



The Last Paradise on Earth

Research by Vicky Wong

Pictures by Scott A. Woodward/www.scottawoodward.com

Exaggerated stories of kidnapping and political instability have kept tourists at bay, but that's precisely why most of the Philippine's 7,107 islands are so pristine. **Vicky Wong** provides an eco-focused round-up of hot-spots in the country she calls "The Last Paradise on Earth."

Sustaining a Nation: Secretary of Tourism, Joseph 'Ace' Durano

Secretary Joseph 'Ace' Durano was appointed the Philippines' Secretary of Tourism in 2004, and has been taking eco-tourism very seriously ever since. "We've been heavily funding our 'CPR' projects: Conservation, Protection, Reservation," says Durano. Past developments in places like Cebu, the capital and 'queen' city of Visayas, one of the three island groupings, have proven that, ideally, tourism is not concentrated in one area, but spread out in soft developments over the many Philippine islands - low volume, high yield. He cites Palawan as a model - the country's biggest province, consisting of nearly 2,000 islands in the west: here, resorts stay within the maximum of 20 to 30 villas per island.

There are over 7,000 islands in the Philippines, but, as Durano clarifies, "The ecology here wouldn't be able to cope with mass tourism. We therefore have to maximise

economic benefits by having high-spending visitors for longer stays... The pricing of resorts should limit the volume."

Another goal of the CPR programme is to prevent locals from over-fishing by presenting tourism as an additional source of income. As of today, over 50 areas in the Philippines have been identified as protected marine sanctuaries. There is a 3,000-page report by the UN concluding that the Visayas Sea in the Philippines has the highest marine diversity in the world. "Our natural assets are what visitors come here for, with marine resources being the major market," Durano adds. "We need to cultivate the culture of tourism within the local communities and raise awareness about the fact that their livelihood depends on sustainability."

Marine Eyes: El Nido Resorts

El Nido Resorts (www.elnidoresorts.com) are run by Ten Knots Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Asian Conservation Company, of which ex-banker Leigh A. Talmage-Perez is president. "ACC's mainly American shareholders are investing in the business, as an alternative to making donations," Perez explains. "They are investing in the future; and when we make a profit, rather than taking the money out, we reinvest it back into the project." El Nido is their first project that involves working with the local community; if it succeeds, the concept can be transplanted to anywhere in the world.

Ninety-five percent of El Nido's staff come from the area, making the local community their workforce as well as spokespeople. They get trained in F & B, housekeeping and massage techniques - acquiring skills they can be proud of. Perez explained that environmental awareness can only be raised through education. "It's all about respect - we have to be careful to not be too tough on the locals, either." The resorts offer them alternative occupations to fishing and farming; staff are taught why illegal fishing methods are short-sighted.

Dotted with 250-million-year-old limestone formations on the northwest tip of Palawan Province, El Nido consists of two resorts: Miniloc Island Resort and Lagen Island Resort. The location was discovered by the owner of a Japanese sugar company and his partners who were avid divers at a time when El Nido was one of the best places in the world for diving. They used to organise live-aboard dive trips until a boat broke down in 1980. They then decided to build a dive camp in Miniloc, which evolved into the resorts of today.

While there are only 50 species of coral in the entire Caribbean, the Philippines can claim up to 300. In 1998, when El Nido was recognised as one of the most important sites of biological diversity in the country, the Philippine government elevated its status from marine reserve to protected area, thus prohibiting commercial fishing. Lagen opened that same year, but due to the lack of government funding, protection laws weren't reinforced. "We've become the eye of the protected area," El Nido Resorts' General Manager Etienne La Brooy explains. "We're the helpers - if we notice anything, we'll immediately inform the authority." A portion of the



Picture by Vicky Wong

profits made by the resorts goes to the El Nido Foundation, which looks after the well-being and livelihood the local community, by stipulating that anything that they do should protect and enhance the environment as well as make gains for sustainable development.

The corals at El Nido have been through a series of disasters: they got bleached by El Niño in 1998; then they were wrecked by a freak typhoon. In 2003, divers carefully removed up to eight tonnes of crown of thorns, fast-breeding parasites that kill whole corals. Just like the Filipinos themselves, the corals of El Nido proved to be resilient: they are growing back and maintaining the great diversity for which these waters are known. Scuba diving and snorkelling are still amazing here. The Sulu Sulawesi seas have the highest number of species of fish and corals in the world - and they come in large quantities. Divers can expect an average visibility of 60 to 100 feet from March to April.

This year, El Nido Resorts plan to revive the coral population with the installation of artificial corals modules in the north of Miniloc Island. This will be the second such project in the world; the first was successfully carried out in Bunaken, Indonesia. The modules look like big snowflakes: Made only by Eco Reefs, they are one metre in diameter and sustain live corals that have been transplanted into the ceramics, and that have a similar pH level as that of seawater. The corals grow one foot every 50 years, and can shelter fish immediately after installation. If it works, El Nido will add more in the area.

The support is there: Seacology Foundation is providing a grant for the EcoReef installation and a specialised marine biologist is helping out. "But the main thing is to get the local community involved, educate them about the no-take zone, explain to them how and why we're putting in artificial reefs that will replenish the fish stock," La Brooy explains. "We're just here to help because we have the resources, but it's the local community that's leading."

El Nido is simply a beautiful place. There is the centrally-located Beach Club on Pangulasian Island with a look-out to staggering sunset and sunrise scenes. There are plenty of water sports on offer: you can kayak out to two lagoons where concerts are often held (thanks to the excellent acoustics). Over 103 species of birds and 12 species of mammals live in the thick forests of El Nido. Guests can explore the mangrove forests near Lagen Island by dinghy. After dark, the North Star, the Southern Cross and the Milky Way can all be spotted due to the equator's proximity.

The dive masters here are more than happy to share their thorough knowledge of the sea, and snorkellers will be thrilled by what can be observed in the shallows of Miniloc Island Resort: schools of one-metre Jack fish, numerous corals, enormous puffer fish, barracudas and large clams.

Not only are visitors surrounded by natural beauty, they are also treated to the sincere hospitality of the staff, and to entertainment from groups of excellent local musicians. El Nido Resorts directly enhance the lives of 3,000 local people in the area - as well as every lucky visitor, the author included.



Picture by Vicky Wong



Image courtesy of Amanpulo.

Fragile Rock: Amanpulo

Just east of El Nido is Amanpulo ('peaceful island', www.amanresorts.com/pulo) - a fine example of how a resort can be at once ultra-luxurious and ecological. Set on Pamalican, a 220-acre private island, Amanpulo has only 40 *casitas* or villas nestled discreetly among the tropical foliage fringing the beach. Pamalican is covered with a sandy jungle and trimmed by seven sq.-km of pristine reef and over five km of white sandy beach, ensuring privacy and exclusivity for all guests. Every beach villa has a hammock tucked away in the trees and sun lounges on a private section of the beach.

In each spacious 65 sq.-m *casita* is a summary of the ecological study done on the island previous to Amanpulo's construction, profiling its fragile ecology and the resort's strategy for minimising human impact on the environment. (The complete four-volume study is available in their library.)

Simplicity and the high quality of local building materials make Amanpulo's villas naturally elegant. To minimise the use of plastics, Amanpulo provides bath products in ceramic jars. But it's the little touches that stand out: sand-

fly/insect repellent in the rooms and along the length of the beach, and a variety of sun-blocks for guests' use.

But the best way to educate people about the environment is to let guests and staff enjoy it. Each *casita* has its own golf cart so that guests can explore the beauty of the whole island. Complementary snorkelling tours are run via a luxurious double-decker boat that takes guests to reefs in the protected area, where fish and corals are abundant and colourful. On the southern tip of the island, baby sharks can be spotted in the clear blue water.

Meals and drinks are had in various scenic settings: by the pool, at the Beach Club, in the picnic grove, on a cocktail sunset cruise, or perhaps at a seafood BBQ next to a massive beach bonfire. And there's nothing like washing down Amanpulo's scrumptious food with some refreshing *calamansi* juice, made from a tiny vitamin C-rich local fruit that tastes and looks like a crossbreed of lime and orange.

The resort hires locally: 70 percent of its staff come from the island adjacent to the resort. Amanpulo is the perfect retreat for those who want to be well-looked after yet left peacefully alone.



The Environment Police: Boracay Foundation

Boracay is internationally renowned for its crystal blue water, fine white sand and vibrant nightlife. Due to over-development, the pristine environment is under threat. “The issue lies in uncontrolled migration and the increasing number of people residing in the area, crowding out the source of income - our visitors,” Dr. Orlando Sacay, Head of the Boracay Foundation (www.boracay.com), explains. “And we don’t have sufficient public transport and cheap housing for those who work here to go back to the mainland, either.”

Dr. Sacay holds a Ph.D in Economics from Cornell University, and used to work for the World Bank in Washington, where he’d often have heated arguments about the consequences of lending money to poor countries in return for free trade privileges for rich ones. Since returning to the Philippines he has been working in poverty management for the government. He also owns the Waling-Waling Beach Hotel and the new Sitio Waling Waling in Boracay.

Boracay is famous for its gorgeous sunsets - hang out and have a drink in a hammock on the beach in one of Waling Waling’s cosy cabañas or pavilions made out of some salvaged mulavé wood (A.K.A. iron wood, so hard it is anti-termite). For those are after a more secluded environment, head to the Sitio Waling Waling, a compound consisting of four double-storey villas with penthouses surrounding an organically-shaped pool.

Dr. Sacay has appointed a new police chief to reinforce the 58 ordinances designed to protect Boracay’s environment effectively. Violators get seven warnings, after which they are sent to jail. Septic tanks are no longer allowed, but there are still 116 establishments that remain unconnected to the central sewage facility 800 metres inland. They will be closed down if they fail to comply. “That’s the only language they understand - this is the only way to protect the island,” Dr. Sacay observed darkly.

An Ecological Archetype?

Analysis by Su Mei Toh

Pictures by Reza Azmi

Japamala, a boutique resort on Tioman Island in the South China Sea, is almost as responsible and sustainable as it is possible to be in modern times – but there’s always more to be done.

A hubbub of activity centres on a large fig tree between the beach and the hill forest. As if on rota, wildlife arrives to gorge on its ripe fruit: squirrels clamber up the branches in the early afternoon, mynas arrive noisily in the late afternoon, and at dusk, dozens of fruit bats make their silent approach. It is clear that Japamala, a boutique resort on Tioman Island in the South China Sea, was designed not just for people – wildlife and the ecosystem are also fundamental concerns.

Like the ficus, the large natural boulders and lush hill forest that surround the property are the main focus here. The resort owners, Federico Asaro and Maple Loo, are keen for nature to take centre stage: “We leave the landscaping to nature.” But it has taken the couple’s genius to gently build a haven for travellers without so much as sacrificing a tree or a boulder.

Wild Asia was recently invited to have a look at the island resort through the lens of its Responsible Tourism framework. Based on the three tenets of responsible tourism – economic, social and environmental responsibilities – they developed an assessment method with scoring for each tenet. Ultimately, the intent is to communicate performance levels to tourism operators and suggest how they can improve and progress on these aspects. Not surprisingly, Japamala scores high on environmental responsibility.

Their logic is simple: “We don’t want to stress the environment. So we keep everything small, like the number of rooms, which means we can keep staff numbers down,” says Federico. More staff and guests mean more facilities, more wastes generated, and more impact on the pristine reef-fronted beach and hill forest habitat.

This means that rooms at Japamala are capped at 15 on an 11-acre property. At present, there are only 10 dwellings. If this suggests to you a great deal of space and privacy, you’re absolutely right. The wooden *kampung*-style chalets, snugly nested into the forested surroundings, are built on stilts atop huge boulders. No trees were felled in their construction. “I spend a lot of time walking in the forest to get a feel for potential chalet sites. Only if a particular spot has a small number of trees, then it becomes a possibility,” says Federico.

A lot of thought goes into the site selection and design of each room: the best sea views, maximum privacy and minimum impact. Natural climate control is another consideration. Unlike other beach resorts that swelter in the heat of the day, these spacious and elegant chalets – tucked under the forest canopy – are naturally cool and breezy, day and night. To my delight I also found that our chalet made an ideal refuge for private wildlife, as birds, butterflies, squirrels, macaques were all observed nearby.

Maple and Federico are also thrilled about the diverse wildlife they have come across since starting operations in May 2004. They have seen up to five species of snakes, flying foxes, wild boars, civets, a slow loris and a porcupine (drinking from the pool). Even resident dolphins cavort off the jetty. This is probably the closest you’ll get to boutique-style wildlife-spotting while maintaining a sweet smell – thanks to the original line of aromatherapy products that Maple has created for guests, using only natural ingredients.

Attention to the environment and wildlife is not merely a façade. Behind the scenes, Federico, who harbours a long-standing passion for diving and marine photography, tries to ensure that “nothing goes out to sea”. His effort to maintain the resort in its raw state means that waste treatment is a major consideration. A great of money is spent each month on non-chemical cleaning and treatment products that use bacteria to decompose waste naturally. “We can save a lot of money using conventional detergents but we don’t, because it would clog up the sewers!”

Assessment and Options

Despite all the good planning that has gone into Japamala, Maple and Federico realise more needs to be done. They have made a good start in regard to environmental stewardship, educating their staff and supporting educational and awareness programmes for islanders. But there are areas that are beyond their immediate control that will take time to nurture and realise. For example, the overall waste management on the island is presently less than adequate. Also, a lack of markets and options on the island prevents them from buying locally to support the island economy as much as they would like.



On the positive side, the size of their operation keeps their ecological footprint to a minimum while their understanding of sustainability issues have led to informed management decisions. “The assessment has also triggered ideas that we have overlooked, which we put on hold because our focus was on developing the rooms,” says Federico. It also highlighted new ideas such as “looking at waste prevention to minimise what is brought into the resort, rather than only trying to get rid of it.”

Practising responsible tourism is about adapting and taking numerous steps towards attainable goals. At Japamala, their conscious plan to be a small, responsible operation is proving to be a successful gamble – they are frequently fully booked and enamoured guests keep coming back, staying longer each time.

Responsible Tourism is about tourism operators providing quality travel experiences that promote conservation of natural environments and offer opportunities and benefits for local communities.



Wild Asia, a Malaysian-based conservation group, believes that Responsible Tourism is a business ethic that all tourism operators should adopt, and works with operators to help them understand the principles of sustainable tourism.

Above: Japamala on Tioman Island: boutique responsibility.