

# THE BIG BANGKA THEORY

The Philippines covers 116,000 square miles – it's very big and diverse, but surprisingly often thought of as a single destination. To get an idea of the sheer variety of diving there, **JOHN BANTIN** embarked on a boat trip with a difference



**"NO WORRIES, MATE.** We drive the *bangka* right up on the beach outside the hotel each night. You just step ashore." So said Andrew, the enthusiastic Australian salesman from Abyss World on the Scuba Travel stand at the Dive Show.

"Hmmm... Two weeks in an outrigger canoe. I trust you won't be taking your laptop," mused my wife.

I did, but on reflection, I wish I'd taken a dry-bag. It would have made my journey from the *bangka* to the shore in an overloaded dugout each evening that little bit less stressful.

What's a *bangka*? It's a traditionally built vessel, and ours was a rather large one. It had a canoe-like hull more than 20m long that drew very little water under it, and this was flanked on either side by a massive arrangement of outriggers that made the vessel almost as wide as it was long.

The deck had some cover from the elements in the form of a cabin made from the finest firewood, and the masts

and outriggers were made from a couple of drainpipes and a large collection of bamboo poles, lashed together with many yards of heavy-duty nylon fishing-line and cable-ties.

Wire stays were not under tension. Their function was to limit how far the outriggers dipped under the surface.

At the aft end, a wooden box reminiscent of something that might have been used for a puppet show gave a limited degree of privacy in a toilet that flushed by means of a bucket tied to a length of rope. Two small outrigger canoes were lashed in place on the outriggers, for use as annex boats whenever we needed to go ashore.

There was no handrail to stop anyone from falling overboard, but areas intended for passengers were carpeted in blue non-slip matting, whereas the crew could clamber anywhere they wanted – and did.

First impressions might not have been too good. A Health & Safety Executive inspector would have had a blue fit, and the risk assessment just for making

**Above:** Outriggers make the *bangka* almost as wide as it's long...

**Right, from top:** Mini-versions are used as annex boats; English is widely spoken – how else could fans sing along to Britney Spears?

passage might have taken on the dimensions of a Tolstoy novel. But we soon got used to it and actually started to see advantages over more conventional boats used for diving.

In fact the speed with which all the passengers adapted was amazing. Heath-Robinson would have been

so proud. We felt like something out of the Kevin Costner film *Waterworld*.

The whole contraption was driven at high speed, flapping and flexing as it went through the waves, by an enormous 280hp 10-cylinder Isuzu truck engine.

The helmsman controlled this using further lengths of fishing line, connected directly to the throttle and tied off on a nail. The whole thing had to be revved almost to destruction to move anywhere in reverse, revealing that the original gearbox must have been in line between the prime mover and the propshaft.

**GOING FORWARDS WAS A DIFFERENT** story, and we hurtled along at speeds approaching 18 knots. This enabled us to cover a lot of the Camotes Sea, far more than might be experienced by someone travelling by a conventional liveaboard plodding along at a typical eight knots.

The four Filipino crew proved fantastic. Hermes and Markos, deckhands and doughty canoe-paddlers, helped us on and off with our diving gear and did everything to make our stay on

board comfortable. The captain always managed to put the vessel exactly where it was needed, and its shallow draught meant that he could pick up divers from the water almost anywhere.

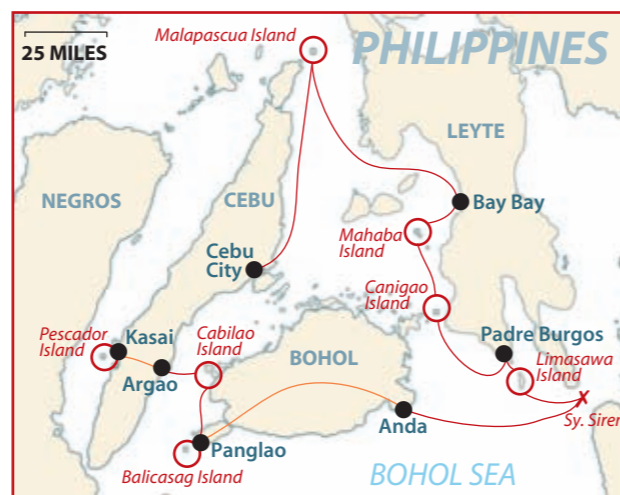
Two sets of steps were lowered to allow us back on the boat.

Dive guide Bruce Lee (no relation to the martial arts specialist) had an infectious laugh and the ability to spot the smallest critter under water.

Vincent, the French dive-guide, was alarmingly good-looking, spoke perfect if sexy English in the style of Maurice Chevalier, and had developed the sort of sense of humour that one must need when rotating between life in a third-world country and nurse-maiding European dive groups on safaris.

Abyss World is a French-owned company based in Switzerland, and we were lucky enough to have Christophe, the owner, on board with us.

After 20 years of operating these diving safaris in the Philippines, there's little he doesn't know about it. The locals, wherever we went, knew and



were evidently very pleased to see him.

We were also lucky with the passengers. Besides my pal Tony and I, who are well-hard, there were four lads from the Home Counties who were obviously used to adventurous vacations and coping with adversity. One was a lifetime Luton supporter, after all.

There was also a Parisian girl who was into not only diving but other adventure sports such as off-piste skiing and canyoneering. Conditions might not have suited those accustomed to a less athletic lifestyle.

Apart from the fact that Filipino nurses can be found working in all the hospitals of the world, and nearly every British merchant ship has a Filipino crew, what did I know previously about the Philippines?

They are a group of islands that were discovered by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. He claimed them for Spain just before he was unlucky enough to be murdered by the local inhabitants. The islands stand between Malaysia and Japan, and General MacArthur famously returned there to defeat the Japanese in World War Two.

**MORE RECENTLY**, the massive US Forces base at Subic Bay was finally abandoned after the Filipino government decided that it could do without the billions of dollars it contributed to its economy, and after a volcanic eruption made it unusable.

The Philippines was once ruled by a despotic leader whose wife Imelda frittered away the country's resources on shoes. He secretly planned to annex Malaysia's Sabah, but his specially trained guerrilla forces all died in mysterious circumstances when he changed his mind about it.

Cory Aquino finally ousted Ferdinand Marcos in a bloodless coup, but not before he had invited her opposition-leader husband Benigno back to Manila and had him murdered on the steps of the plane in which he had arrived.



**Pictured:** On the approach to Gato Island.

**Right:** The nocturnal mandarinfish, one of the most colourful of reef-dwellers.

**Below:** A thresher shark at Malapascua – getting its long tail into the frame is half the battle.

I once knew a lovely lady by the name of Sandra Burton, sadly no longer with us. She was a journalist for *Time* and was on that plane.

Her testimony and the sound recording she made at the time helped to convict the soldiers involved.

More than 10 years ago, Muslim terrorists kidnapped a group of European divers from nearby Sipadan.

Most recently, a tank was used to enter an international hotel in Manila to recapture a renegade army officer who had walked out of his trial. The news-feed has not been good, which is probably why the destination has not been particularly popular.

**WHAT I LEARNED DURING** my visit was that every island has its own identity, and that 80% of the population is under 25 and heavily into rock & roll. English is spoken by nearly everyone – how else could they sing along to Britney Spears?

With so many people having family-members working abroad, everyone is very friendly to foreigners. They are nearly all actively Christian, thanks to the Conquistadores and their Spanish Catholic church.

I didn't know that Filipino mangoes were sweeter than any others. I didn't realise that the Philippines are relatively easy to reach from London, thanks to direct flights over Siberia to Hong Kong and a quick connection through to Cebu, where we joined our giant



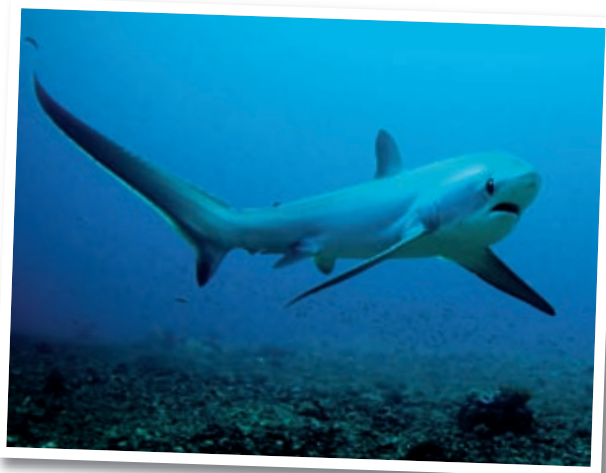
*bangka*. And I didn't know that the islands offered some of the best diving in the world.

We had four hours to get used to our new mode of transport as we hurtled north through the Camotes Sea, from Cebu City to the tiny island of Malapascua. We went ashore by little outrigger canoe for the night, to a tiny, if beautiful, hotel.

This would be our base camp for three nights, because we would be getting up before first light and heading out to a cleaning station at Monad Shoal for a chance to dive with its thresher sharks.

Threshers' enormous eyes betray the nocturnal nature of these animals. You need to catch them in their bathrooms before they return to the depths for the day.

They look rather shy about it, with particularly unaggressive-looking faces. Maybe they are embarrassed about their ridiculously long scythe-like tails or just the fact that they need the attention of the cleaners. They are certainly not





Clockwise from above:  
Mantis shrimp;  
nudibranch; clownfish;  
seahorse; coral;  
bearded scorpionfish.

Far top right:  
Tarsis monkey on Bohol.

Far below right:  
Bay-Bay, where  
the bicycle  
rickshaw rules.



travelled south along the coast of Leyte, diving wonderful sites along the way, pulling the *bangka* up on the beaches of deserted paradise islands and skirting the actual Camotes Islands themselves.

Dive sites seemed to be knee-deep in big, bearded scorpionfish. I counted six close to each other at one point.

Bruce seemed to point out minute pygmy seahorses on every seafan we passed. At first I felt obliged to photograph each one, until I realised that I had more pygmy images than a traditional Chinese doctor would have dried specimens in his medicine jars.

I called it a day once I had squinted through my camera sufficiently to secure an image of the rare and almost impossible to see yellow pygmy seahorse, along with several pink ones.

The problem is that not only are they exceedingly small and shy but they mimic the tiny details of the gorgonian frond on which they sit.

**A DOZEN TYPES OF CLOWNFISH**

busied themselves around as many types of host anemones, burying themselves in the blankets of safety once they felt threatened. Unfamiliar looking warty triggerfish eyed us suspiciously.

We spent the night at Bay Bay (*bye-bye*), a bustling town with an equally bustling and stomach-churning market. Main form of transport was the bicycle rickshaw.

Returning to the *bangka* in the morning, I noticed local police, all smartly dressed in uniforms, being briefed by an officer still wearing only vest and underpants.

Their chosen form of transport? Bicycle rickshaws, of course!

Next day we were off again, diving the remarkably clear waters of Nunez Shoal and Bilangbilanguan, and around the islands like Mahaba and Canigao.

The Canigao Channel led us to the town of Padre Burgos, where we were to stay for four nights at a hotel we had to ourselves at nearby San Roque. Padre Burgos is at the southern tip of Leyte, and the entrance to the Bohol Sea.

the in-your-face variety of reef sharks encountered at staged shark-feeding dives elsewhere in the world.

During the long and patient waits in the gloom, I often wondered if I would have been better off with my macro camera. There was so much weird and wonderful stuff on the reef to look at. Interaction with the sharks is necessarily fleeting and I, for one, was glad to get back on the *bangka* and hurtle back to the hotel for breakfast each day.

I was amazed to see that a veritable diving industry had grown up in Malapascua around these shark sightings. Local dive centres have names such as Thresher Shark Divers, and local artisans offer carved models of the sharks as souvenirs.

**WE ALSO VISITED SITES AT NEARBY**

Gato Island during the day. Visibility was disappointing, but the soft corals were as spectacular as anything I'd seen anywhere. Mantis shrimps, giant cuttlefish, giant frogfish, reef-walking dragonets, decorator crabs and vast numbers of nudibranchs, including Spanish Dancers too big to photograph properly, kept our cameras busy.

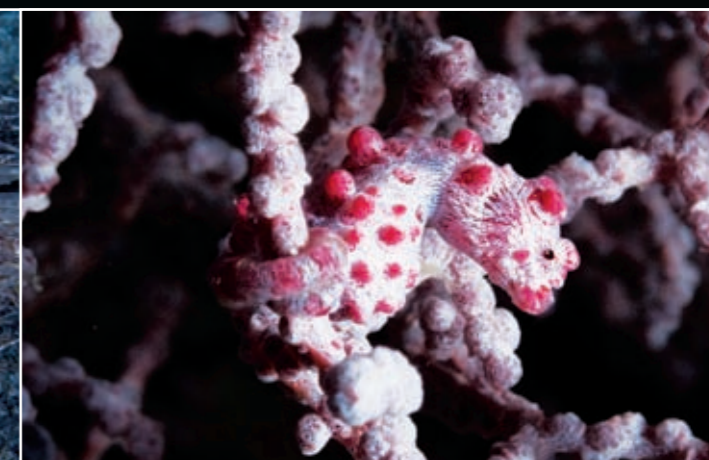
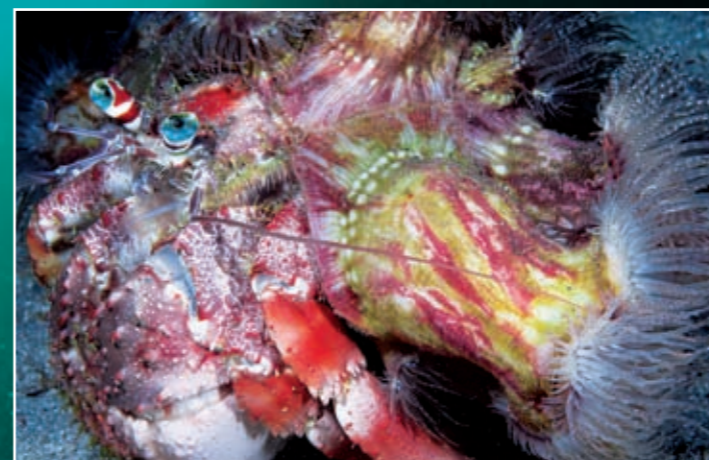
Ubiquitous lionfish have taken on a colour scheme here that makes them look different to those you might encounter in the Red Sea, for example.

Gato Island has a submerged tunnel that passes completely through it, and the long swim in this dark overhead environment is rewarded with the sight of aggregating whitetip reef sharks unaware that you are coming out at the open end.

Night dives in the shallows back under the lighthouse at Malapascua rewarded us with bucketloads of shots of mandarinfish, seahorses and other night-time creatures.

After a few days, we





Gunter's Wall provided us with spectacular hard corals, schools of giant barracuda and green turtles (trust the Germans to have pinched the best bits). On the western side, we were promised encounters with whale sharks.

True to his word, Vincent had soon identified the position of the first spotty monster, and everyone was in the water swimming furiously with their snorkels towards where it fed in the plankton-rich water. We weren't the only people doing this. Again, I was amazed to see that the entrepreneurial locals had painted the words "Whale Shark Encounters" on the sides of their boats.

I'm not into competitive swimming, and felt sure that all the splashing was inconducive to a quiet and productive encounter. So I hit on the idea of getting Markos to paddle me silently over to the whale shark in one of the little outrigger canoes.

**MY PLAN WOULD HAVE WORKED**

well had my cox and I enjoyed a common language. He kept dropping me in directly on top of the animal, when in fact I needed to be ahead of its route to get that head-on money shot. I just got endless close-ups with my extreme wide-angle fish-eye lens as I struggled to get out of its way.

Eventually I realised the confusion between my instruction to "go ahead" and "the head of the shark", my cox got the idea, and I got my prize.

Tony, on the other hand, got a better picture of me attempting what seemed almost impossible at the time.

Soon after, we met up with *Philippine Siren*, a very luxurious liveaboard, in the channel between South Leyte and the northern tip of the large island of Mindanao. We were agreeably surprised to find Thomas and Susie, former dive guides from the Red Sea's *Typhoon*, on board.

The stately *Philippine Siren* covers far less territory during a charter than a fast *bangka* like ours.

It's not all diving in Leyte. Tony persuaded me to take a day off and join him and Christophe in a visit to one of 60 cave systems on the island.

A hair-raising ride in the back of a pick-up up a rough mountain road often resulted in the tyres smoking, because the hills were so steep that the driver had to make several runs at them. Did you know that the word "haemorrhoid" is the same in both French and English?

This was where several Japanese soldiers were discovered many years after the war had ended. I ventured that the journey up had been so terrifying for them that they had decided to keep on fighting rather than return to the coastal towns to surrender.

Abandoning the truck, we continued by foot, led by two cave experts from a mountain village, and carrying lamps and wearing hardhats. The path was steep and arduous. We came to a cave entrance, after which the path was not only steep and arduous but dark, too.

We slipped and slid on mud-covered rocks, ducking under the numerous stalactites. Occasionally I would take a picture, the flash giving a false impression of the light available.

The image on the LCD gave me a view of what I was missing and what I could see only in part by panning my torch around.

After 45 minutes or so, I asked how long we were going to keep walking. Half a day, I was told. I decided that one bunch of stalactites felt very much like another, and persuaded my companions that we had banged our heads on enough of them.

**BACK ON THE BANGKA**, we made a quick dash across the Bohol Sea to Bohol and the little town of Anda, from where we travelled by road to see the Chocolate Hills, and an unusual, if rather touristy, view of some remarkable topography.

Nearby, we got to see some charming

Main picture: Lionfish are everywhere, but don't look like those you find in the Red Sea.

Above, from left: Crab with a cloak anemone on its back; divers get spoiled for pygmy sea-horses off Leyte.

Below, from top: Impressive caves on Leyte, though a little can go a long way; a banded sea snake at Balicasag.

Left: They have whale sharks, too – this one was off Limasawa.

little tarsus monkeys. These tiny creatures with huge eyes are now rather rare thanks to the activities of domestic cats, but are said to have inspired the creation of the character Yoda in *Star Wars*. Dining on insects and moths, they cling steadfastly to the smaller trees and will allow you to get very close with your camera. No wonder the species is fast disappearing.

The Abyss "Magellan" tour normally stops at this point, and we were pleased to find that our boat-crew had already put our bags in our hotel, the Oasis, at Panglao. This is more of a tourist town than we had seen up to now, and I met

We had the chance to do a couple of night dives under its pier while we were there. Hundreds of years of rubbish had been strewn across the seabed, but one man's tip is another animal's preferred habitat, and we were able to see both ornate and robust ghost pipefish in large numbers.

Decorator crabs and crabs laden down with cloak anemones on their backs strode brazenly among the detritus of human existence. Leaf-fish swayed with the swell looking like, well, dead leaves.

Other little crabs guarded their cerianthus homes, and there were

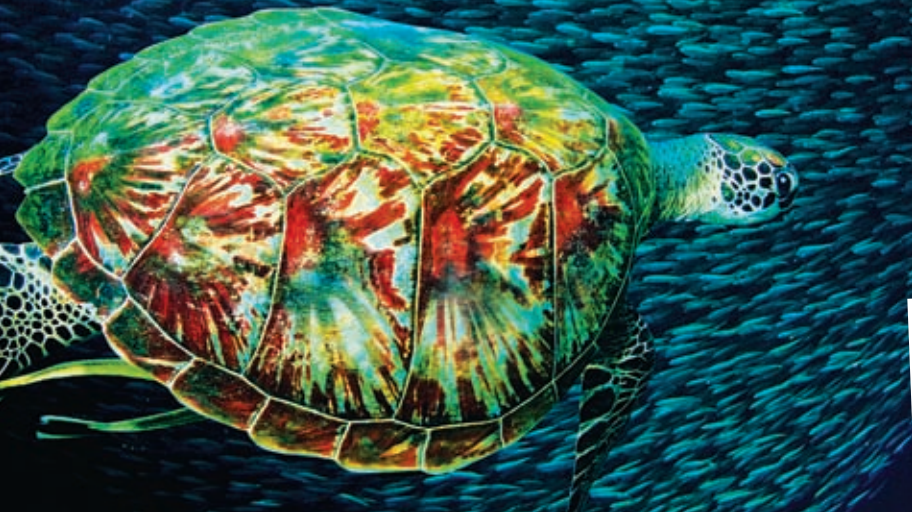
dozens of full-size seahorses under the pier's supports.

Seahorses are annoying creatures for underwater photographers. They may be around 10cm tall and easy to see, but no sooner do you point the camera than they shyly turn their backs.

This is compounded when there are as many as a dozen from which to choose, because you constantly find yourself moving on to what might be a better prospect – until it too discovers that it is the target of the underwater paparazzi.

Next day, we dived around the small island of Limasawa. On one side,





a **DIVER** reader in the bar. There was more, however. We carried on with an extension to the tour, and dived the spectacular hard coral reefs at Balicasag Island, about 30 minutes off in our boat.

Here we rendezvoused with another Abyss World *bangka* and said goodbye to Vincent, who returned to Cebu City to guide his next excursion.

On the reef at Balicasag I saw even more scorpionfish. Upscaled porcelain crabs in unimagined sizes scurried around the skirts of huge anemones, and I experienced the fearless attention of a banded sea snake around my camera housing.

When I say “fearless”, I am of course referring to the snake, an animal that carries one of the more virulent venoms known to man. Allowing it to investigate me unmolested, I managed to grab a couple of wide-angle close-ups of it when the moment arose.

**CABILAO ISLAND IN THE BOHOL**

Strait is even more spectacular than Balicasag. Its walls sport nudibranchs so big you can photograph them with a wide-angle lens, and there is a plateau with vast areas of pale-coloured soft corals that are reminiscent of fields of farmed cauliflower.

Green turtles browse, not short of food, or of somewhere to lay their eggs on the sandy beaches. Vast schools of barracuda haunt the sunlit water.

I carefully slipped into the vortex of barracuda, and gave the other divers below me a memorable image of man and swirling silver fish. Alas, it turned

out that the only one with a camera was busy elsewhere.

The boat then took us across the Bohol Strait, pausing for us to take pictures when we encountered a pod of pilot whales feeding. Tony and I said goodbye to our boat, its crew and fellow-passengers at Argo, on the island of Cebu, and made our way by bus to the dive resort at Kasai near Moalboal for a couple of days.

This Swedish-run resort is luxurious, but the diving was still under development, with a long jetty being built out over the fringing reef to where a new boat will eventually wait.

We improvised, and took a local *bangka* out to Pescador Island, a lonely outpost in the Tanon Strait, between the islands of Negros and Cebu. The strait enjoys quite strong currents at times, thanks to a large rise and fall in tides, but this encourages the marine life. We found Pescador Island surrounded by locals fishing from tiny canoes.

The diving there was worth the visit, if only for the schooling “sardines”. These silversides are not sardines, but the locals refer to them as such because they are as densely packed as if in a giant can. There seem to be billions of them, and when we visited in March they had been there for 10 months without being discovered by any hungry predators.


They are quite hard to photograph, because not even tropical mid-day sunlight penetrates the mass. Insinuate yourself beneath them and it becomes a night dive. The fish form a black cloud 100m across; this constantly undulates

**Main picture:** A green turtle surveys a dense shoal of ‘sardines’.

**Above:** An encounter with Philippine Siren off Leyte.

and rolls and flickers into new shapes.

I spent a whole dive enjoying being under and among them, but I needed something in the foreground of my pictures, or I would get nothing but shots of a big black cloud.

I tried with tube sponges and the odd dive-guide, but what I really needed was a green turtle to swim by... 

**FACTFILE**

**GETTING THERE** ▶ Fly to Cebu City via Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong or Singapore.

**DIVING** ▶ Giant *bangkas* from Abyss World. Passengers’ diving equipment is carried aboard and tanks are refilled by the on-board compressor overnight, [www.abysssworld.com](http://www.abysssworld.com)

**ACCOMMODATION** ▶ Passengers go ashore each night to en-suite accommodation.

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Any time.

**HEALTH** ▶ No malaria has been reported from the areas visited. Hyperbaric facilities are few and far between.

**PRICES** ▶ The 16-day Abyss “Magellan” diving safari costs from £2545, based on two sharing overnight accommodation, with flights from London on Malaysia Airlines to Cebu via Kuala Lumpur. Scuba Travel, [www.scubatravel.com](http://www.scubatravel.com)

**OTHER TRIPS** ▶ Other itineraries are available, some with more land-based content.

**FURTHER INFORMATION** ▶ 020 7835 1100, [www.tourism.gov.ph](http://www.tourism.gov.ph)

