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Paradise Found: Puerto Galera, Philippines

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photos by Gunther Deichmann/Dream Time



My first trip to Puerto Galera was an accident. Plans to travel South America's Amazon region for the month of December got cancelled in mid-October, leaving me scrambling for somewhere else to go. I'm not the best at scouring books and articles to find destinations. Dive centers and resorts usually have someone standing around telling tales of distant dive travels so I just go and listen to their stories; if they strike my fancy, then I investigate. And so it was that I came to the Philippines.



From the moment I arrived, I felt quite safe and continue to do so this day. When other expatriates and I hear the bad publicity; we often wonder what country that media is talking about. The people here are friendly; and go out of their way to be helpful. English is one of the two official languages and spoken by the general public. Smiles are fast, warm and genuine. In fact, there is a strong belief that the bad publicity is disseminated elsewhere to distract people from problem in their own nations. The upside of it is that it is not over-developed here, not it is expensive to visit. Quite the contrary, travel to the Philippines is downright cheap.

When I first decided to go, my research told me there was a lot of variety for divers in the 7000 plus islands of the worlds second largest archipelago. The choice was overwhelming, so I came up with a plan to spend five days each in four locations, then go back to the one liked most for the last five days. Ah, the best laid plans of mine and men...

First stop, Puerto Galera. Just two hours by car home and one hour by banca (outrigger boat) and the hustle and bustle of Manila is a distant memory. Sabang, where the diving in Puerto Galera happens, is a village that grew up around diving. It is small, yet packs everything a diver needs. - Dive shops, good restaurants, and watering holes to watch the sunset from while discussing the day's diving – in to a beachfront community with no roads.

Let's get to the real subject: Diving, diving and more diving. Imagine lying in bed listening to the breeze whisper through palm trees with the water lapping the beach in background, then hearing a knock at your door, "Would you like to dive this morning?"

"When?"

"First dive is in 20 minutes."

"Okay I will have some coffee and where are we going?" (As if the location matters.)

There are close 30 dive sites within 10 minutes of the beach, offering up a variety that makes this a truly and world class dive location. The Verde Island Passage





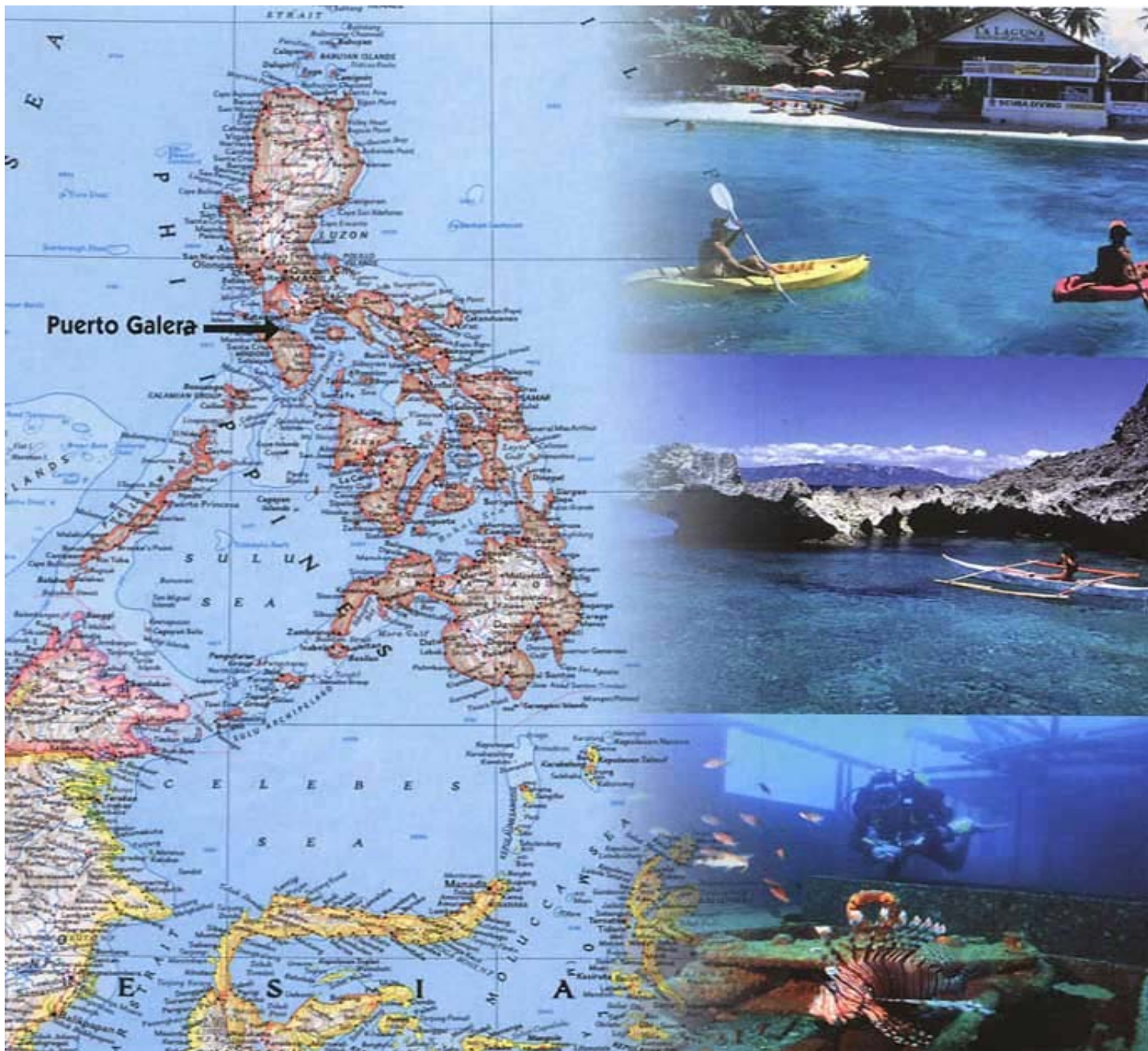
separates Puerto Galera from Luzon Island to north. This opens into the South China Sea, leading to currents of up to seven kilometers/six knots and water that is often clear with visibility reaching 30 meters/100 feet or more. There are approximately 300 of the 450 species of fish found in the world. Hard and soft corals abound, creating magnificent underwater gardens. The result is something for everyone. Snorkelers can be entertained for days on end, novice divers don't have to wait to see big and small fish, professional photographers find four weeks too short a visit and, for experienced thrill seekers, a 15 minute dive in the Kilima Drift can get your heart racing like nothing else.

I recently had some new arrivals out on an easy first dive. In addition to the large number and variety of school of fishes, we came upon two frogfish, scorpion fish, a leaf fish, several razor fish and a ribbon red eel – not too shabby for a 50 minute dive. Puerto Galera is

also great for name dropping – pygmy seahorses, mandarin fish, regular seahorses, ghost pipefish, lacy scorpion fish, flying gurnard, white tip sharks, sea turtles, to name drop a few of the regular finds. In fact, if you spend some time here, you forget that quite a lot of what you see on a daily basis is quite rare.

Technical Diving

Are you a dive professional looking for another challenge? Would you like to take your skills to a new level? A lot of pros are turning to technical diving and Puerto Galera, much as it leads, the way in so many other realms of diving, has established itself well in the forefront of Asian technical diving. Quality dive sites and proximity to deep water, professional dive centers that are large enough to support the necessary initial investment to do things safely and correctly and a handful of experienced and motivated



individuals have all led to its growth and built its reputation.

Technical diving has matured to the point where three very active facilities are now maintained, with three distinctive atmospheres and emphasis offering technical dive consumers variety and choice.

Blowing Bubbles

Okay, so you've been diving three times a day for two weeks and figure's it's time to off gas some nitrogen. (And by the way our spouse/partner/family is getting pretty tired of lying on the beach getting ,massages while waiting for you to come back to shore...)

Puerto Galera has an excellent array of non-dive activities that will appeal to all ages and interests, including jungle treks, sailing, golf, sightseeing tours up to a Tamaraw Falls, kayaking, paint ball, guided tours and much more.

So, how do I sum this all up? Puerto Galera, Spanish for Port of the Galleons is a bit of a lost paradise. Far from the typical, overdeveloped, "Wish I had seen it 15 years ago." Environmentally exhausted location, it remains a dive frontier with healthy reefs and a large variety of sea life. Check it out. Who knows, once you get there, you might never leave- I didn't. ♦

Get your group to Puerto Galera Philippines

About the Philippines

The Philippines are an archipelago of more than 7000 islands that lie between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. The archipelago has been split into three regions: Luzon, The Visayas and Mindanao. Luzon and Mindanao are the largest regions, making up approximately 66 percent of the country's area. Only about 1000 islands are larger than one square kilometre/0.4 square miles and 2500 islands haven't even been named. The Philippine's closest neighbors are Taiwan, Eastern Malaysia and Brunei and Indonesia.

The Philippine islands are volcanic and experience frequent seismic activity. There are 37 volcanoes in the Philippines, with the highest peak being Mindanao's Mt. Apo at about 2954 meters/9689 feet high. There are more than 1000 species of birds and animals in the Philippines, including wild dwarf buffalo, mouse deer, crocodiles and pythons and more than 10,000 species of trees, shrubs and ferns, the most common being plums and bamboos.

The Philippines are hot and humid year round. Though weather in the archipelago can be somewhat complex, it can, for the most part, be divided into dry season (January-June) and the wet season (July-December). The average annual temperature is 25 degrees Celsius/77 degrees Fahrenheit. Perhaps the best time to visit the Philippines is between December and May, though it would be wise to avoid Manila in May as temperature can reach as high as 40 degrees Celsius/104 Fahrenheit.

Where To Find Puerto Galera

Puerto Galera is found on the north Shore of Mindoro Island, 130 kilometers/81 miles south of Manila and 26 kilometers/ 14 nautical miles from Batangas City. It is made up of 12 coastal districts, called barangays, and one mountain district, which are spread over an area of about 23,247 hectares/57,420 acres. Puerto Galera is bordered in the north by the Verde Island Passage, in the south by Mount Baco and Mount Malasimbo, in the northeast by the San Teodoro Municipality and in the northwest by Occidental Mindoro

What it looks like: Puerto Galera is mostly rugged with dense

jungle. It also features an irregular coastline with warm clear water and wide sandy beaches. Its natural harbor and safe anchorage are favorite with sailors worldwide.

Weather: Puerto Galera has a tropical climate with high humidity, mild temperatures, gentle winds and three seasons: Wet or rainy from June to October, cool and dry from November to February and hot and dry from March to May.

Currency: Peso

Electricity: 220 volt

Time Zone: UTC +8

Visa: Most foreign visitors planning stays of 21 days or less do not require a visa. Citizens of certain countries with which the Philippines have no diplomatic relations must obtain a visa prior to travel to the Philippines. Three-month visas are available and cost around \$35 US. Multiple-entry visa (lasting six and 12 months) are also available though they are expensive and only allow for stays of 59 days at a time. Visas are required by citizens of the following countries: Albania, Cambodia, and People's Republic of China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Vietnam, Brazil, Israel, Romania and Sri Lanka.

Health risks: Malaria, cholera, hepatitis, rabies

Getting there and getting around: Basically, the only way to get to the Philippines is by plane and Manila and Cebu are the major entry points. There are flights between the Philippines and plenty of Asian cities, as well as between Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Several airlines offer internal flights between destinations in the Philippines. There is only one railway line, which operates from Manila to Naga in southern Luzon, so buses are the main overland mode of transportation. There are plenty of ferries and boats operating between islands, though the quality of service may vary. Car rentals are available, and international agencies have offices in most major cities. Local transport includes jeepneys (original reconstructed jeeps), metered taxis, PU-Cabs (small taxis without meters), tricycles (motorbikes with sidecars) and trishaws.

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