



A tropical resort deck with lounge chairs and a pool overlooking the ocean. The deck is made of light-colored wood and features several wooden lounge chairs with cushions. A small table holds a bowl of fruit. The pool is a deep blue, and the ocean is visible in the background. The text 'philippines' is overlaid in a large, light-colored serif font.

philippines

Pristine, Unesco-protected coral reefs, aquamarine seas, luxurious jungled-island retreats that coddle and pamper... and all now within easier reach, says Lucia van der Post, thanks to non-stop international flights and a new seaplane service

Ask Charlie McCulloch, the maverick entrepreneur who found a deserted palm-fringed island in Linapacan in Palawan and turned it into a private paradise, what took him to the Philippines in the first place and he has a ready answer. "I wanted a challenge," he explains, "and the Philippines turned out to be just perfect. The Calamian Archipelago in Northern Palawan had everything I was looking for. It is one of the last places in the world where there are pristine seas, untouched reefs and unexplored islands. I wanted more than just luxury and a stunning location – I was looking for authenticity and adventure and a way of enjoying the company of friends and family in a totally relaxed and private setting."

On the face of it, creating Ariara (pictured on this page and overleaf) – a heavenly private island resort – in a far-flung little-known sea seems perverse, for there's no getting away from the fact that the Philippines, for those of us who live in the west, is a long, long way from home. And it's the

huge distance that has made this extraordinary country, with its 7,000-odd islands and some of the most beautiful unpolluted seas and beaches in the world, something of a hard sell as a holiday destination to anybody except backpackers and ardent divers with time on their hands and adventure in their bones. But things are changing, and Charlie McCulloch looks to be onto a winner.

It helps that Philippine Airlines restarted its non-stop flights from London to Manila in 2013, which takes a lot of the pain out of the journey. It's still around 14 hours but for truly charming service and delicious, rather exotic food it's hard to beat. And then the recent arrival of Air Juan (seaplane pictured left) has made visiting these countless islands a whole lot easier. Island-hopping for those without their own chartered yacht was, until recently, a laborious exercise often involving flying back to Manila each and every time, but the seaplanes have no need of landing strips or airports, which means they can go wherever your fancy takes them.

When Charlie and his wife Carrie, for instance, first started developing Ariara they had to fly to Coron, the nearest airport to their island, which lies some 257km southwest of Manila. From

the airport they had an hour's drive to the port, from where they embarked on a four-hour boat journey. For those who have the time, that made it a splendidly adventurous start to a holiday, but for those in more of a hurry the six-hour-plus journey from Manila can now be done in an hour and 20 minutes by seaplane, which lands right beside Ariara's own jetty.

As for Ariara itself, it is the sort of island that one dreams about in the bleak dark days of a European winter. It's 125 acres in all, fringed with jungle made up of myriad different trees and foliage, has some 600m of beautiful beach, and nesting in one of the hills behind the main house and cottages are a pair of awesome sea eagles. And the whole point of it is that, like Richard Branson's Necker Island (only for a fraction of the price), Ariara has to be taken in its entirety, which means you have the whole island to yourself as your own private paradise. There's a minimum charge for six to eight people (\$715 per person per night; but if there are 15-18

staying for seven nights it is just \$475 each) and most things, apart from fuel for the boats, scuba-diving, massages and alcohol, are included in the price. One sleeps in individual cottages scattered

Main picture: the infinity pool at Ariara Island. **Inset:** an Air Juan seaplane arriving at the resort from Manila



unseen





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through the grounds, and it's hard to put into words quite how privileged one feels to be there.

But let me make a start: the cottages (all designed by Jorge Yulo, a distinguished Filipino architect) look straight out over the beach, with its sand like spun sugar, and beyond that onwards and outwards to other sand-rimmed, jungle-covered islands scattered through the turquoise seas. There are toys galore – everything from simple snorkelling and diving equipment, paddleboards and kayaks, speedboats and jet-skis to the *Maya Maya* (a beautifully equipped three-cabinned motor yacht) and the *Karen Joy* (a traditional 100ft wooden Filipino fishing boat with four air-conditioned cabins) both of which can be used for two-, three- or four-day expeditions to neighbouring islands or diving sites.

Then there are somewhere between 35 and 40 staff (depending upon numbers staying) who are there simply to give you the time of your life. You eat where and when you want. Lunch under the trees, dine on the beach by torchlight, or under a canopy at the end of the jetty. Want to snorkel? Somebody will miraculously appear with a basketful of flippers and masks. Lounging round the pool? In no time there'll be a cappuccino or an iced calamansi lime juice by your

From top: **Huma Island resort and spa. The Lodge at Ariara Island. A sea turtle off Huma Island**

side. Florian Müller runs the place, and he's an expert at all watersports but is also a dive instructor. I can hardly think of a better way to learn to dive, or more benign and beautiful waters in which to do it. All round the island are spectacular reefs, alive with neon-coloured fish, starfish, angelfish, sea-urchins, turtles, crabs and the odd little reef shark, all weaving in and out of the extraordinary coral.

The idle can spend their days round the pool, snorkelling off the beach or having a massage, while the energetic can hack their way through the jungle to the top of the island and marvel at the views, or kayak over to one of the nearby islands to visit a little Filipino fishing village or the nearby town of San Miguel. But with either the *Maya Maya* or the *Karen Joy* (and, of course, their expert crews) there is a host of islands to be visited, the wrecks of second world war ships and planes to be explored (the Japanese moved a fleet to the Coron Bay area during the war, which the Americans later sank), treks to lakes and lagoons to be had and, most exciting

of all, you can embark on a six- or seven-day excursion to the Unesco-protected Tubbataha Reef Marine Park, which is a world-famous diving site, with chances to see sharks, manta rays, turtles and other marine life. There is no better place than Ariara to have a great family party or to celebrate an anniversary with a group of friends.

But not everybody is up for hiring an entire island; for those just wanting to check into paradise on their own, there is Amanpulo (pictured overleaf). Built on an island in the Sulu Sea, by chance a mere 49km from Ariara – is one of

the earliest and best of the Aman resorts and many an Aman junkie's favourite. Though it can take as many as 220 visitors at a time, you'd never know it, so cleverly placed are all the villas and so spread-out are the gardens, the restaurants and the spa. Since it is now over 20 years old, the powers that be have just given it a serious upgrade. The two tree-top casitas have their own private swimming pools; bathrooms and bedrooms everywhere have been redone; and the technology is state-of-the-art. But what remains unchanged is its heavenly position, its beautiful seas and the famous Aman service. The experience starts at the airport in Manila, from where Aman's own small aeroplane flies guests onto its airstrip. From the moment you arrive at the airport to the time it comes to leave, Aman staff cosset you all the way. Outside each beach casita (in my view, much the best place to stay) are decks to sit on, umbrellas and sun-loungers on the sand; at night quite often the shore is alight with the barbecues where staff will cook individual private dinners. By day you snorkel,



From top: The Farm at San Benito healing sanctuary. A tree-top

The Farm at San Benito is a bit of an insider's secret, a wellbeing sanctuary with highly trained medical supervision a mere hour and a half from Manila

picnic on sandbars, take a boat to the nearby Manamoc island, whizz around driving your own little buggy like Mr Toad, and generally bliss out.

Much less sophisticated, and still recovering from damage wreaked by Typhoon Yolanda, is Huma Island (pictured on previous page). Inspired by resorts in the Maldives, it has 64 over-the-water villas, though some at the time of my visit were still being rebuilt, and 15 that give right onto its very beautiful beach (which I much preferred); but its great claim to fame is the adventures it offers (and it has a terrific wine cellar). Right in the bay in front of the villas lie the remains of a second world war plane wreck, round which I spent a happy time snorkelling. But within an hour's distance by boat there are some nine other plane and shipwrecks, of which the most spectacular is the *Okikawa Maru*, the remains of a Japanese tanker. More adventures are being developed all the time, and expeditions and picnics to nearby islands – such as the limestone caves of Black Island – are already on offer, while rock-climbing, abseiling and caving are soon to be launched. And all around Huma, within easy reach by kayak or the island's own catamaran, are pristine reefs that offer excellent snorkelling.

While islands and unspoilt seas and coral reefs are what the Philippines is mostly famous for, The Farm at San Benito (pictured top) is a bit of an insider's secret. It's a wellbeing sanctuary with highly trained medical supervision a mere hour and a half from Manila, so if you take the Philippine Airlines flight from London you land at Manila in the mid-afternoon the next day, and by 6pm you could be having a massage in the spa, ready to start the next morning on whatever programme you feel you need. I did a four-day detox (though they recommend a minimum of seven days) that involved drinking nothing but revitalising juices, crammed full of vitamins and nutrients, at regular intervals. I did yoga



each day, walked in the ravishing grounds filled with bamboo and coconut trees, and tripped off to the spa for massages, scrubs and wraps. I felt a million dollars (and was 4.8lb lighter) by the time I left. There is no nightlife, no entertainment of the more extrovert variety. Instead, it offers a chance to stop awhile and reboot, to stand and stare. Its USPs are its charming therapists and its air of great serenity and tranquillity. Entirely vegan, its fresh salads and juices are all made from fruits and vegetables organically grown on site.

It is owned by Narra Wellness Resorts and one of its biggest investors is a delightful Indian who came to stay and loved the place and the experience so much he wanted to be part of it. The resort is on a beautiful site and its relatively new luxury rooms overlook a rich jungly river gorge. The Farm won't be for everybody but for some (those with diabetes, heart or serious weight problems, skin or digestive difficulties) it could be life-changing. There are tales of people who arrive scarcely able to walk, but after weeks of tender care and a supervised detox leave walking upright. Combine a stay at The Farm with some island visiting through some of the world's most glorious seas, and it's the sort of holiday that leaves you refreshed, rejuvenated and longing to go back for more. ✦

CREAM OF THE ISLAND HOP

Lucia van der Post travelled as a guest of **Cleveland Collection** (020-7529 8560; www.clevelandcollection.co.uk), which offers seven nights on Ariara Island from £5,239 per person for a group of eight full board, including flights with Philippine Airlines and private transfers with Air Juan; three nights on Huma Island from £1,069 per person B&B; and three nights at Amanpulo from £2,190 per person full board. She was also a guest of **Healing Holidays** (020-7529 8560; www.healingholidays.co.uk), which offers a seven-night detox programme at the Farm at San Benito from £3,799 per person, full board, including all treatments and activities, flights with Philippine Airlines and transfers with Air Juan. **Air Juan**, +632-464 7799; www.airjuan.com, from \$1,950 per hour. **Amanpulo**, Pamalican Island (00800-2255 2626; www.amanpulo.com), from \$1,200. **Ariara Island**, Linapacan, Northern Palawan (+632-893 9908; www.ariara.com), from \$5,005 per person per week for a party of six to eight. **Huma Island**, Dicingan Island, Busuanga-Palawan (+632-553 0119; www.humaisland.com), from \$1,300. **The Farm at San Benito**, 119 Barangay Tipakan, Lipa City, Province of Batangas (+632-884 8074; www.thefarmatsanbenito.com), from \$229. **Philippine Airlines** (+632-855 8888; www.philippineairlines.com) flies from London Heathrow to Manila five times per week, from £694 return.