

Myanmar's underwater safaris

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Photo- Michelangelo Pignani / The Myanmar Times

The boat trip out took longer than planned. The compressor was being repaired in Yangon, so we had to make a detour to pick up our air bottles. There were only three divers that day: my wife, myself and a local guide. The cool morning had given way to the heat of the afternoon, and the limpid turquoise sea looked inviting as we dropped anchor. Bulky and sweltering in our wetsuits, we clambered into the small seal-grey dinghy.

The boat effortlessly glided to the spot the guide had pointed out. Putting on our masks and fins, we rolled backward into the cool water. Quickly bobbing up to collect my camera,

I signalled to the others to descend. No matter how often you dive, the first few seconds in this alien, silent, weightless world never lose their magic.

Diving in Myanmar may not be quite as cheap or as polished as diving in other parts of Southeast Asia. But it does offer an authentic experience and can be surprisingly accessible. On this dive we were only a few miles away from the idyllic palm-lined beach of Ngapali.



Photo- Michelangelo Pignani / The Myanmar Times

Slowly descending to the seabed, I excitedly spot one of my favourite creatures – a nudibranch. These underwater hermaphrodite slugs are the drag queens of the ocean: They are toxic, and fluorescently advertise it. Resplendent in their flamboyant outfits, they can be surprisingly elusive.

This one was laying eggs, a bright yellow ribbon unravelling behind it. Slowly spiralling around its own axis, with all the deliberation of an hour hand, it would spend most of the day weaving a gossamer Archimedes spiral. My buddy swims around hunting for any other critters she can find, while I happily settle down for a few photos. The visibility today is about 10 metres, and my wife will try to keep visual contact.

That doesn't leave a lot of terrain for her to explore. The itch to venture a little further afield will soon take hold, and after a few minutes I can almost feel her impatience. So after about 20 shots I leave my new-found friend to her, or his, task, and continue on our underwater safari.



Within a few seconds, the dive master is banging his tank to attract my attention, and pointing at a long stretch of cord-like whip coral. We swim over and peer at the finger-thick white stem. A minute fish skitters across the coral's surface like an undersea maglev train on its rail, keeping its belly constantly in contact with the coral. No bigger than the nail on your little finger, this tiny goby will spend its whole life swimming up and down these corals. It has to: A weak swimmer in open water, it would make a tasty snack for any passing predator.

The proximity of the camera makes it anxious, and like some manic elevator it ascends and descends. I know from experience that if you wait a few moments their frantic panic will subside, they will settle down for just enough time for you to take a shot and then the whole dizzying display repeats itself.



Before long, I hear the muffled “clang clang”, tolling the discovery of something else interesting. This time we have considerably moved up in scale, to a fearsome-looking moray eel, its fist-sized death’s-head hypnotically swaying back and forth, its mouth slightly ajar, displaying needle-sharp white teeth. Diver legend holds that they can sever a finger in one bite. I am suspended in water less than a metre away from its toothy jaw, hoping that its short-sightedness and shy disposition will keep it at arm’s length. This brute is a honeycomb moray, with a snake-like body probably more than 3m long, concertinaed away in the crevasse of the reef behind him. They rarely stay around once the flash on the camera fires, and this one is no exception.

Later, a couple of quizzical-looking butterfly fish coyly swim around us, and then the dive master swims into my field of vision jerking his thumb in the direction of the surface, indicating the end of the dive.

Perhaps Myanmar’s best-known dive destination is the Myeik (formerly Mergui) Archipelago. These beautiful islands present the best and most diverse diving in the country. I had the chance to dive here a few seasons ago at the Andaman Island resort. Its 20-plus dive sites are all easily accessible with travel times from the resort ranging from a few minutes to an hour. One of my favourite dive sites is Pink Canyon, a small underwater cleft carpeted in purple and orange soft corals. While sightings of big fish here are rare, smaller reef fish and colourful macro creatures are plentiful.

If staying at a hotel and doing near-shore dives isn’t quite enough, you could consider a live-aboard, where you sleep on the boat that you dive from. They allow divers to explore remoter destinations, often far beyond the limits of day trippers. In Myanmar there are several operators running out of Kawthoung, Tanintharyi Region. While it might be possible to find a scheduled dive trip from here, most only offer diving charters.

Another option is to take a live-aboard run by a Thai-based operator running regular scheduled cruises in Myanmar waters. Trip duration ranges from three to eight days, with three to four dives a day for the serious enthusiast, and the prices generally include food, accommodation and dives. Just be sure that you know what you are letting yourself in for before setting sail.

Myanmar’s diving industry is still in its infancy. But hopefully, with the gradual development of the tourist sector, it will grow into a major source of revenue for the country, and help protect the fragile underwater ecosystem.

Dives around Ngapali are offered by the Ngapali Water Sport Centre (ngapaliwatersport@gmail.com or +959- 49577070). Prices start from around US\$110 for a two-tank dive, including lunch and pickup/drop off from your hotel.

The Myanmar Andaman Resort is closed for renovation, but should open for the winter season of 2015

(sales@myanmarandamanresort.com or <http://www.myanmarandamanresort.com/>). They will have an attached Padi accredited dive centre with training facilities.

Two possible live-aboard options running from Kawthoung are Burma Boating, which offers private charters for divers (<http://www.burmaboating.com>). Prices are about \$4800 a day for a party of up to 12.

Mergui Princess Cruise offers semi-scheduled live-aboard trips (<http://www.merquiprincess.com/>) starting from \$1150 for five days, four nights.

For Thai-based live-aboards visiting Myanmar, there are many companies running from Ranong. One such is The Smiling Seahorse (www.thesmilingseahorse.com). Prices start from \$980 for six days, five nights.