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Napa

The Valley Of Wine and Romance

Hundred Islands • Korea's Ski Capital • Thresher Sharks • Avilon Zoo



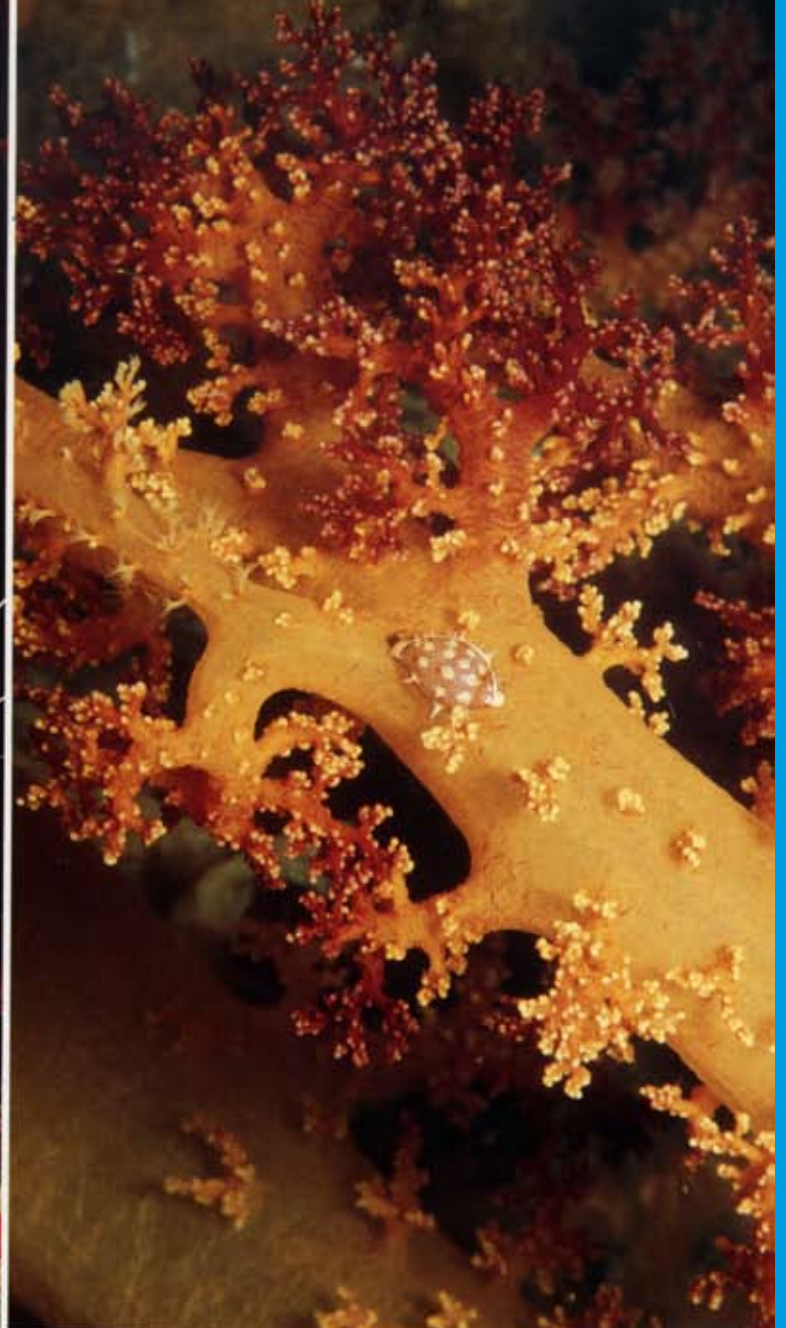
THRESHERS BEFORE BREAKFAST

Text and photos by TONY KARACSONYI



(Clockwise from top left): The nocturnal adult tip reef shark in Gato Island. *Nudibranchia* or sea slug's "holmfed" patterns serves as a camouflage. This sea slug is covered with sea squirts: ascidians (ball-shaped), tunicates (gel-like), and hydroids (fern-like). Clownfish can hide in an anemone without getting hurt because their coats are similar to that of an anemone.





(Left to right photo) Despite its beauty, the lionfish is a venomous fish that uses its large fins to help swallow their prey. Cowry shells grow up to only 15cm. Anthias are like celebrities because they are the most photographed fish.

It's the crack of dawn. I'm scuba diving with Toto, a Filipina dive guide, on the top of an underwater seamount named Monad Shoal, off Malapascua in the Visayas Islands. Toto

points to something ahead, but I cannot see it clearly as the water is dim and green. Suddenly, a huge shark is near – it has an enormous barrel belly, silver sheen and a long tail. It slows down, almost to a full stop, looks at us, flicks its tail and disappears in the waters. This encounter lasted for only 10 seconds but will remain with me forever. The shark is a big thresher, one of the mackerel shark family that leaps from the ocean, like the mako.

It is on this seamount, Monad Shoal, that thresher sharks arrive at dawn to be cleaned by dozens of wrasses. Malapascua is believed to be the only place in the globe where scuba divers can reliably see these rare and magnificent creatures.

Summer is the peak diving season in Malapascua, but the months of October to December are the best months to see these sharks. Thresher sharks can grow to 25 feet. They feed on mackerel and small tuna, by encircling schools and stunning them with whips, or thrashes, of their long tails.



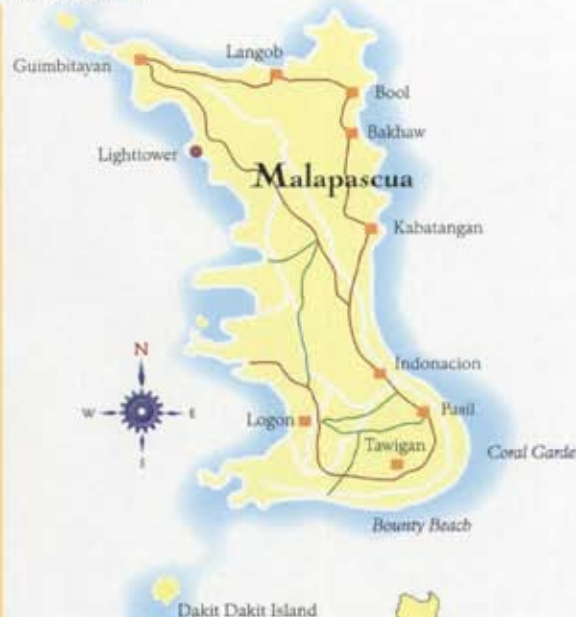
Each morning as early as six, the 24-metre long Filipino outrigger 'Exotic Three' scoots out to Monad Shoal, putting divers in the water after first light. Divers then settle on the seamount at 23-metres, near one of three cleaning stations and wait for the sharks to arrive.

The thresher is a very shy species. Unlike other sharks, they are not aggressive or dangerous. In fact, they seem to be very placid when they come to the feeding stations to be cleaned of parasites. It may well be a change in behavior too, but it's always best to be careful when diving with any kind of shark.

When the sharks arrive, one should breathe very slowly, as the bubbles can scare them. But despite their peaceful nature, threshers are full of surprises. Be sure to look behind you, and overhead – sometimes they pass right over your head. On another dive, two threshers arrived and circled in front of us. They passed by and kept on circling a few meters away.

The threshers are Malapascua's biggest draw card but what impressed me equally, was the richness of its soft coral reefs. Dik de Boer, a Dutch National, and his Filipina wife Cora, started the first dive resort on the island in 1997. Dik still remembers seeing the first thresher sharks with his friend, Mikael Person, in the same year. Over the years, with the help of local fishermen they also found two Japanese World War II shipwrecks and a Manila-Cebu ferry.

Lapus Lapus Island



■ DIVE GUIDE

Exotic offers diving accommodations, dive shops, restaurant, bar, espresso and dive safari boat. They operate four Filipino outrigger dive boats called bangka. Their PADI Dive Center, offers various dive courses for amateur and first-time divers.

■ WHAT TO TAKE

Your basic diving gear, camera, light clothing, sunscreen and malaria medication.

■ HOW TO BOOK

Contact Lorenza, Dik and Cora, at the Malapascua Exotic Island Dive Resort (tel. no. +6332 4370983; email: info@malapascua.net; www.malapascua.net).

■ GETTING THERE

From Cebu City, hail a cab to the north town of Maja in Daan Bantayan. You can also ride a bus for only 75 pesos (less than US\$2) or rent a vehicle for 1,800 pesos (US\$39) to 2,500 pesos (more than US\$54). Travel time takes two to three hours. From here, ride an outrigger banca (boat) to Malapascua. Travel time takes 40 minutes and costs 50 pesos (more than US\$1).



PAL flies from Manila to Cebu seven to eight times weekly. For more information, please call the PAL Reservations Office (+632 855 8888) or log on to www.philippineairlines.com



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Thresher shark (topmost photo) can be distinguished by their long tails. Anthias (top right) swim by the thousands. Nudibranchs (top left) feed on sponges and sometimes, even on fellow slugs.

At the famous North Point diving site, you can drift over soft coral gardens filled with anemones, clownfish, harlequin shrimps, butterfly fish, lionfish and harlequin sweetlips. Another amazing site is the Gato Island, a short sharp rocky island and a 50-minute boat ride from Malapascua. White-tip reef sharks live in the caves. One cave tunnels right through the island's center and as you swim further inside, you'll discover hidden passageways and hidey-holes, adorned in bright yellow daisy corals.

The island's highlight is the multi-colored mandarin fish at the Lighthouse dive site. The trick is to arrive before dark to find a colony of mandarin fish. As it starts to get dark you can see the larger males chasing the females. The pair rises off the coral for a few seconds before discharging their sperm and eggs into the sea. It's a magical scene, matched only by the phosphorescence in the ocean at night.

House Reef is an artificial reef created by Dik and the locals, including Edgar, my boat captain. It's fascinating to see how different critters use different kinds of artificial reef structures - sea urchins have colonized the roof and bonnets of the two jeeps, squid are laying eggs in the suspended tree branches, and three lionfish camp there.

With a combination of the exciting shark diving and the overwhelming beauty of its coral reefs, Malapascua remains as one of the favorites in any diver's tropical diving destination - if not the first in the list. ■