



CROWNING GLORY: The island of Coron is recognizable by its jagged peaks, resembling the spikes of a crown. With no hotels or lodges, it's the ultimate getaway. Photo by George Tapan; Inset: Kayaking in Kayangan Lake. Photo by Nyx Martinez

ESCAPE TO CALAMIANES: FIVE ENCHANTED DAYS

NYX MARTINEZ rediscovers paradise in Palawan

DAY ONE:

"If you love me, stop paddling!" I couldn't see John behind me, but I knew he was working steady and fast. Ahead was the Coron Island crown-shaped rock—our destination. But directly between us and the island was a huge passenger ferry, and we were headed straight for it.

"Please!" I shrieked again in desperation, "Stop paddling!"

"No! Keep going!" my husband yelled back. "We're not gonna hit it, trust me!"

Trust! Wasn't that what marriage was all about? Yet right now, I was reluctant to let John have mine. We were in a two-seater kayak, attempting to reach Coron Island, and return before sundown. We wanted to see the mysterious Kayangan Lake, swim in

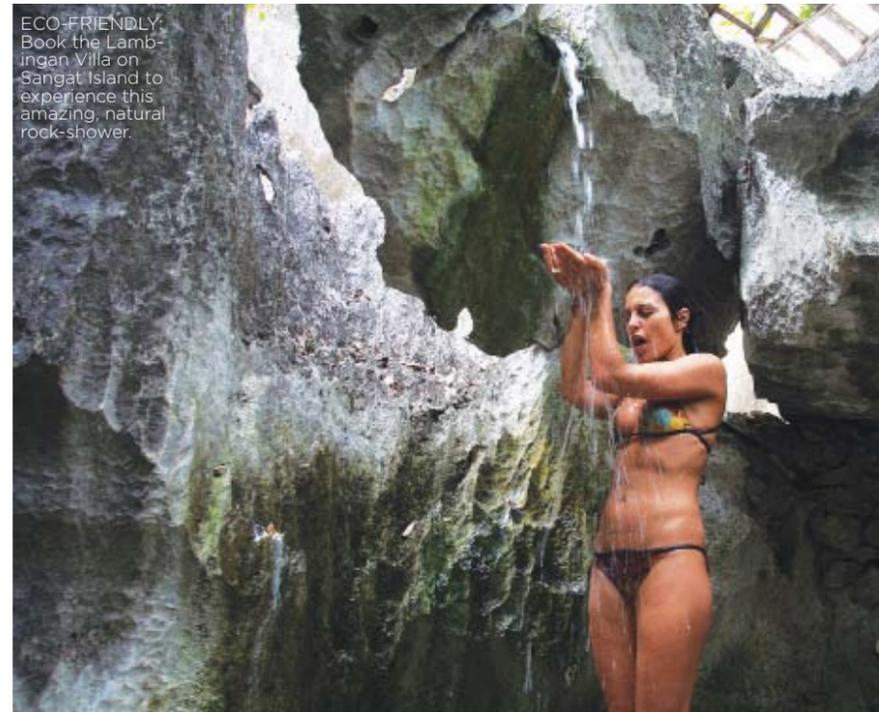
it, and have a grand, romantic time. If we don't get swallowed up first by a giant ferry, I thought.

We were celebrating our second wedding anniversary, the biggest journey I had ever embarked on. It had been, so far, what all good journeys entail: adventure, discovery, and once in awhile, getting lost. John, who had kitesurfed almost every possible part of our islands, had spent much time in the Calamianes group, in the North of Palawan. He was familiar with the wind, the waters, the current, and how to navigate them with a kite. I wasn't so sure about his kayak captaining skills. Yet again, he proved me wrong. Keeping his gaze steady, both on the ferry and on our destination, he steered us safely past the giant. At the



mystical Kayangan Lake, we swam in an enchanted piece of heaven.

It was past sunset by the time we returned. We stopped in at Bistro Coron, a little side restaurant run by a Frenchman named Bruno, who had lived in the Philippines for four decades. And he had that many stories to tell. His adventures were punctuated with multiple expletives. John just smiled; he had heard them all before. On the menu were European pizzas, pastas, and scallops done just right. When the electricity shut off a couple hours later,



ECO-FRIENDLY: Book the Lambingan Villa on Sangat Island to experience this amazing, natural rock-shower.



STRAIGHT INTO SERENITY: From Club Paradise's dive pool (Dugong Dive Center), it's just a few steps to the ocean to experience the magic of Calamianes.

we were still there, and Bruno was telling us about being blown up in a tiny boat when he was in his 20's, about finding some of the country's first archaeological ruins, about the corruption of politics which had caused him so much trouble. The old man was so grumpy, it was fascinating. "Ah, my wife, she says I complain too much," he snarled, taking another swig of rum-coke, the typical island mix, "it's not good for my heart, she says."

Another place down the road, Otto's bar, was run by an Austrian named Otto, of course. This jolly old soul kept us in delightful company. "Respect before you expect," Otto admonished a few times.

"A sheikh in Africa once told me this. I was in Nigeria when there was a lot of crime, but my colleagues and I were always safe because we showed respect." When the rum had warmed us more than was adequate for this tropical climate, we thanked Otto for his sound advice before flagging down a trike back to our choice resort for the night, Kokosnuss.

DAY TWO:

The Calamianes Group of Islands is best known for its main three: Busuanga, Coron, and Culion—but there are hundreds more. The next day, we hopped on a speedboat to the Sangat Island Reserve. During

the 15-minute ride, we got to know Jojo Lorenz, the German PADI and SDI dive instructor, who was also one of those "locals." Jojo had been a diver here for 16 years. It was popular with divers who would come here specifically for wreck-diving. Andy Pownall, who ran Sangat, had first come to Coron from the UK in 1986, as a professional diver for a British marine archeological group. "In those days, we didn't have much communication, we didn't have much TV, we didn't have anything," he told us later over lunch. "But it was just fantastic!"

Andy loved the islands so much, he eventually purchased Sangat Island. He married a Tagbanua woman, learned to speak the local language, to read and write it, and have a thorough understanding of local laws and traditions. In 1994, the eco-friendly resort was opened. It now comprised a restaurant and bar, gift-shop, water sports and dive center. With 14 native accommodations, Sangat had a very relaxed, rustic and quiet atmosphere. Our private part of paradise was the tri-level, two-bedroom Lambingan Villa, separated from the main island by a walkway which led to a hidden beach. The rest of the afternoon, John and I snorkeled, bathed in hot springs, and watched for wild monkeys. That night, on a moonlit sandy shore, under a blanket of stars, it was just the ocean making music, and us.

DAY THREE:

Wreck diving was one of the reasons Sangat had become so popular in recent years: A few of the sunken ships were just 15 minutes from its shores. The gunboat we chose to explore was popular with underwater photographers. Its crusted hull was visible just five inches from the surface. I stayed near the top with my snorkel and mask while John and Jojo, in full dive gear, dove much deeper. Later in the day, Andy took us to Tending Island, where a simple school for indigenous Tagbanua children was set up. There, we met Bert Peeters, a Belgian NGO worker who showed us around the school. At Tending, I also saw the most curious thing: One British fellow and one Belgian, both speaking Filipino—not just with the locals, but with each



CLOSE ENCOUNTER. The Dugong Dive Center on Dimakya Island is near to some of the ocean's rarest marine mammals. (BELOW LEFT) Just off Sangat Island, huge corals shimmer when the sunlight shines on these shallow waters.

other. This was true integration, where no language barrier could segregate them.

"The culture is in their survival," Bert said, about the Tagbanua, "their ways and means of dealing with this climate." "They've actually got so much they can teach us," Andy remarked, "and what we can do is help them adapt to the changing environment and the changing world." Bert took us around the school grounds, which was a simple, single hut for teaching and a large space for eating. "The mats they are making are better quality than many other mats coming from different areas of the Philippines. So we try to help them make a profit from that, and it goes back to the Community."

Volunteer teachers taught the children who came from neighboring fisher-folk families. Schoolbooks were donated; it wasn't much, but a head-start to education and a progressive life for these kids.

DAY FOUR:

Club Paradise was waiting. The resort sits on a 19-hectare island named Dimakya. To get there, we returned to the Coron airport and were shuttled an hour over land and boat. On the island, guests can choose from different types of cottages: Garden View, Sea

View, Hillside, Island View, Junior Suite, or Beachfront—the single detached cottages that we chose for our one night here.

Dirk Fahrenbach, president of the world-class Dugong Dive Center on the island, was so enthusiastic about the existing marine life. "This place has the most marine diversity in the world. We have much more to offer than the Maldives! Here, there is everything—whalesharks, dugongs, shipwrecks from the war. You can dive all year round."

For beginners like me, Club Paradise was the ideal location for an Intro dive. Straight from the pool into the ocean, stepping on the seabed felt like walking right into a clear, vast aquarium. With complete equipment to ensure full safety, we had the best viewing point possible. Dugongs, or sea cows, were said to be spotted here in the March-June season. I came across giant sea turtles, baby sting rays, loads of jellyfish, amazing coral gardens and psychedelic fish in this fascinating world. We walked around underwater for half an hour before resurfacing.

The late afternoon was spent lounging by the Dugong Bar with Long Island Iced Teas—and the classic cocktail never seemed more fitting. This stretch of pure white in



Illustration by Ryan Kabigting

front of us was 700 meters long and poured into turquoise waters, the color clear as could be to the horizon point. Then, just after sundown, we saw the most amazing phenomena: Hundreds of thousands of bats started soaring over head, leaving our island in droves, going in search of food. Later, we learned this was a nightly event. After a delicious buffet dinner, we spent some time talking with the resort's owner, Juergen Warnke. "I've seen all the countries in Asia," the wistful, elderly German said. "To me, the Filipinos are the friendliest in the world. And the islands are more beautiful than any other islands in the world. It's as simple as that."

DAY FIVE:

Our last stop was El Rio Y Mar, the sister of Club Paradise. This resort felt a bit more secluded but the air was tranquil, the rooms spacious. They offered native cabanas, cedar cabanas, or full houses with sea views. The Caltom's Bar sat at the end of the pier, lit up at night, and magical. We lingered there till late, when the rain drizzled around us,

recalling the people we had met here and the lives we'd encountered. It was a fantastic week in one of the most remarkable places on earth.

"The Calamianes Islands are a world in itself," I'd remembered Mr. Warnke saying. Separated from the main body of Palawan, which was already out of the way from the rest of the country, these islands had always held their own secluded charm. Whether it was ancient Chinese traders, Borneo neighbors, Malay settlers, or today's expats and tourists, those who came to this enchanted place almost never wanted to leave.

Going here was getting back to nature, and to ourselves, celebrating a marriage that worked out when we'd trusted each other enough to let life happen. John and I had traveled together to many romantic places in Europe and Asia. Yet here, in the Philippines' Calamianes islands, at the far side of Palawan, I felt that nothing could compare. Perfection, some claimed, was near impossible; but it was out here. And, forced to kayak together, we had found it.

For all-inclusive hiking, camping, and boating tours of the Calamianes Islands, contact Betan Pe, a trustworthy, local guide featured in *Lonely Planet*. Call Showtime Adventures at +63908 939 3703.

CORON TOWN

- Van from Airport to Coron Town (Php150)
- Kokosnuss Resort (Php1,700 for bungalow with private bathroom and aircon)
- Dinner at Bistro Coron: Beers (Php50); Pizza for two (Php300)
- Kayak Rental (Php800); wet bag to keep valuables (Php100); snorkels (Php100 each); entrance to lake (Php200/person)

SANGAT ISLAND RESERVE

Rates start at US\$100; +63919 617 5187; info@sangat.com.ph; www.sangat.com.ph

- To Sangat Island: 15 minute speedboat from Coron town
- PADI and SDI Courses: US\$89.50 (2-3 hours; 3-8 meters)

CLUB PARADISE RESORT

Rates start at US\$190; +632 838 4956; clubpara@info.com.ph; www.clubparadisepalawan.com

- From airport, take 20 minutes shuttle van, then 45 minute boat to Dimakya Island, Club Paradise (land and boat transfers: US\$22 per pax)
- Full Body Massage at the spa: Php1,000

(Island-hopping and other Coron tours available)

DUGONG DIVE CENTER

Rates start at Php1,400 plus Php700 rental charge; info@dugongdivecenter.com; www.dugongdivecenter.com

EL RIO Y MAR RESORT

Rates start at US\$170; +632 838 4956-60; info@elrioymar.com; www.elrioymar.com

TENDING ISLAND SCHOOL

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