In a Lazy Paradise called Palawan

A STRING OF ISLANDS TRICKLING DOWN FROM THE WESTERN PHILIPPINES TOWARDS MALAYSIA

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



BUSUANGA
Where the Journey Begins

AURORA IGOROTA
Our Bangka Home

TANGAT ISLAND
Wreck Diving and Reefs

PANGARAYCAYAN
White Sands and Tall Palms

A LAZY PARADISE

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Aurora Igorota

The Filipino province of Palawan consists of a string of islands that trickles down from the western part of the Philippines towards Malaysia. With 1,780 islands it offers those seeking an adventure holiday the opportunity to travel to places that few tourists see.

With the support of Tao, a local Filipino company that takes adventure holidaymakers to see and share how the islanders live I was going to board one of the small vessels to experience three days of island hopping. Tao fosters ecotourism and sustainability in practice, supporting a clean environment, organic eating, preserving nature and it supports the country's ecology. It bridges native life with tourist ambitions by creating jobs for and opportunities for villagers and farmers.

II



watching the sun setting

Starting on the island of Busuanga (there are air connections from the Filipino capital, Manila) I and other passengers drove to Coron from where my boat would sail.

A fairly rigorous training session prefaced our sailing. A quick geography lesson was followed by instructions on what to take, how to pack and to stress the importance of our "dry bag." This is to keep belongings safe in a wet environment, particularly as we would disembark the boat and use kayaks to get to some islands.

The journey with Tao taught me more than the fundamental cultural elements of basic life in these remote islands and provided me with a personal test. Could I, a city man, live in small hut under what looked to be a makeshift bamboo roof? Could I cope with sharing time and space with complete strangers? I was about to find out.

III



a smaller bangka boat used for fishing or short trips

Unlike many journeys I had made over the years, the itinerary is flexible. A particular route would be followed but passengers would be at the whim of the weather and our own personal wishes. Next morning we set off in our bangka (also known as a banca or pump) boat. This is the prime method of transport for Filipinos living in coastal or wetland areas. Ours was equipped with a kitchen, a toilet cleansed by seawater and a large storage area for the kit we carried. With large outriggers for stability, our ship was called the "Aurora Igorota" and it easily skimmed over the water.

Shortly after setting off we ventured into expansive seas but within view of the green hilly landscape of Coron. Sailing past its tip, we would see our first stop – Tangat Island – a spot renowned for its diving, clear waters and marine life.

IV



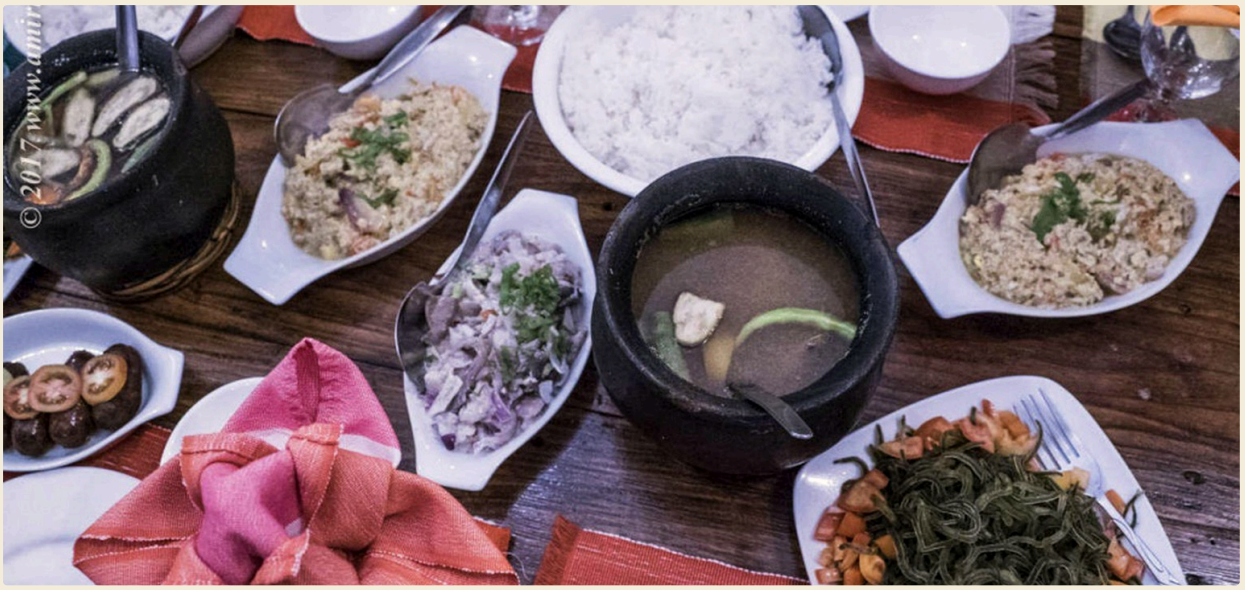
diving into cystal clear seas

There is another attraction. On the sea bottom is a wreck although nobody is quite convinced what type of ship it was. It doesn't matter. The wreck attracts fish and other marine life and that attracts divers. Even with just a snorkel I could make out the wreck's shape as it lay many feet below.

A lazy swim was followed by a lazy lunch back on the boat all the food being organic and sourced from Tao's local farms, another means by which Tao melded tourist and local together. Although many of us could quite happily have spent more time at Tangat, other wanted to move on and we steered towards the nearby island of Lusong Coral Garden for a brief stop to enjoy the soft, creamy sands and the crystal clear and unpolluted waters.

Our third island of the day was Patsy Island, our home for the night. All of us swam ashore whilst our belongings travelled by kayak. Before dinner there was time to watch a stunning sunset that left many of us speechless. You see sunsets like this if movies but in real life? Here was the proof they existed.

V



meals sourced from a local farm

A long day was followed by a long, leisurely dinner as we feasted on local fruits and vegetables, fish and egg dishes. For those of us who wanted to retain some contact with the outside world it was time to recharge mobile phones since a generator provided the only power source on the island and it was only powered up for four hours in the evening.

That night we slept like logs but still awoke early to see the sun rise. So, as not to lose time, we breakfasted on the Aurora Igorota but hurriedly for, at the end of Culion, was a wall of rock that stretched high above the sea. A group headed ashore to climb the rock and happily hurl themselves back into the sea before we set sail again.

VI



palm trees protecting our huts from the hot sun

We reached the open sea as we sailed between Culion and Linapacan Islands. Did I say that the outriggers made the boat stable? Not as far as I was concerned but, thankfully that was the only rough sea encountered.

When we reached Kulaylayan Island my stomach cheered! It was the end of open water. This and the Cagdanao Islands which were the next islands to pass seemed even clearer, glassier and more full of marine life than those we had previously seen. Was I getting spoilt for choice? The inviting waters summoned us to swim, snorkel and have fun.

VII



the guides and crew from Tao who looked after us

For our last night we camped at Tabayan Base, Campon an uninhabited island where the crew and guides produced a barbecue of grilled fish which we had seen them catch during the day. No-one wanted the day to end so we sat singing, playing games and reminiscing of the sights we had seen until sleep claimed us.

A cold shower behind a wooden bamboo curtain in the woods began the day for me before I re-joined the boat for our return journey. A stopover on El Nido Island allowed us to journey for an hour to Pangaraycayan, a long white sandy beach screened from the heat of the sun by tall palm trees. Then it was back to reality and I and my fellow adventurists left the clean environment of Palawan and returned to Manila.

VIII

Back in my Manila hotel room that night, the last few days seemed an age and a dream away. Did I really sail through parts of Palawan?

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