



An Atmosphere of Awesomeness

Atmosphere resort in Negros Oriental delivers equal doses of relaxation and adventure – just what the doctor ordered for the intrepid traveller.

Words by Yvette Tan Photos by Rica Garcia

Atmosphere Resort in Dauin, Negros Oriental is the kind of resort that marries adventure with class. It's got friendly and efficient staff, great ambiance and amenities, and a roster of repeat guests and more on the way, which makes it hard to believe that the resort is only two years old.

"(My husband Matthew and I) used to live in Boracay and we both decided that we wanted to do our own thing. Boracay was already very well established and we wanted to go back a little to what we loved about the Philippines," says Gaby Holder, Atmosphere's General Manager and owner. "We know that the Visayas is beautiful and that there's a lot of good diving in the area. We basically came down here to check out Apo and went around the area and fell in love with it and found the perfect piece of land."

They decided to call their resort Atmosphere because the word denoted the feeling of the tropics that they wanted to achieve, and also fed into their interest in diving (both Gaby and Matt are certified diving instructors). "Atmosphere and diving all links in because you measure depth in atmosphere so the name came about," Gaby says. "It (also) has all to do with... the feeling of what made people want to come back, and maybe it was the atmosphere that we created."

For me and my photographer, Rica Garcia, it is easy to understand Atmosphere's allure, as we were pampered as soon as we stepped out of the airport and were whisked to the resort. We were welcomed with a cold towel and an iced tea shake before being led to our Penthouse, which had two rooms, a kitchen, living room (where the TV is located) and a balcony that contained a second sala set and a hammock. Hammocks abound in the resort, with each dwelling having one of its own, reinforcing Atmosphere's laid-back appeal.



From top: Atmosphere's private beach; Blue restaurant; a romantic dinner, can be easily set up upon request

Relaxation Sublime

One thing to look forward to is Atmosphere's spa, which should be operational by the time you read this. Rae Collins, Spa Manager and resident Yoga Instructor (Atmosphere offers outdoor yoga classes twice a day), took me on a tour of the spa's site. With its tropical design, lush greenery and tranquil ponds (the spa has two), the spa's layout aims to promote interaction between the guest and nature, Rae explains. Part of the ritual of moving from one part of the spa to another involves walking through a partially submerged bridge whose water connects to the pool (again, the spa has two, one of them a Watsu pool -- Rae is still working on her certification as of the interview). The massage rooms will be similar, with a seating area for the foot wash at the beginning and the tea ceremony at the end. The only difference would be their bathrooms, which will range from nature-inspired to ultra-modern.

The treatments will be a mix of natural products grown locally and from trusted brands overseas. "The spa treatments that we will be doing will encompass a lot of indigenous fruits and herbs and plants as much as we can grow here and also in the essence of showing the clients where (the treatments) are coming from and what the plants are being grown for," says Rae, who designed the treatments with her spa therapist trainer. "We will also be stocking branded treatments. A lot of people in Europe who come here like to use a well-known tested brand, so we'll have a nice little mixture of branded and natural cosmetic treatments like facials, body scrubs and body wraps."

I asked Rae for a preview of what guests can expect come December, when the spa formally opens. "I believe one of our signature treatments will be an all-natural aloe vera plant extract facial, infused with tea tree, some basil elements along with a white clay mask. It's a nice hydrating mask but it kind of gives a little firmness to the skin as well," she says. "No surprise but one of our signature scrubs will be using Batangas Barako coffee as an exfoliant. It's an antioxidant and it stimulates the senses as well."

With its list of activities and amenities, the availability of a cuisine and proximity to the city and to awesome dive spots, Atmosphere clearly knows how to keep its guests busy -- whether it's adventure or relaxation they're after.

"We're not just about diving," Gaby says. "One of the things we emphasize is that people can enjoy total relaxation, switch off from all the events at work and home life and come here and totally relax. People chill out by the pool or they tend to have massages or they just want to go snorkeling off the beach. We've also got nice waterfalls and things in the area to take you away from everything that is normal and bring you somewhere where nobody can bother you."

Just one day in the resort and you will, as we did, readily agree.

"We get a wide mix of nationalities. We get people from Manila, people from the province, we get a lot of Europeans as well. What kind of people enjoy Atmosphere? People who like to take the time out for themselves and know that we'll spoil them when necessary," Gaby relates.

Tucked Away in Paradise

The resort has eight suites and four residences, making for a pretty intimate getaway. The suites are your typical resort rooms, except for the outdoor shower and a day bed, which means it can house a maximum of three people. The residences each have a penthouse on the second floor and below it, two apartments. Each contains one room, a kitchen and a living area, both types designed with long-staying guests in mind.

What impressed me was the resort's dedication to being green. Hot water is provided via solar-powered heaters, and guests are encouraged to reuse their towels and are requested not to take home toiletry containers, as these will be recycled. Their green advocacy stretches to their amenities, as their infinity pool, which looks out onto a beautiful blue sea, is saltwater chlorinated, and in their use of local materials whenever possible.

Land and Sea

Atmosphere caters to its guests' every whim, arranging tours of nearby sights, as well as trips to Dumaguete City. What they are most known for, however, is their diving. The resort is very near Apo Island, which has often been cited as one of the best dive spots in the world. Whether you dive (as Rica did) or snorkel (as I did), you will come across many wonders such as giant table corals, different kinds of fish, and a lone hawksbill turtle who seemed perturbed at being followed.

It is very easy to organize a day trip to the island, or perhaps a

safari, where divers stay overnight. Diving equipment can be rented in the resort. Something that delighted my photographer to no end was the availability of a camera room, where underwater photographers can store and tend to their equipment. Rica was also fascinated with Atmosphere's house reef, which is great for muck diving. Beside it is a marine sanctuary that's great for snorkeling, and where people have sometimes seen green turtles, clown fish, and trigger fish.

Island Cuisine

One is bound to be hungry after a long day of diving (and let's admit it, even after a long, luxurious day of not doing anything). Atmosphere's answers to this problem come in two forms: the bar, which is located near the pool and caters to hungry swimmers taking a break before they reenter the water; and Blue, the more formal (there's no dress code, but guests aren't allowed to dine in wet clothes) dining area. Both restaurants serve a mix of Eastern and Continental cuisine with a local dish always included as one of the chef's specials.

Head Chef Glomer Elenano, who has almost 13 years kitchen experience, shares that his secret to serving good food is "love."

He let us try one of his specialties, Big-eye tuna with Spinach Risotto. The dish was served char-grilled, the tuna containing a lovely smoky flavor on the outside that yielded to a raw, moist, pink interior. It went well with the risotto's herby creaminess, the rice grains firm, yet easily yielding. This was followed by BTS Cake, (the acronym---Pastry Chef Adrian Leong shyly said--- meant "better than sex") which is a dense, dark chocolate cake infused with coffee liquor, topped with caramel crunch and served with toffee sauce. I could imagine people getting addicted to this instead of, you know, that other thing.



Clockwise from left:
The Penthouse has its own living area; a sample of one of Atmosphere's cozy bedrooms; big eye tuna with spinach risotto; the resort offers yoga classes twice daily.

