

THE GOOD LIFE



PHOTOS BY TEENA APELES, TRICIA APELES, CHARLES CISNEROS, FELIX PEREZ.

72 HOURS IN PALAWAN

story Teena Apeles

►► For an Angeleno like myself, beautiful beaches, warm weather and palm trees (as well as the hospitality of Filipinos!) are in abundance, so I had high expectations when I ventured to Palawan, the much-hyped Philippines' getaway that was voted top island in the world last year in *Condé Nast Traveler's*

Readers Choice Awards. Over the course of three days in February — an ideal time weather-wise to visit the country, period — I savored a quick taste of the many wonders Palawan offers.

A short 5 a.m. flight from Manila had our large family (my husband and our 2-year-old, my parents, sisters, their

significant others, aunt, 7-year-old niece and cousin-slash-tour guide extraordinaire) landing after sunrise on the island. First stop was Emerald Playa Beach and Nature Park, just nine kilometers from the Puerto Princesa Airport. We checked into the quaint Microtel Palawan, with its very humble entrance. But once we passed through the hotel lobby, the sight of the secluded white sand beach dotted with magical mangroves took my breath away. You could see miles and miles out into the sea and walk out into the still, warm waters without a care in the world. We had arrived.

For our first memorable meal we strolled to the neighboring Bahay Kubo hotel food shack for fresh tropical juices. When a local climbs nearby palm

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trees to pluck fresh coconuts within minutes of you ordering buko juice, you know you're definitely not in Los Angeles anymore. We feasted on an amazing spread of fried fish, shrimp, lechon and squid, as well as crab, eggs, rice and watermelon (to cool down), all enjoyed under a large gazebo.

We later took in some of the tourist sites that did not disappoint: the Palawan Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Center, where we were welcomed to hold a baby crocodile; Butterfly Eco Garden and Tribal Village, for the unique opportunity to stroke a python, the pet of a local tribe; and Baker's Hill, a kitschy playground where you can shop for *pasalubong* (gifts), fun for adults and toddlers alike.

Day two brought us to the Underground River at the Subterranean River National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While it's upwards of a two-hour winding van drive followed by a 30-minute boat ride from the Sabang Port to the park, they give you a glimpse into island life beyond the popular attractions. And the river is truly a vision to behold (save the throngs of anxious tourists waiting at its mouth, but there's even delight in the international people-watching). A 45-minute guided boat



Amazing seafood at Pandan.

ride took us along deep-blue water into the cave filled with not only wondrous rock formations but also thousands of sleeping bats. At the end of the tour my daughter expressed her approval: "Papa, that was great."

And the thrills did not end there. My cousin Felix (whom we now call "King of Palawan") had a boat take us to a nearby zipline that had us flying high above the China Sea. We took the Sabang Xtreme Zipline, but he highly recommends the Ugong Rock Zipline that requires spelunking to reach.

For sustenance, not far from where our feet touched ground again, we walked 20 minutes along the beach to

the picturesque Daluyon Beach and Mountain Resort. There we enjoyed more Filipino dishes at its open-air restaurant before returning to our hotel for a night swim with the lighted mangroves in the distance.

And just when we thought Palawan couldn't be more dreamlike, we island-hopped our final day to La Isla Pandan, a real piece of paradise where we rented a "cottage" on the beach, as well as jet skis and a banana boat (yes, we did both) for amusement. But it was really the simple pleasures that were the highlight for me: just floating in the water on my back surrounded by such beauty — not to mention the incredible seafood delivered beachside. For the first time in our three days there, we could just take in the ocean, the sea life (underwater and on our table), the tropical climate, clear skies and each other. I wish I could package the laughter of my daughter and niece as they buried themselves deep in the sand that day.

We ended the day with our only trip into the busy, more city-like area of Palawan to dine barefoot at the famous KaLui Restaurant on Rizal Avenue. (Until that point, I had no idea the island had more than a couple hundred people on it!) It's a beautifully decorated tropical haven of a place — even its bathrooms, if you can believe it — that was teeming with tourists and an array of dishes, from Fish Cordon Bleu and Chili Crabs to Eel in Coco Cream, being rushed from table to table. It was an impressive feast to close our stay, but for this traveler, it was those meals on the beach with my feet in the sand that satisfied the most.

Thank you, Palawan, you have my family's vote for best island as well. And even more so, *salamat*, to our guide, my cousin Felix, who introduced us to all its wonders. See you next year.



A boat ride at Sabang.



Emerald Playa.



The underground river at the Subterranean River National Park.