

10 THINGS TO DO IN CORON, PALAWAN

by Mark Anthony Barquin Togonon



The boatman signals me to snorkel further to see the extensive growth of corals, which he says look like a human brain. According to him, sightings of the Black Tip Sharks, Napoleon Wrasses, Eagle Rays and Bumpheads have been reported in the area so I maintain a sharp lookout for them as I swim across the profusion of healthy Cabbage Corals and Elephant Ear sponges. Large coral tables, densely surrounded by soft and branching corals, serve as playground to a school of butterfly fish, whose flat disk-shaped bodies glisten with hues of yellow and red. Startled by my presence, a group of speckled angelfish flit about. A clown fish storms back and forth from the pink tentacles of an anemone, as if threatening me not to swim closer to its home.

It's not difficult to understand why the Forbes Traveler Magazine listed Coron as one of the ten best Scuba diving destinations in the world. Located in the Calamian Islands in northern Palawan, Coron is famous for its remarkable marine life and a dozen WWII Japanese shipwrecks of depths between 10 and 40 meters. Besides the underwater spectacle, there is so much to see and experience in the island that planning your itinerary can be quite a challenge. Here are 10 activities you dare not miss.

1. VISIT CORON ISLAND'S LAKES AND LAGOONS

Colossal and riveting, the black karst formations erupting from the cobalt blue waters of Coron Island will render you breathless. Hidden among these cliffs are thirteen mysterious lakes, two of which are open to tourists: Kayangan Lake and Barracuda Lake. The rest are protected and considered sacred by the indigenous Tagbanuas, who had fought long battles for this ancestral domain.

A short but exhausting trek across a steep rainforest will take you to Kayangan Lake, which has won accolades as the cleanest lake in Asia. Cloistered by an array of jungle-covered limestone hills, the crystal clear lake enchants even its jaded visitors. And if you think the spectacle ends with what is seen above its brackish waters, wait until you see the sharp-edged walls and stalagmite formations underneath. The Twin Lagoon, not far from Kayangan Lake, is just as beautiful. Here, two lagoons converge through a small cave-like opening, which one may swim through during low tide, at the base of a cliff.

Don't forget to visit the Barracuda Lake as well, named after its elusive resident barracuda. The bizarre underwater limestone formations and the thermocline (the rapid temperature changes of the water) are not to be missed. Water temperature here ranges from 28 to 40 degrees Celcius.

2. LOUNGE BY THE BEACH

Coron may be known for its lakes and shipwrecks but there are plenty of white-sand beaches to laze on. The common choices are Malcapuya Island, Banana Island, Banol and CYC Beach.

The secluded Dimakya Island in the northern part of Coron has a 700-meter beautiful white-sand beach and sparkling turquoise waters, which serve as a sanctuary to sea cows and the Green Sea Turtles. The island, which hosts the resort Club Paradise, is also home to the White-bellied Sea Eagles, Rufous Night Herons and seventy more exotic animal species thriving in its lush vegetation.

Imagine waking up from your slumber to the rich, whistling songs of the Black-naped Orioles among the nearby Talisay trees and the delicate splashes of the sea. You watch the bright blue skies give way to stunning sunset hues above the mountains on the island across from a hammock in your beachfront cottage. You know this is exactly how you want your vacation to be.

3. SEE THE WWII JAPANESE SHIPWRECKS

When the US Navy strike force of fighters and dive-bombers attacked the Japanese vessels anchored in Coron Bay and around Busuanga Island on September 24, 1944, they left behind a number of burning and sinking ships. Today the wrecks, heavily encrusted with sponges and corals, attract divers from all over the world.

But you don't have to strap on a tank or even be certified diver to see one of the WWII shipwrecks. The 25-meter Lusong Gunboat, located in the southern end of the Lusong Island, rests just between 5 to 10 meters deep. This provides snorkelers an opportunity to admire face-to-face the multitude of colors and the rich diversity of marine life surrounding the wreck.

Other famous wreck diving sites in Coron Bay include the Irako wreck, OkikawaMaru wreck, Akitsushima wreck, Kogyo Maru wreck, Olympia Maru wreck, Skeleton wreck and the East Tangat gunboat wreck.

4. EXPLORE THE CORAL GARDENS

The dilemma of visiting an island that abounds with astounding coral gardens is deciding where to go first. The usual choices include the Twin Peak Reef, Decalve Marine Park, Marile Coral Garden and Bogor Marine Park but the most popular among them is Siete Pecados (Seven Deadly Sins in Spanish), conveniently located around two kilometers from the Coron town.

Rising above the clear emerald waters are seven rocky islets, which according to myth sprung up when seven children, who went swimming against their mother's wishes, drowned at the sea. A protected sanctuary, Siete Pecados has thick layers of extensive and bizarre-looking corals carpeting the sea floor, providing shelter to schools of angelfish, butterfly fish and lionfish among others. If it's your lucky day, you may even see green turtles wandering about.

Dimakya Island's house reef is also an excellent site to observe the underwater wildlife. Besides the vibrant reef fishes and turtles, the blue-spotted stingrays also frequent the area.

5. HAVE A RELAXING DIP AT MAQUINIT HOT SPRING

Is there anything more comforting than a quick dip in a natural hot spring after a day of physically exhausting activities? It is best to visit the Maquinit Hot Spring after sunset, when the cold night air begins to rustle the tall flowering trees around the pool. Emanating from a nearby underground volcano, the water here can be as hot as 40 degrees Celcius so don't make a mistake of diving into the pool right away.

The Maquinit Hot Spring is said to be the only saltwater hot spring in the country. Located around 20 minutes from the Coron town, the spring rests between a densely forested hill and the sea, whose shores are fringed with lush mangrove trees.

6. WATCH THE SEA COWS/DUGONG IN THE WILD

One of the ecotourism activities that Club Paradise offers is the dugong-watching tour, which takes participants along the coast of Busuanga to observe the gentle sea cows in their natural habitat. Many of them can be spotted munching on the sea grass not far from Dimakya Island.

The sea cows are marine mammals that depend mainly on sea grass communities for subsistence and can grow up to three meters long and weigh 400 kilograms. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, they are close to extinction but fortunately, they can be found thriving in the Calamian Group of Islands.

7. DO A HISTORICAL TOUR IN CULION

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8. CHECK OUT THE CALAUIT SAFARI PARK

Consider yourself warned. The 718 steps to the summit of Mt. Tapyas will test your endurance and will definitely leave you huffing and puffing, but the panoramic view of the nearby islets especially at sunset is priceless. Towering 210 meters above sea level, it is the second highest mountain, and without a doubt the most popular, in Coron. Well-paved and accessible by foot from the Coron town, Mt. Tapyas is usually the first stop of tourists. Its peak is landmarked with a giant white crucifix, making it easily recognizable wherever you are in the island.

9. HIKE MT. TAPYAS

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10. SHOP FOR PASALUBONG AND SOUVENIRS

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