

PALAWAN

THIS PHILIPPINE JEWEL IS ONE OF THOSE PLACES THAT YOU MIGHT WANT TO KEEP SECRET ABOUT

BY CINDY WILK

The Boatman threw the anchor and pointed to the beach. I saw no sand, but swam anyway, towards the massive limestones covered with tropical vegetation. A group of people was gathered together next to a rock and, as I approached, I saw one by one disappear. Then I spotted a hole and a small portal that led to a cove encapsulated by rocks, where all you had to do to get to the sand is to cross the translucent waters. The secret beach is actually no secret to those who go to Palawan. 1,780 islands and islets form a long and narrow strip of 450 kilometers in Southwestern Philippines.

Palawan itself is no longer a secret told by word-of-mouth, especially after being elected in 2017, and for the second time, the best island in the world by readers of *Travel & Leisure*. A decade ago, El Nido, the main catalyst of tourists in the archipelago, was a small fishing village surrounded by natural beauties. Today, the downtown is a chaos. Only by boat, on a one-day tour prosaically baptized A, B, C and D, one can get to the wonders of El Nido, among them the Matinloc island's Secret Beach (tour C, take note).

Palawan has much more than El Nido. Coron, to the north, is the best place in Southeast Asia to dive (whether with cylinder or snorkel) amid the wreckage of Japanese WWII ships. To the south, about an hour from Puerto Princesa, there is the underground river of Sabang, 8km channel that runs inside a cave, which was raised to one of the Seven New Natural Wonders in 2011. If one wants to find a fishing village with the atmosphere of the Discoverers' El Nido, just head to Port Barton, before it is too late (there are plans of building resorts and an international airport in that region).

There are so many amazing places in Palawan that it is unnecessary to boast that the inspiration of Alex Garland, the author of the book *The Beach*, which gave birth to Leonardo DiCaprio's film, was not the Phi Phi Islands, but the many hidden coves of the surroundings of El Nido. The choice of

setting the story in Thailand was pragmatic, since it is the preferred destination of the backpackers that he wanted to portray. Or, perhaps, it was a tricky maneuver of the author to mislead tourists who could turn into a 'Thailand' the place where he lived for six months.

Tourism in Palawan is far from Thai saturation levels (okay, Garland, we cannot deny that *The Beach* has to do with it). The archipelago is still a lost paradise, far from the slums of Manila or the violent anti-drug policy of President Rodrigo Duterte. A place big enough to give the tourists a taste of the Philippines, its culture and its people fun, but far enough from the rest to get around safely. And more: still full of secrets to be discovered. One of the best kept ones is called Tao Phillipines. The company, opened 11 years ago, has 8 boats and 16 camps in the most remote places between El Nido and Coron. The expeditions last 5 days, take 20 people on board, 8 crew members, including a dog, and there is no fixed route, it goes where the wind blows. The nights are spent on deserted beaches, in cabins with neatly arranged mattresses and mosquito nets, eating fish freshly caught - often on board - and deliciously prepared by the chef. Then one arrives at the most preserved coral reefs and remote villages, where every house has its rooster tied at the door, and there are no Western buddies except for other travelers, who have learned of the Tao by some friend generous enough to share the secret. Oops, I've said it ...

Photo credits:

1) Rodrigo M. Nunes, 2) Christian Kober/AGBPhoto, 3) Cindy Wilk, 4) Danita Delimont Stock/AGBPhoto

Photo description:

- 1) The exuberance of the island, well away from the chaos of Manila
- 2) The underground river of Sabang, one of the Seven New Wonders of the World
- 3) Hard life in the fishing village Port Barton
- 4) The tiny portal leading to Secret Beach
- 5) Port Barton is still peaceful, but there will be resorts and an international airport

WHEN TO GO

The best period is from January to May. The rest of the year, the country is usually a target of typhoons and hurricanes.

HOW TO GET THERE

The main airport of Palawan is in Puerto Princesa, which receives flights from Manila, the Philippine capital. From Sao Paulo, Qatar Airways (bit.ly/qa_t) flies to Puerto Princesa, with connection in Doha and, later, in Manila, prices start at US \$2,586.

DOCUMENTS

Brazilians don't need visa. A passport valid for six months and yellow fever vaccine would do.

CURRENCY

Peso filipino (US\$ 1 = PHP 50,35).