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+ NOTHING PREPARES YOU FOR YOUR FIRST THRESHER SHARK EXPERIENCE. THAT LONG WHIP-LIKE TAIL, BIG EYE, SILVER SHEEN AND THEIR SLICK EFFORTLESS MOVEMENTS. INSPIRED BY SCOTTY TUASON'S EARLIER REPORTS ON THRESHERS IN SPORTDIVING MAGAZINE, I JOINED DUTCH, GERMAN AND SPANISH DIVERS CHASING THESE ELUSIVE CREATURES IN THE PHILIPPINES' VISAYA ISLANDS AND DISCOVERED SO MUCH MORE

**M**alapascua is believed to be the only place on the globe where divers can reliably experience thresher sharks at a spot named Monad Shoal – the top of a seamount where these sharks arrive at dawn to be cleaned by a collection of wrasses.

Threshers are usually very shy, and it's often in the last few minutes of a dive that they're seen. When they arrive, the trick is to breathe very slowly because divers' bubbles can spook them. But these threshers themselves are full of surprises, so you need to check behind and overhead as they sometimes break their own rules and pass right over the heads of divers.

Each morning at 6am the 24 metre long Exotic 3 scoots out to Monad Shoal to put divers in the water soon after first light. We settled on the seamount at about 23 metres and waited for the sharks to arrive at one of three cleaning stations. Mantas, mobula and

eagle rays visit these spots too. Early in my trip a pair of threshers arrived at a cleaning station and started circling about six metres in front of us, then passed behind and continued circling so my Nikon burned hot. On another dawn dive in seven metre vis we were buzzed by a three metre thresher that came within about three metres. It was a magnificent animal with a fat belly; it was either pregnant or had eaten an awful lot of fish the night before.

The threshers are an amazing adrenaline rush and Malapascua's biggest drawcard, but what impressed me just as much was the richness and biodiversity of the soft coral reefs! On a gentle tide at North Point you can drift over dense soft coral gardens filled with anemones, clownfish, commensal shrimps, harlequin shrimps, white cowries often



# MALAPASCUA MAGIC!

“**THRESHERS BEFORE  
BREAKFAST,  
SEAHORSES  
BEFORE LUNCH,  
WRECKS BEFORE  
DINNER...**”



seen on the pale soft corals, butterflyfish, lionfish, ringed pipefish and juvenile harlequin sweetlips. Exploring a ledge at 18 metres, the overhang was adorned in soft corals, thorny oysters, sponges and a large greyish frogfish, a well known resident here. There's also a black giant frogfish which dive instructors Tim and Zoe have seen 'walking' with its pectoral fins.

Gato Island is like something out of a Harry Potter movie – it's a short sharp rocky island rising from what seems like the middle of nowhere in the South China Sea 50 minutes by boat from Malapascua. Nesting seabirds scoot around the island and a colony of flying foxes camp in rainforest trees high on the cliff. Kingfishers flit in and out of the sea caves. Gato is constantly bathed in current, giving life to soft coral canyons and myraids of

rare and unusual nudibranchs – nowhere have I see so many bizarre nudis in all shapes and forms.

Nudibranch egg clusters were prolific, and there's pygmy seahorses at 25 metres. Whitetip reef sharks live in the caves and one cave leads right through the centre of the island. As you leave the light at one end it becomes dark and as you swim onward the blue light of the other side appears. The cave has several passageways and secret hidey holes, adorned in thousands of lovely daisy corals, thorny oysters and sponges.

There is a guard's house on the sheltered side of Gato with a sign 'Sea Snake and Marine Life Sanctuary'. There's plenty of seasnakes especially at the three to five metre depth where the juvenile snakes hang out. Some of my best sightings were a

large banded sea snake at 20 metres, a big coral moray and a flighty silver eel on the move. Gato Island is full of surprises and every dive had something new to offer, such as porcelain crabs and squadrons of squid.

The Tapilon, believed to be a Japanese shipwreck is 29 metres down off Tapilon Island, hence the name. Though in three or four segments, this is a rich and rewarding dive with lots of black coral trees, immense schools of small barracuda (great wide angle stuff) and about 10 very lonely remoras. For those looking for the elusive ghost pipefish, the Tapilon is said to be a prime site, with good sightings by Zoe and Tutong.

An absolute highlight was the colourful mandarin fish at the Lighthouse dive site. The trick is to arrive before dark and find a colony of mandarin fish, then wait and see

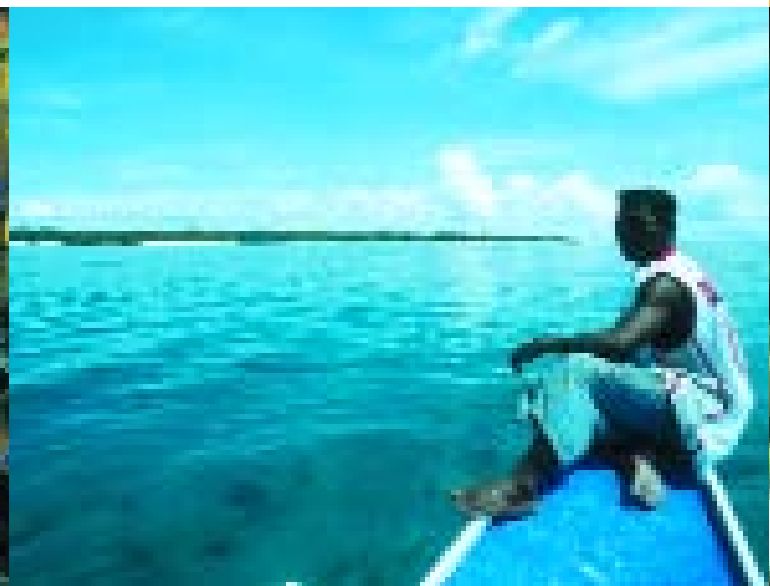
Thresher sharks belong to the mackerel shark family and are a pelagic species living in tropical and cold-temperate waters worldwide, growing to almost 25 feet in length. The heaviest shark recorded weighed over 750 lbs. Estimated to live 19 to 50 years of age, it also sometimes leaps from the ocean surface, as does the mako and great white. Threshers feed on mackerel and small tuna, by encircling schools and stunning them with whips, or thrashes, of their tail, hence the name thresher. Considered a game fish, especially in the USA and South Africa, threshers are often hooked in the tail when they try to stun live fish baits. Threshers are vulnerable to overfishing, and a drift net fishery developed in Southern California rapidly overfished local stocks. Now, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) classifies the Californian population as 'near threatened'.

what happens. As it starts to get dark the larger males begin chasing the females. The pair rise up off the coral for a few seconds before discharging their sperm and eggs into sea. It's a magical scene matched only by the amazing night phosphorescence in the ocean.

House Reef is an artificial reef created by Dik and the locals, including Edgar the boat captain. An exciting array of marine animals reside on all sorts of bits and pieces they placed on the sandy seafloor at 12 metres. It's fascinating to see how different critters are using different types of artificial reef structures. Sea urchins have colonised the roof and bonnets of the two jeepneys, squid are laying eggs in the suspended bunches of tree branches, large healthy sweetlips are hanging under the low bamboo structures, and an orange frogfish lurks on the spherical

wire structure. Three fat and healthy lionfish have taken over one of the jeepneys ~ they hang about as if they own it. The other jeepney has a big resident cuttlefish. On the sandy seafloor are razor fish, shrimp gobies, sole, sea biscuits (looks like a mouse) and on one of the large tube like structures I saw a stunning little juvenile lionfish.

Malapascua is one of the richest places for tropical marine life I've ever dived and the Exotic Dive Resort, one of the best and well organised, land based diving resorts. The local Filipina people are warm and welcoming; you can freely explore the island and visit local villages. At Gato Island and North Point, the soft coral gardens and critters need to be seen to be believed, and you'll see nudibranchs at Gato you may never see again. Oh, and then there's the thresher sharks of Monad Shoal – these alone make the entire trip worthwhile!



**ABOUT EXOTIC DIVE RESORT** Dutch National Dik de Boer and his Filipina wife Cora started the first dive resort on Malapascua Island in 1997. They first checked out this little island paradise north of Cebu in 1996 after reading about the island in a Lonely Planet travel guide. Dik still remembers seeing the first thresher sharks with his friend Mikael Person in 1997. Over the ensuing months and years, assisted by local fishermen, they also found two Japanese WW2 shipwrecks and a Manila-Cebu ferry that was already known as a beautiful wreck dive. Exotic was the first dive operation and nitrox station on Malapascua Island and has become a one-stop dive centre with accommodation, dive shop, dive safari boat, restaurant/bar/espresso, transfers, and internet service.

Their PADI dive centre provides a full range of dive training from junior open water to divemaster. The air and nitrox filling station operates three Bauer compressors and a 4000 litre air bank. There are four well maintained traditional Filipina outrigger dive boats or bangkas. The 24-metre Exotic 3 is one of the biggest and fastest outrigger dive boats in the Visayas. Ask about their three and four day diving safaris.

The first and last boats on any dive often encounter the threshers because excess divers can scare them away. The peak summer diving/holiday season at Malapascua isn't the best time to see the sharks – the winter months, despite some rain and cloud, is better. Exotic Dive Resort's experienced dive masters have hosted film crews and underwater photographers from all over the world. The resort has beach frontage plus garden; rooms vary from standard with fan/aircon to deluxe with aircon. Exotic's inhouse restaurant offers an a la carte menu with both local Filipina and international cuisine. Their banana, mango and pineapple shakes are a must!

**GETTING TO MALAPASCUA** Fly with Philippine Airlines from your city to Manilla, then on to Cebu. If you arrive late in the day you will need to overnight in Cebu. From there you will be picked up by the Exotic Dive Centre staff and transferred to Malapascua by mini bus and boat.

The transfer takes about 3.5 hours each way but is most enjoyable as you'll see a lot of street/village life along the way. Once you're there, it's feet in the sand, lots of diving and happy hours at Exotic's bar.

**WHAT TO TAKE** Lots of film or digital disk space plus batteries. Nicads can be charged overnight as Exotic maintains 24 hour power via three generators. Bottled water and softdrinks are

readily available.

**PRE TRIP** Although this area is said to be free of malaria, you should consult a doctor with knowledge of tropical diseases well before travelling.

**HOW TO BOOK** Contact Lorenza, Dik and Cora at the Malapascua Exotic Island Dive Resort  
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