

Underwater Adventures with Eco-Photo Explorers

## Completing the Circle: A Dive Safari Around the Philippines' Mindoro Island

December 7, 2017 | Article and photos by Eco-Photo Explorers Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver

"What was that?"

Moments earlier, we had been quietly preparing our cameras for the next day's dives in our respective hotel rooms when suddenly the beds began shaking dramatically, with the headboards banging against the walls and the curtains on the windows swaying eerily in dark. Either we were heading a scene from the movie "The Exorcist"... or we were having an earthquake!

Now, as we stood on the hotel balcony at the Marco Vincent Dive Resort in Puerto Galera, Philippines looking out over the pool and watching the water sloshing back and forth, we understood what life is like here on this part of the Pacific "Ring of Fire".

The Philippines, often referred to as being part of the "Coral Triangle", the center of marine biodiversity for the world's oceans, also are part of a major area of seismic activity. In a 25,000-mile arc stretching from New Zealand north through Indonesia and the Philippines and up to Russia, and Alaska and back down along the California coast to the southern tip of South America, a series of the Earth's tectonic plates interact, creating a region populated with 75% of the world's active and dormant volcanoes, and home to nearly 90% of the world's earthquakes.

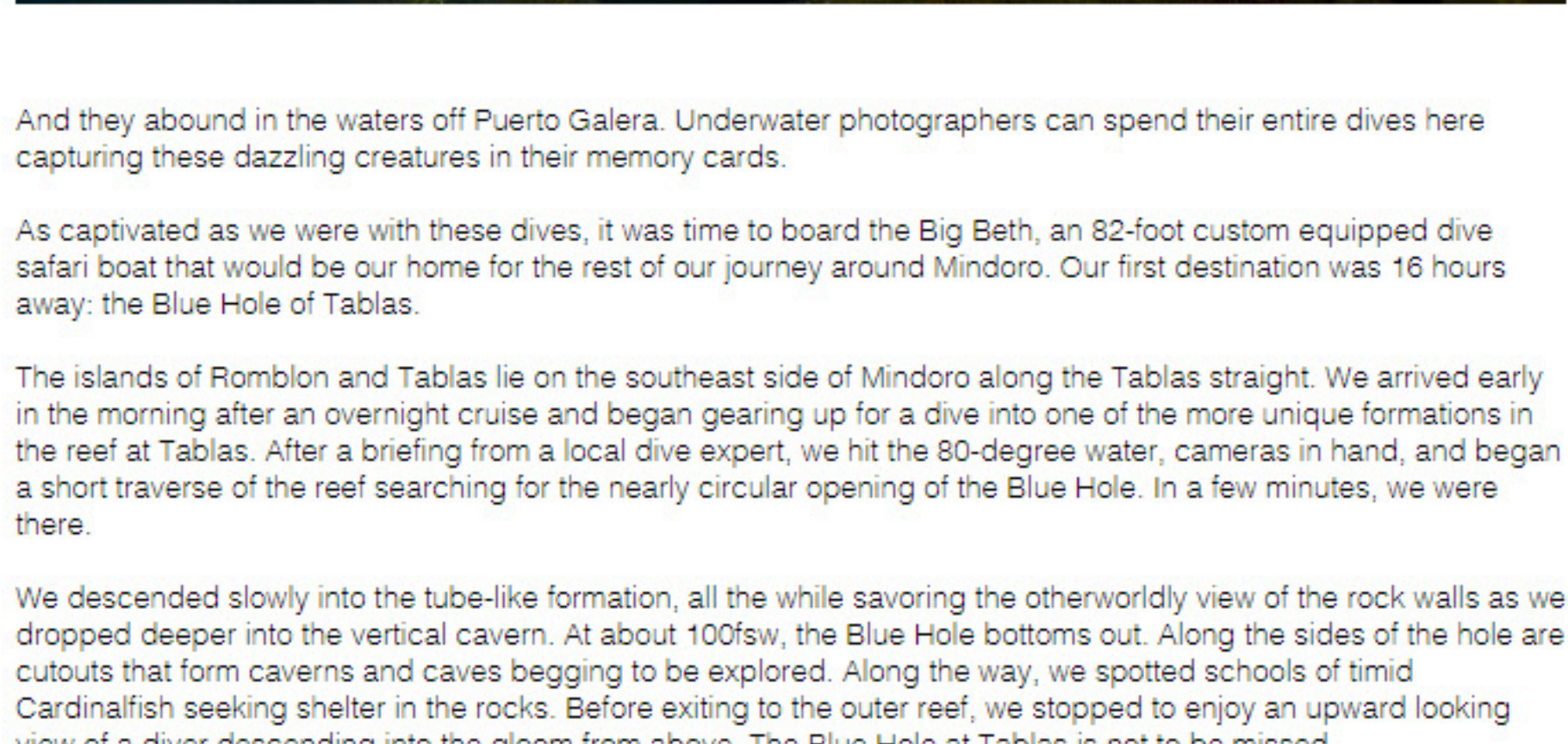
A 5.4 magnitude earthquake like the one we experienced this night is a common occurrence here! Welcome to the Philippines.

Undeterred by the evening tremors, we began our dive safari the next morning. Our objective was to circumnavigate the large island of Mindoro, the 7th largest island in the Philippines, and explore its many diverse diving opportunities. Our first dives would take place right off the shores of Puerto Galera, where some of the best muck diving sites in the world.

All underwater photographers have "bucket lists" of marine creatures they seek to capture in images and we are no different. On our first dive at a location known simply as Secret Bay, we checked two items off our list: there, in the otherwise drab sandy bottom of the bay was a gorgeous but highly venomous Blue-Ringed Octopus, our first bucket list species and we spotted it half-way through our first dive! This little creature, about the size of a golf ball, can inflict a deadly dose of venom if it bites you. Beautiful, diminutive...and quite lethal is our little lady of the muck!

A short while later, we came across the second of our bucket list species: A type of Rhinopias known as a Weedy Scorpionfish. With filly appendages and a mottled coloration pattern, this odd-shaped bottom dweller is easy to miss as you swim along the bottom.

As macro photographers, we have fallen in love with Nudibranchs. These vibrantly colored sea-slugs creep and crawl along the bottom in full sight of predators, displaying their gaudy color schemes and waving their rhinophores in the current with nary a care in the world. They often stand out from the glum muck of the bottom with their brilliant colors, sometimes reminding us of the striking garment at the center of Andrew Lloyd Webber's famous musical, "Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat!"



And they abound in the waters off Puerto Galera. Underwater photographers can spend their entire dives here capturing these dazzling creatures in their memory cards.

As captivated as we were with these dives, it was time to board the Big Beth, an 82-foot custom equipped dive safari boat that would be our home for the rest of our journey around Mindoro. Our first destination was 16 hours away: the Blue Hole of Tablas.

The islands of Romblon and Tablas lie on the southeast side of Mindoro along the Tablas straight. We arrived early in the morning after an overnight cruise and began gearing up for a dive into one of the more unique formations in the reef at Tablas. After a briefing from a local dive expert, we hit the 90-degree water, cameras in hand, and began a short traverse of the reef searching for the nearly circular opening of the Blue Hole. In a few minutes, we were there.

We descended slowly into the tube-like formation, all the while savoring the otherworldly view of the rock walls as we dropped deeper into the vertical cavern. At about 100fsw, the Blue Hole bottoms out. Along the sides of the hole are cutouts that form caverns and caves begging to be explored. Along the way, we spotted schools of timid Cardinalfish seeking shelter in the rocks. Before exiting to the outer reef, we stopped to enjoy an upward looking view of a diver descending into the glow from above. The Blue Hole at Tablas is not to be missed.

Nearby to Tablas is the wreck of the Mactan Ferry. Sunk in July 1973 during a typhoon as she was en route to Manila from Nasipit, the ship now lies on her side between 60 and 145 fsw and can fairly be considered one of the most beautiful wreck dives in all of the Philippines. Covered in marine life and home to vibrant populations of fish and marine invertebrates, divers can marvel at the stunning resplendence of the wreck without ever penetrating the interior. Her forward holds and open superstructure do make for fascinating recreational dives, however, and tech divers who wish to penetrate the entire length of the ship can get their fill of adventure here as well.

The smaller Wreck lies near the island of Maestros de Campo, and located in the harbor here are two Japanese wrecks sunk by aerial bombs during the second World War. These two ships, one a cargo vessel and the second a smaller wooden vessel, lie perpendicular to each other in 90 fsw and make for excellent night dives.

On the southwest side of Mindoro off the coast of the island of Palawan is Coron Bay, home to a collection of dramatic World War II era shipwrecks. In between the battle of the Philippine Sea and the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the US Navy launched a strike force of fighters and bombers to attack a Japanese supply fleet of up to 24 ships that were at anchor in Coron Bay and around the nearby Busuanga Island on September 24, 1944. In a devastating aerial assault, the US Navy sent most of these ships to the bottom of Coron Bay. Today, many of these shipwrecks are accessible to SCUBA divers who wish to explore history and witness the tragedy of war first-hand.

Some of the prominent wreck dives of Coron Bay include the Olympia Maru, a Japanese Freighter that is now sitting upright in 98fsw, the Kogimo Maru in 112fsw, the Okikawa Maru lying in 85fsw and the Akitsushima Maru, a Japanese seaplane tender resting on her side in 118fsw.

Coron Bay holds great fascination for shipwreck historians and wreck divers. It can be a multi-day dive safari destination by itself for both recreational and technical divers. Marine life abundance but the real allure is the plethora of enticing penetration dives that can expose divers to the inner secrets of these once proud vessels.

Our dive safari continued to the north to the fabled Apo Reef.

Here, surrounding a tiny sand-spit island that is home to a ranger station, a mangrove swamp and a towering lighthouse, is a marine reserve where divers can find some of the most dramatic wall dives in the Philippines. Washed with amazingly clear water, healthy stands of soft corals bloom in the underwater breeze while fields of dense hard corals beckon divers to explore and search for marine life.

At South Corner, we descended quickly to 100fsw and drifted along a captivating vertical wall, photographing giant sea fans, gorgonia and soft corals all the while looking into the blue water for sharks, passing tuna and patrolling jacks.

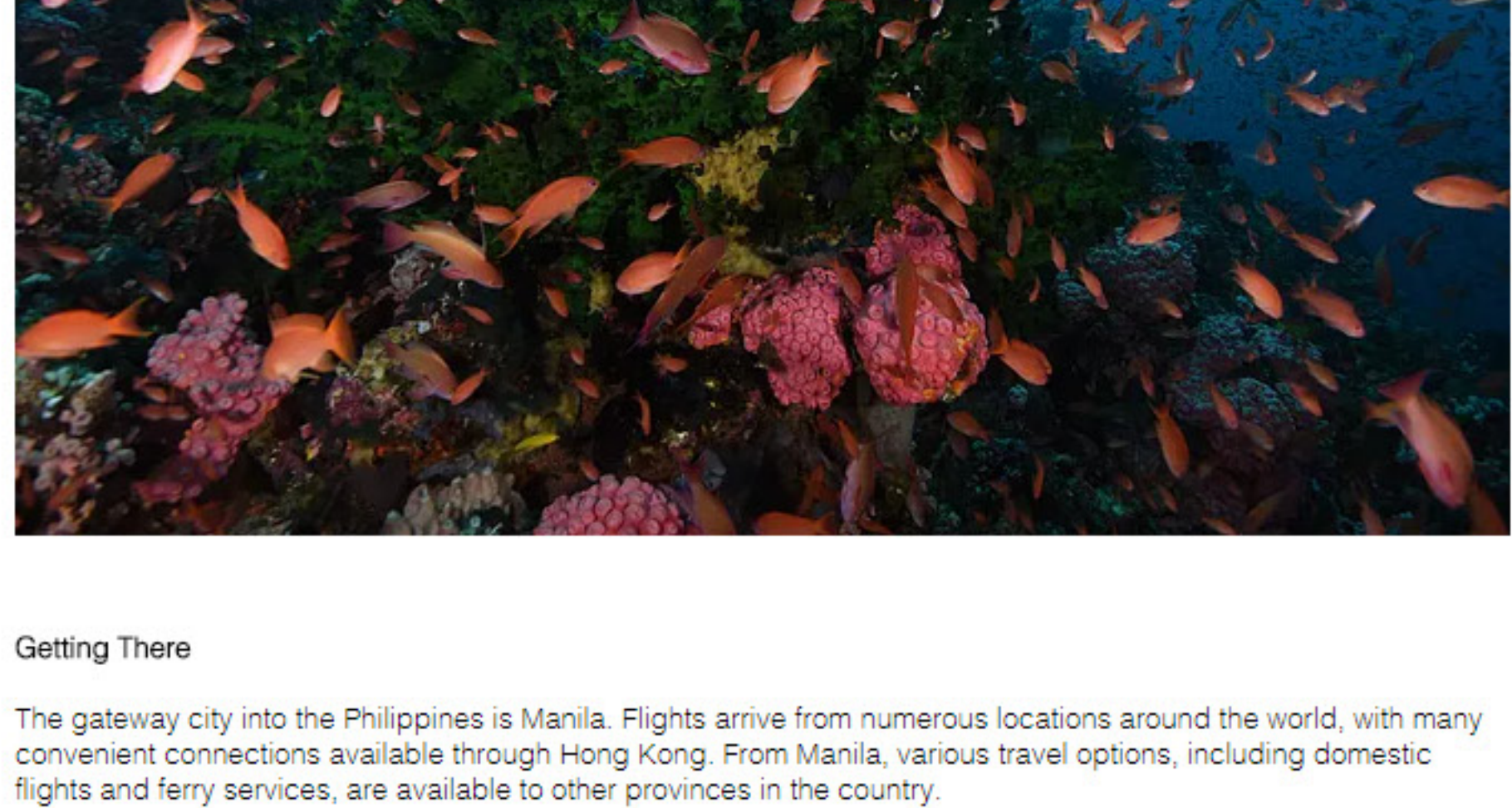
We stretched the limits of our nitrox mix at 105fsw at a site known as Apo 29, named because of its depth, and photographed schools of Barracuda and Trevally jacks.

The Shark Airport is famous for its resting Whitetip Reef Sharks. Named because of the stretches of white sand that line the various sections of the tumbling wall, the resting sharks resemble airplanes waiting to take off into the blue... which they do if you don't approach them slowly and carefully!

A complete circumnavigation dive safari of Mindoro Island would not be complete without a visit to Verde Island. Located about an hour by boat from the home base of Puerto Galera, Verde Island has been found to be a hotbed of marine biodiversity by marine biologists studying the region. Unbelievable varieties and quantities of marine organisms thrive in the swirling currents here. For example, divers can marvel at the clouds of anemones that obscure the views of the corals while searching for large pelagic fish or tiny macro subjects. The currents can be strong and swift here, so dives should be timed appropriately with tidal movements, but the rewards of diving Verde Island are plenty.

As we returned to Puerto Galera, we are reflecting on the wonderful experiences of our dive safari around Mindoro and we contemplated the changes that are taking place around the world. Everywhere on the planet, the climate is changing. The oceans, too, are warming. Rainfall is more acidic. Coral reefs are under siege and bleaching events are becoming more widespread and dramatic. Entire ecosystems are transforming as some species are dying off, some are relocating to cooler waters and other species are adapting to changing conditions and thriving.

Some of what we've come to cherish in our oceans will likely disappear and some of it will transform. Perhaps new and beautiful things will emerge from these changes. As the earthquakes of our first night on the safari remind us, things often move at a geological pace on the Earth. For now, the wonders of the underwater world surrounding the Philippines' Mindoro Island remind us of what is precious about our marine world...and what we stand to lose if we don't protect it.



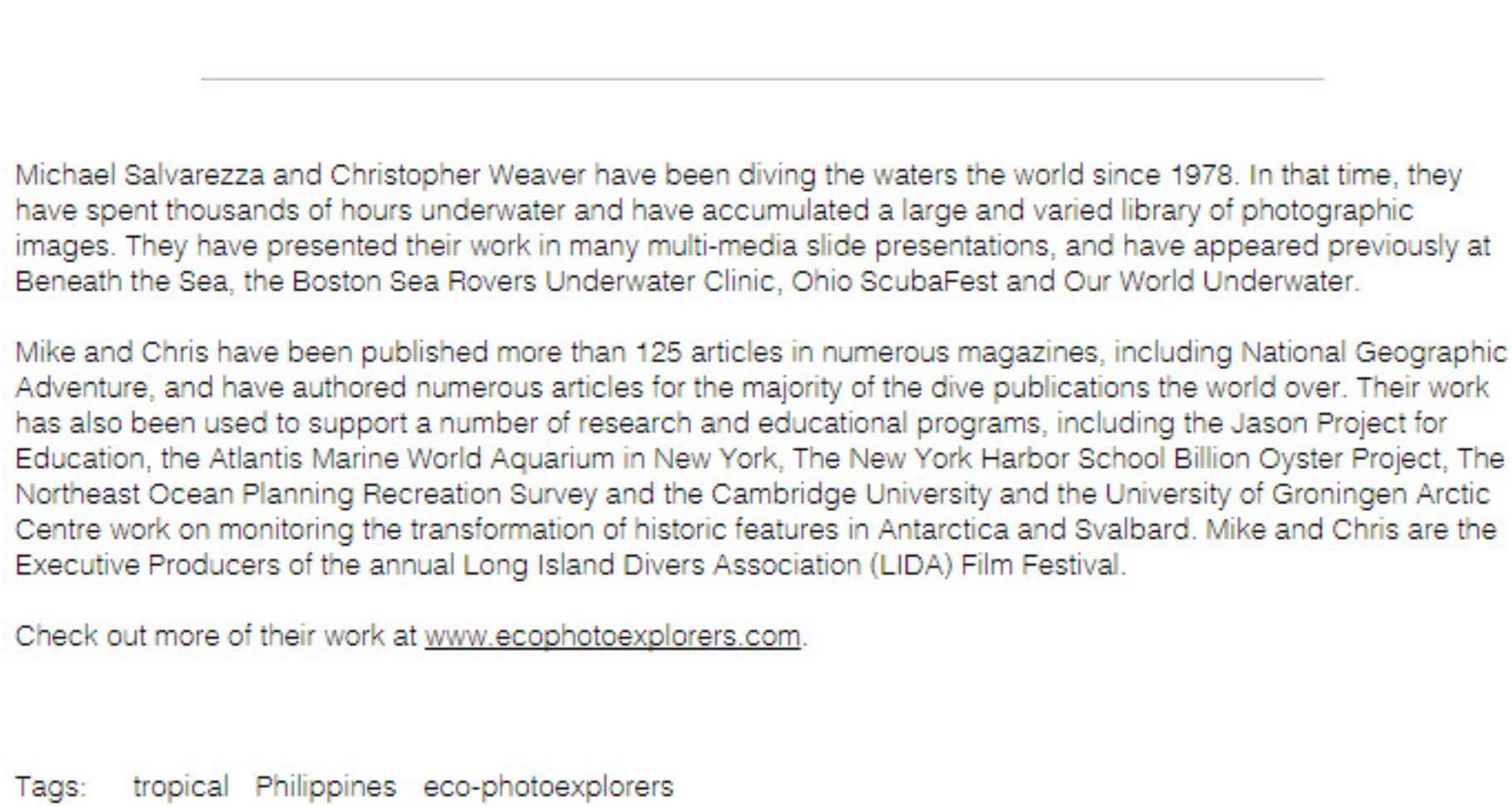
### Spotlight on Marco Vincent Dive Resort

Located on White Beach in Puerto Galera is the **Marco Vincent Dive Resort**. This Mediterranean inspired property boasts 38 tastefully furnished rooms that are the most spacious in the Puerto Galera Area. All rooms are equipped with cable television, LED TV, refrigerator, A/C system, hot/cold showers and WiFi internet connection. The resort features 3 restaurants (2 on-site and 1 beach front), an indoor pool and Jacuzzi as well as a full service dive shop located adjacent to the property.

Guests of Marco Vincent Dive Resort are taken care of the moment they arrive into the country. Representatives will personally meet guests at the airport, take them to the port at Batangas and arrange for ferry transport to Puerto Galera, which takes about 1-1/2 hours. Throughout their stay, a very cheerful, capable and helpful staff tends to the needs of resort guests.

Marco Vincent Divers currently features two dive boats: Lady Merici is a 40-foot single hull dive boat fully equipped to comfortably support the needs of divers. Big Beth is an impressive 82-foot custom equipped dive boat that can accommodate up to 23 divers on dives to Verde Island, Puerto Galera and remote locations such as Anilao. The dive center has a full complement of rental gear and offers a variety of PADI training options. It is complete with a swimming pool, classroom facilities, gear washing area, lockers and Nitrox capabilities.

Visitors to any area, including Puerto Galera, should take some time to experience more than just the sites under the water. The staff at Marco Vincent can arrange for zip line tours, treks to nearby volcanoes and waterfalls, and visits to World War II sites, including Corrigedor Island, home to a fascinating war memorial and museum.



### Getting There

The gateway city into the Philippines is Manila. Flights arrive from numerous locations around the world, with many convenient connections available through Hong Kong. From Manila, various travel options, including domestic flights and ferry services, are available to other provinces in the country.

For US visitors, a VISA is not required. If you are a citizen of another country, check the VISA requirements before planning your trip.

A valid passport is required for entry, and must be valid for 6 months after arrival.

### Immunizations and Medicine

As with any travel to tropical regions, make sure all your vaccinations are up to date! All travelers should visit their personal physician or a travel health clinic to discuss what vaccinations (e.g., Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Malaria, Typhoid, or Tetanus-diphtheria) and travel medicine are recommended. All medicine should be packed in their original, clearly labeled containers. Having a signed and dated letter from a physician describing your medical conditions and medications is suggested.

Note: Travel health clinics usually provide more detailed health protection services since they specialize in travel medicine. Beware of travelers' diarrhea, which is the most common travel-related ailment. Insect protection is a must and essential!

### Baggage

Baggage allowances vary for each international carrier so check before you leave.

### Weather

The Philippines has a tropical climate. There are basically two seasons: the wet season (May-October) and the dry season (November-April). April and May are the two warmest months, marked by high temperatures and humidity. During these months, temperatures can reach 90 degrees F or higher. In the cooler months of December and January, temperatures moderate with less humidity.

The Philippines is in the tropical cyclone belt, and typhoons threaten the region between July and October. Typhoon Yolanda struck the southern regions on November 8, 2013, with devastating results. The damage and effects were limited to the south, however, and Puerto Galera and Verde Island were not affected in any way.

### Currency

The local currency is the Filipino Peso but US Dollars are often accepted at all resorts.

### Electricity

Power voltage used in the Philippines is 220 Volts (50 Hz). Be sure to double-check your appliance's compatibility before plugging them in. Converters / adaptors are usually available upon request at your hotel front desk. Travel Adapter: Round Pin Universal Plug.

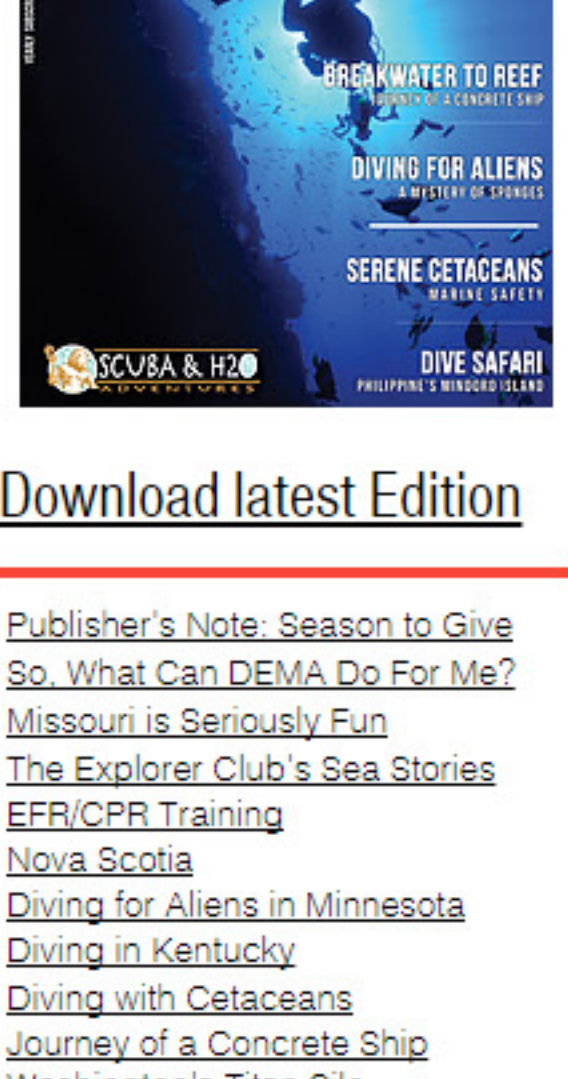
Michael Salvarezza and Christopher Weaver have been diving the waters of the world since 1978. In that time, they have spent thousands of hours underwater and have accumulated a large and varied library of photographic images. They have presented their work in many multimedia slide presentations, and have appeared previously at Beneath the Sea, the Boston Sea Rovers Underwater Clinic, Ohio ScubaFest and Our World Underwater.

Mike and Chris have been published more than 125 articles in numerous magazines, including National Geographic Adventure, and have authored numerous articles for the majority of the dive industry's top world over. Their work has also been used to support a number of research and educational programs, including the Jason Project for Education, the Atlantis Marine World Aquarium in New York, The New York Harbor School Billion Oyster Project, The Northeast Ocean Planning Recreation Survey and the Cambridge University and the University of Groningen Arctic Centre work on monitoring the transportation of historic features in Antarctica and Svalbard. Mike and Chris are the Executive Producers of the annual Long Island Divers Association (LIDA) Film Festival.

Check out more of their work at [www.ecophotoexplorers.com](http://www.ecophotoexplorers.com).

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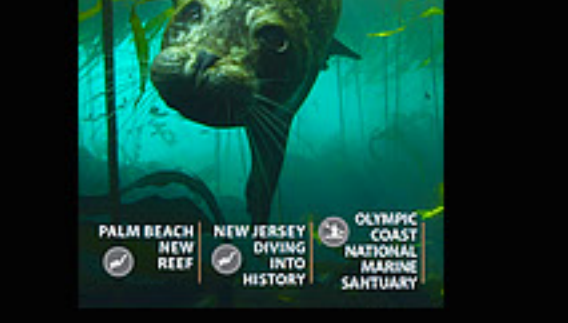
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