tubbataha Marine Preserve, we left aboard our liveaboard home, the *Discovery Adventure*, for Apo Reef and, eventually, Puerto Galera. Along the way, we stopped at a little known and rarely explored rock jutting up from the sea floor, known locally as Cauayan and prepared to dive.



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Cauayan is a rock begging to be explored underwater

Cauayan has been explored underwater by only about 100 or so divers according to the dive leaders aboard the **Discovery Adventure**. It lies far off the beaten path and not very close to any established diving services. Our explorer juices began to flow!

We suited up aboard the liveaboard and then transferred in teams to small zodiacs for the quick run over to the island. The sun was shining and we began to sweat in the tropical heat of the Philippines. As we approached the stark piece of rock we could see the sea birds swirling above and could hear the rush of water as the surge crashed into the rocky island walls.

Having discussed the possibility of dangerous currents, including down currents and swirling whirlpools, we back-rolled into the clear water with our senses on alert. Quickly, we made our way to the rocky walls of the main island and began a descent along a beautifully colored coral wall.

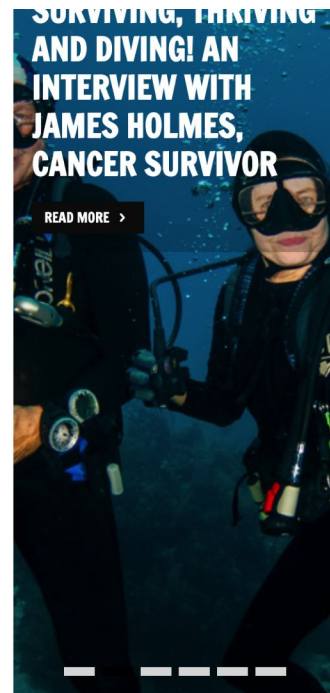


Soft Corals abound in these waters

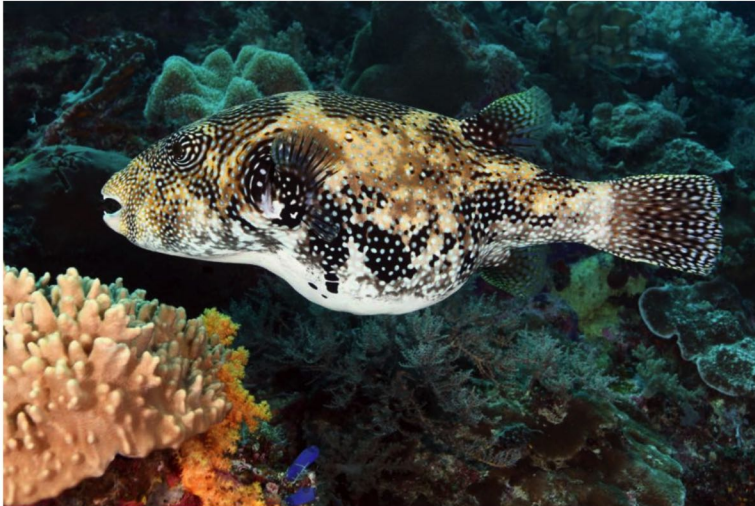
Hard and soft corals were competing for space here. We were instantly delighted to find anemones and their resident anemone fish tucked alongside large boulders. A small school of Sweetlips hung motionless near a cleaning station, the neon blue cleaner wrasse scouring the bodies of these bulky fish, while butterflyfish flitted amongst the coral nearby.

As we swam further down, we encountered geologic formations and rocky swim-throughs, which delighted the photographers in us. As we looked back up the wall towards the surface, clouds of brilliantly colored Anthias swarmed over the corals in an exhilarating display of marine fecundity.

On the bottom, we swam over bright blue starfish, large sea cucumbers and an



occasional pufferfish keeping a wary eye on these unexpected visitors to their ocean home.



A Map Pufferfish

The rocky substrate of the small island seemed to provide an ideal base for the reefs to build. Using our macro photography setups, the small denizens of these reefs came into sharper focus. Nudibranchs, tiny gobies, blennies and even whip coral shrimps all became the latest stars of our photographic library.

Towards the end of the dive, a small crevice in the side of the island's base came into view. As we approached, it became evident that a torrent of water was streaming out from untold depths deep in the rocks. More interesting than the velocity of the water was the temperature: our gauges recorded 73 degrees and dropping while the surrounding water was in the high 80s!

Before long, it was time to surface. Our time at Cauayan was far too short and our boat was itching to move northward towards Apo Reef. But we still had a safety stop to do, and Cauayan wasn't quite done with us yet. Suddenly, as we slowly rose to 15 feet of water, we found ourselves unable to move forward toward the dive leader. And we were unable to rise any further either...we were caught in a swirling, shifting, confusing current that was deceptively powerful. We tried to swim out of it but that was difficult. We struggled to stay at 15 feet, and that was difficult. And, interestingly, the rest of the dive team, who were no more than 20 feet away, were having no trouble at all! Clearly, we were in a small eddy, and it took all of our strength to break free of it and swim a mere 20 feet to calm water!



Author Christopher Weaver emerges from a rocky swim through

We left Cauayan behind later that morning as the **Discovery Adventure** began a 15-hour run to Apo Reef. With the island receding into the distance we reflected on this tin

patch of ocean paradise and were grateful that it chose to reveal a few of its secrets to us as we briefly visited on the way to Apo Reef and beyond.

The expedition to Tubbataha, with the stop at Cauayan, was organized and chartered by the **Marco Vincent Dive Resort** in Puerto Galera. We thank them for their spirit of adventure and exploration which helped shape the very special itinerary of this trip.

Words & photos by Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver



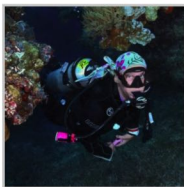
Coral formations mimic pieces of art



A Green Sea Turtle seeks respite under an overhang



A Many-Spotted Sweetlips being attended to by a Cleaner Wrasse



Exploring the reefs



Author Michael Salvarezza photographs the coral



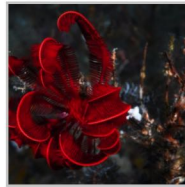
Healthy stands of hard corals



Barrel sponges dominate the reefs



A Map Pufferfish



Black Feather Stars are so named because they appear black underwater



Cauayan boasts dramatic dropoffs



Soft Corals abound in these waters



Author Michael Salvarezza explores the Cauayan reefs



The dive team descends

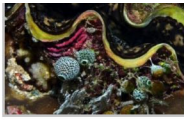


Cauayan is a rock begging to be explored underwater

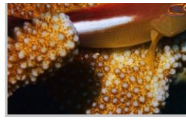


Staghorn corals at Cauayan





A Tridachna Clam



Arc-High Hawkfish
make for great photo
subjects



Author Christopher
Weaver emerges from a
rocky swim through



Dramatic drop-offs
make for great wall
dives



Clouds of Anthias



An aptly named Blue
Sea Star



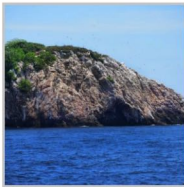
A Beautiful Feather Star



Schools of Striped
Barracuda patrol the
reefs



Neighboring islands are
sparsely populated



The rocky island of
Cauayan



The dive team departs
for the dive at Cauayan



Cauayan is home only to
birds above the water