

Conquering Bunzie's Cove and Capitancillo Island

Contributed by Rod Anthony Arriola
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Bunzie's Cove and Capitancillo Island (Tabogon, Cebu)

I got Rudy Balbuena's invitation to dive in Tabogon from Mike Lazaro. Tabogon is a town in Northern Cebu, bounded by Bogo in the North, San Remigio in the West, Borbon in the South and the Camotes Sea to the East. I relayed the invitation to Toby Panopio. I was only told where the dive was and given a date, time and place to meet. I didn't really ask for more details. This was an invitation to dive in a new place, and as usual, I was all for it. Have tanks, will dive. I have turned down several invitations from Mike and Rudy B. in the past, and I was not about to turn this invitation down.

It was a day before the dive that I got more details from Mike. Apparently, we were scheduled to do a clean-up for the first dive at the house reef in Bunzie's Cove in Bito-on, Tabogon. Then, I learned of an added bonus -- The second dive was in Capitancillo Island. I thought then, Now you're talking!

Toby asked me for more details regarding the day's dive when I picked him up that morning and I didn't have any more details to give him. I was only advised to bring my gear and weights...and to remind Toby to bring his camera.

Getting to Tabogon was no problem. The road going north is well cemented and safe except for a few peeves – a bridge under construction in Catmon, and of course, the tricycles in the highway that slow you down, plus the occasional gung-ho (see A*&HOLE) Ceres and Rough Rider bus driver.

Nobody knew where Bunzie's Cove, the site of our first clean-up dive, was. Nobody even knew where Bito-on, Tabogon was. All we knew was how to get to Tabogon.

"Once in Tabogon, just look for a National Geographic logo, colored red, right side when you're going north. You won't miss it" was the only instruction Mike said was given to him by Rudy. Rudy was already in Tabogon. He went there the day before to prepare for the day's dive.

The gate to Bunzie's Cove indeed had that very prominent "National Geographic logo, but colored red" thing. It was very hard to miss.

After filling up all the tanks, Rudy B. gave us the briefing inside the living room of the main house in Bunzie's Cove with a breathtaking view of the Camotes Sea. From this point, Rudy pointed northeast to the lighthouse in Capitancillo Island.

Our itinerary for the day was relayed as such:

First dive, shore entry and exit, House reef, Bunzie's Place, Tabogon. Lunch. Second dive was after lunch, boat dive Capitancillo Island.

We were told what to expect in the cove and in Capitancillo Island.

We were also honored to be diving with one of the pioneers of SCUBA diving in Cebu –Dodong Peña with his son Bernard. (Most of you may have heard of Dodong Peña. Well, I'm proud to say that we met him, talked to him...and even dove with him.) We were all but Padwans in the presence of this Jedi Master.

After the briefing and registration, we were assigned to team up in threes. Toby and myself were "pre-assigned" to Tet Ko by hubby, "Lovey" Oliver, who couldn't make it that day and texted me the night before. Mike was with Hastang lead guitarist Gaw Luche and girlfriend Phoebe Pacquiao. Louie and Lynn Moro were with Giandi Pajes. The Peña's with

Manuel Castro and Rudy B.

The order of the day was to HAVE FUN...the clean-up was just an excuse to get together with other divers and dive in a new site. But we were doing our share to clean up the environment.

The house reef was exactly as Rudy described it. An assortment of corals could be seen even with poor visibility with abundant growth and marine life at 20-40 ft. Below that depth, the bottom becomes more lined with silt, with visibility only for several meters. With more divers finning, the poorer the visibility became.

We met with Louie, Lynn and Giandi underwater. Their sack was filled up and ours was...well...it was not empty! Suffice it to say that we just didn't find any more trash underwater. It seems they got it all out. They're really good at it! The only rubbish we managed to collect consisted of a plastic cup, 2 candy wrappers, a small piece of PVC pipe, and well, that was it.

When we met Mike, Gaw and Phoebe underwater, they only got a hook and line so I placed my sack in theirs to make it look full. When we got back to the cove, I saw Rudy's sack also filled up with trash. No wonder. Lynn began wondering if indeed Tet was cleaning up the reef when we started talking about the shrimps and the fishes that we saw.

All too soon, it was time for lunch! We ate in one of the cottages on the cliffside in Bunzie's Cove. After eating, we had time to wade in the pool while the tanks were refilled. Near the pool was another red NatGeo logo. It was about 10 feet tall and roughly 6 feet wide. Nobody knew what it symbolized, or what it was for, and naturally, it became the topic of our discussion. I was about to suggest extra-terrestrial origin when we were called to board Rudy's boat.

Our next stop was Capitancillo Island, one of the oldest lighthouses in the Philippines located in the Municipality of Bogo, Cebu. The original lighthouse was built by the Spanish colonial authorities, but was replaced with the slender concrete tower we see today sometime in the 1950s. The northern half of the island has been declared a marine reserve. Why only the northern half and why not the whole area are questions I cannot answer. It is way beyond my pay grade to even ask.

It was a 30 minute boat ride from Bunzie's Cove to the lighthouse. On our way, we sighted several pods of dolphins from a distance. I also got the chance to ask Sir Dodong Peña an important question...what year did he start diving? He answered 1955. Wow! We got to talking about the gear they used during that time and started comparing it with the present gear we were using when Rudy interrupted us to ask which part of the island we wanted to check out. Sir Dodong suggested the Southwest wall. He had been here several times in the past and knew the good sites. Not as good as way back during their time, we were forewarned, but these sites are still okay.

Converging with our buddy teams, we went on to conquer Capitancillo.

Visibility now was far better than our first dive. The reef top was shallow, about 30 feet. Rudy, in his briefing, told us there was still dynamite fishing in the area. Yes, people still continue to do it. And yes, the politicians and other authorities know but do nothing about it, as is the case in Kaubian Island off Olango Island in Mactan and other blasted areas.

Past the thick growth of corals which line the edge of the reef top, was the wall. It had overhangs and small caves, so many that I had to stop counting after 5 (as I do my beer). They say there are large pelagics in the area, and even Manta Rays and Whitetip sharks; but they were not there that day, and we were at a shallower depth. The bottom will have to be reserved for the next time we dive here. The site, however, was abundant with the smaller reef fishes, and Toby seemed to have a great time taking Macro shots of everything. We all had a great time.

On our way back to Bunzie's Cove, we saw the dolphins again. This time, they were nearer. We confirmed about 3 pods. Rudy said they were resident dolphins there and are actually present year-round. I started wondering why dolphin and whale watching trips are all the rage in Bohol and Bais, but virtually nonexistent in Cebu. That would be a question worth raising...it's not beyond my pay grade. But I was just too engrossed watching the dolphins to think about it.

We had bigger smiles when we got to the cove than when we left. We cleaned and stashed our gear, washed up, and talked some more while eating the left-over food from lunch. After a while, we said goodbye to Rudy who was staying for another night. Hopefully, next time, we'll get a chance to meet the owner of Bunzie's Place, Annie Chen, who we should thank for financing the event and inviting us to her lovely resort, and Jet Valenzuela, who provided the PADI certificates for the clean-up. Thank you all so much.

It was getting dark when I drove the 2 hours or so back to Cebu City. Toby and I agreed that it was a great dive and that we needed to plan another dive in Capitancillo Island -- perhaps even stay overnight at Bunzie's Cove -- while Mike snored in the back seat. We will certainly be back for more of this. I'm sure Tabogon has more dive sites to offer.

About the Author: Rod Anthony Arriola is a singer, a performer, an orthopaedic specialist, a storyteller, a satirist, and the co-founder of CebuDiver.com. His official title -- according to his ITR, birth certificate, driver's license, and other pertinent documents -- is All Around Handsome Guy. But sometimes, he moonlights as The Life of The Party, too. More frequently, he goes by his alter-ego, The General. Other times, he's just Rod Arriola, no title necessary. [the editor]