

Palawan

This island paradise on the Philippines' southwestern side will beguile you with its pristine waters, exquisite beaches, unexplored caves, and virgin rainforests

This is the life, waking up to the unobstructed view of the sea stretched out before you, the stunning sight of turquoise waters so soothing it makes you want to sit back and put your feet up. This is Palawan, where you can blissfully do nothing, or be the intrepid traveler and fill your days with activities. But one thing's for sure, you'll certainly be planning your return even before you leave.

The biggest province in the country in terms of land area, Palawan stretches from Mindoro to Borneo in the southwest. It consists of one main narrow island and several groupings of islands surrounding it. The province's almost 2,000 kilometers of rugged coastline are dotted with more than 1,000 islands and islets, rocky coves, and white-sand beaches. It's also one of the few places in the Philippines with a vast stretch of virgin forests in its mountain ranges. Palawan is truly for the adventurous and for those who want to get away from the madcap chaos of the city. Welcome to the Philippines' Last Frontier.



Guests can stay in cottages steps away from the beach. (Right) Veranda of a cabana at Club Noah



WHAT TO DO

Go the historical route. Although Palawan is known primarily as a nature sanctuary for adventure-seekers and beach lovers, it's also full of fascinating historical landmarks.

Cuyo Fort, one of the most ancient in the Philippines, is an unusual octagonal-shaped structure built by the Spaniards to defend their small settlement against the "Moros."

Eight hours from Puerto Princesa in Taytay town is **Puerto de Sta. Isabel**, a fort built in 1667 by the Augustinian Recollect Fathers and once used as a military waystation by the Spaniards. Its small chapel and cannon are still intact. Taytay used to be the capital of Palawan and is the jumpoff point to nearby islands, like Apulit.

Melville Lighthouse, which is more than a century old, in Balabac Island is still in use, serving as a guide for international vessels passing through the Balabac Strait (the body of water that separates Borneo and Palawan).

For a quick overview of Palawan history and culture, visit the **Palawan Puerto Princesa National Museum**, where jars, porcelain, hunting and trapping tools, musical instruments, brassware and artifacts from the Tabon caves, as well as Spanish era and antiques are displayed. Old City Hall Building, Rizal Avenue, Puerto Princesa

Go underground. Palawan is also home to the **Puerto Princesa Subterranean River Park**, reportedly the world's longest underground river, in Bahile. To explore this over eight-kilometer long river, ride a paddle boat as the current wends its

(Clockwise from top left) Lagen's swimming pool, heated by special volcanic rocks; Puerta de Sta. Isabel; limestone formations in Apulit Island

way through a deep cave under rugged limestone and marble cliffs and that stretches deep into an underground lagoon before emptying out into the South China Sea. You'll see rock formations, stalactites and natural amphitheaters. Two ways to get there: Take a pumpboat from Sabang, 81 kilometers from the capital, or a pumpboat from Bahile wharf.

Soak in local color—literally! We're talking about beaches and dive spots. With its miles of white-sand beaches, Palawan has many resort options for travelers (for the best, see Where To Stay). Most have diving and snorkeling areas, as well as instructors to help first-timers. Sunbathers can try the beaches and sports enthusiasts can snorkel, dive, and do other water sports.

Check out the neighborhood. Divers should head out to **Tubbataha Reefs**, a marine sanctuary in the Sulu Sea, 98 miles southeast of Puerto Princesa. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, it is one of the world's best dive spots and many tour operators offer live-aboard trips to the reefs.

For more accessible destinations from Puerto Princesa, check out **Honda Bay**, 12 kilometers east of the town—with its islets and beaches, it's perfect for swimming, snorkeling and diving.

Choose among different islets with colorful names like Luli (for "*lulubog-lilitaw*," meaning "sinking-floating" because the island is only visible in low tide), Starfish Island (famous for its white sand and, yes, starfish!), Snake Island, Pandan Island, Señorita Island and Meara Marina. To get to the bay, hire a tricycle or jeepney to the Sta. Lourdes wharf, where there are pumpboats for hire to take you to the islands of your choice.



Water cottages at Lagen, El Nido. (Below) Majestic limestone cliffs are a common sight in Palawan



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MD PILAR, DEXTER FRANCIS DE VERA, AND COURTESY OF EL NIDO RESORTS



(Clockwise from left) Refreshing waters of the Big Lagoon, El Nido; go kayaking around different areas; relax in a Jacuzzi with a great view in Club Noah Isabelle. (Opposite page) View from a veranda in Miniloc, El Nido



Take note, some islands are privately owned, so may require permission from the owner or an entrance fee.

For landlubbers, go to **Tabon Caves**, a series of caverns where anthropologists discovered what came to be known as the Tabon Man, the remains of a prehistoric man, and his tools. To get there, head to Quezon town, 155 kilometers south of Puerto Princesa. From there, take a pumpboat from the wharf to the caves. Travel time is three to four hours by bus or jeepney to Quezon (less with your own vehicle), plus a 30-minute boat ride to the caves.

Get to know the locals. Palawan is the best place to see some of nature's more exotic creatures. Aside from fish and starfishes, you may encounter manta rays, and the elusive sea cow or dugong. On land, there's the **Calauit Game Preserve & Wildlife Sanctuary**, full of exotic animals from Africa, as well as those endemic to Palawan. Closer to the capital is the **Palawan Butterfly Garden** (located in Sta. Monica) and **Palawan**

Lepidoptera Farm (located in Barangay Tiniguiban), home to different species of butterflies both native to Palawan and Southeast Asia. Then there's the **Palawan Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Center** (located on National Road, Barangay Irawan), a mini-zoo to view reptiles, as well as a hospital to rehabilitate sick and disabled crocodiles.

WHEN TO GO

Palawan is at its best in the summer—March to June. But book early because flights and resorts may be full.

HOW TO GET THERE

Seair flies several times a week to the following airports in Palawan: Busuanga, Cuyo, El Nido, and Taytay. For bookings, call (2) 849-0100 (Manila), (45) 323-6713 (Clark), (32) 255-0801 (Cebu) or go to flyseair.com. There are also daily charter flights direct to El Nido, which has its own airport. —*additional reporting by MD PILAR*



WHERE TO STAY

Palawan is postcard-perfect everywhere you turn. But what about the accommodations? Here, a mini-guide to three of the best

AMANPULO BEACH RESORT

Situated in its own Pamalican Island, this luxury resort run by the Aman Group is the ultimate get-away-from-it-all vacation spot. Amanpulo or "peaceful island" has 40 beach, hillside, and treetop casitas modeled after the *bahay kubo* (nipa hut). Each one is provided with its own golf cart for island exploration. Guests can either spend their days beachcombing or go diving, swimming, snorkeling and other maritime pursuits. There's also a tennis court, a high-tech gym, and a 30-meter-length pool. Bonus: The garden and beach casitas are designed in such a way that their salas are discreetly secluded for pleasurable open-air body treatments. amanresorts.com

Guest comments:

- "Amanpulo has the most private beach of any resort. Get the staff to set up breakfast right by the shore to start the day off wonderfully!"
- "I always find interesting crafts items at the resort boutique—things that are hard to find even in Manila."
- "If you're a beach person, Amanpulo is the place to go. You'll have an entire strip of white sand to yourself. But the resort has none of the stunning limestone cliffs scenery you will find in some other resort areas of Palawan."

EL NIDO RESORTS are just off the municipality of El Nido in northwest Palawan. The name "El Nido" comes from edible birds' nests ("*nido*" in Spanish) of swiftlets, which roost in the limestone cliffs. The two El Nido resorts—one in Lagen and one in Miniloc—are located in the protected area. Lagen has 51 rooms—18 on stilts, nine are beachfront—20 Forest Rooms and four Forest Suites; Miniloc has 43 rooms—seven water cottages, five seaview rooms on stilts, 12 garden cottages, four family cottages, three cliff cottages, and 12 beachside rooms.

Things to do: Blessed with clear blue waters, lagoons and coves, El Nido is a marine sanctuary, perfect for snorkeling, diving, kayaking or just simply swimming. Manta-ray sightings are common and, if you're really lucky, you'll chance upon a rare dugong. As a break, go island-hopping or rock-climbing. For the perfect way to end the day, head to the spa for complete pampering.

How to get there: Upon landing, resort staff are on hand to greet you and facilitate transfer to a motorized outrigger for a scenic boatride to the resort. elnidoresorts.com

Guest comments:

- "Miniloc is older and more compact, but it has the better beach. Lagen is newer and further from the airport, but the boat ride over provides marvelous view of limestone cliffs. It's great for couples."
- "Book a Judith Jackson massage at Lagen's second floor massage hut facing the beach at sunset. It's amazingly relaxing."
- "Let El Nido know if you're celebrating your wedding anniversary at the resort. They'll plan something special for you!"

CLUB NOAH ISABELLE is perfect for families. Set on 3.86 hectares of land on Apulit Island, the resort has a great ecotourism program and has received awards for its practices. There are 50 picturesque white cabanas set right in the water—from cozy one-bedroom cabanas to spacious three-bedroom cabanas ideal for big groups.

Things to do: Each guest in Club Noah is assigned a resort activity officer to assist you, whether you want to go kayaking, diving, fishing, snorkeling, or of course, swimming. Start by snorkeling just off the pier where the waters are teeming with colorful fish and corals. Go as far as "the angel," a beautiful stone statue of an angel in a prayer pose that serves as a marker for divers. If you're feeling romantic, your officer can also arrange a private cocktail for two at a secluded cove in the island. Ask about the boat tour around the island to see the majestic limestone caves on the other side.

How To Get There: Going to the resort is an adventure in itself. After an hour's plane ride on Seair from Manila's domestic airport, you land at the picturesque Cesar Lim Rodriguez Airport and take a five-minute jeepney ride to Tamisan River. From there you take a small, motorized *banca* (outrigger) to an even bigger boat at the mouth of the river. Mangroves line the river and it's a great opportunity to teach kids about the value of this natural sanctuary. From the mouth of the river, it's a 40-minute boat ride to Club Noah Isabelle, where upon disembarking, guests are greeted with a folk song-and-dance number, a cool glass of iced tea, and a warm towel. clubnoah.info

Guest comments:

- "The food at Club Noah is better than at most other resorts in Palawan."
- "Don't miss a trip to Isla Blanca, a small strip of an island that offers a 360-degree view of Taytay Bay. A walk on its white sandy beach is a must."
- "The design and furnishings of the cabanas are modest, but the views are just gorgeous. The service is also excellent. Every night at dinner, we were treated to an excellent program of Philippine folk music."