

The Samboan Experience

Contributed by Rod Anthony Arriola
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I have been to Samboan several times, and on three occasions, I was there to dive. The first time was to explore the reef in Kulasi with a group. Kulasi was a newly declared marine sanctuary back in early 2000, and we went there upon the invitation of then Mayor Peter Calderon through Atty. Mark Tolentino (who was still a non-diver back in early 2000). In 2007, I went back twice - in August to explore Bato, Samboan, and on late September, upon the invitation of Samboan incumbent Mayor Raymond Calderon through his brother Dr. Tito Calderon, to check out Kulasi marine sanctuary again. Nobody had underwater cameras back then when we first went to Kulasi. Fred Q, John M and Toby were in that dive, along with several other divers. We all remembered a healthy growth of corals, lots of squid, but that was it. We did, however, remember the current. more»

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Our latest visit to Kulasi was for me, an event to last a lifetime. Those who were present were Dr. Tito of course, Fred Q, Toby, Atty. Mark, Oliver and Tet, Tim, Gaw and Phoebe, and my favorite dive buddy Nene.

Remembering what happened in our previous dive at this spot, Toby and I decided not to bring our cameras. Toby had a feeling that we will spot a shark on the first dive, but the current was something that worried us, so the cameras had to stay on the boat.

And so we dove.

The current was not as strong as our previous dive here and we feasted our eyes on a reef so alive, I suddenly missed my camera.

Twenty six minutes into the dive and at 50 feet underwater, Fred was banging his tank like crazy. I have heard Fred's banging in Tinggo and Moalboal and I knew he was on to something. I turned around and saw from a distance the outline of a huge fish. With visibility good for several meters, I could just barely make out the stripes on it's side. My first thought was a Tiger shark! So I swam in front of Nene who was closer to it than I was, so she would think that I came in between her and the Tiger shark being all heroic...but in truth I swam in front of her so I could get a better look at it and still be heroic!

The huge fish decided to swim in our direction. As it came nearer, the distinct "checkerboard" spots and stripes on its skin became clearer. It was not a Tiger shark. It was a Whale Shark...my first ever Whale Shark!

About 25ft long, and now only five feet away from us, I went for a closer look and swam with it for several seconds. I swam back to my group and found Tim, who had brought his camera, and signaled if he was able to take a shot. He signaled back how he fumbled with his camera and that he wasn't able to take a shot at it. Not to worry...Oliver and the rest of the divers were ahead of us and the whale shark was moving in their direction. Hopefully, he'll get a picture of it. We had to finish the dive before we would know if he was successful or not.

Shark Finder Fred did it again. We were all shouting underwater and shook hands with each other feeling very lucky at what we just encountered. Shark Finder Fred is the Man!

I just wanted to end the dive after that. Nothing could top what we just saw! We continued on however, and found more fish and corals and spectacular rock formations. But my mind was still on the recent experience of seeing a magnificent creature.

On the surface, and waiting for the boat to pick us up, we were still shouting. Tim later told us he "never felt so small underwater". I looked at Toby and asked why he did not follow me when I got closer to the shark, all he could say was he was in shock.

Oliver got his shot of the whale shark. Thank goodness! Now we have proof that we indeed saw it. Back in Marine Village in Santander, Oliver told the Japanese DM working there that we saw a whale shark. The DM just smiled and probably did not believe it and said he has been diving for several years now in Santander and only saw a whale shark once years back. Oliver showed him the whale shark picture, and his eyes got bigger than a Japanese anime character. Now, we are authorities on whale shark sightings in Samboan.

That night, we were guests at the Calderon household. It was the Samboan fiesta, and we were treated to a major banquet. Dinner was just in time as we already had a whale shark of an appetite!

Underwater photography by Oliver Ko. Thank you Oliver!