

Tubbataha's remote atolls and reefs consists of two atolls and one coral reef that are located in the middle of the Sulu Sea - effectively the core of the Philippine archipelago. And those 'exposed reefs' are the highest tips of the many extinct underwater volcanoes and mountains that form the Cagayan Ridge, which rises up from the 3,000m depths of the Sulu Basin.

To fully comprehend the importance of Tubbataha's atolls and reefs you will need to understand a little about the Coral Triangle and its life-source - the Indonesian Throughflow. Both of which are very complex subjects, but let me try and do the Reader's Digest version of both...

The term Coral Triangle is a pretty neat way to visualise the area of south-east Asia that is universally recognised as having the richest concentration of marine biodiversity in the world. Studies of which have identified some 600 species of coral, together with 3,000 species of reef fish and to put those numbers into perspective – the Red Sea has around 200 coral species and 1,000 fish species while the Caribbean has 50 and 900! While the numbers are impressive and much quoted, what is harder to understand is just why all that biodiversity is there – which is where the Indonesian Throughflow comes in.

Simply stated, the Indonesian Throughflow is the largest volume of water flow in the world, in fact so large is that volume that hydrologists had to come up with a special measurement to quantify it – the Sverdrup...

Named after its inventor, Norwegian scientist Harald Sverdrup, one Sverdrup is one million cubic metres of water per second. To conceptualise that, think of a river 100 metres wide, 10m deep and flowing at two knots. Then imagine 1,000 of those rivers all combined together – that is one Sverdrup! It is estimated that the total amount of seawater carried by the Indonesian Throughflow is 15 Sverdrups, or 15,000 of those rivers... A massive volume of water which has to make its way through the Lesser Sundas, the chain of islands that runs along the bottom part of the Indonesian archipelago.

I had heard many stories about the intense biodiversity of Tubbataha's reefs - which are generally renowned for both what you will see, together with what you might see, and was sorely tempted. ▶

Tubbataha



CONSERVING Tubbataha

Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor Don Silcock extols the virtues of Tubbataha's atolls and reefs, and the marine life that calls them home

Photographs by Don Silcock

Did you know?

The Tubbataha Reef Marine Park covers 96,828 ha, including the North and South Atolls and the Jessie Beazley Reef. It is a unique example of an atoll reef with a very high density of marine species; the North Islet serving as a nesting site for birds and marine turtles.



Turtle looking relaxed on the reef

So... What is so special about Tubbataha?

There are a few things that are really special about Tubbataha, which combined together create something that verges on the unique!

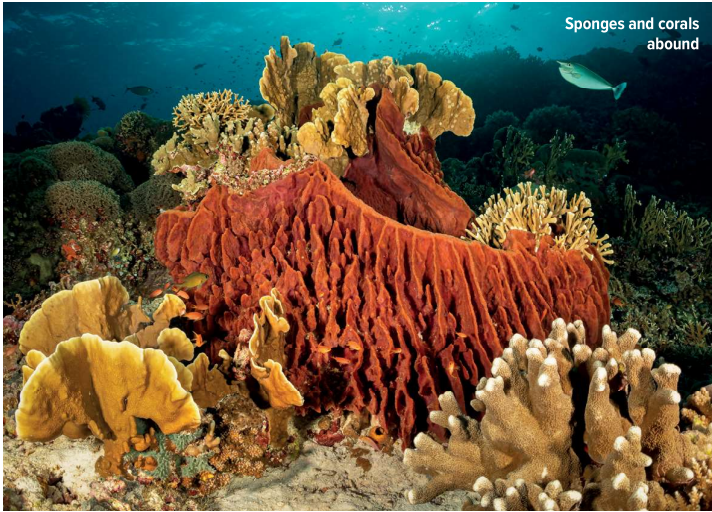
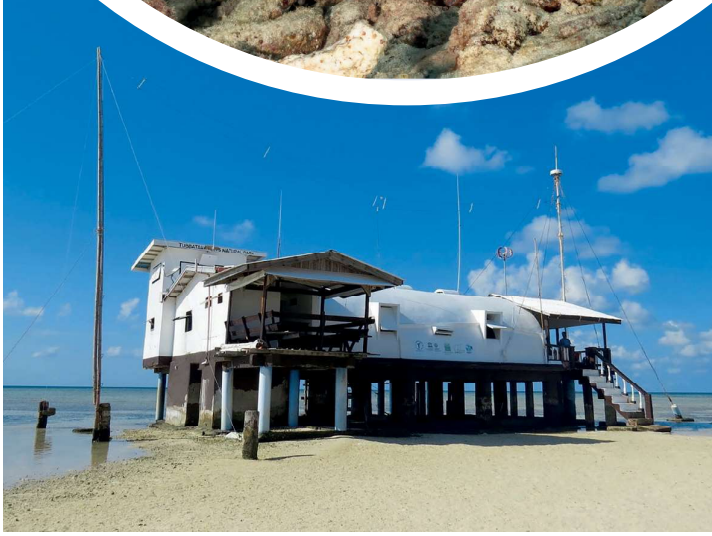
Let's start with the Sulu Sea, the 260,000 km² body of water that is bounded on three sides by the Philippine archipelago and, in the south by the province of Sabah in Malaysian Borneo, which marine biologists classify as a Large Marine Ecosystem (LME). Basically, the area is extremely rich in marine biodiversity with some 600 species of fish, 360 species of corals, 11 species of sharks / rays and 13 species of dolphins and whales.

All that concentrated biodiversity is nurtured and sustained by the fertile currents of the Pacific Ocean from the east together with the rich deep-water upwellings produced as those currents flow through the Sulu Sea.

Secondly, Tubbataha is some 150km from the nearest landfall on the large, narrow island of Palawan and, up to the 1980s, well beyond the range of traditional fishing boats, plus with no fresh-water available, habitation was impossible. So, the isolated atolls evolved into almost a marine version of the Garden of Eden with almost only natural predation occurring.

Then the early 1980s saw the first motorized fishing boats arrive... Driven from the more-accessible fishing grounds in the Sulu Sea by over-fishing and the dramatic depletion of fish stocks, the rich bounty of Tubbataha's atolls made the long and perilous journey worth the risk - but to maximise their returns those boats also introduced cyanide and dynamite fishing and by the mid 1980s that Garden of Eden was no longer what nature had made it.

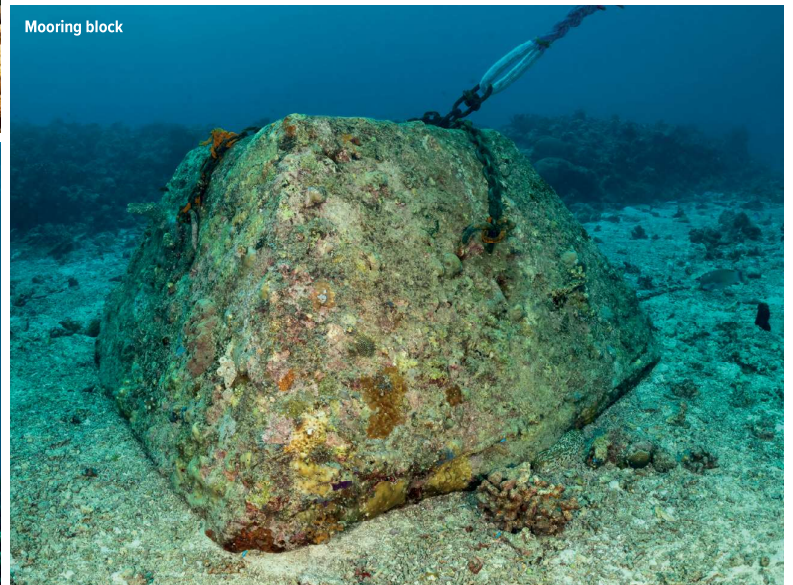
Good governance was rarely associated with the Philippines in the 1980s, but through the efforts of a few key, highly motivated individuals, the government was stirred into action and in 1988, then-President Corazon Aquino designated Tubbataha a national marine park - the first in the country - and five years later UNESCO inscribed it as a World Heritage Site. Nature is an incredibly powerful thing when we humans let it do its job and by 2015, scientific studies of those badly decimated reefs had been restored to a near-pristine and truly natural state!



Sponges and corals abound



Vast shoals of fish are common



Mooring block



Anemone on the reef



Various species of moray eel can be found

“ What you will see at Tubbataha are superb reefs in pristine condition that are bursting at their seams with a veritable smorgasbord of marine life ”

Diving Tubbataha

If you like tropical reef diving – and who doesn't... imagine if you will rolling backwards into blue water that is so clear, the visibility seems to stretch out to infinity. Then arrayed below you on the upper reef margin are vast rolling dunes of staghorn coral with schools of resident anthias swimming up into the light and then darting back down for protection as an endangered green turtle forages for food among the branches.

Then head down to about 15m where the margin ends and the reef slope begins its descent into the depths of the Sulu Sea. Arranged to perfection along the slope are rows of huge gorgonian fans that stretch out into the current and feed on the passing nutrients – each one a mini ecosystem of its own with permanent residents like sea stars, brittle stars, ghost gobies, pygmy seahorses and the pygmy's nemesis, the long-nosed hawkfish. Look up and there is a good chance of seeing the massive schools of jacks that patrol the upper parts of the reef and then out into the blue, where schools of barracuda move up and down the reef wall. Concentrate on the blue and you will see large groups of black-tip reef sharks hunting in the current – often with individual sharks working tag-team with a giant trevally.

At this point you tend to have to make a decision... stay focused on the blue on the chance of a pelagic encounter with one of the regular open-water animals that visit ▶



Hard coral structures

Healthy reefs
await

“ What you might see are those passing pelagics that are roaming the Sulu Sea, which pass like ships in the night! ”

Did you know?

The site is an excellent example of a pristine coral reef with a spectacular 100m perpendicular wall, extensive lagoons and two coral islands.

Tubbataha such as whalesharks, giant oceanic mantas and tiger sharks. Or you stay focused on the beautiful and wonderfully biodiverse reef slope because, believe me, it's hard to do both! And that's just my description of one of my personal favourite sites - Staghorn Point on the southern tip of the South Atoll. There are another 16 other sites to choose from at Tubbataha and of them at least seven are absolutely world-class in terms of their biodiversity.

How to dive Tubbataha

Stating the obvious... from a liveaboard, as there is simply no other way to do it, and there are currently around 18 registered vessels all operating from Puerto Princesa mid-way down the island of Palawan.

But the season is limited to about three months from mid-March to mid-June because of the tropical storms from the November to March northeast monsoon and the July and October southwest monsoon. During those months the diving conditions are usually excellent with clear skies, calm seas and vis up to 50 metres! To get to Puerto Princesa, I flew Qantas from Sydney to Manila, did an overnight near the airport and caught a Philippine Airways Express flight.

In summary

There are certain iconic locations around the world where, when I have been fortunate to experience them, a constant thought runs through my mind – there must have been so many places like this once!

Tubbataha is a stunning example of just how powerful nature is in creating such Gardens of Eden and what can happen if we humans get out of the way and let it restore that beauty!

What you will see at Tubbataha are superb reefs in pristine condition that are bursting at their seams with a veritable smorgasbord of marine life. What you might see are those passing pelagics that are roaming the Sulu Sea.

Was it worth the wait and the expense – well for me, it certainly was, and was the perfect remedy for two years of Covid-induced half-life! ■

Sweetlips in a barrel sponge



Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor and is based from Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

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