

THE APO ISLAND VISIT

Apo Island at the southern tip of Negros Oriental is world renowned among scuba divers. For one thing, it is a marine sanctuary. So corals, fish and other marine life such as turtles remain undisturbed and do proliferate.



There are number of resorts south of Dumaguete that cater to divers, many of whom are foreigners. Services include scuba gear rental with accompanying dive masters, and transportation on a large out-trigger

boat to the island, as shown above. This usually is a day trip that gives an hour or two of diving.

My US-based daughter Babette is a diver, and she has dived there a couple of times, the first being over 6 years ago. In her last visit to the Philippines 2 months ago with her two young children, (Asha 5-1/2 and Corey 4), she decided to make another trip, and this time, I tagged along, my first time ever. We had to bring along a retinue - the temporary nanny of the two kids, hired for the 6 week duration of their visit, and for good measure, some house help, which included the two pre-teen children of our cleaning woman, one of whom we are sending to school. All of them are good swimmers and they get along very well with my grandkids. Lisa decided not to join as she had been there before. And we decided to stay overnight at Apo.

There are other options getting to the island. The less expensive way is to bypass those foreign owned resorts with their package deals, and go to the Malatipay pier, about 20 km south of Dumaguete, pay P300 for a one way fare on the smaller boats plying the route. Staying overnight on the island is no problem. There are a number of resorts with various classes of accommodations. From hotel-like structures to room-rental arrangements by the locals. The lower rates, patronized by many young European backpackers seem to average P300 - P500 per night, or about \$7 - \$11 a day.

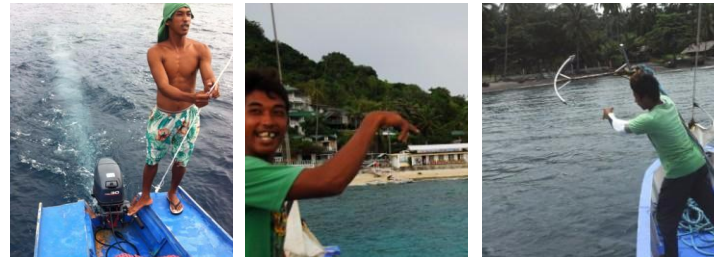
There were 8 of us in the party, and since this was Babette's treat, she warned we all go economical. She made all the preparations via internet and found a certain fellow named Mario who offered to provide the boat ride back and forth (on a two-masted sail boat) for P2,500 and put us up in a dormitory of eight bunk beds in one big room with 2 t&b for P1,500. Scuba gear rental and accompanying dive-master was P1,300 per dive. It was a very good deal. He also provided meals, which turned out most reasonable.



The jump-off point was not Malatipay pier but some beach closer, accessed from a narrow road at signpost km 17. That's Apo island in the distance, and the motorized sailboat on the right. Inset shows it backed up to the shore. It certainly was better than a motorized banca. Even had a loo and cabin.

I would have enjoyed it more if the two-man crew raised sail and went to Apo Island on sail power, but for that short distance of about 7 km, they used the 30 hp Yamaha outboard engine, which even they admitted was underpowered. It took an hour. That's a speed of about 4 knots. The boats from the resorts (left) go much faster. Yet, they said that when in a stiff wind on sail power, they fly over the water, such as on trips to Siquijor, Bohol and Boracay. Good environmentalism. I later had long talks with owner Mario and was much impressed.

Photos below show the tiller-man steering the boat using his foot; him asking his boss where to drop anchor; then him tossing the anchor from the bow (front). With the



bow position secured, they back up the boat closer to shore; tiller man jumps into the water and brings the land line to shore where he secures it on a tree trunk, then they pay out both bow and stern lines, adjusting such that the back (stern) of the boat is safely closest to the shore. If the sea is rough, and the tide is low (exposing the rocky shore), the boat could be damaged. So invariably, you wade to shore thigh high at best. At worst, you get a complete drenching. The boatmen carry your belongings on their heads as part of the service. Sometimes, as an option, they may carry you piggy-back style.



That's me, Asha, and Corey. Note plywood decks over the out-triggers for more deck space. On left side is stairs that can be lowered for easy access to the water. On right is a small out-trigger banca for service (better seen on inset on left photo).



The party of eight, counting Babette who took the picture.



As we approached Apo Island, first view was an enclave isolated by rocks on both sides.

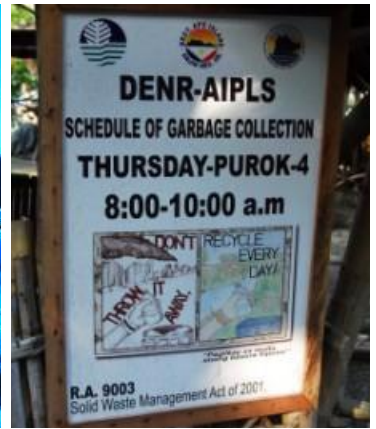
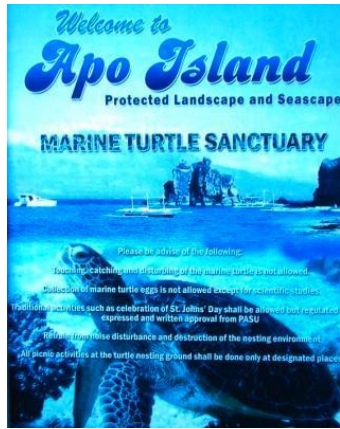
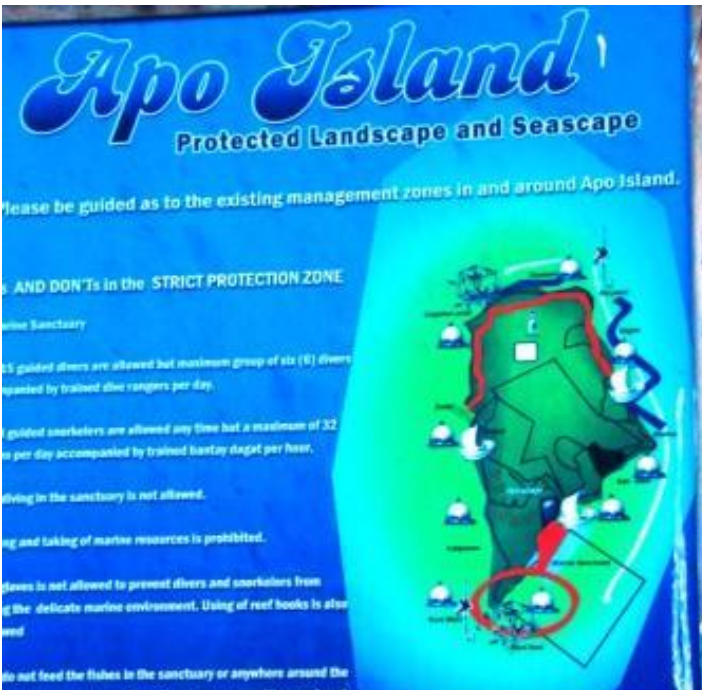


Just past the enclave was the village where everybody alights. Below is an administrative building, where one registers and pays the landing fees: P100 for foreigners, P30 for locals, half for children, and P10 for seniors.



And there were many posters and signs here and there indicating the sights on the island.

Below is a map of Apo, about half a square mile in area.



Top left photo shows the turtles. Top right indicates garbage collection schedules. Sign above advertises Mario's resort, while the photo on left is a shot of a private house with sign of room for rent, at P500 per day.

I don't have any pictures or rates of the fancier rooms or resorts but they are there. See Mario's homestay room sign above.

However, they can't have all the amenities of mainland resorts because of the following.

- a) electricity only in the late afternoon to about 9:00 pm.
- b) no central water supply.



The accommodations provided by Mario were great. On left is the dormitory building with our large room on the third floor. The right photo shows some of the bunk beds.

To the right of the dormitory is the main resort structure with private rooms, dinning hall, etc

And there is running water.

Apparently, each establishment has an extensive roof draining/filter system that collects rain water into a storage tank. The water is pumped to smaller overhead tanks near the bathrooms. And drinking water is brought in by boat.

Almost every incoming boat disgorges dozens of those black plastic 5 gallon containers of potable water. However, there are numerous wells on the island, such as



shown in photo on left . The water is brackish, which is good enough for laundry needs, and sometimes bathing.

Surprisingly, up to a few years ago, there was a complete central water distribution system on the island. Source was high tech sea desalinization using reverse osmosis

According to Mario, even now there are a number of places serviced by a local company that provide desalinization, such as in Mactan. This same company proposed such a system to the board members and municipality of Dauin, of which Apo is a barrio. It was a build-operate project wherein the contractor provided all the funding, then got back their investment as they collected water payments at a very reasonable rate. So it was approved, built, and operated, but that went on only for less than a year. The company found itself losing money, and proposed that they be paid an additional P30,000 a year for the unexpected higher diesel fuel costs. By that time, Mario wasn't anymore a board member, and though he felt this additional cost was well worth it, the contract was terminated, the company pulled out its equipment, and all that remains now are some 4 inch black plastic pipes running along the pathways of the village. Mario says that the cost of transporting water from the mainland runs twice what the cost should have been for the reverse osmosis system. I understood it costs about P30 per 5-gallon container. In Tanjay, it is P20.



Left photo shows yours truly beside a typical rain water storage tank, typically of fiberglass. Others are concrete. Note roof drain pipes running into tank.

Power, on the other hand, is available. Their central generator is on the other side of the island, not in the village, but it runs only from about 6 in the afternoon to 9:30 at night.

Apparently, this gives adequate time for electric pumps to transfer the water to overhead tanks.

I found Mario an amazing person. A graduate of Silliman, he is a diver, entrepreneur, part politician, population control advocate and most importantly, an environmentalist. His family is one of the original settlers in the island. The island has about 800 plus inhabitants, mainly children. Some years back, he had invited some population commission people for a series of seminars, and he noted that the year before, the birth rate was 29, the next year it was 19, and last year was 9.



He ought to know because his wife is a midwife who does most of the birth delivery on the island.

That is Mario shown on left photo with Babette, Corey and his wife Mila.

There was a young Belgian who went diving with Babette, accompanied by the ever-present dive master. There only are six accredited resident dive masters on the island. This does not count those dive masters who come with the tourist boats from the mainland resorts.

So during peak season, there is a lack of dive masters on the island, and the Belgian, Jean I think was his name, was aiming to come back, get accreditation, and then become one of them. There are many such cases that Babette has heard about, such as in Boracay, Sipalay and other places. For those more enterprising, and with extra financial backing, they eventually settle down to open a dive shop and resort. Jean had been all over Asia doing the dive spots, and said the Philippines was the best, mainly because of the climate, the attitude of friendliness and easy-going ways of the people, and lastly, their facility with English. He hitched a ride back with us on the boat, and we offered him a ride in our van to Dumaguete where he was billeted at a P300 a day hotel.

So what did we do while Babette was off doing her dives? We frolicked in the beach and water, as shown in photos below. At least the kids and their nannies did. I just swam and bit and did a lot of walking and exploring.



Above photos shows the low tide and then high tide scenes of basically the same area. These is where the sea turtles can be seen when snorkeling. Later, with Babette, all of them (except me and grandkid Corey) took turns donning face mask and snorkel. That's Asha at left.



The shore line of the island near the village isn't really like what great beaches such as Boracay are known for, with wide white stretches of sand. Above view is looking north, opposite from the two shore views on the previous page. Beyond those rocks is the sandy enclave shown in the first photo on page 2. Yet, way beyond all that is one of the best diving spots, according to Babette, with a deep rocky shore lined with coral and populated by a fantastic array of sealife. They divers go down to about 20 meters.



The Marine Sanctuary is at the southern end of the island, easily accessed by a 300 meter walk from the village. Unfortunately, last year's storm tore up the area. Sign on the photo says it is temporarily closed, which I suppose means one can't go swimming there. The beach was wide with coarse sand and coral.



Walking to the Marine Sanctuary is through meandering "roads" (more like widened pathways - no motorized vehicles on the island) that pass some sort of lagoon, mangrove "forest", and such structures as the day care center and drugstore, as shown in the clockwise photos.

I didn't venture far. Crossing to the other side of the island involves climbing a steep path passing the famed lighthouse on top of a bluff. Too much for me.



Above two photos are more shots of tourists. Lower photo shows Babette with some of them.



There was a birthday party in the village, and a group of drum and percussion players performed music. The central tune was carried by a small home-made xylophone. And the tourists flocked around.

Since I didn't have any photos of the views underwater, especially Babette's report of a man-size parrot fish, I am presenting below the closest substitute: the fish we had for lunch, freshly caught and broiled to our heart's content.

