



# Cebu

Far from the chills of Moscow, Patrick Garrett recalls a dive resort in Cebu, an easy getaway for a few days from Hong Kong.

I guess I knew it would be a relaxed trip when the SARS quarantine medic at Cebu airport calmly recorded ear temperature as 31.7 degrees centigrade... perhaps such "well chilled" temperatures are the norm for holiday makers arriving in this easygoing part of the world but elsewhere most doctors would expect to find you unconscious!

Unable to secure a seat on the Manila flight that morning I'd been glad to be hand-carry-only as helpful ground staff agreed to switch me to Cebu instead - a flight already rather far into the boarding process. Rushing to the gate I'd banged in a call to Nora Ross at PADI dive operator Tropical Island Adventures she agreed to meet me off the flight, ready the boat, and do her best to book me a room on a certain island, somewhere off Cebu, that I'd chanced on back in '97 and always meant to get back.

Tropical Island Adventures is however more than just a dive shop. As we set off Nora told me that many companies in Cebu make their living off the reef but she believes in also giving something back. She is a Co-Founder of the Coastal Dynamics Foundation - established in 2000 to help bridge an apparent gap between plans and physical actions to improve reef conservation. The Foundation builds on a wealth of practical, local experience and connections in the marine sciences, diving and resort industry to mobilize support and resources for reef conservation initiatives. They encourage establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), educate local communities on the economic benefits of reef conservation and MPAs, and provide technical assistance to assess

and monitor reefs under the Reef Check program ([www.reefcheck.org](http://www.reefcheck.org)).

On board the boat I was the lone passenger with a crew of four - a situation reminiscent of CX during the height of SARS... The water was smooth as glass and a rich blue. Flying fish - the first I'd ever seen - emerged from the water alongside and soared briefly above the surface apparently cushioned in their own ground effect like ekranoplanes.

We skirted the occasional rain shower and after about three hours the island I sought - Balicasaig - appeared on the horizon. I'd stopped there once on a snorkeling trip and the conditions had been perfect - clear, clear water and the most fantastic corals and coloured fish. I don't know why it had taken me nearly six years to get back - the simple plane-van-boat transfer from Hong Kong had made it all embarrassingly easy.

The tide was out this time and so rather gingerly I loaded my cameras onto a flat-bottomed plastic canoe to be paddled onto shore. I dumped the bags in a simple chalet - a decent double bed with aircon and a shower for around US\$20 - and headed for late lunch. Given the choice I'd have opted for the mackerel that the security guard was grilling out on the beach over a bed of palm-tree charcoal - but the tuna steak on the menu was also good and was followed by a succession of refreshing fresh fruit shakes. If you've got a particular seafood favourite you can apparently buy it straight from the fishermen in the morning and have it cooked to order.

The canoe returned to take me on a private snorkeling tour. The coral was stunning - so many different shapes

and colours - some resembling huge brains. I was happy to just float and watch the fish teeming below - a whole world down there of communities, prey and predators.

As dusk fell and a bank of clouds above and a range of hills below on the mainland shuttered the sunset, the boat crew offshore settled down for what they thought would be a peaceful night afloat. There were only three other guests on the island that night, and entertainment was strictly "bring your own". However nobody surely slept until well after midnight as the weather Gods opted for a spectacular thunder and lightning show.

Next day the hotel inquired what time I planned to check out, and rather used to the aggressive yield management of the big chains I inquired meekly if mid-day might be OK? "Actually, we don't care too much - take your time - enjoy yourself - 4pm or evening is OK with us!" they assured me in a most uncommercial way.

I was strongly tempted by another day on the island, but the lure of dinner at the fabulous Le Souffle up in Manila won out. En route back, and just offshore from Cebu airport, we spotted schools of dolphins jumping and playing. I'd have swum to get closer if it hadn't been for a blanket of jellyfish that might have perhaps explained why those dolphins were so active? We stopped for a full half hour to watch them - the local crew clearly just as fascinated by these beautiful creatures as I the tourist...

Tropical Island Adventures Dive Center  
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