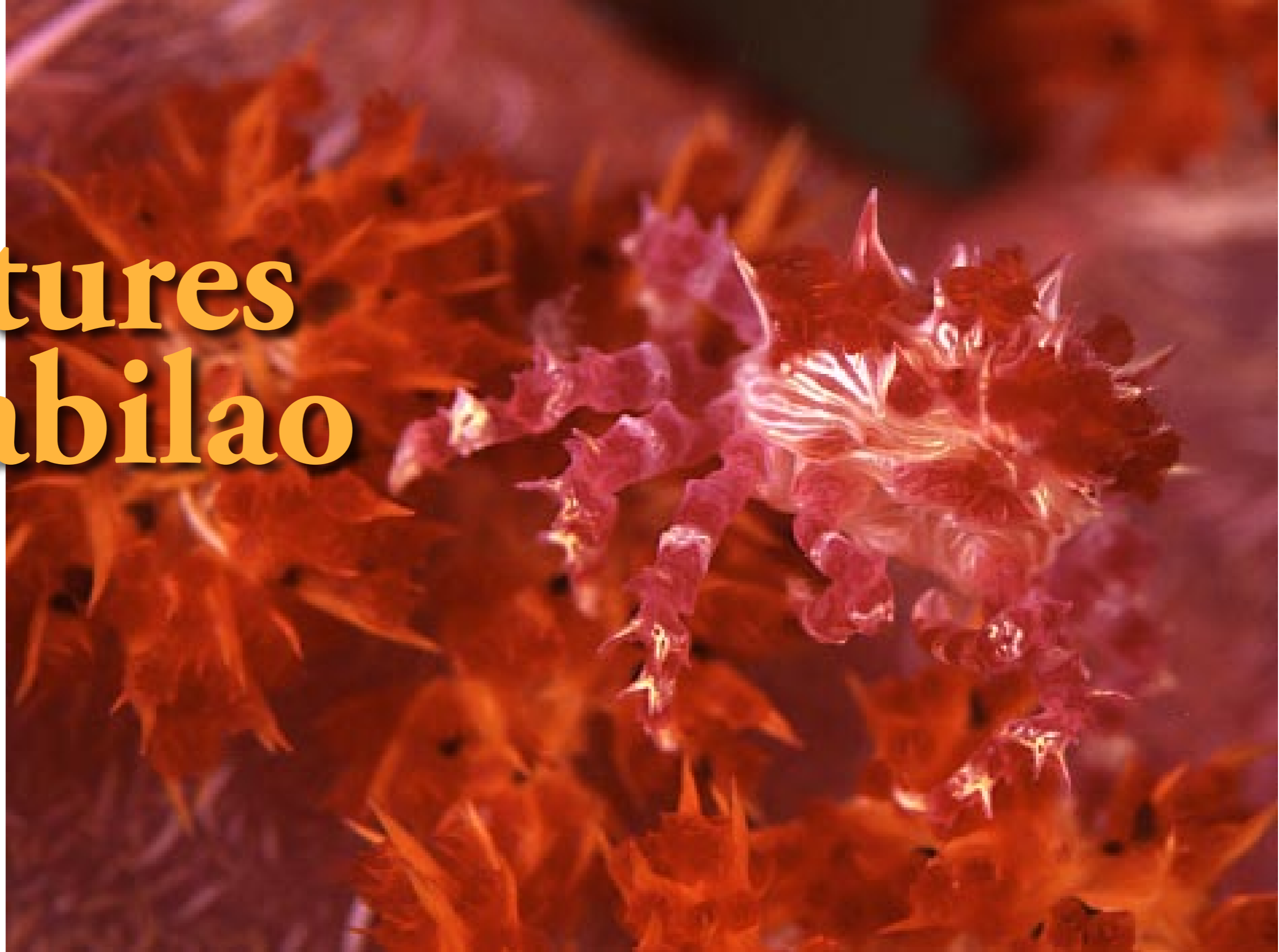


Creatures of Cabilao

Discovering the fancy faces of the Philippines

Text and photos by Nonoy Tan

After a two-hour car ride and an hour boat travel, I finally reached my destination—Cabilao, an island paradise located near Cebu, Philippines. Before coming here, I had read exciting accounts about Cabilao Island, particularly about the stargazers and pygmy seahorses that reside in its surrounding waters. On this trip, I was determined to see these critters, at the same time discover other things that Cabilao had to offer.



A decorator crab mimicks the color and texture of its soft coral host





Completely oblivious to my presence, this white octopus continued its search for prey

The white-sand beaches and crystal blue waters immediately captivated me. As I went to shore, my gracious host Babie gave a pleasant welcome of her vacation haven called La Estrella dive resort. The ambiance scene was very tranquil. Apart from the intermittent courting sounds of the birds, I could hear only the rhythms of the sea and wind. Located a few steps from shore was the native-inspired restaurant where I had an ice-cold drink offered to me by the staff. Later, I was guided to a nipa hut that would be my home for the next four days. In front of the hut was a hammock tied between two coconut trees. It was very inviting.

After settling in, I decided to comb the beach. At a distance, I could see the scuba diving facility earlier pointed to me by Babie. I headed towards its direction. Upon reaching the place, I was met by the Sea Explorers dive personnel with whom I had a chance to plan my diving itinerary for the subsequent days. I would be provided with a dedicated dive guide so I could have a lot of flexibility and time to take photographs. My

expectations were high.

Diving adventure

The following morning, I was at the dive facility early. In no time, I was geared up and ready for the dive. Together with an expert guide, we took a shore entry into calm and clear waters. Less than ten minutes into the dive, I discovered a long-snout pipefish hidden among the seagrass. With a length of about a foot, I could easily have mistaken it for a dead tree branch. Apparently confident of its camouflage, it was unmindful of my presence as I took a few photographs. A few minutes later, my guide pointed a porcelain crab to me. I clicked the shutter several times and then continued to trail my escort.

Upon reaching 80 feet, I noticed a magnificent red sea fan stretching out to the open sea. Upon closer inspection, I detected a red spider crab slowly moving across its branches. The crustacean had overly long and thin legs; it looked like a spider. After taking several shots, I realized that this dive was becoming photographically intense.

Cabilao

Subsequently, my guide led me towards an adjacent sea fan. He aimed his finger to a pair of red pygmy seahorses. One was a third of an inch in size, while the other was even smaller! They easily blended with the color and texture of the tiny coral branches; their camouflage was perfect I had to keep my eyes glued on them in order not to lose them from my sight. At one time,

I made the mistake of glancing at my camera controls and consequently lost sight of the pair. I spent several minutes searching the same coral while the seahorses remained motionless. Completely delighted at finding them again, I took their images until my film was almost exhausted. It was time to head back to shore.

On my return journey, the sight of

a two-inch Pegasus seamoth darting across the sand caught my attention. It had a long snout and a scaly body, but looked nonetheless beautiful. Just as I had used my last film exposure, another seamoth emerged into the scene. This new seamoth was larger and had an alluring mint green body color. Too bad, I did not have any film left in the camera. Nonetheless, I was determined to go



Closer inspection of soft corals reveals a variety of residents such as the porcelain crab



features



Cabilao

LEFT: A brown leaf fish poses for a portrait

TOP RIGHT: Sea moth

BOTTOM RIGHT: This star-gazer waited underneath the sand for an ambush



back later in the evening. In the meantime, the hammock in front of my hut was waiting for me. As a result, I spent the rest of the day in dreamland (sleeping).

Night diving

By nightfall, I was well rested and ready

for another dive. Armed with a flashlight, I was soon underwater. Crabs, prawns, eels stalked the reef for food. Particularly interesting was a stargazer that laid motionless underneath the sand waiting for unsuspecting prey. As I took a mug shot of this monster in disguise, another





Spider crab on a sea fan





fact file

Cabilao, Philippines



History: The Philippine Islands became a Spanish colony during the 16th century; they were ceded to the US in 1898 following the Spanish-American War. The islands attained their independence in 1946 after Japanese occupation in World War II. The 21-year rule of Ferdinand MARCOS ended in 1986, when a widespread popular rebellion forced him into exile. In 1992, the US closed its last military bases on the islands. The Philippines has had a series of electoral presidential transitions since the removal of MARCOS. The government continues to struggle with armed Muslim insurgencies in the south.

Government: Republic
Capital: Manila
Currency: Philippine peso (PHP) per US dollar - 56; per Euro - 70.

Geography: Southeastern Asia, archipelago between the Philippine Sea and the South China Sea, east of Vietnam, mostly mountains with narrow to extensive coastal lowlands; **Coastline:** 36,289 km; **Elevation:** lowest point: Philippine Sea 0 m; highest point: Mount Apo 2,954 m **Agriculture:** rice, coconuts, corn, sugarcane, bananas, pineapples, mangoes, pork, eggs, beef, fish **Natural resources:** timber, petroleum, nickel, cobalt, silver, gold, salt, copper.

Climate: Tropical marine; northeast monsoon (November to April); southwest monsoon (May to October).

Environmental issues: Uncontrolled deforestation especially in watershed areas; soil erosion; air and water pollution in major

urban centers; coral reef degradation; increasing pollution of coastal mangrove swamps that are important fish breeding grounds.

Population: 86,241,697. Percent of population below poverty line: 40%, Ethnic groups: Christian Malay 91.5%, Muslim Malay 4%, Chinese 1.5%, other 3%. Religions: Roman Catholic 83%, Protestant 9%, Muslim 5%, Buddhist and other 3%; **Language:** Filipino & English

Medical/Decompression chambers: Cebu City Recompression Chamber Camp Lapu-Lapu Lahug / Doctor Memerto Ortega. (032) 310-709 or (032) 312-325 / (032) 746-652 loc. 2625

Dive Travel: The best time to visit the Philippines is during the period from November to June. Precipitation is lowest during April and May. Temperatures are cooler during December to February (26- 27°) and warmer between March and May (29°).

Web sites: Sea Explorers Dive Center www.sea-explorers.com El Dorado Beach Resort www.eldoradobeachresort.com La Estrella Resort www.laestrella.ph Philippines Department of Tourism www.wowphilippines.com.ph

Dive info: www.starfish.ch



A pigmy seahorse uses its ingenious camouflage to disappear in the matching patterns of the corals it inhabits

stargazer suddenly jumped out of the sand beside me. Curiously, it exposed itself for a few seconds before digging back into the sand. Other critters showed up as well, such as the brown leaf fish that posed while I took a portrait photograph. After a few minutes, an octopus appeared. This nocturnal predator was oblivious to my presence as it prowled the reef while using its tentacles to poke inside rock crevices in search of prey. I followed the octopus for several minutes until I spotted a soft red coral. Upon closer inspection, I discovered a thorny little crab crawling across the stems. Its red and white coloration, and spiny body mimicked its soft coral host. Unless it had moved, I would not have noticed it.

As I explored the reef, I realized that the underwater night scene was full of life. I was already awed by the large

amount of activity in the reef. Again, I ended the dive with great anticipation that the succeeding days will be as enchanting. I was not disappointed.

For three more days, I savored the sights underneath the waters of Cabilao – beyond doubt, a paradise for critter shutterbugs. Cabilao is best dived and experienced with the warmth and hospitality of La Estrella Resort (www.laestrella.ph) and Sea Explorers Philippines (www.sea-explorers.com). For additional information about diving the Philippine islands check out the Philippines Department of Tourism website (www.wowphilippines.com.ph). ■

In our next issue, we will visit the mystical and magical Philippine island of Dauin with dive writer and award winning underwater photographer, Nonoy Tan.