



Kayaking at sunset, Lagen

# EL NIDO:

## THE GUARDIAN OF THE PHILIPPINES' LAST ECOLOGICAL

On the northernmost point of the Palawan Province, southwest of Manila, is the El Nido municipality. White sand beaches, coral reefs and limestone cliffs rank El Nido beaches some of the world's most beautiful. The region is also called the Guardian of Palawan, the Philippines' last ecological frontier

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Photography: Sravasti Ghosh Dastidar

# FRONTIER



**For Filipinos**, El Nido and Puerto Princesa in Palawan are must-see places in their archipelago. Apparently, the topography is totally different from all other beaches in The Philippines. This intriguing information made us visit the islands of El Nido. After all, what could be so extraordinary in a country with the most exotic stretches of white sand and aquamarine seas in the world?

An hour's flight in a chartered AirSWIFT ATR aeroplane from Manila took us to Lio Airport. The rustic terminal of Lio welcomes guests with refreshments and singers, and sets the tone for the entire trip. An eco-friendly *jeepney* transported us to the jetty, and there lay the cerulean sea with limestone cliffs behind it. It was different from the regular island beach!

El Nido is a cluster of islands with white

beaches surrounding dark looming cliffs. Getting to the hotel in a catamaran, weaving through the cliffs, will remind you of the cliffs of the isles of Krabi and Ha Long Bay.

#### **Be GREEN (Guard, Respect, Educate El Nido)**

El Nido wants to be remembered for its mission to maintain the ecological balance and to make us responsible tourists, and therefore promotes the 'Be GREEN' principle – a locally coined acronym for 'Guard, Respect, Educate El Nido'.

Palawan is called the 'Last Ecological Frontier of the Philippines' because it's the last bastion with lush forests. Frequent typhoons and earthquakes in Southeast Asia do not threaten it. On one end of Palawan is Puerto Princesa, with fascinating underwater caves, and on the other is El Nido. Guarding this natural frontier is El Nido Resorts and its experienced Environment and Sustainability Department. They strive to strengthen ecological sustainability by involving the local community in maintaining 90% local



Water villas of Lagen Island Resort

The photogenic Lagen Rock



Illustration by: Yornal Vajrajith Payagala



The marching and clicking go on

hiring, sourcing supplies from the community and spreading awareness. This has also prevented local fishermen from using illegal fishing practices. El Nido is a Managed Resource Protected Area. El Nido's limestone cliffs have been around for over 250 million years. It is home to over 800 species of fish, 400 types of coral, over 15 endemic birds and various other wildlife.

#### **The Green Welcome**

Evidence of the sustainability drive were visible from the moment we boarded the catamaran, as we were provided environment-friendly bags to dispose of litter. Forty minutes into the ride, the water villas of Lagen Island Hotel and the triangular Lagen Rock came into view. The smiling hotel staff greeted us in true Filipino style, with pandan juice, a song and a dance, followed by a mandatory talk on the dos and don'ts of their sustainability routine. The travel desk helped with the itinerary for the next two days, and allotted us an environment officer, Jamie Dichaves, and an experienced guide, Lover Mañibo. Lagen is called the eco-sanctuary resort. It has the densest forest over limestone of the 45 islands and islets in Bacuit Bay.

El Nido Resorts has 3 more island resorts catering to diverse profiles:

► **Miniloc** - the eco-discovery resort, with easy access to most tourist spots in the bay like the Big and Small Lagoons, has a rustic feel. Deep sea diving, snorkelling and watching jackfish feeding are popular activities.

► **Apulit** - the eco-adventure resort is for adventure junkies with activities like rappelling off a 60-meter limestone cliff and rock climbing. An added attraction is diving to a Japanese shipwreck.

► **Pangulasian** - the eco-luxury resort is a quiet honeymooner's retreat. It's known as the 'Island of the Sun', as both the sunrise and sunset can be enjoyed from its location.







The distinctive and picturesque Lagen Rock, separated from the hotel by a lagoon, is also visible to all its rooms and restaurants.

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#### Exploring the Blues and Greens

A trip to Turtle Island to watch hatchlings being released to the sea was our first activity on the itinerary. Since 2009, the islands have been recording turtle nesting and hatching incidences. Jamie, nicknamed ‘Turtle Mother’, handles all matters concerning marine turtles. She has improved the recording system and conservation measures in 2015 after undergoing intensive turtle conservation work under the Marine Turtle Watchers programme of Save Philippine Seas. A talk was followed by the release of hatchlings. Almost 50% of hatchling don’t make it to the ocean because of predators. So, having people around during the release improves their chances of survival.

After the hatchlings are released, the hotel organised a sunset dinner on a desolate sandbar. With the sun going down on the west and the full moon rising on the east, the sea reflecting myriad hues and candles lining the way to the seafood-filled table, it was an intoxicating atmosphere.

The next two days were for exploration.

Early morning is the best time to visit the Big and Small Lagoons near Miniloc island. We kayaked to the lagoons surrounded



## BALESIN – 7 COUNTRIES IN 1 ISLAND

Alphaland Balesin Island Club is an exclusive, members-only island club located east of Manila, Philippines. A 20-minute chartered ATR plane ride from Parañaque will get you there. The Balesin Island Club brings together the ambience of seven countries to the 500-hectare tropical isle with 7.3km of white-sand beaches. The island is the epitome of luxurious holidaying amid forest and marine sanctuaries. It ensures ecological continuity with rainwater harvesting, 80% water recycling, a reverse osmosis plant, on-site eco-friendly transportation, organic farming and alternative sources of energy to reduce waste.

There are seven themed villages, with lavish villas offering premium amenities – namely Balesin (Philippines), Bali (Indonesia), Phuket (Thailand), Mykonos (Greece), St. Tropez (France), Costa del Sol (Spain) and Toscana (Italy) – recreating the atmosphere of the countries they represent. From architecture, landscaping, interiors, food and drinks to music, each villa and restaurant will transport you.

The Balesin Royal Villa, overlooking the scenic Lamon Bay and the Sierra Madre mountain range, echoes Asian royal culture. The island is a preferred venue for high-profile, themed weddings.

Balesin has a wellness centre and spa. The center focuses on diagnostic testing to predict possible illnesses due to genetics and lifestyle habits.

To enjoy Balesin, you either have to be a member or be accompanied by one. There are three membership plans, open to all nationalities:



**1. Gold Balesin Share** – around \$440,485 for 7 free villa nights a year, 1 nominee.\*

**2. Diamond Balesin Share** – around \$80,088 for 14 free villa nights a year, 2 nominees.\*

**3. Corporate Balesin Share** – around \$120,132 for 28 free villa nights a year, 3 nominees.\*

\*Forfeits after 12 months from anniversary month. Rates are subject to change and include conditions.

by labyrinthine black cliffs. Some tourists were riding tiny bangka boats. It was amazing to see how phone cameras and selfie sticks have taken over our lives, with most tourists keeping their eyes on the phones instead of the scene before them.

There was more to discover in these tropical islands, replete with diverse flora and fauna. A Filipino lunch at an Island Club was followed by a tour of Snake Island – named due to the s-shaped sandbar that “snakes” off the shores. The white sandbar, with shallow swimming areas on either side, is visible only at low tide.

On the way back, it was sad to see forest fires on some islands despite the conservation efforts.

Lagen Island was yet to be explored.

There are two ways to access the beach – kayaking to it around the cliff or hiking up the hill. Lover guided us through a bird and monkey-filled dense rainforest trail. The quaint cove was a welcomed sight at the end of the moderately tough and humid walk. Kayaking back, after a refreshing dip, was less tiring.

#### Life on a Green Island

As an environment officer, Jamie has no “typical days”. She could be in office, researching or attending community meetings, or conducting lectures about wildlife and showing how turtle nests are managed on-site. For Jamie, living in the island is a dream, as well as therapeutic. She does not mind the absence of malls, partying, drinking and such. Wildlife, hiking and snorkelling rejuvenate and de-stress her. Homesickness and craving for fast food is usually cured by a day off or a stash of comfort food.

Losing track of time is better than losing track of her surroundings. She needs to remember she is living among wildlife. Walking into monitor lizards and snakes is common. Jamie has even once actually stepped on a water monitor lizard! Thankfully, there are not many venomous types around.

What is really venomous is man’s destructive nature.

Just three days in El Nido can make one realise the importance of people like Jamie and her employers, who protect our much-threatened environment and educate us to be responsible tourists.●