

The Province

TRAVEL

travel@sunprovince.com



Life's a beach

Favourite closed? Don't worry, there are others

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Miniloc Island Resort offers pristine tropical beauty away from other tourists. There's much to see throughout the Philippines, if you know where to look. — EL NIDO RESORTS

Find heaven in the Philippines

The government has closed tourist spot Boracay island. Here's where to go instead

Glen Petrie

When I went with Filipino friends on a search for paradise among the Philippine's 7,107 islands, we decided to skip Boracay because the island was so popular. It proved a prescient decision, since outspoken president Duterte recently shut down the entire island to deal with pollution and overcrowding, notoriously calling the country's top resort "a cesspool."

We headed instead to the north end of the big, remote island of Palawan, where over 40 small isles litter Bacuit Bay, each one a stunningly beautiful ideal of tropical par-

adise. This also proved prescient, since Travel & Leisure Magazine would vote Palawan the best island in the world.

This is where Alex Garland found the secret lagoon that inspired his breakout 1996 novel, *The Beach*, made into a hit movie with Leonardo DiCaprio. Ironically, or perhaps not, the Thailand location used for the movie, Maya Bay, has also recently been closed due to tourism spoilage.

Each morning in El Nido, the town that serves as Palawan's tourist base camp, we boarded a local boat called a bangka and set out on a floating whistle-stop tour of white beaches,

blue lagoons and emerald coves. An hour here to swim, an hour there to snorkel, a stop on white sand for a lunch of scallops and corn cooked on a charcoal fire.

"Secret Beach," said an eight-year-old kid on my boat, pointing into a tight bay. His dad pushed the rudder with a bare foot and the bangka, a spindly outrigger that looks like a big water insect, turned toward a jagged karst island, a cathedral of sharp spires rising from the sea.

I sat on the outrigger arm and let my toes skim the surface of a sea the colour of mint mouthwash. I could see to the sandy bottom several metres down, but I could not

pick out the promised beach ahead. That's why it's "secret."

Secret Beach is findable only if you know it's there, and involves swimming through a narrow cave and surfacing in a pool of crystal water rimmed by a blindingly white strip of sand. Garland's inspiration was immediately obvious.

After a brief swim, we set off again toward another island. "Secret Lagoon," the kid advised, pointing toward a strip of sand at the base of a monumental cliff. We beached there and waded through a small, flooded cleft in the limestone. As with Secret Beach, we emerged in a round pool completely encircled by

vertical cliffs. I had to crane my neck to see the sky; it felt like being at the bottom of a vase.

At Small Lagoon, another bangka waited with a fleet of kayaks to rent. We each took one and paddled over vodka-clear water, then passed through a hole in a rock wall so small we had to lie flat. The other side revealed a cloistered series of interlinked lagoons, a shimmering world invisible to anyone who passed outside. I paddled silently about, poking into tight spaces and slipping through channels from one pool to another. Orchids sprouted from the rock walls above.



Lagen Island Resort, one of four secluded properties run by El Nido Resorts on separate islands, offers a beautiful slice of peace and quiet. — EL NIDO RESORTS

On these daily boat tours we sometimes stopped for snorkelling, and I was anxious to discover the beauty below the water. When I first dove in, however, I almost cried. Only a few unremarkable fish darted over acres of dead coral. At the next spot, the same sad scene. The problem, I would learn, was that dynamite and cyanide fishing in the 1980s and '90s had devastated the fishery.

Homemade bombs were dropped to stun fish with sonic shock, and one blast can kill a reef that took hundreds of years to grow. While the practice still goes on, it's been greatly curtailed. In 1998, the area was declared the El Nido-Taytay Managed Resource Protected Area, but recovery will take decades.

Overtourism threatens Palawan, as well. The effects are showing up in the town of El Nido, where we saw garbage tossed anywhere and everywhere. Trash and sewage washed up on the shore. Fortunately, locals in El Nido are starting to host beach clean-up days, with everyone pitching in to rake up mounds of plastic flotsam.

For now, it's best to stay clear of El Nido itself. Just a few kilometres either north or south of town lie comfortable accommodations in quiet, natural settings. And if you can spare the bucks, there's always Amanpulo, the deluxe Palawan property of Aman resorts, splendidly isolated on a tiny sliver of paradise



Fresh seafood can be bought, cooked and served to you on the beach. — GLEN PETRIE

called Pamalican Island. You get there on the resort's private plane from Manila.

Or try one of the four El Nido Resorts, each on a different island and offering over-water bungalows. You'll find not only peace and beauty, but good snorkelling, since illegal fishers don't dare go near. In an

encouraging sign, some local fishermen have come to realize that tourists are more valuable than dead fish. And the concept of conservation is spreading.

In Coron, a place of similar idyll north of Palawan that sees much less tourism, a years-long battle between local citizens, environmental groups

and developers finally resulted in a victory for the reefs.

In one of the most diverse coastlines in Southeast Asia, Philippine developer Coral World Park had partnered with media conglomerate Viacom to build a Nickelodeon-themed resort and underwater attraction: think snorkelling with

If you go

Philippine Airlines flies non-stop daily from Vancouver to Manila. Air Swift (air-swift.com) flies from Manila and Cebu to El Nido. El Nido Resorts (elnidoresorts.com) operate boutique hotels on four of the offshore islands near El Nido: Miniloc, Lagen, Pangalusian and Apulit. From about \$575/night including boat transfers from El Nido. Amanpulo Resort on Pamalican Island (aman.com) starts at \$1,979 a night. Avoid staying in the centre of El Nido. Just outside town, try El Nido Bungalows from \$150; or Makulay Lodge and Villas from \$58.

SpongeBob SquarePants in Bikini Bottom. The very idea outraged residents, with some of the strongest resistance coming from the Tagbanua Tribe, the first Indigenous group in the Philippines to have won ancestral domain title over their territory, making them stewards of the 17 lakes and 11 lagoons.

"We do not need an underwater theme park in Coron," the Tagbanua said in a petition letter.

Viacom pulled out, putting the project in limbo. Palawan, after all, is considered the world's best island just as it is.