

THE REEF SEEKER



REEF SEEKERS DIVE CO.
P.O. Box 634
Beverly Hills, CA 90213
(310) 652-4990
www.reefseekers.com
e-mail: kenkurtis@aol.com

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PHILIPPINES MINI-REPORT

As you're reading this, I'm likely on the plane heading home from the Philippines. This was what's known in the dive industry as a FAM trip. FAM stands for "familiarization" and basically, dive destinations invite shops, clubs, instructors, etc. to be their guest and sample their facility in the hopes that these people will then book a group for a full return visit.

In this case, we were the guest of Atlantis, which runs resorts in both Puerto Galera and Dumaguete. We spent the first four days in Puerto Galera, and I'm writing this in the Manila Airport as we await our flight down to Dumaguete.

One caveat about any FAM trip is that you have to figure that the resort will be on their best behavior. In other words, your results may vary.

Getting here is a bit of a schlep. I flew United which meant LAX-HNL-GUM-MNL. Laurie Kasper went with me but flew China Eastern LAX-Shanghai-MNL. Others took a Philippine Airways non-stop from LAX. The point is, there are plenty of ways to get to Manila, which is a major Asian destination and airport hub. Once here though, there's still more work to do.

To get to Puerto Galera requires an additional van ride of about three hours down to Batangas, then a 30-minute ferry ride over to Puerto Galera (which is more like an hour because it takes time for them to load all the

bags on the speedy boat), and then it's about a three-minute walk to Atlantis Puerto Galera.

One thing that amazed me was how many dive operators there were. Pulling into Puerto Galera is similar to pulling into Avalon in terms of the look of the place. It's a curved bay and everything butts up against the water. But it seemed like EVERY storefront along the shore was a different dive operation. Atlantis is certainly the biggest, but by no means the only option.

The resort itself is really nice. What's weird about Puerto Galera is that the main "street" is really a narrow path that runs all along the bay and cuts right through Atlantis. The dive shop and assembly area are below the path, and the dining area, pool, and all the rooms are above the path. So if you wanted to, you can just sit there and watch what passes for activity in Puerto Galera pass on by.

Since the resort is built into a hillside, one feature is that there are a fair amount of stairs as you move level to level. This is a not a place for anyone who's disabled or who might have knee or back issues that stairs might aggravate.

The rooms are very nice although Laurie dubbed them "Flintstones" because there's a lot of rock and shale and plaster walls that remind fans of Bedrock of that look. The rooms are comfortable and a couple of their upgraded rooms are downright fancy.

They've got a large locker area right above the central path where your

dive gear lives, and then you cross over the path to the dive assembly area where you can analyze your nitrox tanks for the dives and get ready to go. You walk out from there to the beach and one of the five small but efficient dive boats that Atlantis has. But the walk could be tricky.

When we arrived late afternoon, the boats were snuggled almost right up to the dive shop. By the next morning, it was low tide and it was amazing to see how far out the water was. The bay has barely any slope to it so even the tide only dropping a foot causes the water's edge to recede greatly. When we boarded the boats each morning, we walked out 50 yards or so through ankle-deep water to where it was deep enough for the anchored boats to float. Quite a sight to see.

The diving was OK but not as spectacular as I had hoped. Some of this may be seasonal. The reefs are in pretty good shape but the water conditions were less than optimal. Water temp was a little cool at 77-78 degrees and visibility was sort of stinky at 20-40 feet with a fair amount of particulate in the water. We did some local dives and spent a day at Verde Island (3 dives) but overall I thought these dives were a bit ho-hum, maybe a 6 on a scale of 10.

We did four days at Puerto Galera and then flew down to Dumaguete for another four days. (As you're reading this, the trip is over and we should be on our way back home.) I will do a regular full trip report once everything is over but thought I'd get you started with these impressions.



AVALON CLEANUP

Mark the date if you haven't already: Saturday, February 22. That's the date of the 39th Annual Avalon Underwater Cleanup, which benefits both the Catalina Hyperbaric Chamber and the Catalina Conservation Divers.

If you've never done it before, the format's pretty simple. Up to 500 divers at three different locations enter the water at 9:30AM and have until 11AM to scoop up as much trash and debris as they can find. Most years, we're pulling up a collective total of 2,000 pounds or so. But this event involves more than just collecting trash because we know there are "treasures" to be found and we want to recognize that.

That's why there's an awards and prize ceremony that starts at 1PM on the Wrigley Stage in the center of town. There will be raffle and door prizes to be won, plus we bestow an award upon selected finds. The categories vary year to year but it's things like "Most Tasteless," "Weirdest," "Smallest," "Most Valuable," and stuff like that.

There are also three important awards given out which are the Jon Hardy Award, given to an in-

dividual, group, or organization who has worked hard to promote diving at Catalina. Jon was a long-time instructor on the island and he dearly loved diving its waters so this is a way to remember him and honor someone who's following in his footsteps. And the other big award is the Golden Flipper, given annually to an individual who has made significant contributions to the Cleanup over the years.

But the third award is near and dear to our hearts and that's "The Coveted Ken Kurtis Silver-Tongued Devil Award" (that's really the official name – but it's also known as the "BS Award") and that's given to the person who comes up with the most creative story – and it doesn't have to be true – behind a piece of trash they found. The award got its name because Ken won it the first two years and they made him a deal: Don't enter any more and we'll name the award after you. Sold!!!

There are two keys components to winning the award: Make your story relatively short and make sure it has a punchline that will cause people to laugh. If you do those two things, you stand a good chance of walking away a winner,

because we allow the crowd, by their applause, to be the judge, and they're a merciless bunch. One diver from each of the three dive stations will be selected as a contestant, so when you turn in your trash, be sure to think of a good story to go along with some of it.

Reef Seekers will once again be at the Green Pier, our usual spot. We'll be going over on the 6AM Express out of Long Beach, will be in place by 7:30-ish, you all go to breakfast while we handle the group sign-in, there's a dive briefing at 9AM, and then the diving starts at 9:30AM. Once the diving is over (you can do multiple dives if you want as long as you're out of the water by 11AM), you can either choose to go to the UW Park for more dives (we'll get you a taxi) or you can have your gear stored for the afternoon so you have plenty of time for the awards, to walk around the island, and maybe even participate in our annual miniature golf tourney.

If you want to be part of our group and sign up through Reef Seekers, give us a call at 310/652-4990 or shoot an e-mail to kenkurtis@aol.com. Cost for the event, boat, taxi, and fun is \$150. Hope to see you there!!!

2020 DIVING VACATIONS

March 16-29 • Yap

May 15-23 • Bonaire

August 1-8 • Isla Mujeres

SOCORRO IN 2021

We've set aside spots for a Socorro trip with Nautilus Liveboards and want to have you join us.

As you may know, Socorro – really the Revilligedo Islands comprised of San Benedicto, Socorro, and Roca Partida – lies about 220 miles south of Cabo San Lucas and is home to many big animals such as Hammerheads, Manta Rays, Humpback Whales (seasonally), and other pelagics, as well as a healthy concentration of reef fish. We were there in both 2008 and 2010 and it's high time we went back again.

Nautilus runs three boats there and we're going to choose to go on the Nautilus Under Sea January 6-14. The boat takes 17 divers which we think is a good number for this kind of a trip. (The other two boats take 26 and 30 divers and we'd rather deal with a smaller group and maybe even have the entire boat for ourselves.) As an added bonus for those of you who did our Sea of Cortez Don Jose trips in the past, this is the boat where Hernan Parra – engineer and tank filler on the Don Jose – now works.

It's also important to understand the logistics of this trip. Because of the distance involved, the first and last day are spent at sea in transit. This means that even though it's a 9-day trip, there are five full days of diving. Usually this means 4 dives each day and an occasional night dive (one with Silky Sharks) which will all be plenty to fill your head with wonderful memories.

Among the spots we'll hit will be The Boiler at San Benedicto where Manta Rays are known to hover

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Thu.	Feb. 13	Redondo (Vets)	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE!!!
Sun.	16	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Sat.	22	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Cleanup	\$150
Wed.	26	- CLASS -	- NAUI NITROX -	\$75
Sat.	Mar. 7	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Thu.	12	Redondo (Vets)	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE!!!
Sat.	14	Diver's Day	Aquarium of the Pacific	FREE!!!
Wed.	Apr. 1	- CLASS -	- FISH ID -	\$25
Thu.	9	Redondo (Vets)	••• Night Dive •••	\$25
Sat.	18	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$150
Sat.	25	Redondo (Vets)	Navigation dive (single tank)	\$25
Wed.	29	- CLASS -	- TABLES & COMPUTERS -	FREE!!!
Wed.	May 6	Many boats/AOP	Chamber Day/Eve 2020	\$120

over divers begging for a belly rub. There's also frequently a small school of dolphins there who seem as interested in the bubble-blowers as we are in them.

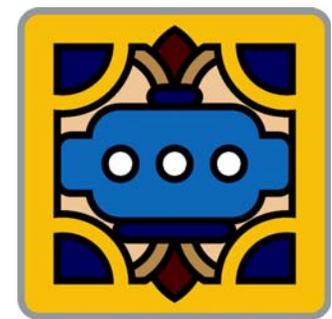
Roca Partida, a small spit of land another 80 miles removed from the two big islands, is an amazing place. The rock seems to literally rise out of the water from the bottom and, due to its remoteness, many times features incredible visibility along with incredible fish life. One of my personal favorites is a small shelf on the back wall where there always seem to be 5-10 Whitetip Sharks all nestled in together taking a nap. And there's plenty more to see at Roca as well.

January's a good time to go (we had originally thought about doing this trip in December of this year but the boat filled before we could secure spots) as it's out of hurricane season and it's also when the Humpbacks start arriving. So you may get a whale encounter out of this too.

It's not a cheap trip. There are multiple classes of rooms which will range from \$2,600 (triple) to \$4,500 (Premium) per person. Add into that a crew tip (another \$300-400) and a national park fee (\$300 last time I checked), plus airfare

(LAX-SJD) which could be anywhere from \$400-900, and it ain't cheap. But it's definitely worth it.

We have as many as nine people already committed to going so that only leaves us with about eight other spots. If you're interested, email us or call 310/652-4990. We'll want a \$500 deposit now, but can work out payment plans since we have so much lead time. But this is definitely one you want to do.



CHAMBER DAY IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER

Just a little reminder that Chamber Day 2020 – Wednesday, May 6 – will start taking sign-ups on March 1. (In fact, we'll reveal the logos for the event at the Cleanup.) We'll give you lots more info next month, but we thought we'd plant that seed in your head now.

SOME LITHIUM-ION QUESTIONS

There are still no definitive answers about the cause of the Conception or Red Sea Aggressor fires, but there seems to be a strong consensus that lithium-ion battery charging will play a major role. But if that's the case, it's also begs another question: Are these batteries (which are widely used) blowing up on a regular basis or were these two instances simply rare and unfortunate coincidences?

If these are regularly failing does that mean houses are catching on fire as well? Or is this somehow tied only to charging these batteries in a marine environment? And if that's the case, shouldn't we also be hearing of fires at resorts

from divers who are charging batteries there?

At first glance, there isn't anything obviously different about charging these batteries on a boat as opposed to at an ocean-based resort. It's certainly possible that exposure to salt air, over time, factors in. But you would think that the salt air exposure at a resort should be similar to that of a boat. But if this is somehow relegated only to boats what's the "X" factor that isn't immediately obvious?

There seems to be a rush-to-judgment and an eagerness to say, "This is it." While it may well be the case that lithium-ions were the cause of both fires, before we can definitely reach that conclusion, hopefully there will be tests run that can replicate the environment that the

batteries were in and reproduce the type of ignition that would have caused these fires.

It's certainly prudent for us to continue to be suspicious and to take precautions like no overnight charging, charging batteries in fire-resistant LIPO bags, and stuff like that. But there's a difference between being proactive and cautious, and finalizing an answer so one can move on with life.

Because to jump to a conclusion without fully vetting it may be giving us a false sense of security that will be destroyed if this should ever happen again due to something else that we overlooked in our haste to gain closure. And we don't need to compound what has already happened by being sloppy in our investigation

PICTURE PAGE - Puerto Galera, 2020

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2020)



**Gorgeous
Cup Corals opening**



P.O. Box 634
Beverly Hills, CA 90213

WWW.REEFSEEKERS.COM



**Lovely
nudibranch**



**Clowning
around**



**Scorpionfish
stare-down**



**Sea Squirt
with eggs**