

THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Far away from the Philippines' celebrity suite of glossy resorts, the little island of Negros in the central Visayas has been left alone to develop into something more natural, more vibrant and far more enchanting



PREVIOUS PAGE: A fishing boat bobs on the tranquil waters of Negros Island.
LEFT TO RIGHT: The breathtaking Atmosphere Spa and Resort; dolphins are a common sight around the island, as are fishing boats and colourful flowers; the people of Negros like to dress themselves in bright colours.

ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE THINGS ABOUT NEGROS ORIENTAL IS THE SHEER NUMBER OF COLOURS — LIKE AN ISLAND VERSION OF A RAINBOW LORIKEET.

On the sandbank, our friendly hosts barbecue some freshly-caught fish and treat us to juicy mangos and whole-grain rice. It may not be nouvelle cuisine, but in this unique setting, it's one of the most memorable meals we've ever had. After eating, we clamber down the stairs and plunge into the turquoise waters. The other three bungalows are empty. This place, it seems, is one of Asia's best-kept secrets.

IT'S POSSIBLE TO DRIVE THE ENTIRE LENGTH OF NEGROS

Island in around six hours, but it contains enough distractions to delay you for several months. In the northernmost part there is Kanlaon, a dormant volcano stretching 2,435m above sea level. Seismic activity permitting, visitors can scramble to the top and peer into its boiling abyss in one day, then stop off at a natural hot spring to ease the muscle strains on the way back down. But such exertions are far from our minds, so we retreat to Atmosphere to stretch out in our cottage, before dropping off to sleep dreaming of leaping dolphins.

Alongside the feeling that we've stumbled across a beautiful secret, one of the most memorable things about Negros Oriental is the sheer number of colours – like an island version of a rainbow lorikeet. Visayans love to paint their vehicles, homes, restaurants and boats as loudly as possible, and added to the tropical flowers, lush green of the jungle and endless blue of the ocean mean that a visit here is like falling inside a kaleidoscope.

The following morning we make the short hop along the coast to the Atlantis Resort. There are a number of dive outfits in Negros Oriental but few are better equipped than Atlantis, a five-star dive resort offering everything

APPROACHING NEGROS ISLAND FROM ACROSS THE

water, it appears to have so much greenery that you wonder if there is any room left for humans. The third largest of the Philippines' 7,100 islands, Negros is infused with the irresistible serenity that comes from a sparse population. It's unforgettably gorgeous.

Matt and Gabby Holder, the British owners of Atmosphere Spa and Resort, couldn't believe what they found when they purchased their land about half-an-hour south of Dumaguete. In Negros Oriental on the eastern half of the island, they found all the benefits of tropical island living, without the over-development that has plagued other parts of the country.

Today, they manage six luxury thatched-roof cottages framing an enormous lawn that trundles down to the beach around an infinity pool. It's here we eat our healthy, organic breakfast, after being woken at 5am for our dolphin spotting trip, on a stretch of water located around two hours north of Atmosphere.

The ocean is green and glassy as we board the handcrafted boat, and after an hour of pattering around on the sea, we are still completely alone save for a solitary fishing boat returning from its night shift.

Just as the peace begins to give way to sleepiness, flying fish take to the air, joined moments later by a couple of

dolphins, swimming alongside the boat. More and more join the race, leaping completely out of the water, before crashing back into the blue.

Spinner dolphins are named not because of the jumping, but for their penchant for outrageously aerial corkscrewing. It's the kind of thing you might see in an awful aquarium show, but here they do it in the wild, untrained – and it's magnificent. I have no idea why they do it – maybe it's a celebration after a good night's hunting, maybe it's curiosity about our lone boat, or maybe it's simply just because they can. Whatever the reason, we're mesmerised.

More and more of the mammals join us until the pod is about 200-strong and swimming above and below one another, zig-zagging under the bow. We get closer and closer to them – so close we can hear their distinct clicks as they chatter away a few feet from our faces.

As we watch, the captain tells us that rich waters of the Tanon Strait are also home to even bigger creatures, including the rare pygmy sperm whale. Spinner dolphins

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APO ISLANDERS ARE SOME OF THE MOST DEDICATED COMMUNITY CONSERVATIONISTS IN THE WORLD.

THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Calm waters make Negros Island ideal for dolphin watching; the beautiful coastline.

from day trips to lengthy liveboard trips. Our corset-tight schedule can only squeeze in an “Intro Dive” – a sampler for first-time, non-qualified divers. However, we are well compensated by our instructor Steve De Neef, a Belgian ex-pat who spends as much time as he can in these vibrant waters as a dive teacher and professional underwater photographer.

Listening to him talk about his trade, I will never look at an underwater photograph the same way again: “Take the clownfish, for example – everyone loves Nemo, right?” he asks as we prepare to head back out to the Tanon Strait. We nod – we do indeed love that wonky-flipperped little fish. “Well to take a good picture of one of them, you typically have to have a rig with three flashes weighing about ten kilograms, meanwhile, you’re trying to stabilise yourself against the current with poles, all the while making sure not to touch the coral. And remember, the fish you’re chasing is only about three centimetres long.” Suddenly it doesn’t feel so bad to make-do with a waterproof point-and-click.

With that in mind we head to Apo, a volcanic speck of an island an hour from the coast. Apo is famous for rising out of the sea following a massive eruption 300 years ago, and also for an incredibly brave programme of sustainability adopted by the locals.

In the 1970s, observers from one of Dumaguete’s four universities noticed that the reefs were looking worse for wear. After some interviews they were shocked to discover that local fishermen were using cyanide and dynamite to

get fish out of the water. Mother Nature must have felt like she was under attack.

The scientists took the locals underwater to show them the damage they were doing to their reef – damage which, if they weren’t careful, would become permanent. A programme was then set up that protected the coral, while allowing the locals to fish outside of the reserve. To their surprise, their hauls improved once they stopped destroying the environment, tripling over five years. Now, the Apo Islanders are some of the most dedicated community conservationists in the world, patrolling their waters to guard against outsiders ruining their underwater larder.

The fact that the fishermen stayed their hands is part of the reason Apo has evolved into one of the world’s most exciting dive locations. Such is the biodiversity here that the Schedd Aquarium in Chicago has a permanent exhibition that exactly replicates life off Apo’s jagged coast, housing 500 species which are found in these fertile waters.

After lengthy instruction, we finally take the plunge and are amazed to see that for every colour on land in Negros, there is at least one corresponding underwater. For the first-time diver, it feels like wandering around a 1960s sci-fi set: enormous purple domes erupt from the sea floor, housing dancing orange and green sea urchins. Fish of every colour shoot around below whilst an endangered green turtle hovers by somewhere above.

I blaze through my oxygen faster than anyone else and regretfully head to the surface. Steve consoles me. “That happens with first-timers sometimes – too much excitement.” We drag ourselves onto the pristine shores flanking the Apo Island Beach Resort. Looking for all the world like a Monet painting, the resort is composed of neat, pastel-coloured bungalows and a pretty restaurant where we take a seat in the shade for lunch. As the waves lap on the shore, Steve chats about the lazy life in paradise. It’s autumn and Steve laughs when thinking about what the weather will be like back in his native Belgium.

All too soon, we make our way back to Negros for a last night at Atmosphere before heading off to neighbouring island of Siquijor the next morning. Siquijor a remarkable place in its own right and is even less developed than Negros. As I wander down to the waiting boat, I wonder why these islands haven’t become major tourist attractions; how they’ve been able to stay secret for so long. Promising Atmosphere’s staff we’ll be back next year, we consider not telling anyone what happened – staying silent about the dolphins; not mentioning the warmth of the people; keeping quiet about the diving. Then perhaps it’d stay this way, and we could keep a little bit of it all for ourselves. 🌊

WORDS JAMIE LAFFERTY Until his visited Negros, Jamie thought that spinner dolphins were so named because they’re good at cricket. He secretly still hopes this is true.