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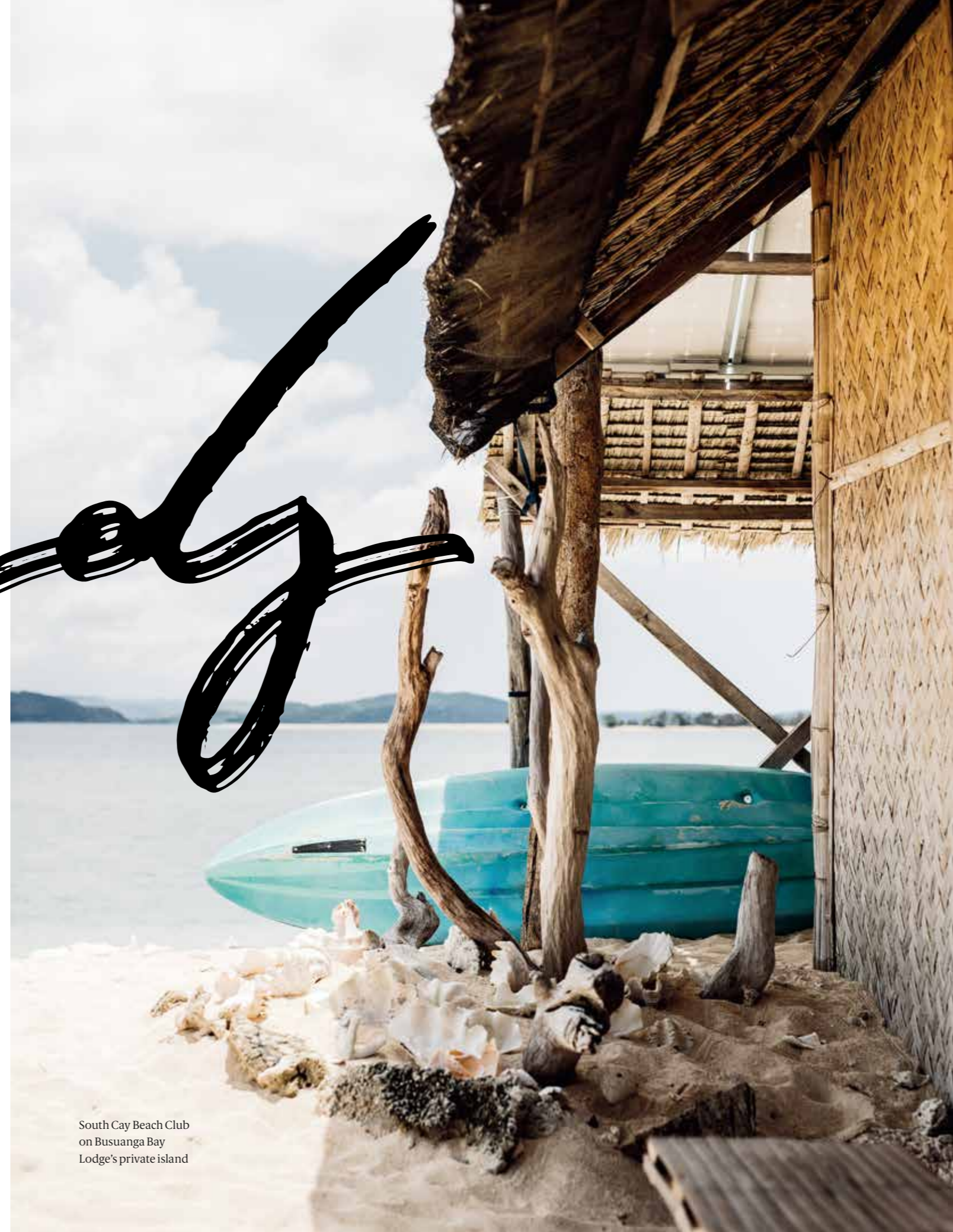
Treasured

WITH 7641 ISLES TO CHOOSE FROM,
THE PHILIPPINES IS A BEACHGOERS' PARADISE.

THE ONLY DILEMMA?
FINDING THE ISLAND THAT'S BEST FOR YOU.

ROSLYN JOLLY IS HERE TO HELP.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM GIBSON



South Cay Beach Club
on Busuanga Bay
Lodge's private island



Nature



(Clockwise from top left) Try the local beer with lunch in a floating restaurant on the Loboc River; visit the tarsier sanctuary; marvel at the surreal Chocolate Hills

Bohol

The 10th largest of the Philippines' 7641 islands and a 90-minute flight from Manila, Bohol is paradise for nature-lovers and those seeking a true taste of Filipino country life. If you like mountains, jungle and villages, as well as tropical beaches and reefs, this island is for you.

Two unique natural wonders attract visitors to Bohol. The first is the Philippine tarsier, surely the strangest and cutest animal you'll ever see. This tiny primate with big eyes and bat-like ears could well have been the inspiration for Yoda in *Star Wars*. The Philippine Tarsier Foundation's sanctuary in Corella is the best place to see these shy and vulnerable creatures, which are so easily stressed that they can die in captivity. There are no cages here; the tarsiers roam freely in their forest habitat, which you can visit on a guided tour.

Bohol's second drawcard is the Chocolate Hills: 1268 mounds – some conical, others rounded – that rise from the jungle floor in this mesmerising, surreal landscape. There's little to do but marvel and it's a sight not to be missed. For a more dynamic experience, nearby Chocolate Hills Adventure Park (chocolatehillsadventurepark.com) offers nature-themed activities such as horseriding, treetop rope challenges and zip-line cycling.

Cool off in a floating restaurant on a Loboc River cruise (boholtourismph.com) through silent, thick, lush forest or, for a more immersive jungle experience, try stand-up paddleboarding (suptoursphilippines.com).

There are two bridges connecting Bohol to Panglao Island, where resorts in the south line the pearly-white coastline. Eskaya Beach Resort & Spa (hotel.qantas.com.au/eskaya-beach) is a spacious property with a great vibe. Its 24 thatched villas, many with a private pool, keep guests close to nature with luxurious outdoor bathrooms. Relax with a drink at the swim-up bar in the main infinity pool, listen to live music while dining at the onsite restaurant or take in the *Survivor*-like ambience of torches and a bonfire while enjoying a beach banquet of Filipino or international cuisine.



Calamian Islands

The stunning beauty of Coron Island's Twin Lagoon could make you think you've left the real world and wandered into a Jurassic Eden – or onto the set of an action-fantasy movie. Sliding over the side of a boat into the ultra-clear water of the first lagoon then swimming under a rock arch to the second lagoon, you feel you're in a place where anything could happen. If King Kong appeared at the top of the jungle-clad cliffs or James Bond dropped down from a helicopter, it wouldn't seem surprising.

The gateway to the Calamian Islands is Busuanga Airport, an hour's flight from Manila. American and European backpackers mill about, negotiating budget tours with local providers, while vans wait to whisk more affluent travellers away to upscale accommodation such as Busuanga Bay Lodge (hotel.qantas.com.au/busuangabaylodge). The one-hour drive to this boutique resort pressed against a hillside on the west coast gives you a window into the lives of Filipinos on this remote island at the edge of the South China Sea.

At Busuanga Bay Lodge, a gloriously situated terrace overlooks an entrancing array of bays and inlets that are just waiting to be explored by sailboat, kayak or jet ski. The resort's bars and two restaurants are

casually elegant places to chill out after sun-filled days spent in and on the water.

Remnants of World War II have made this island group a top wreck-diving destination. Over seven decades, nature has transformed sunken Japanese warships into reefs that house magnificent coral and marine life. Several submerged vessels offer exciting sites for scuba divers, while snorkellers can explore the shallow wreck of a gunboat off Lusong Island, as well as Malwaway Reef and Coral Garden.

Mornings on the move yield to dreamy afternoons spent relaxing at South Cay Beach Club on Busuanga Bay Lodge's nearby private island or lounging by the resort's high-set infinity pool, which has splendid water views.

Active



(Clockwise from above) South Cay Beach Club at Busuanga Bay Lodge specialises in water views and cocktails; a local boatman; Coron Island's Twin Lagoon



Flight path

MNL

Qantas flies to Manila from Sydney, with connections from all Australian capital cities. qantas.com



Family



Cebu

Cebu's high-rise resorts are reminiscent of Waikiki or Surfers Paradise but the snorkelling off the beach is as good as you'll find in more remote locations. Float above schools of rainbow-coloured fish and exquisite coral gardens, just metres away from world-class resort facilities.

On Mactan isle, which is linked to Cebu Island by two bridges, the large Shangri-La's Mactan Resort & Spa (hotel.qantas.com.au/shangrila/mactan) is a "one-stop shop" for families, partly because of its great-value meal-and-accommodation packages. There's a kids' club with programs for preschoolers and primary school children, indoor and outdoor playgrounds, minigolf, a child-friendly zip-line and a teens' games room.

The resort has seven restaurants that offer kids' menus; one also has a dedicated children's buffet area. Alternatively, reserve Paradise Island, a space by the shore, for a private family dinner.

Leave the resort and you're in the heart of the real Philippines. Take a cultural tour of Cebu City to soak up the Spanish and American influences or witness everyday life at century-old Carbon Market, the island's biggest farmers' market (make sure you're back at the resort in time for family-friendly cocktail hour in the Ocean Club Lounge).

The Shangri-La is a bright, busy, colourful resort but it also has plenty of relaxing nooks, including Chi, The Spa with its super-deluxe couples' villas.



(Clockwise from left) Shangri-La's Mactan Resort & Spa has several restaurants and bars, manicured gardens and a marine sanctuary off the beach; artefacts in Yap-Sandiego Ancestral House in Cebu City

Pamalican

A turquoise halo marks the destination: a speck of land 2.4 kilometres long and 500 metres wide, accessible only by private plane, which touches down on a runway in the forest.

Amanpulo, one of Aman's suite of ultra-luxurious resorts (aman.com), occupies all of Pamalican Island, 360 kilometres south of Manila, in the Sulu Sea.

Walking the perimeter of the island takes about 90 minutes, during which it's unlikely you'll encounter another soul. It will be just you, the whispering palm fronds, the sugar-white sand and the surrounding sea, a shimmering palette of cerulean and aquamarine.

Amanpulo pampers guests with a sense of space and privacy. There are 42 *casitas* and 18 villas, their plain exteriors belying the opulence within. A large bathing and dressing area occupies half of each "little house". In the other half, floor-to-ceiling windows, which frame a sumptuous bed, open onto a secluded deck. The villas are even more sumptuous. Each has private beach access, living and dining pavilions, a private pool (some with a cabana) and a dedicated chef and butler.

For all that, the resort's infrastructure is remarkably restrained. Only the central Clubhouse restaurant has the manicured look of a luxury hotel. Elsewhere, there's a lovely sense of wildness, with tangled vegetation and minimal signage. Nature

and the sounds of the wind and ocean are a constant presence. Guests – mainly couples from Europe, Japan and the Philippines – use bicycles and golf buggies to travel between the four restaurants, sea sports hut, tennis courts and spa.

On daily snorkelling excursions, you can swim with tropical fish, as well as sea turtles, whose conservation the resort actively supports through its hatchery and turtle release. You'll experience the quiet elation of being close to these beautiful, wild creatures, some more than 100 years old.

At day's end, sip cocktails while being serenaded on a sunset cruise or sit down to a lamplit, privately butlered beach barbecue, savouring the seclusion and serenity that are arguably Amanpulo's greatest luxuries.

Luxury



(Clockwise from left) Make a couple of hours disappear on Amanpulo resort's beach; be serenaded on a sunset cruise; enjoy a tropical fruit platter in your *casita* on arrival



(From top) Entalula Island's pristine beach; Water Cottages at Lagen Island Resort



Romance



El Nido

In the El Nido municipality in the Province of Palawan, the limpid waters of Miniloc Island's Big Lagoon are up to 27 metres deep, while the towering 250-million-year-old limestone cliffs that encircle it are covered with lush greenery that thrives despite the intense sunlight and lack of fresh water.

The ideal way to explore this patch of paradise is to kayak around the enchantingly blue lagoon then enjoy an alfresco

lunch in a little grass shack (operated by El Nido Resorts) on lovely Entalula isle, the next stop on your island-hopping tour.

At Lagen Island Resort (hotel.qantas.com.au/lagenislandresort), a 45-minute boat transfer from El Nido Airport, manager Jen Zafra knows that spectacular natural settings can enhance life's most romantic experiences.

Here, in a location that's perfect for savouring tropical sunsets, two high promontories jut into the sea like a pair of mighty arms holding the small settlement between them. Stylish but unpretentious, the resort is a haven of eco-friendly comfort that makes use of its extraordinary location to stage dream-come-true events.

The staff goes to great lengths to design the perfect wedding or vow-renewal ceremony for guests. And locations for private marriage proposals or honeymoon dinners include a rainforest cabana, a floating bamboo raft and a sandbar reached by speedboat.

"Whether it's a wedding or a marriage proposal, my goal is to make them cry – with happiness, of course," says Zafra, laughing. "It's a personal challenge and I have a 98 per cent success rate." ■



Wellness getaway

Medically guided detox programs and award-winning raw, vegan cuisine feature at The Farm at San Benito (hotel.qantas.com.au/thefarmsanbenito), a holistic wellness retreat set amid rolling hills and lush forest on the main island, Luzon.

Best of the Rest

Manila luxury

In upmarket Bonifacio Global City, Shangri-La at the Fort, Manila (pictured above; hotel.qantas.com.au/shangrilamanila) is a chic, contemporary property with exceptional dining and fitness facilities, making it an ideal hotel for a stopover in the Philippines' capital.

Marine discovery

At Atmosphere boutique resort (atmosphereresorts.com) on the south-east coast of Negros Oriental Island, diving courses, photography classes and marine science presentations enable guests of all ages to discover the renowned underwater environments of the Dauin coastline and nearby Apo Island.

Authentic adventure

Tao (taophilippines.com) is an ecotourism network that hosts sailing expeditions and camp stays in northern Palawan. Expect to leave your comfort zone and get close to nature and local communities.

Heritage accommodation

In Bataan, Central Luzon, a unique collection of buildings from the Spanish colonial era has been lovingly restored to create Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar (hotel.qantas.com.au/lascasafilipinas). Heritage walking tours and cultural shows complement the resort's old-world atmosphere.