

Everyday  
encounters with  
thresher sharks  
are the norm  
off the coast of  
Malapascua Island

IMAGES: JACOB MAENTZ

In the center of the Philippine archipelago, these relatively harmless underwater creatures have transformed the tourist economy of the island, becoming the biggest attraction as well as the main source of income for many islanders

By **Chiloy Boholano**



## Sounds are limited to rhythmic, gurgled breathing



**ABOVE**  
Abundant underwater life has introduced new jobs to the island over the years; (opposite) thresher shark-spotting boat trips take place on a daily basis

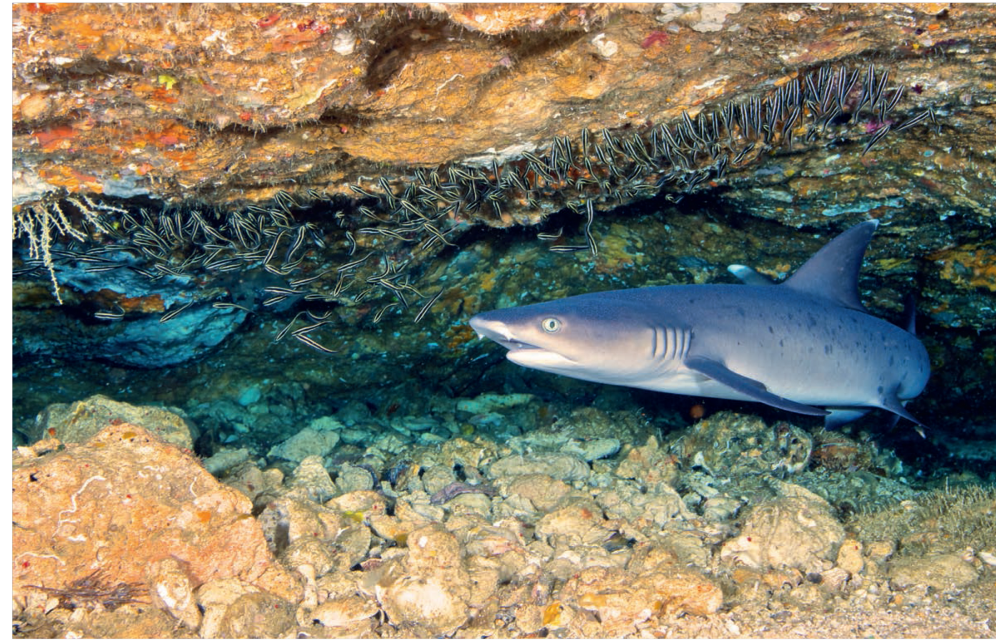
and dawn's first light has only just started to illuminate the underwater cliff that we are standing on. This, along with the incredibly dark blue backdrop, are all contributing to the eerie feeling that comes with waiting for a shark beneath the open sea.

We are in Monad Shoal, an underwater island on the edge of a 200m drop-off, and the only known point in the world where the deep water-dwelling thresher sharks congregate every morning, all year round. These large, long-tailed sharks, which have been listed as vulnerable to extinction by the World Conservation Union since 2007, come here daily to have themselves cleaned or, occasionally, give birth. It's here, off the small island of Malapascua in north Cebu, that these fish with huge, scythe-like tails jettison their solitary instincts.

Divers have coined this part of Malapascua's waters the thresher sharks' cleaning station. A mix of colorful and light brown cleaner wrasses are abundant here. These smaller fish are parasite pickers that use their thick lips to eat dead skin and bacteria from the sharks' body and gills, and are even courageous enough to go looking for snacks inside their mouths.

Anywhere from two to seven sharks show up every morning. Today, three sharks have come here to unwittingly give a free show to an audience of more than a dozen divers. We hold a rope and form a line as the sharks swim parallel to and above us. Some are swimming so near that we can just about reach out for a feel.

"At first, I was scared. They're very impressive. But eventually you'll see that they're actually very friendly," says Anastacia Chaves, a 28-year-old diving visitor from France. Like many others, she has been lured by Malapascua Island and amazed by the animals that drive its tourist trade.





“The only known point in the world where thresher sharks congregate every morning, all year round”

Getting here from the city of Cebu is easy; it takes around three hours on the road to the municipality of Daanbantayan, with two short boat transfers. The island is so small that you can take a motorcycle and circle the entire expanse within an hour or two, depending on how much time you take ogling coconuts or snapping photos of the surroundings. Malapascua Island has no bank and bicycling around the interior can be hard, as maneuvering in soft sand is tricky – which is why motorcycles are more commonly used. Gasoline is imported from the mainland and usually sold in 1-liter soft-drink bottles.

Before the dive, we thrill-seekers were educated about dos and don'ts under

the water. In addition to avoiding quick movements, we were instructed to follow the rope and stay with the group. To test concentration and alertness, we had to prove we could add 110 and 246, and then assemble a child's puzzle before diving under the water.

Our adventure to Monad Shoal had begun on the beach at 4.30am. Like hardworking fishermen, we waded to a small blue and white boat, flashlights on hand, under the dark sky. Our slow pace betrayed the tiredness we felt, but you could tell that everyone was excited.

A five-minute ride took us to a larger boat where our scuba equipment lay

**BELOW**  
Monad Shoal is an underwater island and classified as an intermediate dive site; (opposite) unspoiled coral gardens can be spotted throughout



IMAGE: DAVID KLEINFELT

IMAGE: DAVID KLEINFELT





waiting, as shades of magenta, orange and lavender swirled together above a still dark sea. This magnificent sky served as the only sight during the 30-minute trip, but it was more than enough. By the time we arrived, the light show had already ended and the bright rays of morning were ready to illuminate our sub-aquatic adventure.

Suited up in scuba gear, we followed a rope underwater and plunged to a depth equivalent to a six-storey building to reach the underwater coral plateau. It was on this cliff edge that we waited for the sharks.

Thresher sharks, which have big, dark eyes and small, sharp teeth, usually feed on schooling fish such as mackerel and herring. Their slender bodies can be spotted completely jumping out of water. These sharks use their tails to hunt and stun prey; their predatory instincts begin so early that pups even eat each other inside their mothers' bellies.

However, even these sharks' powerful tails cannot protect them from another hunter: humans. Like most magnificent creatures, the thresher sharks are also hunted for their fins and meat. Overfishing has caused a steady decline in their numbers – but help is at hand.

"We formed the *Migo sa Iho* [Visayan for 'Friends of Sharks'], a group of local law enforcers also known as the Bantay



#### FUN FACTS ABOUT THRESHER SHARKS

They take 11 years to sexually mature.

They use their tails to chop off their prey before they eat.

They travel alone.

They eat each other inside the womb; that's why they cannot produce a lot of pups. They have been found to produce only a maximum of two.

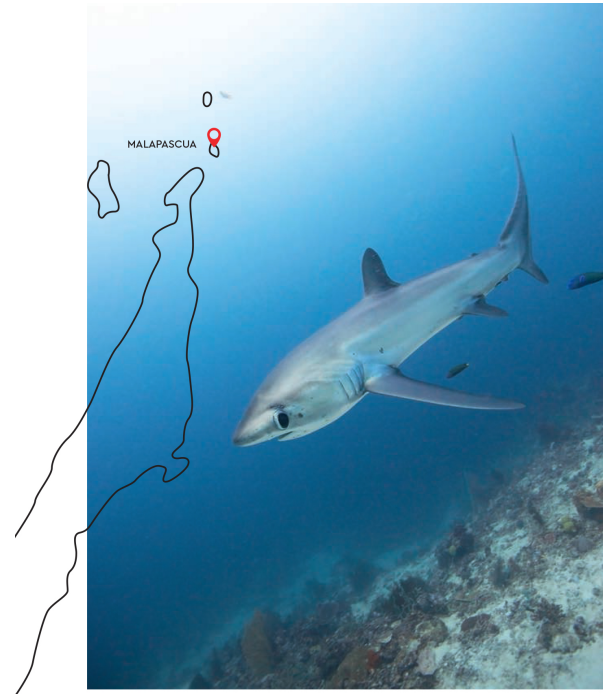
No tourists have been harmed by the sharks.

Dagat," says Atty. Anna Oposa, co-founder and executive director of Save Philippine Seas. "It is a joint effort of dive shop operators and managers who collectively call themselves the Malapascua Marine Preservation Fund, a Malapascua-based NGO called SharkLink and Save Philippine Seas. The members underwent coastal law-enforcement training with the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, and then became deputized law enforcers." In the last two years, the organization has succeeded in apprehending illegal fishing activities in coordination with the local government unit. "Prior to their work, there was little to no apprehension," Oposa adds.

In Malapascua, despite the fact that shark tourism has been going on for a decade, Monad Shoal was only recently declared a marine sanctuary. "There has been an improvement in underwater behavior," scuba diving instructor Dennis Bryan Bait-it explains. "Incidents like hitting of corals have been diminished. Some tourists, if you don't explain the rules properly, get too excited and want to chase sharks."

Resorts and dive shops across the island have been active in the education of diving tourists when it comes to the upkeep of underwater life, especially in Monad Shoal.

"Some divers are not properly trained and it degrades the environment," says Gary



## "We plunged to a depth equivalent to a six-storey building"

"I've been here for over 10 years, and shark tourism had already started taking place across the island when I reached the shores," 48-year-old Eduardo Baguio tells me in Cebuano as he sits inside his small souvenir hut beside the beach. The "I Love Malapascua" white T-shirt the vendor is sporting contrasts heavily against his sun-darkened skin.

He says tourism on the island is even better now. After diving, tourists usually lounge around in the long stretches of white sand or take a dip and decide whether the waters, which look like boundless liquid diamonds, are clearer in the Caribbean Sea or here.

"Before, along this stretch there were only two cottages for guests. Now, there are rows of them and most are actually very nice," says 56-year-old beach masseuse Elina Comendador. Seated across from me on the sand, she protects herself from the sun with circular shades, a white fisherman's hat and matching light blue blouse and pants. She used to sit alone on the beach and offer her services around 22 years ago. Now, there is healthy competition among beach masseurs on the island.

Some residents also make money from carving sharks to sell as souvenirs. For a meter of wood, they can earn up to PHP3,000. "Shark tourism provides income," 35-year-old Ryan Barcenas says with a smile as he stops on the sandy pathway near the beach. He has been supporting his family of four for eight years now by carving and selling wooden sharks. Like the other carvers here, he looks at shark photos and replicates them through his work.

As I sit on the sand and stare at the setting sun, I reflect on my shark encounter from earlier that day – that extraordinary moment when, crouching on the coral plateau, waiting for the purplish-gray fish to approach me, my emotions quickly transferred from excited and scared to calm and completely captivated.

#### WHERE TO STAY

Malapascua has around 30 lodgings that range from concrete hotels and resorts to rustic thatched-roof cabanas dotting its coasts.

Among those standing just a few meters from the beach is **Exotic Island Dive Resort** ([malapascua.net](http://malapascua.net)). This resort, which is well known in the area, has villas that mix concrete with *amakan* (hand-woven bamboo) walls.

For cottages and villas by the beach, try **Cocobana Beach Resort** ([cocobana.ch](http://cocobana.ch)) or the sea-facing rooms with private balconies at **Ocean Vida Beach and Dive Resort** ([ocean-vida.com](http://ocean-vida.com)).

Cases, who has been diving for 39 years. His outlet, Divilink, is among the diving shops active in the preservation of the sharks.

"The number of tourists coming to Malapascua increases almost every year," Bait-it tells me while sitting on the boat and waiting for divers to suit up. The island's tourists come from all around the world – an average of 500 visitors arrive every month. If it is winter in Europe, lots of Europeans come for extended stays.

Asian travelers, on the other hand, arrive en masse – especially during summer – but stay for shorter periods. Although Malapascua has white-sand beaches, sharks remain the main tourist draw; the rich underwater environment has not only attracted the thresher sharks, but also white-tip and hammerheads. Schools of manta rays and devil rays have also been spotted swimming in the area.

The abundant underwater life has not just benefited visitors. The growing tourism trade has provided locals on the island with the opportunity to find more work. As you walk along Bounty Beach, the more touristy side of the island, you'll meet souvenir sellers and masseuses hanging out along the shores.