

IT'S BEEN SEVEN YEARS, BUT ALONG THE BEACH SABANG DOESN'T SEEM TO HAVE CHANGED A GREAT DEAL. THIS IS A PERFECT ESCAPE FROM THE HUSTLE OF MANILA, JUST A SCHEDULED BUS AND BANCA

DEAL. THE RELAXED VIBE THAT ORIGINALLY DREW THE OIL MEN FROM THE MAINLAND FOR R & R CONNECTION AWAY. THE AIR IS CLEAN, THE SKY IS BLUE AND THE DIVING, LIKE THE LIVING, IS EASY.



The town meanders behind the beach front establishments, essentially a covered alleyway switching through bars, restaurants and shops selling everything you're ever likely to need. There's a slalom of beach vendors for everything else. Be polite. They don't know it's the tenth time you've been offered Viagra in the last hour.

The spur out of town is guarded by The Tropicana Hotel, built in the style of a Bavarian chocolate box castle. And why not. Everything about Sabang is chilled and there's plenty of laughter.

El Galleon resort has a theatrical feel to it, in a sense that it is situated in an amphitheatre. The balcony rooms are scattered around the hillside like private boxes, down to the pool and the spacious restaurant stalls, the framing palms in the wings, leading the ocean beyond. The waiting stage. As dusk falls the sunset tops the bill, with a performance of magic so endemic to these parts, drenching the neon salmon sky with an indigo wash. Suddenly the light dims and everything is squid ink.

Only the twinkling diamonds of Batangas on the horizon tell of a world outside. Unless Batangas has a power cut; then you'll see sod all. Except the food on your plate, or the drink in your hand, because El Galleon has its own generator, and the lights of the adjacent Point Bar are only extinguished after the last patron leaves.

Australian Alan Nash arrived in Mindoro on a sail boat in the early 80s from Hong Kong, became a scuba instructor, realised he was

TEXT: H E SAWYER IMAGES: BETH WATSON © 2014



PORT OF GALLEONS



having the time of his life, and never looked back. There were only three dive shops in Sabang then, and Alan eventually set up his own dive shop in his house. The kitchen doubled as the classroom. Obviously the scale of the operation meant that a dozen divers would classify as 'busy'. And the marketing policy? Sit on the beach and wait for the tourists to arrive looking for a room and something to do. It was as simple as that. When Tommy Soderstrom arrived from Sweden, he caught the Sabang bug big time and Asia Divers was up and running, and became the first PADI Career Development Centre in the Philippines. Alan already had his eye on El Galleon, the prime real estate on the front, which he bought at the earliest opportunity. Now they had the best resort to go with their first class service.

Twenty years on there's over 30 dive shops in Sabang*, and Asia Divers is busy if they have 60 divers, although they're set up for a hundred. El Galleon continues to develop, with the emphasis on accommodating today's clientele and their laptops. Progress is underway to develop suites "so it's not just a bed for the night."

I think Alan's being modest, because the rooms are terrific already. Light and spacious, all with flat screen TV, aircon (and a fan), a fridge, comfortable beds, and a built-in safe to deposit valuables. The classroom has free internet access for those who can't be bothered to lug a laptop with them. You won't need an alarm clock either. The Philippines employs a cock crow as standard throughout the islands.

"Our customers have aged with us", Alan explains. There's plans to build a lift into

the rock to save climbing the stone steps through the beautiful terraced gardens, which will hopefully be in place by the time I visit again.

What is already in place is a splendid 30m by 15m dive deck with sun loungers for those who like to bask, and a first rate storage facility for kit. And the best bit? The storage crates are housed in compartmentalised shelving! This little bit of thought, and admittedly quite a bit of additional wood, makes a world of difference. They even have a microwave to heat those post dive hot towels. Bliss.

Resort manager Ruby took me to the development Alan built into the hillside. It's an oasis with private courtyard, pool and five Balinese style houses. Four are for rent and can accommodate eight people per house. There's a kitchen for self catering, or food can be ordered in from the restaurant at El Galleon. This would be ideal for a dive club on tour.

Although Asia Divers caters for recreational divers, there's a Tech shop just a three minute stroll down the beach in Alan's original house. Tommy felt it best to separate Tech and Rec, so that those taking their Open water course weren't intimidated by those kitted up to the gills like Mad Max, and speaking a foreign language. The Tech shop handles the 40 to 100m dives and is run by Dave, and Sam Collette, who took me through my Advanced Open Water course, which now seems a lifetime ago. I sensed 'Navigation' was going to be my downfall, so we walked the rectangle I had to plot on the beach first. But at nine metres on a gentle sloping sandy bottom it seemed 'Nav' would be a breeze. Until on my penultimate leg, Sam acted as

'current', deliberately pushing me off course. Back in the classroom he asked me to map the course I'd taken. Honestly, I drew a rectangle with a very wonky side. It didn't look pretty, but it did look vaguely rectangular - if you closed one eye. Then he took the marker pen and showed me what I'd actually finned. A right angled triangle. A cheese wedge. And the mice had been at it. "Grab another tank and let's do it again."

At no point during my chagrin did he stop grinning from ear to ear, and when we meet once again, he's still grinning. I expect he still remembers that look on my face...



* If the number of shops in Sabang hasn't already given the game away about how good the diving is here, then you'll discover for yourself when you duck your head under the water. The sites are all close, less than 10 minutes by boat, but the good news is that there's over two dozen, so it's unlikely you'll bump into 'Boxhead Divers'** during your underwater adventures.

My favourite site is in 15 to 18m less than two minutes from the dive deck; Sabang Wrecks has three small differing carcasses strung out in various stages of decay. The marine inhabitants frequenting the steel yacht and the timber remains change during the day, and again at night. Better still, there's plenty to see en route between each wreck, including a rather wonderful resident frog fish blending into the coral outcrop. Night dives bring out the stargazers, with the help of a guide with keen eyes, and the wrecks become

festooned with critters, including decorator crabs and moray eels.

Giant Clams is a terrific dive - especially if you like giant clams. They're bountiful here, and sit in as little as six metres. There's a guy stationed in a boat to guard them from the pot and subsequent shop shelf.

There's also the deeper scuttled wreck of the *Alama Jane* in 30m, usually undertaken at the start of the day's diving schedule.

*Other dive resorts are available in Sabang. They may have a public footpath running through the middle of them, might not have balcony rooms, a dive deck, pier, pool, restaurant, bar, or retail shop - but other dive resorts are available.

**'Boxhead Divers' do not exist, and are a figment of Sam Collette's imagination.



DETAILS Asia Divers hit the water throughout the day at 8am, 10.30am, 4pm, and 6pm for the night dive. The restaurant is open from 6.30am to 11.30pm, so you can fit your appetite around your dives. They have an Indian buffet on Friday evenings.

- Dive groups are a maximum of six.
- Visibility ranges from 10m to 40m, and the water temperature is 22 degrees Celsius in January, February, rising to 30 degrees in June to September. April to



June is the hottest time of year, the rainy season runs through July and August, and minor squalls feature during November to January, but I can testify that they never last long. This means you can actually go for a night dive on a placid evening and surface an hour later into somewhat

FISH LIST

Triggerfish
Parrotfish
Pennant fish
Moray eels
Surgeonfish
Snappers
Groupers
Moorish idol
Lizard fish
Gobies
Batfish
Lionfish
Trumpet fish
Trevally

INVERTEBRATES LIST

Transparent shrimp
Neon-coloured nudibranch
Basket sponges
Crinoids
Anemones
Sea cucumbers
Starfish
Worms & fire corals
Gorgonian seafans
Turtles
Octopus
Cuttlefish
Sharks

choppy conditions, which can make you look more 'special needs' than 'special forces' when re-boarding the boat.

- There are regular excursions out to Verde Island, an underwater mountain just under an hour away for those seeking some current and the ensuing pelagic action.

- You can also join one of Asia Diver's liveaboards, which are run throughout the Philippines and beyond, including the stunning reefs at Tubbataha.

- One of the big drawcards with Sabang is you can dive up to the last minute before departing. There are boats to return you to the mainland of Luzon, or on to Anilao if you want some serious muck diving, so it's not as if you will need to ground yourself for a day before taking an onward flight.

- If you feel like a break there's plenty to do topside on Mindoro, and Asia Divers can arrange it for you.

Ponderosa is a challenging 9-hole golf course step cut into the mountainside at 1,700ft. Even if you're rubbish at golf it affords spectacular views over the island, and there's clubs for rent. Tip your caddy; the fairways are narrow and he'll earn it. There's also trekking to the beautiful Tamaraw Falls, trail biking, even paintball if the boys must shoot something. But when you're in Sabang, other activities are simply distractions. Here diving is king.

H E Sawyer was a guest of Asia Divers

> **LINKS** www.asiadivers.com