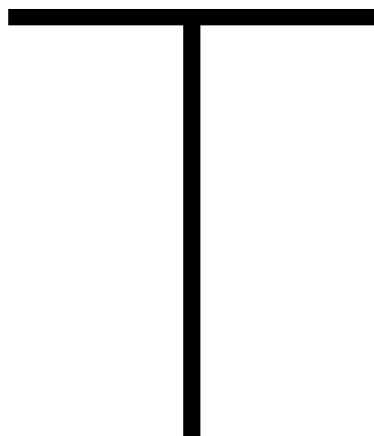


FROM THE KARST-STUDDERED SEASCAPE OF CORON BAY TO THE TEEMING REEFS OF TUBBATAHA, BACK-TO-BACK BOAT TRIPS IN THE WATERS OF THE WESTERN PHILIPPINES—ONE ABOARD A TRADITIONAL *PARAW* OUTRIGGER, THE OTHER ON A JACUZZI-EQUIPPED DIVE YACHT—PROVIDE PASSAGE TO THE REMOTER CORNERS OF PALAWAN.

Secrets of the

Sulu Sea

BY **JOHNNY LANGENHEIM** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **KATHERINE JACK**



The rain struck my skin like a thousand acupuncture needles, driven by a wind that almost bore my weight as I leaned into it. The only real shelter on board the *Balatik* was the wheelhouse, where 15 or so bedraggled guests huddled around Toto the tiller man as he squinted into the squall. But four or five of us preferred to stay outside with the crew as they hurried to lower the sails, everyone shouting and roaring with laughter at the fury of the elements. For the seasoned crew this was nothing, of course—the Philippines is a magnet for some of the fiercest tropical storms on the planet. It was just a bracing prelude to rainy season.

Still, hampered by the low visibility and unable to hear the shouted warnings from the bow, Toto ploughed into the rope floats bordering a pearl farm and we had to carefully reverse, while one of the crew dove under the boat's keel to disentangle us. I made my way to the stern to check on the pig that had been brought on board earlier that morning. It looked surprisingly unfazed. Or resigned to its fate, perhaps, since it was destined for the spit that night.

We were four days into an island-hopping voyage in the Palawan Archipelago, our vessel a native Filipino outrigger known as a *paraw*—at 22 meters, the largest of its kind in existence. On board were a couple dozen sunburned, barefoot wannabe buccaneers of varying ages and nationalities whose itinerary included exploring hidden reefs, kayaking past jungle-clad limestone monoliths, and sleeping in bamboo huts on deserted beaches. It was a way of experiencing the islands that felt refreshingly unfiltered.

Named after its main island, Palawan, the Philippines' westernmost province is also its largest and least inhabited, and it's being positioned as the country's new tourism jewel. Its biogeography is distinct from the rest of the country, sharing many species of flora and fauna with Borneo, and its 1,700-odd islands feature dramatic karst formations, powdery beaches, and swathes of tropical rain forest. Developers are apparently queuing up to grab beachfront plots.

For this trip, I'd forsaken landlubber luxuries in

favor of boats. First was this leisurely expedition between El Nido at the northern tip of Palawan and Coron on Busuang Island, some 150 kilometers to the northeast. After that, I would spend a week on a well-appointed dive boat at Tubbataha, an isolated marine park farther out in the Sulu Sea that's earning accolades not just for its underwater attractions, but also for sustainable management.

In fact, both segments of the trip boasted impressive ecotourism credentials. Tao Philippines, which part-owns the *Balatik* along with 10 other boats, has been running voyages like this for a decade and has built 16 camps scattered through the islands of north Palawan in partnership with local communities. Founders Jack Footitt and Eddie Brock Agamos started out with just one boat and a simple desire to explore the region. "We began bringing backpackers along because we hadn't realized how much it costs to run a boat," Eddie told me after my trip. "It grew organically from there and pretty soon we had the communities working with us and we were able to help them out with infrastructure, building schools, providing access to water. We've been able to build an economy—an entire ecosystem, really—around Tao. But we never had investors or a business plan, it just unfolded very naturally." These days, Tao is held up as a model of ecotourism, and both Jack and Eddie give lectures all over the world.

The Tao Organic Farm in San Fernando village, where we spent our second night, is by far the largest and best-equipped of the outfit's camps, with ocean-facing bamboo guest pavilions strewn along the beachfront, an impressive permaculture enterprise, livestock, and a giant bamboo edifice that serves as a community center for various cooperatives. It was here that I met Melot, a grizzled old salt who had lost an arm dynamite fishing some years before. His whole life, in fact, had been one of hardship, as he recounted one evening outside his home, a beach hut cluttered with nets and buoys and driftwood. Recruited by communist rebels as a child and taught to shoot a gun, he was then sent off by his father to join a crew of compressor divers—arguably an equally dangerous pursuit. Breathing air pumped through a simple plastic hose, compressor divers descend as deep as 40 meters hauling vast nets, which they manoeuvre over shoals. Many of Melot's friends died, either from the bends or by getting tangled in the nets. He said he took up dynamite fishing to feed his growing family.

"Life's better now," he told me. "I look after the water and electricity here, my wife runs the massage cooperative, and my daughter's going to college in Puerto Princesa." The latter is thanks to Tao's scholarship fund, which supports promising young students from the local villages.

Palawan's relative remoteness meant that it was sparsely populated until about four decades ago, though human remains have been found here dating as far back as 10,000 years. In the 1970s, migrants

Pictures from Palawan

Opposite, from top left: A bamboo beach house at Tao Philippines' community-owned base camp and organic farm near San Fernando; a freshly caught mackerel on its way to Tao's Kantina beach restaurant; swimming with a whale shark at Tubbataha.





Making a Splash

A warm welcome awaits the *Balatik* on its arrival at San Fernando. Opposite: Ancient karst formations in Bacuit Bay.



Island Idyll
Waking up to the
waves at the Tao
base camp on tiny
Ginto Island.



WE WERE IN THE WATER BY 7 A.M., DROPPING IN ON THREE WHITETIP REEF SHARKS AND AN EAGLE RAY SNOOZING ON A SANDY LEDGE ABOVE A CORAL WALL

started arriving from the Visayan Islands, which form the central part of the Philippines between Luzon in the north and Mindanao in the south. Today, like everywhere else in the country, Palawan's fish stocks are under pressure thanks to a spiraling population and destructive fishing methods. Local families who've fished for generations have been forced to turn to farming, resorting to slash-and-burn in the absence of agricultural know-how.

Tao has been gradually introducing permaculture techniques that are more sustainable. "We grow a wide variety of native vegetables, fruits, and herbs, and we keep livestock," Eddie told me. "Everything is locally available and integrated, so there's no waste. Now we're setting up a marketplace with local farmers where we buy excess crops for our trips."

It all seems to be paying off—the food offerings at the Organic Farm camp and throughout our voyage were excellent. Our first stop was Cadlao Island in El Nido's Bacuit Bay, where we waded onto a white beach in the lee of an enormous limestone crag. Jeff, our jocular and tireless chef, cooked up a delicious mung-bean stew served with giant trevally while the ship's dog, a solemn Jack Russell puppy named Datu, dug for crabs. We ate out under the stars, as we did every evening. The next morning, there was an impromptu game of beach volleyball for those of us not nursing hangovers from the lethal rum cocktails served from sunset each day. And then, after a refreshing cold shower, came a breakfast of watermelon slices and eggs with banana-flour fritters loaded with onion and green pepper.

There's no set schedule on board the *Balatik*, but there is a lot of time spent in the water. Palawan lies within the Coral Triangle, a million-square-kilometer bioregion that's home to more marine species than anywhere else on the planet. The reefs were mesmerizing, colorful subaquatic gardens teeming with tropical fish and occasionally larger pelagic species including turtles and trevally. On one of my last dives, the day after the rainstorm, I felt something nipping my chest and looked down to see a remora that must have mistaken me for a shark. It stuck around for the rest of the dive, nibbling at my skin—and once quite painfully on my lip.

I'd sometimes join our captain, Gener Paduga, up at the bow, where we'd sit wearing headphones, beer in hand, gazing at the blue-on-blue horizon. As we neared Coron and the end of the voyage, he told me he'd spent two years building the *Balatik* after stumbling across the design in a book. "The last of these boats stopped trading in the 1970s," he said. "But

they've been around since before the Spanish—they were once used as warships, with 100 warriors rowing on the outriggers." Building it was a major undertaking as there were no master shipbuilders familiar with the old design, and Gener insisted on using traditional materials, employing local tribes to carve indigenous motifs into the wood.

After one night in Coron, a ramshackle town that's mostly used as a jumping-off point for the surrounding islands, I caught a flight back to Palawan's capital, Puerto Princesa, to pick up my boat to Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park. The *Stella Maris Explorer* proved a very different creature to the *Balatik*. A modern 36-meter aluminum cruiser, it came with 10 cabins, a plush galley complete with a giant flat-screen TV, decks strewn with sun loungers, and a Jacuzzi.

Tubbataha is a nine-hour voyage from Palawan and we cruised through the night to get there. I woke early the next morning and went on deck where all was blue save for the setting moon, a distant storm cloud, and a tiny dot on the horizon before me. That dot gradually resolved itself into the surreal image of a domed structure built on stilts in shallow, electric-blue water beside a searing-white spit of sand. This was the Tubbataha Ranger Station, where a crew drawn from the Philippines navy, coastguard, and staff from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) do two- to three-month shifts watching over the park.

The dive season at Tubbataha lasts for just three months between April and June, when the currents and weather are at their tamest. And it is all about the big stuff—sharks, turtles, tuna, barracuda, mantas, and recently whale sharks. There were only six of us on board as this was the *Stella Maris's* penultimate trip of the year, so we had the luxury of four dive masters between us and four scheduled dives a day. We were in the water by 7 a.m., dropping in on three whitetip reef sharks and an eagle ray snoozing on a sandy ledge above a coral wall. The second dive in the same spot showed up very little for the first half hour, and I was fiddling with my GoPro when I glimpsed a huge form below us in the blue—a tiger shark, at least four meters long. With nothing else to tap on my tank, I used the camera, which promptly fell off its mount and sank, luckily landing on an outcrop of rock. My dive master, Shao (short for Shaolin, so named for his bald pate and Zen-like manner), went down to retrieve it and as he headed back up, the tiger shark followed him, passing within spitting distance of both of us before heading up over the reef above. It was a tense but exhilarating moment—tiger sharks are considered



The Details

Tao Philippines' four-night cruises between El Nido and Coron on the *Balatik* cost about US\$596 per person including all meals; to avoid the monsoons, sailings are between October and June only (taophilippines.com). **Expedition Fleet Liveboards**, which operates the *Stella Maris Explorer*, has an even shorter season at Tubbataha, where from March through June it offers six-night dive trips from US\$2,600, including meals and four dives a day (expeditionfleet.com).





Out to Sea

Above, from left: A ranger at Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, 130 kilometers from the nearest inhabited island; breakfast at Tao's Kantina restaurant in San Fernando. Opposite: The *Balatik* sailing through the islands of Bacuit Bay.

aggressive, and though attacks are rare, you can't help but feel nervous when 500 kilos of muscle and teeth cruises past and fixes you with an inky black eye.

That afternoon, I spent a few hours with the rangers. Marooned on their tidal atoll, they have lots of time on their hands when not out on patrol. They tell me they go jogging on the sand spit, play occasional games of volleyball, and catch fish—based on a strict quota, of course. We discuss the intensifying territorial dispute in the Spratly Islands, just a few hundred kilometers to the west in the South China Sea. One ranger had been stationed there for six months and had seen firsthand the massive land reclamation project China has been undertaking. “If they're claiming the whole of the South China Sea, what's to stop them invading Palawan?” he exclaimed with a wry smile.

It turned out that WWF researchers were in the park tagging turtles, and so the next day I spent the afternoon on their vessel chatting with Tubbataha's site manager Angelique Songco as a succession of green turtles were unceremoniously tagged and given a laparoscopy to check their reproductive health and history. This involved upending the unfortunate turtle and placing its head through a hole in a table, while turtle expert Dr. Nicolas Pilcher inserted a cam-

era into its soft underbelly. “They must swim back to their mates with tales of alien abduction,” he laughed.

“Tiger sharks, whales sharks—they're both new to the park these last couple of seasons,” Angelique told me. “It's good news. The presence of apex predators like sharks is a sure sign of healthy reefs.”

It was Sod's law that while Angelique and I were discussing whale sharks, my fellow divers briefly spotted one cruising along the wall. I'd long dreamed of swimming with these placid giants and it looked like I might have missed my chance. But on the last day at Black Rock, a vertical wall thick with giant fans, Tubbataha delivered in spades. Not just one, but two whale sharks emerged out of the blue, swimming past in formation. And then one of them turned and I found myself directly in her path; she swept past so close that I could see scars and barnacles among the beautiful constellation-like markings on her skin, and I had to backpedal to avoid her enormous tail. This happened on each of the three dives that day, with the same female doing four or five sashays each time.

These days, it's not hard to swim with whale sharks, thanks to feeding aggregations. But this felt special—a wild, unsolicited encounter. Which in many ways sums up my experience of Palawan. ●