



WOW Pilipinas

A recurrent series of articles about the Philippines and its people, places, events and heritage — presented by the **Filipino American Association of Greater Columbia, SC**



PALAWAN: THE LAST FRONTIER

by **I. C. Go**



Map from www.bambua-palawan.com

[**Editor's Note:** The article contributor is a resident of Bel-Air2 Village, Makati City, Philippines and Columbia, South Carolina, USA. Whenever she is in the Philippines, she explores different parts of the country and supports the local tourism industry. She encourages you to see firsthand what tourists from all over the world want to see.]

My March 2010 trip to Palawan had the most twists and turns of any trip I've ever had. I had hoped to return and write about a much-anticipated trip to the Apo and Tubbataha Reefs. When the 8-day trip was cancelled due to boat failure, I attempted to salvage the days by going to Coron in Palawan. This didn't happen either, mainly due to a fire on the Busuanga runway.

Determined to make the most out of the remaining time, I finally threw a few essentials into a backpack and flew from Manila to Puerto Princesa, Palawan, with just a rough idea of what I was going to do and where I was going to stay. Palawan is often called the last frontier of the Philippines and it is common to see foreigners visiting Palawan with just a backpack. Palawan is said to supply at least half of the fish in Metro Manila and to contain about two-thirds of the forests still left in the country. Puerto Princesa is one of the cleanest cities in the Philippines. I only noticed one piece of street litter when I was in the area.

Heading for Sabang

I met Jennie and Randy, a Filipino couple, at the airport. They were headed to Sabang's Bambua Forest Retreat, which I planned to visit the next day. Instead, I decided to go with them to Sabang, at least 1.5 hours away from the main Puerto Princesa city proper. Sabang still falls under the jurisdiction of Puerto Princesa city even though it is in a remote location. Most tourists take a day trip to Sabang in order to see the Underground River, but there are other things, such as the mangrove forest river and mountain treks, to see and experience there especially if you love nature. When one has time, staying in Sabang for more than a day is highly recommended.

Underground River (a.k.a. Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park)

In the last few years, the Underground River has been getting a lot of attention from Filipinos due to its inclusion as a finalist in the selection of the *New Seven Wonders of the World* (www.new7wonders.com). It is truly an amazing must-see wonder and is the longest known subterranean river in the world. In 1999, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared it a *World Heritage Site*, a natural wonder with outstanding value to humanity.

The best time to visit is in the early morning, when one can avoid the tourist crowd and the heat. Hence, an overnight stay in Sabang has advantages so that you can get to the river quickly the following morning. I went towards the late morning, but my sister went in the early morning during another trip and saw several huge *bayawaks* (monitor lizards) lazing on the beach before the many tourists drove them away into hiding.

Mangrove Forest along the Sabang River

We went to see the mangrove forest while in a *bangka* (paddle boat) twice on the first and second afternoons in Sabang. Jennie and Randy are reptile, insect, and bird enthusiasts, and we were observing and recording images of the mangrove snakes and monitor lizards in their natural habitat. The mangrove forest is an important part of the ecosystem because it filters the brackish water before it enters the sea, where the fresh and sea water meet. Around two-thirds of the fish eggs are laid in the mangrove forest along the Sabang river, while another fourth are laid among the sea coral. Without filtration, debris reaches the coral systems, and destroys the eggs.

The mangrove forest is within walking distance of Bambua. While walking back to Bambua, a dog appeared and led us back. It even stopped along the way when we made a wrong turn, barked at us, and approached us as if it was trying to make us follow it. We later learned that the locals train dogs to lead tourists back to the main road. (*Is that impressive or what?!*) The dogs also take turns providing this service. Just like their human masters, they have days off. They also go absent without leave (AWOL) — the dog followed us to Bambua and stayed there through the night. When Jennie and Randy woke up the next day, the same dog was still at their cottage door, though it eventually went away. One can argue though that the dog was already off working hours since we were the last touring group to exit the mangrove forest.

Mountain Trekking

On our last full day in Sabang, we had a level 2 mountain trekking experience to see the Daylight Hole Cave. We climbed a steep slope — a length of at least 200 feet — covered with limestone rocks. We were lucky because we saw and took pictures of the sunlight rays going through the hole, which does not happen just any time of the day.

Bambua Nature Park Resort

We stayed at Bambua (www.bambua-palawan.com), a forest retreat on a hilltop owned by André and Rosaly Dartmann together with business partners. The retreat has a very good view of the St. Paul Mountain Range. Also, Bambua is adjacent to the mangrove river forest and is along the boundary of the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park. André is a German national who has lived in Sabang since 1988. He learned to cultivate rice and to fish with the locals. He loves Palawan like no other land he has visited. In Bambua, we easily found crickets, leaf hoppers, grasshoppers, cicadas, katydids, stag beetles, frogs, flying lizards, monitor lizards, geckos, squirrels, hummingbirds, egrets, herons, parrots, and mynahs.



Photo by Randy

At Bambua, meals were caringly prepared by Ronald Aspa, our tour guide and cook. We met Dr. and Mrs. Christian and Josephine Löehlein, who lead and work as personnel for the annual German Interplast medical mission to Puerto Princesa, Pangasinan, or Dipolog in the specialty of cleft palate reconstruction. They have been staying at Bambua each year since 1998 on their days off from mission work. People on medical missions donate their time and use their vacation days to perform life-changing services for free.

[The Philippines is known as the land of smiling faces. However, the incidence of cleft palates appears to be higher here than in other countries. There is no known exact cause, but there appears to be a greater probability of cleft palates occurring in children born later into larger families. If the dates work out in 2011, I have expressed an interest in volunteering for the mission, even for a day, as an interpreter.]

Enjoying Solitude

After dinner, we retired to our respective cottages. Without home-life distractions, I stargazed in the dark under the sky until I felt sleepy. In the background, I heard the symphony of insects and the sound of waves crashing on a nearby beach. Without an alarm, I woke up at 4 a.m. each day to enjoy the stars again and to watch 150+ white herons and egrets, dotting a tree in Bambua's small manmade island within a pond, wake up and fly off the tree. Between 6:00 and 6:15 a.m. each day, just like clockwork, the sight repeated itself. Towards sunset the birds would slowly arrive before it became completely dark. André deliberately built the manmade island around the tree to make the birds feel safe from predators. This is a nature lover's treat no other place in Sabang can offer.

Although I felt Mother Nature prepared a show for us to enjoy each day, the trip was also about soul searching. The hours of solitude gave me time to think of my past, present, and future with a clarity I've not found elsewhere. I got to listen to my soul in a most special way.

Back to Puerto Princesa and Then to Manila

My last day was spent in Puerto Princesa on a city tour with Jennie and Randy. We saw the Crocodile Farm, the Butterfly Garden, and other attractions. That night, we enjoyed a special seafood dinner at *Ka Lui's*.

I acquired traditional *pasalubongs* (gifts) for the return to Manila. Whereas I arrived with a half-empty backpack, I returned with a full one with two kilos of roasted cashews instead of cheaper and less healthy fried cashews. I also bought *kamagong* weapons: a pair of arnis sticks and a pair of *tsakos* (nanchuks). *Kamagong* (*mabolo* or Velvet Apple [*Diospyros blancoi*]) is a

fruit tree native to the Philippines. *Mabolo* means hairy and describes the hairy exterior of the tree's fruit. As a member of the ebony family, the tree's wood is very dense, hard, and dark. It has two versions: solid and tiger. The solid version has a solid black color. The tiger version has unique grain patterns in black and colors reminiscent of a tiger. There were also eating utensils and many other types of items in Palawan made out of *kamagong*.

Some Travel Advice

- ◆ Bring sunscreen and insect repellent.
- ◆ Hydrate throughout the day.
- ◆ Bring the appropriate garments and shoes should you want to go mountain trekking. Travel off cement roads in Sabang can get muddy and there could be swift streams to cross during the rainy season if you go exploring near the mountains and trails.
- ◆ Binoculars are useful for looking at wildlife and the waterfalls visible along the Sabang mountainsides during the rainy season.
- ◆ A flashlight may come in handy for night exploration and depending on where you stay. Electrical power is only available in Bambua from 12:00 p.m. to midnight.

Ultimately, my trip to Palawan was not really about sights and sounds; it was mostly about meeting new people and enjoying each other's company. At Bambua, there were engaging conversations with Ronald, the owners, and the other guests. Jennie and Randy added to my appreciation and knowledge of nature. Thanks to them, I am now able to hold insects I would normally never think of touching. Did you know that when insects chirp at night, they are actually males sounding out a mating call to the females? Romance literally fills the air.

From start to finish, NONE of my three sets of plans for seeing Palawan happened exactly as planned, but the surprises were worth it to find a little bit more of myself at Bambua during those late night and early morning hours. Barring more unforeseen circumstances, I hope to see and write about the Apo and Tubbataha Reefs next year. ●

