



OPINION

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Unexpected detours and a sinister anniversary

SOMETIMES life's greatest adventures come from unexpected detours. That is a sentence I came across on social media shortly after experiencing a disturbing event that I had not been anticipating. The fact that it happened exactly on the anniversary of a nasty motorcycle accident I was involved in last year made me reflect on the significance of such detours, as unexpected and unwanted as they might be.

After fully recovering from the injuries I sustained in the accident, I was able to continue practising diving, a sport that gives me substantial satisfaction given the opportunity to witness the beauty of the underwater world and to visit far-flung places to experience the marvels different oceans have to offer.

Last month I flew to the Philippines in order to join a liveaboard diving trip to Tubbataha Reef, a World Heritage Site located approximately 150 kilometres off the island of Palawan in the Pacific Ocean. Tubbataha is a natural park consisting of uninhabited atolls and an extensive reef; covering an area of around 97,000 hectares, it is a biodiverse place hosting more than 1,000 marine species. Renowned as the best diving place in the Philippines, it even features on the country's highest denomination banknote.

Tubbataha's remoteness meant that for the duration of the liveaboard I would have no mobile phone reception and would thus be able to unplug from work altogether. This was an ideal way of fully enjoying the liveaboard experience, which typically entails spending a week or more on a yacht in the company of a small group of divers while doing up to four dives a day in an exotic location. Since the boat moves from one site to another, it is a good means of covering a large area and making the most of one's time.

A few hours after leaving Puerto Princesa, the boat hit rough seas and we were informed that the journey to Tubbataha would take more than 18 hours instead of the usual 12. After many hours in choppy waters, the boat was nowhere close to reaching the marine park.

At one point, we heard lots of commotion among the crew and learnt that the boat had lost one of its outriggers, which had become detached from the main hull and disappeared in the waves. This affected the vessel's stability and the crew were worried that it would start taking on more water since the sea was continuing to get rougher. Not wanting to risk the boat capsizing with its guests



Diving with thresher sharks in Malapascua

on board, the captain took the decision to radio for assistance and we spent the next few hours waiting for another vessel to rescue us.

We were relieved when another liveaboard yacht called Resolute headed our way and started sailing alongside our boat. Given the rough seas, it could not come too close though. Thus, we were asked to wear a lifejacket, divided into two groups, and instructed to take turns to board a small skiff so that we could be taken to the Resolute. We were told to only take our passport and cash with us. The crew decided to stay behind and take their chances.

Once we were safely on the Resolute, we were given food and water as well as a blanket to shield us from the wind while we slept on the upper deck. After a long journey back to Palawan, we met our boat's owner who told us he had not heard anything from the crew in more than ten hours and was now fearing the worst. Fortunately, after a few more hours he received a phone call in which the captain reassured him that the boat

was slowly limping back to harbour.

While I could not help feeling disappointed at missing out on the chance to visit Tubbataha and having my long-awaited holiday disrupted, I was thankful that an unpleasant event had narrowly avoided turning into something far more traumatic or one resulting in tragic consequences.

Upon realising that the rescue had occurred exactly on the one-year anniversary of my traffic accident, I felt stupefied by bad luck's punctual reappearance. However, it was also an opportunity to reflect on how important it is to see the silver lining of any adverse situation and make the most of the unexpected detours that we are sometimes compelled to take.

After my accident last year, I discovered a renewed zest for creative work and academic research that enabled me to climb out of the motivational trough I had found myself in for a couple of years.

After being forced by circumstances to rapidly change my holiday plans, I was able to visit other marvellous plac-

es in the Philippines and undertake such awe-inspiring experiences as observing the sardine run in Moalboal and diving with thresher sharks in Malapascua. It was also an opportunity to learn more about the marine conservation challenges that organisations and local communities in the country are facing, especially with respect to protecting such endangered species as whale sharks and sea turtles.

Even though not all the curveballs life throws at us can easily be adjusted to, chinning up and showing our mettle is sometimes a way of turning a mishap into something more positive. This might involve learning how to be resourceful and resolute when unexpected detours thwart our plans, expectations and aspirations.

Nonetheless, while I do not consider myself as superstitious, I cannot help but feel a measure of trepidation about what will happen once the anniversary of my accident rolls around next year, especially now that the date seems to have taken on a sinister twist.