

# Fire and Nice

It's an island with fiery origins and a history rooted in adventure, but travelers who come to Camiguin also find that it's a fantasy island that offers a peaceful haven

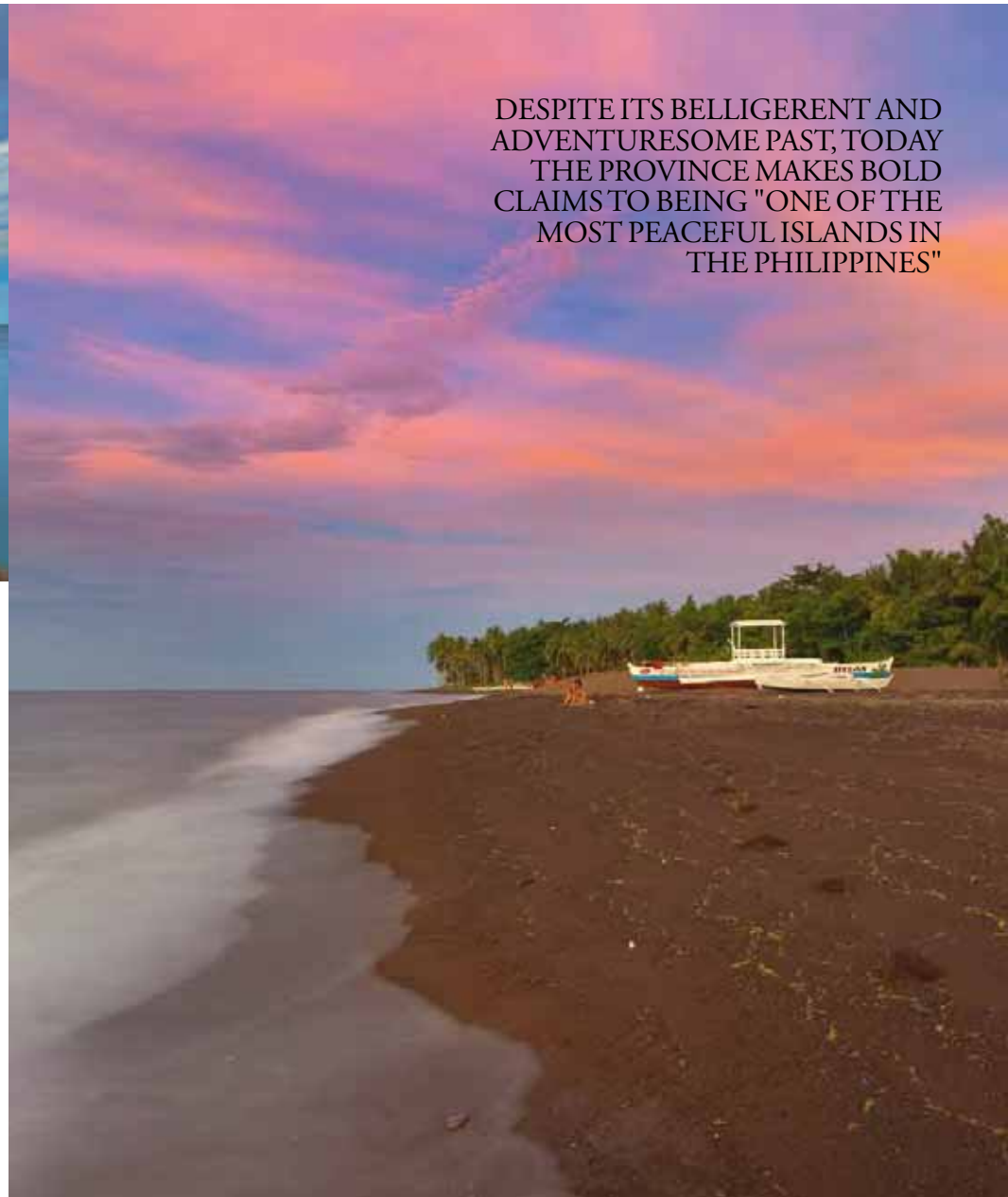
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Cloud-draped Mt. Hibok-hibok looms large over Camiguin



This page: The first view of Camiguin, seen from the Balingoan ferry port in Misamis Oriental. Opposite: The sun sets over the beach in Agoho, Camiguin



DESPITE ITS BELLIGERENT AND ADVENTURESOME PAST, TODAY THE PROVINCE MAKES BOLD CLAIMS TO BEING "ONE OF THE MOST PEACEFUL ISLANDS IN THE PHILIPPINES"

**A**N hour's car ride from Cagayan de Oro's Lumbia Airport takes you to the northern coast of Misamis Oriental, to the Balingoan pier; from there, you can get the first view of the island of Camiguin as it rises dramatically on the horizon.

The island is made blue and gray by the distance, and with the volcanoes of Mt. Hibok-Hibok and Mt. Vulcan its most prominent features, Camiguin radiates equal parts menace and promise.

It takes an hour-long ferry ride to cross the 10-kilometer strip of Gingoog Bay that separates Camiguin from Misamis Oriental, and as the island grows closer, the landscape only looks more and more dramatic. It's a relatively small island province at only 29,187 hectares, it is the smallest in fact, in northern Mindanao. Camiguin seems to have the highest concentration of volcanoes than any other land area on earth: and there are more volcanoes, in fact, than there are towns in Camiguin—seven volcanoes, two of which have been fatally active in only five towns.

Volcanoes always look primordial, but remembering that Mt. Vulcan Daan broke out of the ground just a few generations

ago—in 1871, after destroying the town of Catarman—makes it all the more fearsome. And, still in living memory, the larger Mt. Hibok-Hibok was active from 1948 to 1951; the last and biggest of its long series of deadly eruptions forced nearly half the population of Camiguin to flee and find more peaceful shores.

Indeed, it seems as if the island's entire history is fraught with action and adventure. The earliest written records about the island show that both Ferdinand Magellan and Miguel Lopez de Legazpi both landed in Camiguin in the mid-1500s, heralding the first Spanish settlements in 1598 in what is now Cuinsiliban—the place name refers to the watchtower, which still stands to this day, where the soldiers were on the lookout for marauding pirates. Throughout the centuries, Camiguin has figured prominently in battles big and small; perhaps the greatest of which was the Battle of Camiguin in 1945,

which resulted in the liberation of the island from the Japanese Imperial Army.

Despite its belligerent and adventuresome past, however, today the province makes bold claims as to being "one of the most peaceful islands in the Philippines," on its official local government website. "Though the province had registered some criminality, but it is only minimal and manageable. There is no indication of dissident terrorists, local and foreign threats to national security noted."

The island's small size also means that its attractions are concentrated and accessible. The island is rife with all sorts of natural springs (hot, cold, and even soda), waterfalls, caves, rock faces, dive sites, mountains. It's a sort of dream destination in its way, and the guidebook rightly warns that because Camiguin is yet "uncorrupted by large numbers of tourists, those who do come tend to feel proprietorial about this little jewel and guard news of its treasures like a secret." ▶





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## IT'S EASY ENOUGH TO SEE, ON THE SURFACE AT LEAST, SOME OF THE REASONS ONE MIGHT NEVER WANT TO LEAVE

As a sign of things to come, we'd chosen Camiguin Action Geckos as our base for the first half of the trip, partly because of the good reviews the resort had gotten from similarly adventure-seeking visitors, and partly because of its quirky name. When we got there, we were welcomed by the resort's manager, Michèle Hess, and the resident dive instructor, Ulrich Mewes. Tanned, fit, and perennially dressed, it seemed, in wetsuits, the two were the very poster children for all the action and adventure their establishment's name promised. "The combination of all the things to do or 'not to do' on this small island are incredible. If you're a diver—fine. But if not, there are so many [other options for] enjoying your stay here... springs, volcanoes, waterfalls, lonely islands and secret bays—pure nature!" Michèle enthuses.

Originally from Switzerland and Germany, respectively, the pair had been

in Camiguin for a year and a half when I met them, and had by then imbibed enough of the local culture enough to have gained the air of true islanders, relaxed and unruffled, with a quiet appreciation for their surroundings.

When I first asked Michèle and Uli how long they'd planned to stay in the Camiguin, they had looked at each other and said firmly, "At least three years." This changed not long after, as they officially sought permanent residency and committed to staying for the next five years. "We visited Camiguin, we came back to Camiguin and now we will stay in Camiguin for the next five years BECAUSE it is Camiguin," said Michèle in answer to my question. "You cannot explain

Opposite: Early morning on shore in one of the fishing villages on Camiguin's coast  
Top: The sun sets over a sea wall at the Paras Beach Resort

'friendliness' or 'peaceful living' in words; you have to experience it. Camiguin is a role model. After so many places we've seen before—Egypt, Oman, Maldives, Thailand, Bali, Africa, Cuba, Australia, Russia—Camiguin is worth staying in."

It's easy enough to see, on the surface at least, some of the reasons one might never want to leave. The evening I arrived in Camiguin, the sky lit up on fire. It was a sunset like I'd never seen before—which is saying something, considering that the Philippine sunset is well and truly a phenomenon—and while this is a cliché that I try to avoid, it was a sunset stunning enough to make one believe in the fantasy of an island paradise. The sky was painted with fire and fringed with embers on a field of starry blue.

Up and down the beach, there were not more than half a dozen visitors trying to bathe in the last of the day's rays; the rest were locals, children playing in the sand or ▶

## CAMIGUIN

Right: A fisherman weaves a small basket net for the daily catch  
Below: Picnic huts at the Mantigue Island eco-park  
Opposite: A group of divers departs from Camiguin Action Geckos Dive and Beach Resort



fishermen walking home for dinner. Amazing to think that this vista is what almost everyone here comes home to. This is their everyday beach, this is their everyday sky, this is the sweet scent of their everyday air. And on the other side, there is the promise of adventure and activity within easy reach: tomorrow we go diving, and the day after that, we can trek to the volcano's rim, and the day after that, we can take a boat out to another island. This is the kind of place in which I could easily imagine myself living out the rest of my days—and this, on my first night here.

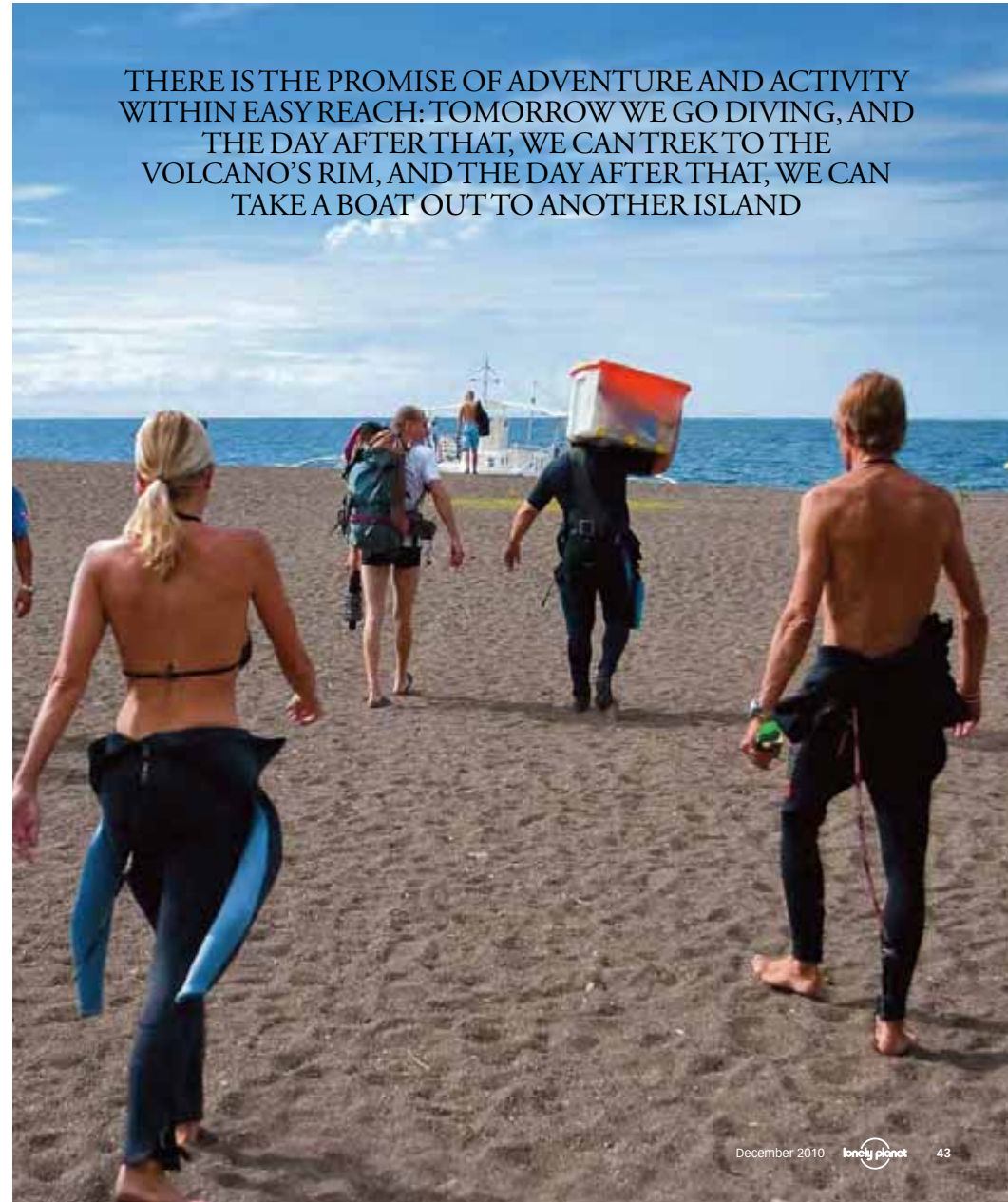
**T**HE best way to see the island is on the back of a motorbike. The *habal-habal* (local term for motorbike) system works for the most part, although I never quite got the hang of being able to tell which were private motorcycles and which took passengers. I tried standing by the side of the road with an expectant look on my face, but that just meant that motorcycle drivers would turn to look at me quizzically before speeding off.

The wisest thing to do is to rent your own motorbike and explore the island on your own. As with a lot of things here, the fees for it are a little higher (generally at around P500 for the first day; P300 for every day thereafter) than in other provinces. But it's a bargain, considering that it buys freedom to come and go as you please, and that there are so many spots to see that there's always somewhere to go. Consider, too, Camiguin's highway, which is mostly free of cars, and which winds lazily through the island's five towns, sometimes on dramatic cliffsides looking over water.

It's a dreamy ride, particularly when one hits the southwestern side, just out of Mambajao town proper. This route not only takes you to the foot of what is listed on maps as "Old Mt. Camiguin Volcano"—where, if you were so inclined, you could stop and huff and puff your way on an incredibly long Seven Stations of the Cross pilgrimage all the way up to the peak—but also past the cross marker of the underwater cemetery and the ruins of the Spanish-era Gui-ob Church.

Press on some more, and the road opens up into these remarkable vistas, unmarked, save for the picturesque towns on one side ▶

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Photos on this spread: Scenes from the highway that cuts through the middle of Camiguin, up towards Mt. Mambajao.



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and tree and sea on the other. Markers will tell you if there's a turn off into the forest to one of the volcanic island's many hot springs or other attractions, but the ride itself is an adventure and a destination itself.

Acting on a tip, I rode into the center of Mambajao to look for the road leading up to the mountains. Take the road that goes up into the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology observation post and then follow that trail all the way over the ridge and back down the other side. I'd heard the tip thrice from different people, and had always been assured, with a knowing smile, that I was in for a treat.

Somehow, though, I did miss the turn, and rode into the gas station to ask for directions. The gas station attendants laughed and joked with me because I had mispronounced "PHIVOLCS," and shook their heads good-naturedly when they saw the uncertainty in my eyes. The attendants conferred hurriedly with one another in Bisaya, until the customer waiting at the next pump piped up. "I'll show you," he said, in the reserved but friendly way I'd come to expect from Camiguëños. "Follow me."

We gassed up, and I followed his lead on our motorbikes up until an intersection I'd blown past. He pointed to the turn leading to an upward-heading road, and called, "All the way up!" before waving and riding away.

This particular road was quiet and nearly deserted, but as promised, the trail showed its charms quickly. Large hillside vacation homes and humble wooden houses would appear once in a while, all of them well-kept and tidy, speaking of their inhabitants' equal pride in their surroundings. And why shouldn't they? The air was sweet up here, the woods lush and green. There were gardens and fields, wildflowers and trees, the sound of wind

and birdsong. "Like a storybook!" I'd been promised by those who recommended this scenic route, and they were right.

The PHIVOLCS observation post, just 2.5 kilometers up the road, was perched on a clearing from which you could have a sweeping view of the coast. But press on past that, and the air very quickly gains the refreshing chill of altitude. With the cool mountain air on my face, the woods to my left, the view of the water to my right, and the highway in front of me—well, let's just say that it felt, at that very moment, that I was having one of the best days of my life.

And so, on and on, until the slope gradually flattened out as I reached the ridge of Mt. Mambajao. The coast disappeared from view, replaced instead by grassy green plains and picket-fenced houses, the jumble of the woods turning to lines of coconut palms. This road, if I am not mistaken, is uncompleted highway that was meant to cut straight through the middle of the island, linking the opposite sides from the town of Mambajao to Catarman. There are, as with many things about development in Camiguin, two sides to it. On the one hand, construction of the highway meant that trees had to be cut down, despoiling the once-virgin forests on the mountain. On the other hand, this also meant access for farmers, who could turn the clearings into farmland. It was another delicate balance that the Camiguëños needed to navigate.

The air turned cold in a matter of minutes, and a thick fog hid everything from view. I parked the bike on the side of the road and stood for a while peering into the ghostly gloom. The children who had been playing outside ran back indoors, and in the sudden quiet I began to worry about the approaching darkness and the ride back. A man emerged from a grove of

## THIS INNOCENCE, THE ABSENCE OF JADEDNESS SETS OFF A PANG IN THE HEART. THIS IS WHAT THE ISLAND'S RESIDENTS ARE TRYING TO PROTECT, UNWILLING TO TRADE THAT IN EVEN FOR THE PROSPERITY PROMISED BY DEVELOPMENT

coconut trees, trailed by two kids—baby goats, not human children—which were prancing and playing like puppies. "Fog," he said, nodding at our surroundings. Then he turned and walked away.

The fog lifted a little, enough to allow me to get back on the bike and try to make good time back into town before dusk came to make the ride down the dark and deserted roads in the motorcycle's weak headlights a real challenge. I rode as fast as my nerves would allow, but even the threat of riding back blind didn't stop me from stopping at the foot of Mt. Tres Marias, where a dirt road veered off the highway, past a cornfield, and up the slope. There were a few small farmhouses around the junction, and when I pulled out the camera from my pack, a child materialized by my side. "Kodak! Kodak!" she yelled, pointing to the camera, referring to it using the local slang, not by brand. Another two children came running up the dirt road. "Kodak! Kodak!" they yelled. Pretty soon, I had a little gang of grubby little children jumping up and down all around, "Kodakan mo kami!" they clamored, asking for photos of themselves. And when I pointed the camera towards the cornfields, they shrieked even louder, "Kodakan mo yung mais!"—take a picture of the corn!; they pointed to the mountain: "yung bundok!"; and picked up rocks: "at yung bato!"

This innocence, the absence of jadedness sets off a pang in the heart, and it's no wonder that this nature of the place is what the island's residents are trying to protect, unwilling to trade that in even for the prosperity promised by development.

When I met Philip and Sue Sykes, they had just arrived from Manchester, England, retiring early to take up ownership and management of the Camiguin Golden Sunset Beach Club. Philip had come to the Philippines in the turbulent Martial Law era of the 1970s as a volunteer agriculturist; after marrying the former Susan Mira, a

teacher he met during his posting, Philip had stayed in the country for years more before they decided to settle in Manchester. A series of turns had them investing in the Camiguin Golden Sunset, and now the newly renovated resort is slowly building up a portfolio of loyal customers.

Once a development worker, though, always a development worker, and this shows in the resort's pricing—if not in its room rates, then in the cheaper-than-usual menu items—and in the presence of locals and students. They like to hang around the family-friendly resort because the Sykeses' philosophy of letting Camiguëños enjoy Camiguin; the students like it because Philip has been known to knock a few pesos off anything they order simply because they ask.

The Golden Sunset is one of those places, then, where profit, while nice, isn't quite the measure of its success. As with an increasing number of balikbayan retirees these days, they live on the premises and run the resort as a way to keep busy; whatever income goes back into maintaining the property. The couple has little interest in seeing Camiguin tourism explode to Boracay proportions, although of course they would like to have a manageable stream of arrivals. As the newly elected president of the Camiguin Tourism Association, made up of tourism-related business owners, Sue is going to keep an eye on maintaining that delicate balance.

"You may have heard the expression, 'Between the devil and the deep blue sea'," Philip writes in an email. "I guess that kinda sums up my feelings regarding the potential changes that would come, should Camiguin ever develop along the lines of Boracay. Traffic, crowds, junk food, crime, pollution—urrrggghhh!"

It's a common sentiment, even, surprisingly, among those with a vested interest in upping Camiguin's tourist arrivals. Johnny, who runs the eponymous ▶



CAMIGUIN







Johnny's Dive n' Fun out of four locations in Camiguin, has been an island resident for so long that it is somewhat of an institution around here, a poster boy for those who have come looking for a place to disappear quietly and found it on the island. "It's remote, but not too remote, with the basic components of a city, and it's accessible as a quick weekend trip from places like Cebu," he says, but "a big part of me doesn't want Camiguin to be too successful as a tourist destination," he admits.

"I'm 'super-happy' here," he draws, gesturing out to the sea. "It's easy for foreigners to live in a kind of fantasy, and it's hard to take them in any direction..." he smiles languidly. "And maybe I'm on my way..." he trails off.

That lack of enthusiasm from residents and small-business owners about Camiguin becoming a full-blown tourist hotspot is only mildly surprising, since it is hard not to envy where it is in terms of the industry. The province took in the good number of tourist arrivals in the past year, placing it in the top 15 Philippine destinations, and while the lean seasons mean that "everybody's fighting for

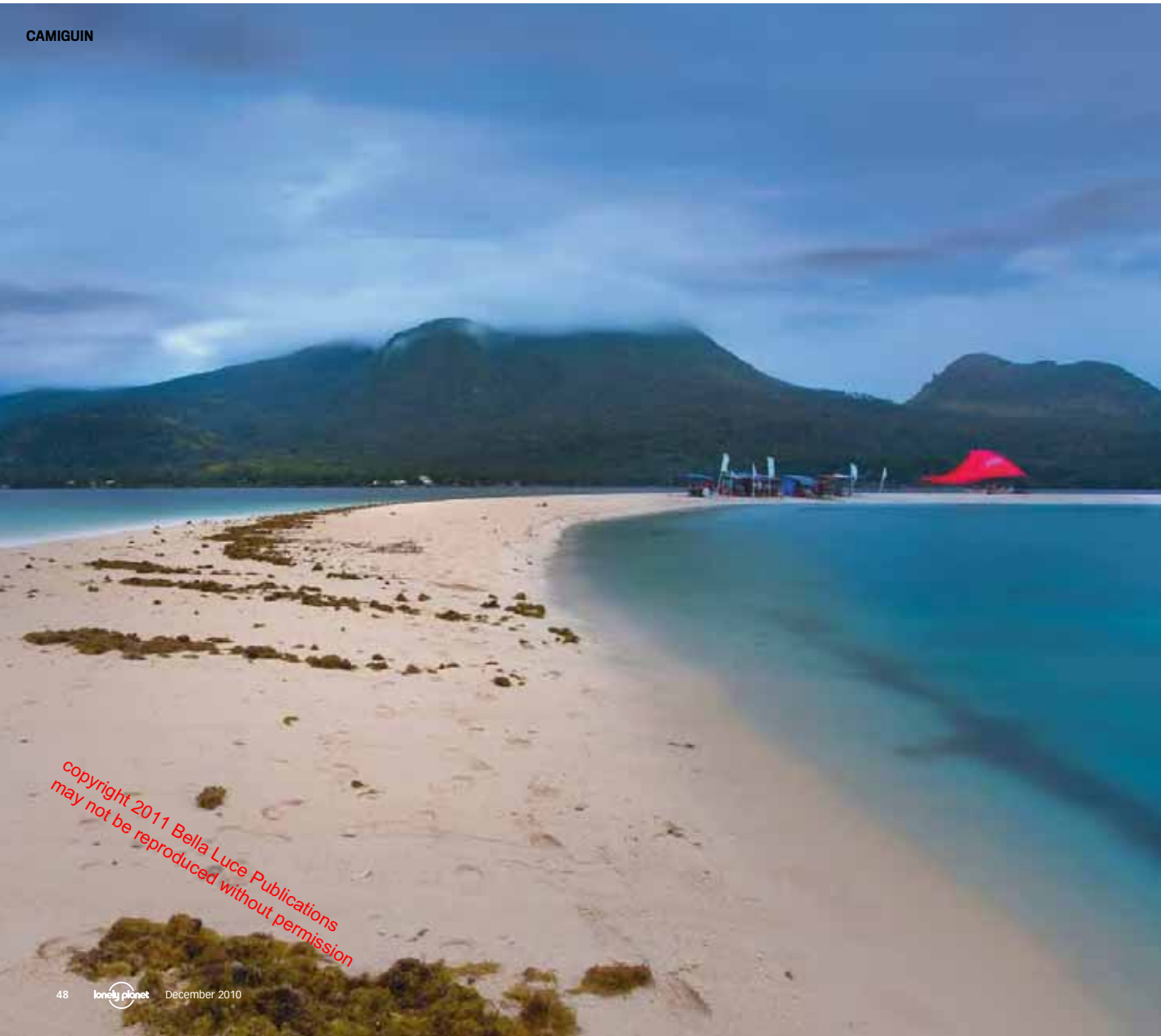
survival," as Phil says, they're surviving, and without yet the attendant problems of a tourist boom.

Paras Beach Resort stands at the polar opposite of opinion, pumping in investment and bringing in the facilities for such touristy activities as parasailing, wakeboarding, banana boats, and recently, even constructing a site for "zorbing," that giant plastic ball which people pay to climb into and roll down a hilly track. There is also talk of bringing ziplines to the island—something that the owners of the resort have some experience with, as the Paras family also owns Dahilayan Adventure Park in Bukidnon, where they claim to have Asia's longest zipline. The resort is one of the oldest and biggest

on the island, and it has all but a monopoly on domestic tourists. And, it seems, what the domestic tourists might want are zorbs and banana boats. Paras does seem to have clout enough to drive tourism in Camiguin, investing as much as they are in new structures and attractions, and owning the only fastcraft to run the route between Cagayan de Oro and Camiguin, to boot.

The absence of convenient transport to the island is one of the things that may stand in the way of Camiguin becoming the Philippines' next tourism hotspot, no matter how hard the local government wants it to be so. The Camiguin airstrip has been closed for over two years, and while the tourism office had been hoping that a domestic carrier would show interest in reopening direct routes to the island this year, nothing came of it. For now, visitors from Manila must fly into Cagayan de Oro's Lumbia airport, and then transfer to the Paras fastcraft. But with only one fastcraft departure a day, tourists more likely need to endure the ride to the Balingoan port, 80 kilometers out of Cagayan de Oro, to take any of the slow boats that leave almost every hour to make the crossing. ▶





Mt. Hibok-Hibok and Mt. Vulcan, as seen from the White Island sand bar

Not to say that the outlook is entirely bleak. Tourism had been given the “One Town, One Product” designation for Camiguin in 2008, which meant that the local government was obliged to lend its full support to buttressing the industry. As a result, tourist arrivals in the first quarter of the year showed a huge increase, with nearly 46,000 visitors coming from January to March 2010—21 percent more than the arrivals over the same period in 2009.

But for now, only twice a year does Camiguin get overrun with visitors: first during Holy Week, when visitors and residents come to witness or take part in the islanders’ unique vigil, walking the 64 kilometers around the island and enduring a trek to the old volcano as a sign of penitence and religious devotion; and then during the Lanzones Festival in October, which celebrates the extra-sweet fruit that the province is known for.

During the rest of the year, Camiguin is enjoyed mostly by Camiguëños, and there is no better testament to the island’s charms than that. Come in the off season, and in places like Katibawasan Falls or the Ardent Hot Springs, even on Mantigue or White Island, and the locals outnumber the tourists.

We ended the trip—fittingly, I think—by both visiting its most beautiful spot and by looking at the island from a distance. Mantigue, 4km and a short half-hour banca ride away from the Mahinog, on the southern side of Camiguin, is a marine sanctuary and an eco-park on a white sand island.

The full splendor of Camiguin can be appreciated from Mantigue: from here, you can see the seven volcanoes jutting out of the water, ringed by sand and rock. Even when the sky is clear and brushed with white clouds, the view is still an easy reminder of the fiery, transient nature of the island. All of this is built on an ever-shifting mass of molten rock and shifting earth.

It’s been observed, time and time again, in similar places the world over, how

residents of volcanic islands tend to be life-loving, laid-back, imperturbable. Maybe it has to do with living with the daily knowledge that nature could turn all of a sudden, that the very earth can shift and buckle under your feet, and that there won’t be anything you can do about it. That kind of awareness tends to make one appreciate the present, so the psychoanalyzing goes.

There is no better opportunity to think about all this than while treading water in the middle of a marine sanctuary. The sanctuary area right off the beach is cordoned off, and fishing is prohibited. The fish population in the sanctuary has boomed, of course, and about just 250 meters out, by the buoy markers, the underwater shelf drops off into the deep. Schools of fish swim and feed by the wall that it forms, and everywhere there is just the sensation of being surrounded by life.

On Mantigue itself, there is discussion about whether to allow fishing communities to remain on the island, or to keep the area entirely as a sanctuary and an eco-park. It’s just another question to be answered while Camiguin and its people figure out their way into the future. Somewhere out on the mainland, the demands of the times push one way—towards ziplines and zorbing tracks, ever-bigger resorts and direct flights—while some people try to hold the line and keep things from changing too fast.

A large family group arrived on a banca while I was out in the water, taking up the tables by the entrance to the eco-park and setting out for what looked to be a full-day picnic. The adults took their places around tables laden with seafood and drinks, while others set out mats on the white sand. The children splashed into the clear blue waters and played with seaweed they’d snagged from the shore. There were no other tourists today, and so it was easy to spot the lone one out neck-deep in the water. The children laughed and waved, but the day was so beautiful that they forgot about me in a matter of minutes. ☑

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