

An Oasis in the Philippines – Marco Vincent Dive Resort

Story and Photos by Bonnie McKenna

When I entered the lobby of the Marco Vincent Dive Resort my first reaction was, “I have stepped into an oasis.” With welcoming smiles and an efficiency that rivals most hotels in the world, the staff quickly checked me in and I was shown to my room in minutes. After traveling, from Texas, for what felt like a week; all the noise and confusion of travel disappeared.

On a recommendation from friends, I came to Puerto Galera on Mindoro, specifically to stay at the Marco Vincent Dive Resort and to do some SCUBA diving.

Mindoro is one of the larger islands that make up the Philippine archipelago. It is at the apex of what marine scientists call the richest and most biologically diverse areas in the world, the Coral Triangle.

On my first evening at the resort I was treated to a ‘sunset cruise’ on board *Big Beth*, Marco Vincent’s safari banca (a Philippine designed outrigger boat). The boat departed White Beach for a slow cruise in and through the waterways and lagoons of the fringe islands. Tropical sunsets are always filled with a riot of glorious reds, oranges and yellows against a sapphire blue sky, I was not disappointed.

I had only four days to take advantage of diving in the area. I was scheduled to be at the dive shop the next morning promptly at 9 a.m. At the appointed time I was introduced to Warren, who would be my dive guide for the next few days. After securing my gear, we boarded the resort’s Jeepney (the ever-present symbol of the Philippines) for a short drive to the pier where I was introduced to the *Lady Merci*, a well-appointed 40-foot dive boat, and her crew.

There are numerous dive sites in the surrounding area. Like all dive resorts they have their own names for various sites. Many sites I could not find on the published site map, but no matter, the guides knew where the diving was the best. My first dive was at a place called ‘The Rocks’ a rocky slope with healthy corals, good viz and lots of nudibranchs. Over the next days, I was treated to a wunderpus displaying numerous postures as it ran across the sand, several mimic octopuses, nudies of all shapes and colors, as well as ghost pipefish, cuttlefish, blue ribbon eels, anemone fish, and pink-eared mantis shrimp. Underwater photography is one of my passions, the other is muck diving; Secret Bay Left and Secret Bay Right did not disappoint and they quickly became my favorite sites. Although I did not have enough time to go there, another great dive site is Verde Island; known for beautiful walls and lots of colorful fish activity, this is a must do while staying at the resort.

While having breakfast, on my last day, I was talking to a Filipino woman from Denver who summed up her stay at Marco Vincent by saying, “I am so happy to be staying here because it is a top-end resort without being egregiously expensive and not the usual bare-bones dive resort. It is clean, comfortable and the staff makes me feel like family.”

Getting There: Marco Vincent guests are taken care of immediately upon arrival in Manila. If you arrive in Manila too late to travel to Puerto Galera the same day, the Marco Vincent staff in Manila will suggest a hotel. In the morning promptly at 8 a.m. a private car will meet you to take you to the port in Batangas;

a 90 minute trip. Ferries to Puerto Galera run only in daylight hours and in fair weather; the trip takes approximately one hour. On arrival at the port, guests are met by a resort representative who will guide you to the ferry. Everything in the terminal seems to be in a state of mass confusion, there are vehicle ferries, people ferries (50 people with baggage/cargo), and lots of people going and coming; having someone to guide you through the process is a welcome relief.

Upon arrival at the port in Puerto Galera a Jeepney takes guests on a short 15 minute ride to the Marco Vincent Dive Resort, located on White Beach, at the northern end of the island.

The Resort: The Marco Vincent is a Mediterranean-style resort with 38 air-conditioned rooms ranging from Queen to Family sized rooms, all equipped with television, refrigerator and Wi-Fi connection. The center piece of this beautiful resort is the large indoor pool and spa. There are three restaurants: El Patio, the poolside restaurant serving American dishes and traditional Filipino delicacies. Marivelles, located on the top floor and The Aqua Bar and Restaurant located on the beach. The Aqua Bar is a great place to toast the sunset and have dinner under the stars. For meetings or groups, there is a multi-function room with the latest audio-visual equipment; the perfect place for dive groups to share photos and videos.

Diving: Marco Vincent is a PADI 5-star dive facility committed to quality dive education. Dive courses offered are Open Water through Dive Master. The dive shop maintains a fully equipped rental and retail facility to fulfill the needs of any diver. Nitrox is available to qualified divers. Six to 10 day dive packages are available. The packages include full board, three boat dives and unlimited beach dives per day.

Weather permitting; *Big Beth* is capable of carrying up to 34 divers in complete comfort on dive trips to the outer islands. The favored destination is Apo Reef, a coral reef situated on the western side of Occidental Mindoro in the Mindoro Strait.

For those interested in other water sports and/or land tours, the hotel staff will be happy to assist with these activities. There are village visits, beautiful waterfalls, volcanoes and treks to take advantage of when not diving.

Sadly, my four day holiday went by too quickly, but I will return to enjoy my new friends, the hospitality of Marco Vincent Dive Resort and to put on my dive gear to once again marvel at the wonders found beneath the surface.

Aside from providing guests with comfortable rooms, good food and diving at Marco Vincent Dive Resort, the owners are involved in training young people, from the area, in the service industry. A number of students from a local college are hired as interns to get experience in all aspects of hospitality service from kitchen duties to the front desk. The goal is to provide the students with a skill to offer prospective employers when they enter the working world.

For more information, go to www.mvdive.com