

Palawan



Palawan is one of the real treasures of the Philippines. Stretching from the Mindoro Strait down to the tip of Borneo, it is a magnificent, coral-fringed range of jungle-clad mountainous islands jutting up dramatically from the Sulu Sea. The flora and fauna in Palawan is quite unique to the island, and is said to have more in common with that of Borneo than with the rest of the Philippines. Due in equal parts to its rugged topography, its small population and its distance from other islands in the archipelago, Palawan has managed to stay largely pristine.

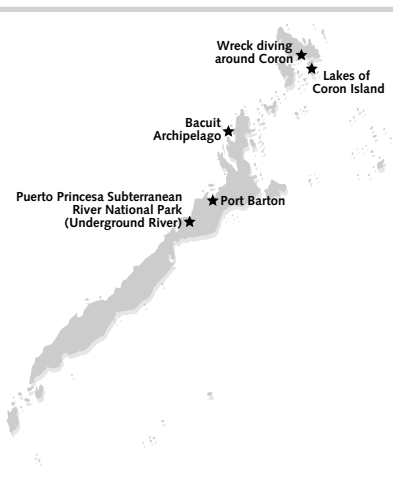
Palawan's world-class diving, snorkelling and jungle trekking make it a must-see destination for nature lovers and adventure-sports fans. The fantastic seascapes of the Bacuit Archipelago, the wrecks around Coron Town and the magical lakes of Coron Island should rank high on any visitor's list. You could spend a lifetime discovering new islands, beaches and reefs, particularly around northern Palawan and Busuanga Island.

With convenient and quick plane and ferry connections from Luzon, Palawan is easy to get to. With few paved roads, however, it can be time consuming to travel overland around Palawan. But the views along the way are usually worth the time and effort. Of course, in the wet season, which usually runs here from June to September, road travel can be difficult in the days following a heavy rain. But, it *is* possible to travel in Palawan during the wet season, and many people enjoy the brilliant sunsets that come with the clouds.

All told, we consider Palawan to be one of the most rewarding outdoor-sports destinations not just in the Philippines, but in all of Southeast Asia.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the islands and beaches of the **Bacuit Archipelago** (p424), one of the world's most stunning seascapes
- Diving onto the **sunken wrecks of Coron** (p427) some of the best wreck diving anywhere
- Journeying to the centre of the earth in **Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park** (Subterranean River; p415)
- Swimming in the turquoise waters of the **lakes of Coron Island** (p430)
- Relaxing in laid-back **Port Barton** (p419)



PALAWAN



Dangers & Annoyances

Palawan suffered from a highly publicised tourist-kidnapping incident that took place in 2001. Some resorts, hotels and restaurants closed down as a result. Luckily, there have been no incidents in recent years and people are coming back. Although it's impossible to predict the future, we believe that Palawan is now as safe as anywhere else in the Philippines.

Getting There & Away

Despite its 'last frontier' reputation, Palawan is easily accessible from Manila and a few other parts of the Philippines. Indeed, with enough planning and good timing, you might even be able to arrive in Manila, change planes, and arrive at your destination in Palawan the same day (flights to Palawan from Manila take just over an hour). More likely, you could fly into Manila, spend a night in the city, then hop on a plane or boat to Palawan the following day. Either way, the delights of Palawan are within easy reach of the traveller.

AIR

Palawan's main airport is in Puerto Princesa, but there are two smaller airports further north in Palawan and one on the island of Busuanga. El Nido and the Bacuit Archipelago are served by small El Nido Airport. Sandoval Airport, about 30km north of Taytay, serves as an alternate entry point for northern Palawan and places like Flower Island and Club Noah Isabelle. On Busuanga Island, there's the YKR Airport, which serves Coron Town and the resorts of the Calamian Archipelago.

The following airlines offer flights between Manila and Puerto Princesa; all except Cebu Pacific fly daily.

Air Philippines (☎ 02-851 7181 in Manila, 048-433 7003 in Puerto Princesa; www.airphils.com)

Asian Spirit (☎ 02-855 3333 in Manila, 048-434 4344 in Puerto Princesa; www.asianspirit.com)

Cebu Pacific (☎ 02-551 6250 in Manila; www.cebpacificair.com) Flights on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

PAL (☎ 02-855 8888 in Manila, 048-433 4565 in Puerto Princesa; www.philippineairlines.com)

In addition, **SEAIR** (☎ 02-884 1521 in Manila, 048-434 5272 in Puerto Princesa, 0919 467 4616 in Coron, 0916

628 6665 in El Nido; www.flyseair.com) has a number of flights from Manila to various airports in Palawan, including: Manila–Busuanga (one on Tuesday and Saturday, two on Thursday, three on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday); Manila–Busuanga–El Nido–Puerto Princesa (one on Tuesday and Saturday); and Manila–Busuanga–El Nido–Puerto Princesa–Cuyo (one on Tuesday). These all operate in both directions on the days listed here.

Asian Spirit (☎ 055-209 1189 in Busuanga) has a flight daily to Busuanga but that can be reduced during the low season. It flies to Taytay's **Sandoval Airport** (☎ 0916 452 8197 in Taytay) daily.

Finally, **ITI** (☎ 02-815 5674 in Manila, 0920 908 1025 in El Nido) offers two direct flights daily between Manila (Soriano Hangar) and El Nido.

You would be well advised to keep in mind that the timetables (as well as the routes and fares) of the different airlines, particularly Asian Spirit and SEAIR, are subject to frequent change, so it's best to check with the airline for the latest update.

BOAT

Palawan has boat connections to and from Manila, Iloilo (on Panay), and San José (on Mindoro).

Manila

A **Superferry** (☎ 02-528 7000 in Manila, 048-434 5734 in Puerto Princesa; www.superferry.com.ph) liner sails once a week from Manila to Puerto Princesa via Coron and back again (P1852 Super Value ticket with meals, 28 hours). It departs Manila on Friday, arrives in Coron on Saturday and then in Puerto Princesa later that same day; it departs Puerto Princesa on Sunday, arrives in Coron on that same day and then in Manila on Monday.

Negros Navigation (www.negrosnavigation.ph; ☎ 02-244 0408 in Manila, 048-434 4735 in Puerto Princesa) has a ferry that sails once a week between Manila and Puerto Princesa (P1835 economy class with meals, 23 hours). It departs from Manila on Thursday and arrives in Puerto Princesa on Friday; it departs from Puerto Princesa on Saturday and arrives in Manila on Sunday.

San Nicolas Shipping (☎ 02-243 4595 in Manila, ☎ 0918 216 1764 in Coron) operates three trips weekly between Manila and Coron (P800, meals included). All trips leave Manila at

4pm (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) and arrive in Coron at 5pm the following day. Coron–Manila trips sail Monday, Wednesday and Friday, leaving Coron at 4pm and docking in Manila at 5pm the next day.

Atienza Shipping Lines (☎ 02-243 8845 in Manila, 0927 406 6036 in Coron, 0918 566 6786 in El Nido, 0919 257 4455 in Liminancong) operates a Liminancong–El Nido–Coron–Manila route, leaving Liminancong at 7pm Saturday and arriving in Manila at noon on Monday. The reverse journey leaves Manila at 6pm Wednesday and arrives at its final destination at noon on Friday. The Manila–Limancong fare is P940, with meals included.

Iloilo (Panay)

Milagrosa Shipping (☎ 033-335 0955 in Iloilo, 048-433 4806 in Puerto Princesa) has a ferry that sails once a week between Iloilo and Puerto Princesa, stopping in the Cuyo Islands en route (P800 economy, 26 hours). The ferry departs Iloilo at 7pm on Monday and Thursday and arrives in Puerto Princesa at 9pm on the following day; it leaves Puerto Princesa, headed in the opposite direction, at 3pm on Sunday and Wednesday, arriving in Iloilo at 5pm the following day.

San José (Mindoro)

San Nicolas Shipping (☎ 0918 216 1764 in Coron) does a weekly Coron–San José trip (P400), departing at 10am Tuesday and arriving at San José about six hours later. The return journey leaves San José at 10pm on Saturday and arrives in Coron at around 4am the following morning.

Getting Around

Getting around Palawan is almost as easy as getting there, but be warned that road journeys can be time consuming, bumpy and frustrating (due to the local jeepney drivers observing the standard practice of not adhering to schedules). Using boats to travel up and down the island is also possible: two ferries travel up and down Palawan (see p410); and bangka can be hired for trips between points on the coast and offshore islands. Finally, air travel is remarkably speedy and efficient in Palawan, and it's certainly the way to go if you can afford it.

AIR

SEAIR (opposite) is the only airline that links destinations within Palawan. On Tuesday and Saturday, SEAIR flies from Manila

PALAWAN: THE LAST FRONTIER

Palawan is often portrayed as the Philippines' last frontier, an unspoilt ecosystem of virgin forests, pristine beaches and clear waters teeming with myriad forms of marine life. To the east lie Tubbataha Reefs, a Unesco World Heritage site; to the north is Apo Reef, said to be home to the world's largest concentration of coral species; and on the main island of Palawan you'll find thousands of hectares of untouched forests where endemic species such as the Palawan bearcat, Palawan peacock-pheasant and Calamian deer roam.

According to the **WWF** (World Wildlife Fund; www.worldwildlife.org), Palawan is home to 15 endemic and near-endemic mammals, along with 20 endemic and near-endemic bird species. It also shares with nearby Borneo some 23 bird species that are found nowhere else in the Philippines. A truly unique species, found on the southern island of Balabac, is the Philippine mouse deer, the world's smallest hooved mammal, which stands only about 40cm at the shoulder level.

Unfortunately, Palawan's biodiversity is in grave danger from such things as unsustainable logging practices and pollution. In an effort to counter this, the whole of Palawan has been declared a Fauna and Flora Watershed Reserve, within which are several protected areas – El Nido-Taytay, Tubbataha, Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, Malampaya Sound, Coron Island and Calauit Game Reserve. In addition, there are designated wilderness areas, forest research reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and marine reserves. Palawan also promotes ecotourism, delicately balancing the need for tourist revenues with the preservation of the environment.

Palawan really is what the travel brochures say it is – a natural wonderland of breathtaking beauty. Every global traveller should visit it at least once. But if you do visit, always remember you are a guest. Before you throw that cigarette butt into the water or pop that piece of coral into your bag to take home, just think of what your seemingly harmless act might be contributing to the potential destruction of this earthly paradise.

to Busuanga, El Nido and Puerto Princesa and back again. SEAIR allows you to fly between the different points on its Palawan routes, so you can, for instance, pick up the flight at Busuanga to go to El Nido. SEAIR is adding routes all the time, and they fly additional routes in the high season, so it's worth checking their website or asking their agents about schedules and destinations. Conversely, be forewarned that during the low season they may 'merge' two flights into one if there aren't enough passengers. Sample fares and flight times include: Puerto Princesa–El Nido (P2315, 45 minutes) and El Nido–Busuanga (P2665, 30 minutes).

One bonus of flying around Palawan is the opportunity for great aerial sightseeing along the way: flying into El Nido from the south, for example, offers eye-popping views of the Bacuit Archipelago. And if you're in a hurry, 30 or 40 minutes relaxing in the clouds sure beats ten hours in a bumpy jeepney!

BOAT

Travelling by boat is a good way to save money and avoid the discomforts of road travel. Two ferries ply routes along Palawan: Superferry, which connects Puerto Princesa and Coron; and Atienza Shipping Lines, which runs between Liminancong, El Nido and Coron. For contact details and schedules, see p408.

There used to be regularly scheduled bangka services up and down the west coast of northern Palawan, connecting Sabang, Port Barton and El Nido. This has ceased operating though it is still possible to charter boats between these and other ports. See those sections for sample travel times and prices.

Of course, it's also possible to hire a bangka by the hour or day for trips between the main island and offshore islands and for island hopping. A typical day rate for island hopping within the Bacuit Archipelago, for example, would be from P1000 to P1500.

ROAD

Heavy-duty road trips are the norm in Palawan, and these trips are made by jeepney/bus hybrids (overgrown jeepneys with the seats facing forward). If you've got the cash, you can hire a private van or jeepney to cover long stretches (a good option for groups). Not only will you be able to see more of the

scenery, you'll be in a better frame of mind to actually appreciate the view.

Note that the wet season in Palawan runs from June to September. During this time, roads may become impassable after a heavy rain. This isn't always the case, however, and you should not assume that just because it's the wet season, overland travel is impossible. It may just be a matter of waiting a day or two. And if worst comes to worst, you can always fly or take a boat.

CENTRAL PALAWAN

PUERTO PRINCESA

☎ 048 / pop 162,000

The bustling capital of Palawan is generally regarded as little more than a jumping-off point for excursions elsewhere on the island. Often overlooked as an attraction in its own right, this underrated town has some decent hotels and good restaurants, and is an excellent base from which to explore central and southern Palawan. 'Puerto', as the locals call it, is certainly clean and relaxed in comparison to Manila, but tricycle jams on Rizal Ave, the main street, go pretty far toward shattering any illusions of a tropical paradise.

Orientation

Puerto Princesa is really just an overgrown country town, with the main street, Rizal Ave, as its long, straight spine. Rizal Ave runs from the airport, through the city centre and down to the pier.

MAPS

The *E-Z Palawan* map features a detailed map of Puerto Princesa. Copies can be purchased for P80 in bookshops, newsstands and businesses that cater to travellers.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Several Internet cafés can be found on Rizal Ave, between the airport terminal and Jolibee restaurant.

2610 Computer Center (☎ 434 7645; Rizal Ave; per hr P25; 11 9am-midnight) The fastest connections and decent machines.

MONEY

There are several big banks with ATMs along Rizal Ave.



Equitable PCI Bank (Rizal Ave; 11 9am-3pm Mon-Fri)
PNB (Philippine National Bank; Rizal Ave; 11 9am-3pm Mon-Fri)

POST

Main post office (Burgos St; 11 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Just off Rizal Ave.

TELEPHONE

Of the very few telephone landlines in Palawan, most are in Puerto Princesa. Mobile phones are the norm, and we've found that Smart offers the best coverage in Palawan.

TOURIST INFORMATION

City Tourism Office (☎ 434 4211; Puerto Princesa Airport; 11 8am-noon & 1-5pm) Located next to the

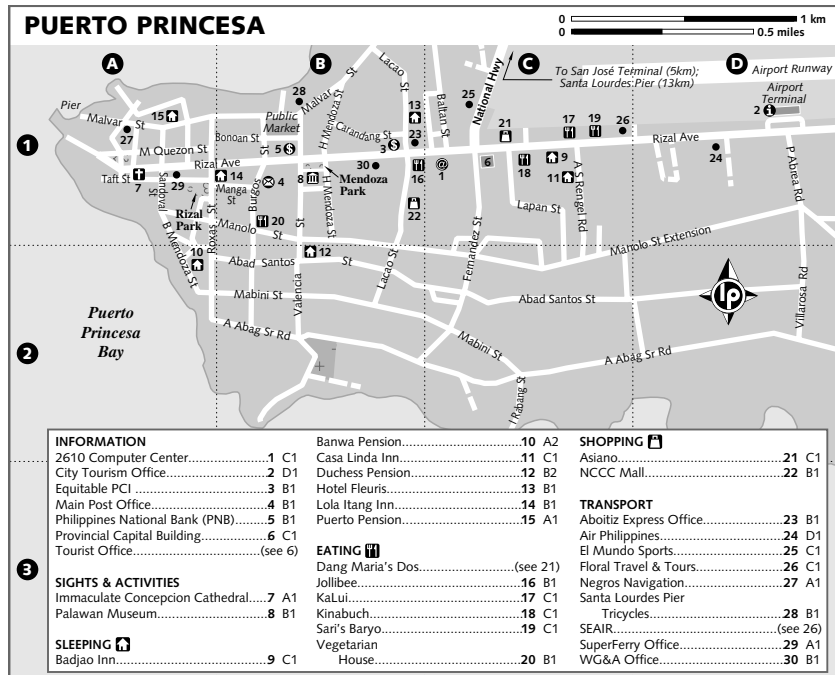
arrival hall at the airport. It has maps of Puerto but these aren't particularly useful.

Provincial tourist office (☎ 433 2968; Provincial Capital Bldg, Rizal Ave; 11 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist Information & Assistance Counter (Puerto Princesa Airport) Operates at the airport to meet incoming flights. Staff can point you in the right direction upon your arrival.

Sights & Activities

The **Palawan Museum** (admission P20; 11 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat) is worth checking out if you're stuck for something to do on a rainy day. It is housed in the old City Hall building adjacent to Mendoza Park and has exhibits of Chinese trade pottery and Spanish relics that were found in the province,



as well as prehistoric artefacts from Tabon Caves. Further along Rizal Ave, you could also have a look at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral, a structure that dates back to 1872.

Festivals & Events

A good time to visit Puerto is during the Baragatan Festival, which takes place from 23 May to 23 June. Held on the grounds of the Provincial Capital Building, the festival features lots of singing, eating, drinking and various stalls selling all kinds of local produce and handicrafts.

Sleeping

Casa Linda Inn (% 433 2606; casalind@mozcom.com; AS Rengel Rd; s/d with fan P400/500, with air-con P650/750) With its manicured garden courtyard and pergola, this well-run guesthouse is the sort of place we'd like to see more often. The rooms are a tasteful mix of hotel-style comfort and nipa hut-style character. A shoes-off-at-the-door rule ensures blissful silence and gleaming floorboards (although this rule is strangely ignored by some members

of the owner's family). The staff are friendly and efficient, but the maintenance leaves something to be desired.

Banwa Pension (% 434 8963; www.banwa.com; Liwanag St; dm P150, s P200-250, d P400-500) This laid-back backpackers' guesthouse has tons of character and comfortable, well-kept rooms. The back deck is a wonderful hang-out spot. Tell the tricycle driver to take you to the corner of B Mendoza and Liwanag Sts in Quito.

Hotel Fluoris (% 434 4338; www.hotelfleuris.com; Lacao St; s/tw from P2200/2700; a) The relatively new Hotel Fluoris is the best hotel value in town, and it's hard to beat its central location. The rooms are fairly spacious, well kept and clean. Best of all, for those who can't stand a cold-water shower even in the tropics, all rooms have hot-water showers.

Puerto Pension (% 433 2969; ppension@pal-onl.com; Malvar St; s P225-500, d P360-660, f P900; a) Located not far from the town pier, the Puerto Pension is built mostly of indigenous materials. The rooftop restaurant has some great views (when it's open). The rooms are on the small side, but they're comfortable enough.

Lola Itang Inn (% 433 2990; lolaitang@yahoo.com; Roxas St; s/d P650/650; a) Small but clean rooms make this place an acceptable choice for a few nights in Puerto. The downtown location is fairly convenient.

Duchess Pension (% 433 2873; Valencia St; s P150-550, d P250-550; a) The rooms in the new wing here are clean and serviceable but bland. The singles in the old wing, which go for a mere P150, are among the cheapest in town – they're dead basic but fairly priced.

Badjao Inn (% 433 2761; 350 Rizal Ave; s P750, d P850-950; a) Right in front of Casa Linda, this place also has an attractive courtyard garden (you'd never guess it from the outside). The rooms are getting a little long in the tooth, and it's not on par with Casa Linda. On the plus side, the rooms are large and fairly well maintained.

Eating

Puerto has a fine little collection of good restaurants, and it's a great place to load up on calories before heading off for a rigorous bout of jungle trekking, snorkelling or diving. Most places are located right on Rizal Ave, which makes it easy to stroll along and choose a place that suits your taste and budget.

Kinabuch (% 434 5194; Rizal Ave; mains from P100) This popular outdoor restaurant is a great place to familiarise yourself with such Filipino classics as *crispy pata* (crispy pork leg; P240, good for three people) and *sinigang na hipon* (tamarind-based shrimp soup; P140, also good for three). The ambience here is really no great shakes, but the *crispy pata* is

among the best we've had in the Philippines – just writing about it makes us want to hop on the next plane back to Puerto!

Sari's Baryo (% 433 4899; Rizal Ave) This casual place serves a wide variety of Filipino favourites, including *sinigang* (tamarind-based soup), *adobo* (pork stewed in vinegar and garlic) and *pinakbet* (an Ilocano vegetable dish). We can recommend the house speciality: *kare-kare* (a peanut-based Filipino stew of seafood or meat, P160). The service is a little uneven, but the food is fine and the atmosphere is pleasant.

Dang Maria's Dos (% 434 8120; Rizal Ave; sets from P89) With indoor and outdoor seating, this cosy little joint specializes in roasted chicken sets (P89). The usual Western suspects are also offered here, including pizza and pasta. And there is one item that you won't likely find on a menu anywhere else in the world: loaya@yahoo.com! It's described as 'a Cuyono dish of pork knuckles stewed with red beans and jackfruit'. We couldn't decide whether to try it or email it.

Vegetarian House (Burgos St; dishes from P30) Vegetarians will find this place a welcome sanctuary in the meat-mad Philippines. It serves a variety of mostly Filipino vegetarian dishes for incredibly cheap prices. It's not much to look at, but the people are friendly and the food is quite good.

Jollibee (Rizal Ave; burger sets from P50) This homegrown fast-food chain hardly needs an introduction – if you've been in the Philippines for any length of time, you'll know Jollibee. For the uninitiated, it's basically the Filipino version of Ronald's place, with slightly tastier food.

Shopping

Asiano (% 434 8167; Rizal Ave; 11.7.30am-11pm) This is the best place to pick up some Palawan handicrafts like baskets, jewellery and woodcarvings. The owner has a good eye and sense of style and his wares are a step up from the usual offerings.

Public Market (Burgos St; 11.9am-5pm) Piles of tropical fruit, stacks of colourful vegetables, puddles of fish blood on the floor and flies buzzing round the butchers' blocks make up the colourful tableau at this central market. Small but vibrant, it's pretty much a must-see for fans of Southeast Asian markets.

NCCC Mall (Lacao St; 11.9am-7pm) This indoor shopping mall, containing a supermarket,

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

KaLui (% 433 2580; Rizal Ave; dinner sets from P120) Step through the gate and enter the small, self-contained world of KaLui, possibly the best restaurant in the whole of Palawan. The speciality here is the seafood set (P275), which can include such things as spicy squid, steamed fish and vegetables. Simpler sets are available for P120. Most dishes are seafood, cooked in Filipino style, with nods to the rest of Southeast Asia. The owners of this restaurant have a highly creative sense of style, and you'll undoubtedly leave the place with ideas for decorating your own home or apartment.

a pharmacy and a department store, is a good place to pick up some necessities before heading off into the jungle.

Getting There & Away

AIR

PAL, Asian Spirit and Air Philippines all offer daily flights to and from Manila; Cebu Pacific operates four flights weekly while SEAIR flies thrice weekly. SEAIR also offers flights to and from El Nido, Busuanga and Cuyo. For details on all these airlines and flight schedules, see Getting There & Away (p408) and Getting Around (p409) at the start of this chapter.

SEAIR (☎ 434 5272; Rizal Ave) and Air Philippines (☎ 433 7003; Rizal Ave) have offices or agents on Rizal Ave.

BOAT

SuperFerry and Negros Navigation operate ferries between Manila and Puerto Princesa. The SuperFerry sails via Coron. Milagrosa Shipping has a ferry that sails once a week between Iloilo and Puerto Princesa, via the Cuyo Islands. For details on sailing schedules, fares, and contact details, see Getting There & Away (p408) and Getting Around (p409) at the start of this chapter.

SuperFerry (☎ 434 5734, 02-528 7000 in Manila; www.superferry.com.ph; Rizal Ave) has several agents and offices in Puerto, including one on Rizal Ave. The WG&A and Aboitiz Express offices on Rizal Ave also handle SuperFerry tickets.

Negros Navigation (☎ 434 4735, 02-244 0408 in Manila; www.negrosnavigation.ph; Malvar St) has an office down by the pier.

CAR

If you've got the cash, hiring a car or van and a driver is certainly a good way to get around the island. With a big enough group, this is certainly a reasonable option – and it beats waiting for a jeepney driver to finish his siesta!

El Mundo Sports (☎ 433 4878; elmundo@pal-onl.com; National Hwy) is a reliable car-rental agency with good drivers and spacious vans.

BUS & JEEPNEY

All buses and jeepneys operate from the San José terminal, 7km north of Puerto Princesa city centre off the National Highway (there is a signpost that reads 'New Public Mar-

ket'). It's a 10- to 15-minute tricycle ride from the city centre, and it costs P40 per person if you're alone and P10 per person if you share with three or more people. Once you get there, the easiest thing to do is simply ask around for the first bus or jeepney headed to your intended destination.

Routes, operators, departure time and fares change all the time in Palawan, so the following is not an exhaustive list. Northern destinations, fares, travel times and departure times include: Sabang (P150 jeepney/P250 minivan, three hours, 7am and 9am); Port Barton (P160 jeepney, five hours, 10am); Roxas (P120 jeepney/P156 bus, 2½ hours, 5.30am, 6.30am, noon, 1.30pm, 4pm, 5pm); Taytay (P230/237 depending on bus company, five hours, 5am, 6am, 7am, 8am, 9am, 10am, noon, 2pm); and El Nido (P300 bus, nine hours, 5am, 7am, 9am).

Southern destinations, fares, travel times and departure times include: Quezon (P150 minivan, three hours, hourly 7am to 5pm) and Brooke's Point (P200, four hours, six daily 6am to 5pm).

For information on getting to/from attractions near Puerto Princesa, see the following Around Puerto Princesa section.

Getting Around

The standard rate for a tricycle from the airport to any destination in central Puerto is P40.

Within Puerto the official tricycle fare rate is P5 for every 2km.

See left for details on car hire.

AROUND PUERTO PRINCESA

There are a few worthwhile excursions which can be done as day trips from Puerto Princesa. The one attraction that simply can't be missed is the Subterranean River in Sabang, a three-hour drive from Puerto. The islands of Honda Bay also make a nice day or overnight trip, and will satisfy beach bums who can't make it to the beaches further north.

Honda Bay

Honda Bay is dotted with small islands that are ideal for snorkelling and island hopping.

Island hopping costs P800 or P1000, depending on the type of boat you take. A regular island-hopping tour allows you to visit three islands, usually Pandan Island, Cowrie

Island and the aptly named Snake Island, a winding strip of white sand that changes shape with the tides. You might be charged an entrance fee when you visit the islands, usually P20 to P30. There is no entrance fee for Snake Island. The island-hopping boat charge entitles you to keep the boat the whole day (until 4pm).

Package tours around Honda Bay are available from tour agencies and hotels in Puerto Princesa (around P900 including snorkelling, transport and lunch, usually from 8am to 4pm).

SLEEPING & EATING

Apart from the places listed in this section, there are no restaurants or stores on the islands, so bring your own food if you wish to have a picnic. On Snake Island, there is a bamboo shack selling a handful of provisions. They sometimes have a stock of freshly caught fish which they will cook for you.

The upscale Dos Palmas Arceceffi Island Resort (☎ 02-637 4226 in Manila; www.dospalmas.com.ph; full board per person from US\$168), on Arceceffi Island, has 10 cottages built over the waters of Honda Bay, and another 38 in garden settings. It offers the usual range of activities and services you would expect at resorts of this scale.

On Starfish Island, the tiny Starfish Sandbar Resort (☎ 0920 627 3427; cottages from P500) has six primitive native-style cottages. There are no screens or fans, and electricity is only on from 6pm to midnight. Bedding, however, is provided. If you are willing to rough it, a night here might turn out to be an unforgettable experience. The small cluster of cottages are the only evidence of human habitation for miles around, and once the electricity is turned off at midnight, your only source of light is the canopy of stars above. The cottages are built on stilts, at the edge of a short sandbar which is the island's only beach. A canteen serves some food, but that is dependent on the availability of supplies. You may, however, bring your own food and ask the staff to cook it (cooking charges range from P30 to P100).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The starting point for trips to the islands in Honda Bay is Santa Lourdes pier, about 13km or 30 minutes from the Puerto Princesa city centre, off the National Highway

(there is a sign beside the highway marked 'Honda Bay 1km').

To get to Santa Lourdes pier from Puerto, you can go by tricycle or a multicab, which looks like a cross between a van and a jeepney. Not every city tricycle is licensed to ply the route; to find one, go to the tricycle terminal in front of Olympic Construction on Malvar Street. A tricycle ride shared with four other passengers costs P15 each, but you can hire the vehicle for your exclusive use for P75. The first tricycle leaves the Puerto Princesa terminal around 5am; the last available one for the return journey from Santa Lourdes leaves around 8pm.

Tricycles and multicabs are available around Santa Lourdes pier for your return trip to Puerto Princesa, but be prepared to wait as they can be infrequent.

Sabang & Subterranean River

The Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park contains one of the real highlights of Palawan: the world-famous Subterranean River (formerly St Paul Subterranean River). A journey into the darkness of this riverine cave is a truly unique experience – you will really feel like a character in Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. The limestone cave that the river passes through is thought to be the longest navigable river-traversed tunnel in the world (though a similar underground river recently discovered in southern Laos is perhaps longer).

You must purchase a permit to visit the Subterranean River at the Tourist Information & Assistance Center (r 8am-5pm) at the pier in Sabang. Permits cost P150 for Filipinos and P200 for foreigners. This office can also arrange boat transport to the river (round trip P600, 15 minutes), which is the easiest and best way to get there. The boat drops you off on a beach near the entrance to the cave; from there you walk for five minutes to get to the actual entrance. Here you will be given a lifejacket and helmet and assigned a boat and driver for the trip into the cave. This second boat fare is included in your permit fee.

While the Subterranean River is actually over 8km in length, tours only take you about 5km into the river (beyond this point, navigation becomes difficult). The round trip takes about 45 minutes. Along the way, you

guide will point out various features of the caves, and you'll see many bats and swiftlets (these cave-dwelling birds are responsible for the guano that 'perfumes' the cave).

After visiting the cave, energetic souls might want to return to Sabang on foot over the Monkey Trail/Jungle Trail. Starting from the ranger station near the Subterranean River, this trail initially climbs very steeply over some overgrown limestone karsts before dividing into two paths. At the time of writing, the Monkey Trail was closed and only the Jungle Trail was open. The total distance from the ranger station to Sabang is 5km and the walk takes between one and two hours (there's another ranger station halfway along, where you can take a rest). Obviously, you can also walk the trail from Sabang to the Subterranean River. The trail divides just after the central ranger station – if the Monkey Trail is still closed, you'll have to take the right fork, which is the Jungle Trail. For those who like jungle flora and fauna, this walk is highly recommended.

Another attraction in the area is the mangrove-lined Poyuy-Poyuy River, which is at the north end of the main beach at Sabang (just past Michi Cottages). The park offers mangrove tours (P75; 11am–5pm); which involves paddling with a guide a few kilometres up the river. Ask at the hut just south of the river. This is a great trip.

Finally, while the beach in front of Sabang is fine, there is a better beach just across the Poyuy-Poyuy River. The beach here is truly beautiful, but there are sandflies in the afternoon on both this and the main beach, so take precautions and consider swimming rather than sunbathing.

Some places in Puerto offer worthwhile package tours to Sabang; see right.

SLEEPING & EATING

The following places are listed in order of location, not preference. The listing starts at the very northern end of the beach and works south toward the pier. Note that there is electricity at the following places only from 6pm to 10pm.

Michi Cottages & Restaurant (☎ 0919 401 8655; michimiyamoto2004@yahoo.com; cottages for 1 or 2 people P800, for 3 people P1050) Michi has four native-style cottages, each good for three people, with ensuite shower and toilet. They boast a very secluded, quiet location with a lovely

view of the bay. Michi is located at the northernmost end of the beach, near the entrance and exit of the Monkey Trail/Jungle Trail and mangrove river, so it's a bit of walk from the pier (around 1.5km). Note that the signboard as you enter the property actually reads 'Metchie Cottages & Restaurant'.

Mary's Beach Resort (☎ 0920 432 1139; cottages for 1 person P350, for 2 or 3 people P450) This is the second resort from the northern end of the beach, right next to Michi. From the outside, the seven native-style cottages look rundown, but they are fairly clean inside. Like Michi, the secluded location is the real draw, not the facilities. We particularly like the hammocks hanging from the branches of a giant tree in front of the property. The friendly owner can send a *kalabaw* (water buffalo) cart to pick you up at the pier.

Taraw Lodge and Restaurant (☎ 0919 601 1227; cottages for 1 person P400, for 2 or 3 people P450) Located around the centre of the beach, this place gets quite a lot of trade from referrals and daytrippers sent by the Legend Hotel in Puerto Princesa. There are native-style cottages with concrete floors. It's fairly well kept, but on the basic side.

There are a couple of simple restaurants in the vicinity of the Tourist Information & Assistance Center, but none are worth special mention. The restaurants at the above-mentioned accommodations are at least as good.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most of the journey from Puerto Princesa to Sabang is over the paved Puerto–Roxas road. Once you turn off this road, it's a bumpy dirt track all the way to Sabang, but the excellent scenery, particularly over the last 20km, more than makes up for any discomforts.

A bus runs daily between Puerto Princesa and Sabang (P250, three hours, leaving Puerto's San José bus terminal at 7am, leaving Sabang at 2pm). Two or three jeepneys also ply the same route (P150, three hours, leaving Puerto's San José bus terminal at 7am and 9am, leaving Sabang at 7am and 10am).

It's possible to hire pumpboats to destinations up the coast from Sabang, including Port Barton and El Nido. To or from Port Barton costs P3000 for a boat that can take up to four people; the journey takes about four hours. To or from El Nido costs P6000

for a four-person boat; the journey can take up to nine hours.

Finally, some travel agencies, guesthouses and hotels in Puerto offer all-inclusive tours from Puerto to Sabang. These are often the most economical and stress-free ways to visit the Subterranean River and the other attractions in Sabang. Ask at your guesthouse or hotel for details.

SOUTH PALAWAN

Palawan's south doesn't have as many famous attractions as the north, but it's still rewarding for adventurous travellers. Tourism infrastructure is almost nonexistent, though if you don't mind roughing it and can speak enough Filipino to have the *barangay* captain arrange basic accommodation for you, there are enough caves and waterfalls down here to keep you exploring for weeks.

QUEZON & TABON CAVES

Quezon, about 100km from Puerto Princesa, is the nearest major town to Tabon Caves. This extensive network of caves has yielded remnants of prehistory in the form of crude burial grounds. Human remains estimated to be 47,000 years old have been found here (see p24). The cave complex is fascinating for its archaeological and anthropological significance and for the odd beauty of the limestone structures and jungle setting. The caves are a half-hour boat ride from Quezon.

To arrange a trip to the caves, you must first stop at the Quezon branch of the Palawan Museum (11am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri), which is signposted off the main road into Quezon, just before the town. Staff will provide a guide to the caves, who will also arrange a boat to and from the caves (the only access from Quezon town). The guide is free, and the boat should cost around P500 for the round trip (about 30 minutes in each direction). Be sure to wear comfortable clothes and walking shoes, and be prepared to scramble and sweat! Bring some protective lotion against mosquitoes. A full tour of the caves takes about two hours.

Sleeping

Tabon Village Resort (☎ 0910 239 8381; cottages with shared/private bathroom from P150/450) Near Quezon on Malanut Bay, this is a relaxing place

with several cottages in a garden setting and a restaurant built over the bay. A tricycle from Quezon should cost about P50 and take 15 minutes.

Getting There & Away

There are six or seven buses a day between Puerto Princesa and Quezon (P150, three hours). From Puerto, the first departure is around 7am and the last at around 5pm; from Quezon, the first departure is at around 4am and the last at around 4pm.

BROOKE'S POINT

Brooke's Point is the last major inhabitation on the southeast coast of Palawan. The town takes its name from the 19th-century British explorer James Brooke, known as the 'White Raja of Sarawak', who is said to have landed here sometime around 1850. There are plenty of opportunities for trekking and exploring in the area, including climbing 2085m Mt Mantalingajan (you'll need to arrange a guide here or in Puerto Princesa to undertake this multiday journey). Be warned, however, that there isn't much tourist infrastructure in Brooke's Point. There is one good place to stay, however (see the following).

Sleeping & Eating

Mt Maruyog Farms & Gardens (☎ 0919 760 0265; Tubtub, Brooke's Point; cottages from P500) This offers basic, comfortable accommodation in rustic nipa-and-bamboo cottages in a garden setting. The grounds are beautifully landscaped, with a big lawn area and pockets of lush exotic vegetation. There is a treehouse for the use of guests and visitors. Near the restaurant is a well-tended pool surrounded by eye-soothing greenery.

Getting There & Away

There are six jeepneys or buses a day between Puerto Princesa and Brooke's Point (P200, six hours). If you go by hired car or van, the journey takes four to five hours.

NORTH PALAWAN

One glance at a map of Palawan and you'll understand why many visitors to the province spend most of their time in the north: with an endlessly convoluted coast and myriad off-shore islands, this is a natural wonderland for



explorers, beachcombers, snorkellers, divers and island hoppers. The fact is, you could spend weeks or even months here and not begin to exhaust the possibilities – there’s always another beach hiding in the next cove or on the next island.

ROXAS

pop 47,000
The uninspiring town of Roxas (*roh-hahs*) is 135km from Puerto Princesa and specialises in roadside cafés for the steady stream of buses and jeepneys running between Puerto Princesa and points north. To tourists, Roxas is best known as the coastal gateway to a cluster of lovely islands, including Coco-Locho Island Resort.

Sleeping

Coco-Locho Island Resort (☎ 0919 613 2393; <http://coco-locho.palawan.net>; 2-night & 3-day full-board packages per person from P12,000) This resort is situated on a corner of its own island and has a collection of bungalows built from wood, bamboo and thatch that are basic but have some charm. As a resort-style place it might appeal to some families due to its safe lagoon and the host of activities available. The island, naturally, is lovely. You can arrange boat transfer from Roxas when you make your booking.

Getting There & Away

Buses and jeepneys make the run from Puerto Princesa to Roxas (P120 jeepney/

P156 bus, 2½ hours, 5.30am, 6.30am, noon, 1.30pm, 3pm, 4pm, 5pm). From Roxas, buses and jeepneys depart for Puerto from the large bus terminal in the middle of town between 5am and 4.30pm.

Between Roxas and Port Barton, there is at least one jeepney a day (P80, 1½ hours). Jeepneys or buses also run to and from Taytay and El Nido.

PORT BARTON

pop 4100

On the west coast, the refreshingly quiet town of Port Barton is a low-key tourist haunt. The town itself is on an attractive beach with colourful sunsets. Even better beaches can be found on the islands scattered throughout the sheltered bay, and up the coast at Long Beach (both are accessible by boat from Port Barton and make good day trips). Quite a few travellers show up here and find the mix of laid-back travel scene and local colour enough reason to stay for a few days. It’s certainly more relaxing than El Nido town to the north, and is a good place for families as the beach is sheltered and peaceful.

Sleeping

Accommodation here is listed from north to south, rather than in order of preference. The north end of the beach is on your right as you stand on the beach and face the sea.

Greenview Resort (☎ 0921 326 0565; www.palawan-dg.clara.net/index.html; d P350, d cottage P800, f cottage P1500) This is the most attractive and best-maintained place in Port Barton, with a nice location on a relatively quiet stretch of beach. Accommodation is in free-standing and attached bungalows, all with ensuite and fan. The family cottage has a kitchen. This is an excellent place for families.

El Dorado Sunset Resort (☎ 0920 329 9049; d cottage from P350) Next to Greenview is El Dorado, which has several cottages located in a pretty, if slightly cramped, garden setting. There is a popular bar in the same complex. The cottages are clean and well maintained, with private bathrooms.

Summer Homes Beach Bungalows (☎ 0921 401 6906; www.oxfly.co.uk/portbarton/; d P350, cottages P750) Across the small creek from the above two, roughly in the middle of the beach, this clean, well-run spot has attached doubles

and cottages in a well-tended garden setting. This is another good option for families, and the restaurant turns out some good food.

El Busero Inn (d P200) This place has extremely basic attached doubles with shared bathrooms.

Elsa’s Beach Cottages (cottages P350-700) This long-running, friendly spot has a variety of cottages spread across its grounds. It’s getting a little long in the tooth, but the friendly atmosphere more than makes up for this.

Swissipini Lodge & Resort (☎ 0921 616 5671; A-frame P700, family house P1200) This sprawling place has a wide variety of houses, A-frames and other cottages packed onto its grounds. At the time of writing, it was under renovation and it was difficult to tell what the final result would be. Families and large groups might consider the three-room house with kitchen, which holds up to six people. Swissipini accepts credit cards and can arrange onward travel.

Coconut Garden Island Resort (☎ 0918 370 2395; <http://coconutgarden.palawan.net>; r from US\$8, cottage US\$17.50) This resort is located on a lovely white-sand beach on Cacnipa Island, about 15km from Port Barton by boat. This place has attractive A-frame cottages with balconies and shared or private bathrooms. It also has a lodging house with rooms, and two-person tents are available as well. There’s boat service from Port Barton to Cacnipa Island twice a week (Tuesday and Friday), which leaves after the jeepney from Puerto has arrived (P120, 40 minutes). Alternatively, a chartered boat from Port Barton should cost about P500 per boat.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

There are no longer any regularly scheduled boats between Port Barton and El Nido or Sabang. However, you can charter a boat to and from El Nido (P4000 for a two-to-four-person boat, P6000 for a four-to-six-person boat, 3½ hours) and Sabang (P3000 for a two-to-four-person boat, P5000 for a four-to-six-person boat, 2½ hours).

BUS & JEEPNEY

A jeepney runs from Port Barton to Puerto Princesa (P160, four hours, daily, departs at 10am). It heads off from the waiting shed at the beach end of Ballesteros St and cruises through town picking up passengers. For

information on getting from Puerto Princesa to Port Barton, see p414.

From Roxas to Port Barton, there is at least one jeepney a day (P80, 1½ hours). From Port Barton to Roxas, there is at least one jeepney a day (P80, 1½ hours, departing between 8am and 9am).

TAYTAY

pop 54,000

The former capital of Palawan, Taytay (*tye-tye*) is a quiet coastal town dominated by two prominent relics of the town's colonial past: **Santa Isabel Fort** and **Santa Monica Church**. The thick walls of the fort (*Kutang Santa Isabel* in Filipino) are fairly intact, and you can go inside the enclosure. On the right by the entrance is a marker that says the fort was first erected by the Augustinian Recollects (an order of Catholic priests) in 1667. Inside the fort are some steps that ascend to a public garden and a small chapel. Built on the very edge of town, the fort offers a sweeping view of the bay.

Located not far from the fort, **Santa Monica Church** also has thick stone walls (the blocks are said to have been cut out of coral), but apart from the side walls, which date back to the 17th century, most of the church looks recently constructed. The front and rear walls, along with the roof, are clearly of recent construction.

Sleeping & Eating

Pem's Pension & Restaurant (☎ 0910 723 6413; s from P150, small cottages from P650; a) This place consists of very basic bamboo-and-nipa cottages built around a grassy patch, which lies behind a couple of nipa-roofed pavilions that are open to the public for eating and drinking. The property is right on the edge of the water, with a panoramic view of the bay and outlying islands, as well as the nearby fort.

Casa Rosa Cottages & Restaurant (☎ 0921 212 0522; r P350, cottages from P800) This place is located on a hill behind the town hall and commands a sweeping view of the bay. Accommodation consists of three cottages plus a couple of rooms (the rooms share a bathroom). The cottages are nicely done, with glazed terracotta flooring, white walls and large glass windows that frame the bay. Casa Rosa is easy to find, and is just a short walk up from Taytay's main street.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Taytay is served by Sandoval Airport, which is located at the northern end of Taytay Bay, about 30km from town. The road is mostly paved, and the journey takes around 40 minutes. One-way travel by 4WD vehicle between the airport and Taytay costs P150 per person or P1500 if it's hired for exclusive use.

Asian Spirit flies between Manila and Sandoval daily (☎ 02-855 3333 in Manila, 0916 452 8197 in Taytay; www.asianspirit.com). At the time of writing, there was also talk of SEAIR flying a Manila–Busuanga–Taytay route.

BOAT

For boats to and from El Nido, Liminangcong and other west-coast towns, you must use the pier at Embarcadero (also known as Agpay), an 8km tricycle ride west of Taytay. The tricycle ride costs P30 per passenger if there are four passengers and P120 for one passenger. The ride takes about 40 minutes, and the road is extremely rough, just about impassable in the wet season.

The boat ride between El Nido and Embarcadero takes three hours and costs P2500 per boat.

BUS & JEEPNEY

Buses travel frequently between Puerto Princesa and Taytay (P230 to P237 depending on the bus company, five hours, up to eight departures daily in each direction).

Jeepneys travel from Taytay to El Nido (P150, two to three hours, between 7am and 9am). From El Nido, two buses go via Taytay on their way to Puerto Princesa, leaving El Nido at 7am or 8am.

APULIT ISLAND

Less than 2km long, the very private **Apulit Island** is home to **Club Noah Isabelle** (☎ 02-844 6688 in Manila; www.clubnoah.com.ph; cottages per person from US\$210; a). Accommodation here is in rows of well-built 'water cabanas' constructed directly over the water. These cottages have both air-con and ceiling fans, and private bathrooms. There is 24-hour electricity. Needless to say, there is a whole range of activities on offer, including diving, snorkelling and island hopping.

Club Noah Isabelle has a regular shuttle service from and to Sandoval Airport, the

fares of which are included in the resort's room rates. The resort can also organise a boat for you between Taytay and Apulit Island (one hour).

FLOWER ISLAND

The peaceful, utterly beautiful Flower Island is home to the **Flower Island Beach Resort** (☎ 0918 924 8895; flowerisland_ph@yahoo.com; cottages per person US\$60), with comfortable, tastefully decorated cottages with bathrooms. There is also a very cool bamboo house with several nice rooms inside, all with bathrooms and air-con. The restaurant is quite good, and meals are included in the rates. There's also diving and snorkelling equipment available for rent.

The best way to get to Flower Island is from El Nido. Jeepneys go daily from El Nido to Batakalan on a surprisingly good road (P90, 1½ hours). Boat hire from Batakalan to nearby Flower Island is P600 per boat.

A banca can also be hired from Taytay for the scenic trip to Flower Island (P1000 per boat, 2½ to three hours).

CALABUGDONG ISLAND

South of Flower Island, scenic Calabugdong Island is home to **Casa del Oasis** (☎ 0921 212 0522; per person US\$30). Guest accommodation is in three cottages, all built in native style, with room rates inclusive of three meals daily. Dinner is served buffet style and eaten with the resort owners. From here the owners can organise diving trips as well as snorkelling excursions. The resort faces west, which allows for beautiful sunsets.

ICADAMBANUAN ISLAND

Icadambanuan Island is located at the south end of Taytay Bay, and is yet another little island paradise for those looking to do nothing more than swim, sunbathe and eat seafood.

Dilis Beach Resort (☎ 0910 231 6392; per person US\$20) is the only accommodation on the island. Rooms have attached bathrooms and are located in a breezy house on a hill. Cottages, also with bathrooms, are on the beach. There's a restaurant on the ground floor of the house, and meals are included with the price of the rooms.

Pumpboats can be hired at Taytay for P500 for the one-way trip.

LIMINANCONG

A ramshackle fishing village, Liminancong doesn't have much to attract the traveller, but you might find yourself here when travelling between Puerto Princesa and the northern extremes of Palawan. If you happen to be here during late February, the village fiesta will keep you drunk and diverted for a few days. During the wet season, the road to Liminancong may become impassable.

Sleeping & Eating

Puerto Paraiso Inn & Restaurant (☎ 0919 478 2776; s/d P200/300) The location here is nice, right at the edge of the water, but the accommodation is very basic – wood floors with bamboo walls. Rooms are fan-cooled, with private bathrooms. There are two communal decks for lounging, one overlooking the bay, the other oriented inland with a view of mountains.

Munting Paraiso Eatery (turu-turò dishes from P40; h 5am-9pm) This *turu-turò* (literally 'point point' – a place where you choose from a variety of pre-prepared dishes on display) restaurant also has some short order items, such as vegetable curry (P80) and *lechon kawali* (crispy pork, P80). The *turu-turò* selection changes daily – pork *adobo*, fish *sinigang* etc. They also serve beer.

Getting There & Away

The main pier in the village (for boats to Manila, Batangas and other destinations) is next to the Petron petrol station.

Atienza Shipping Lines has a Liminancong–El Nido–Coron–Manila route. See p409 for details.

You can hire boats between Liminancong and El Nido (P2500, 70 minutes).

There's at least one jeepney a day between Taytay and Liminancong.

EL NIDO

pop 27,000

El Nido is the gateway to Palawan's greatest natural treasure: the **Bacuit Archipelago** (p424). El Nido itself commands a stunning location, sandwiched between towering limestone karst cliffs and Bacuit Bay, with the fantastic contours of Cadlao Island looming right offshore.

Unfortunately, the visitor to El Nido is literally caught between a rock and a hard place (excuse the pun), for the town itself

is quite unprepossessing, with a collection of substandard accommodation and an overcrowded, hastily developed foreshore. Thus, if you want to visit the Bacuit Archipelago, you must choose between roughing it in El Nido, or shelling out big bucks for the accommodation in the archipelago itself (p426).

Information

Electrical power in El Nido runs from 1pm until 1am.

There are no banks or ATMs in El Nido. **El Nido Boutique & Art Café** (☎ 0918 506 6123; elnidoboutique@yahoo.com; Serona Rd), near the pier, will change money and make cash advances on credit cards (it charges a hefty 6% com-

mission on advances). It also offers international phone calls and can handle SEAIR and Air Philippines bookings.

The **post office** (Real St; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is set back from the beach on Real St.

Sights & Activities

El Nido Boutique & Art Café (left) has everything you'll need for making the most of the area. Here you can book boats to Coron or Manila, reconfirm flights, add your name to upcoming island-hopping tours, hire mountain bikes and other sports gear, stock up on souvenirs, or just have a chat and a coffee.

At the time of writing, **El Nido Marine Club** (☎ 0916 668 2748; srjc_dive@yahoo.com; Hama St) was

the only dive centre operating in El Nido. It's located right on the beach.

Sleeping

Accommodation in El Nido is of a fairly low standard, with most of it packed into the crowded foreshore. These places tend to be noisy and often somewhat rundown. If you want to escape the noise, you should consider places at the eastern end of the beach, or at the back of the town. Alternatively, you can stay in one of the pricey resorts in the bay (see p426).

Lally & Abet Beach Cottages (☎ 0920 905 6822; www.lallyandabet.com; Hama St; r from P1250, bungalows from P1400) At the far end of town from the pier, this small resort has roomy, balconied bungalows with fans and private bathrooms right by the water, as well as some deluxe rooms (with air-con and bathrooms) set back from the beach. This is one of the few places in town that accepts credit cards. The relatively isolated location ensures some degree of quiet (but wherever you go in El Nido, you can't escape the morning chorus of the town's myriad roosters). We have heard reports, however, that maintenance can be a little slack here.

Tandikan Cottages (☎ 0927 562 6350; Hama St; cottages from P500) There are three cottages here, two adjoining and one separate. These are probably the nicest cottages on the beach, with porches for sitting and admiring the lovely view of the bay, and clean, spacious rooms with private bathrooms. It's also the noisiest place we've ever stayed: the owner actually raises gamecocks on the premises. He also owns the neighbourhood TV, around which friends and relatives gather each night for noisy 'TV parties'. If you're immune to noise, this is the best place to stay in El Nido; if not, look elsewhere.

Cliffside Cottages (Rizal St; huts from P500) Set back from the beach at the foot of the spooky cliffs, this is a decent choice, with acceptable freestanding huts with fans and bathrooms.

Rosanna's Beach Cottages (☎ 0929 605 4631; Hama St; cottages P500, r P700-900) Rosanna's has four doubles in one building and two cottages, all with fans and ensuite bathrooms. The location is pretty good and the rooms are fairly well maintained. The upstairs rooms in the building have good ocean views.

Dara Fernandez Cottages (Hama St; r P450, cottages P550) Dara has two reasonable double cottages with fans and bathrooms in a nice garden setting, as well as two ramshackle double rooms.

Marina Garden Beach Cottages (☎ 0916 562 2404; Hama St; tw P300, tr cottages P500) Right in the middle of the beach, there are attached twins here with fans and a common bathroom, and triple cottages with fans and private bathrooms. Both the rooms and cottages are very basic and somewhat rundown.

Lualhati Cottages (☎ 0919 319 6683; Hama St; cabins P300) Out at the back of town, on the road to Corong Corong, this place has very basic attached cabins with fans and bathrooms. It's probably only worth considering in a pinch, or if you're desperate to escape the noisy places right in town.

Gloria's Beach Cottages (Hama St; d P450) Another place to consider only if you're stuck, this place has three very basic doubles with fans and bathrooms. The place is staffed only during the day, so you may have to ask around in order to be shown a room.

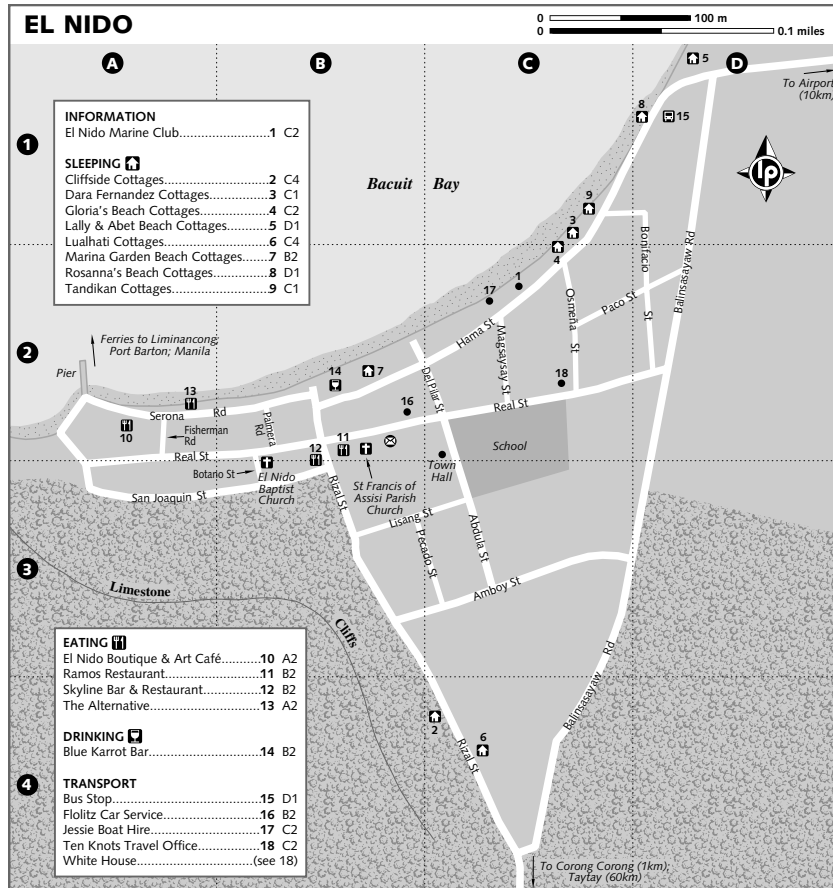
Eating & Drinking

Many of the places to stay in town have their own restaurants. In addition, there are several stand-alone restaurants, some of which cater specifically to tourists. Most of these places attempt an incredibly wide range of foreign favourites, from pasta to Wiener schnitzel, with predictably mixed results. Unless you demand foreign dishes, you'll do better at the local places serving Filipino food, where the cooks are on more familiar ground.

Ramos Restaurant (Real St; servings P40, rice P10) This simple *turu-turò* joint is a good place to grab some inexpensive and fairly tasty Filipino food like *adobo* and rice. It's very simple and there are no veggie choices, but the owners are friendly and happy to heat up anything you select.

Skyline Bar & Restaurant (Rizal St; servings from P40) This is a slightly upscale version of Ramos Restaurant. You can get cold beer and good seafood dishes here, including lobster (P250) and crab (P100).

El Nido Boutique & Art Café (☎ 0918 506 6123; Serona Rd; Western breakfast from P100, Swiss roesti P140) This popular spot is the only place we found that serves proper brewed coffee, as well as good Western-style breakfast and



some surprisingly tasty pizzas. It's a pleasant place to hang out and you can take care of some travel arrangements while you wait for your food.

The Alternative (☎ 0917 896 3408; leann@mala.pacao.com; Serona Rd; dishes from around P80; j) This New Age place offers a variety of natural food and drinks, a bewildering range of therapies and detox programs, as well as Internet access. Staff can also arrange tours and offer simple accommodation in their cool beachfront restaurant and therapy centre. If you find yourself at a loose end in El Nido, you can use this place as your base (and leave your luggage), provided you spend a minimum of US\$10 at the restaurant/centre.

Blue Karrot Bar (beachfront; drinks & dishes from around P60; j 1pm-11pm or later) This is a popular little bar/restaurant right on the beach. It's a relaxed drinking spot, with a good supply of magazines, guitars and board games.

Getting There & Away

AIR

El Nido's Lio Airport is 10km north of town. A tricycle to or from the airport costs P150. Note that you can hire a boat from town to take you to the airport for the same price, and it's certainly a nicer way to go than the bumpy, dusty road.

El Nido is served by SEAIR, which has two flights weekly to and from Manila, Busuanga and Puerto Princesa, and ITI, which has twice daily direct flights to and from Manila. For details on schedules, fares, websites and Manila contact numbers, see Getting There & Away (p408) and Getting Around (p409) at the start of this chapter.

In El Nido, the El Nido Boutique & Art Café handles SEAIR tickets and reservations (see p422). In a house known as the 'White House', the Ten Knots Travel Office (☎ 0917 207 2742; Real St; j 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) handles ITI tickets and reservations (as well as reservations for Lagen and Miniloc resorts).

BOAT

Atienza Shipping Lines (☎ 02-243 8845 in Manila, 0927 406 6036 in Coron, 0918 566 6786 in El Nido, 0919 257 4455 in Liminancong) has a Liminancong-El Nido-Coron-Manila route. For details see p409.

You can hire a bangka between El Nido and Liminancong (P2500, 70 minutes), Port

Barton (P4000 for a two-to-four-person boat; P6000 for four to six people, 3½ hours) and Sabang (from P6000, nine hours).

BUS & JEEPNEY

Two companies operate buses between El Nido and Taytay (P150, two hours), Roxas (P200, six hours) and Puerto Princesa (P300, nine hours). The buses depart from a stop near Lally & Abet Beach Cottages. Buses usually depart El Nido at 7am and 9am.

For information on jeepneys from Puerto Princesa, see p414.

Jeepneys go daily from El Nido to Sibultan on a surprisingly good road (P50 to P60, 1½ hours). Sibultan is the departure point for boats to Flower Island and other islands off the east coast.

CAR

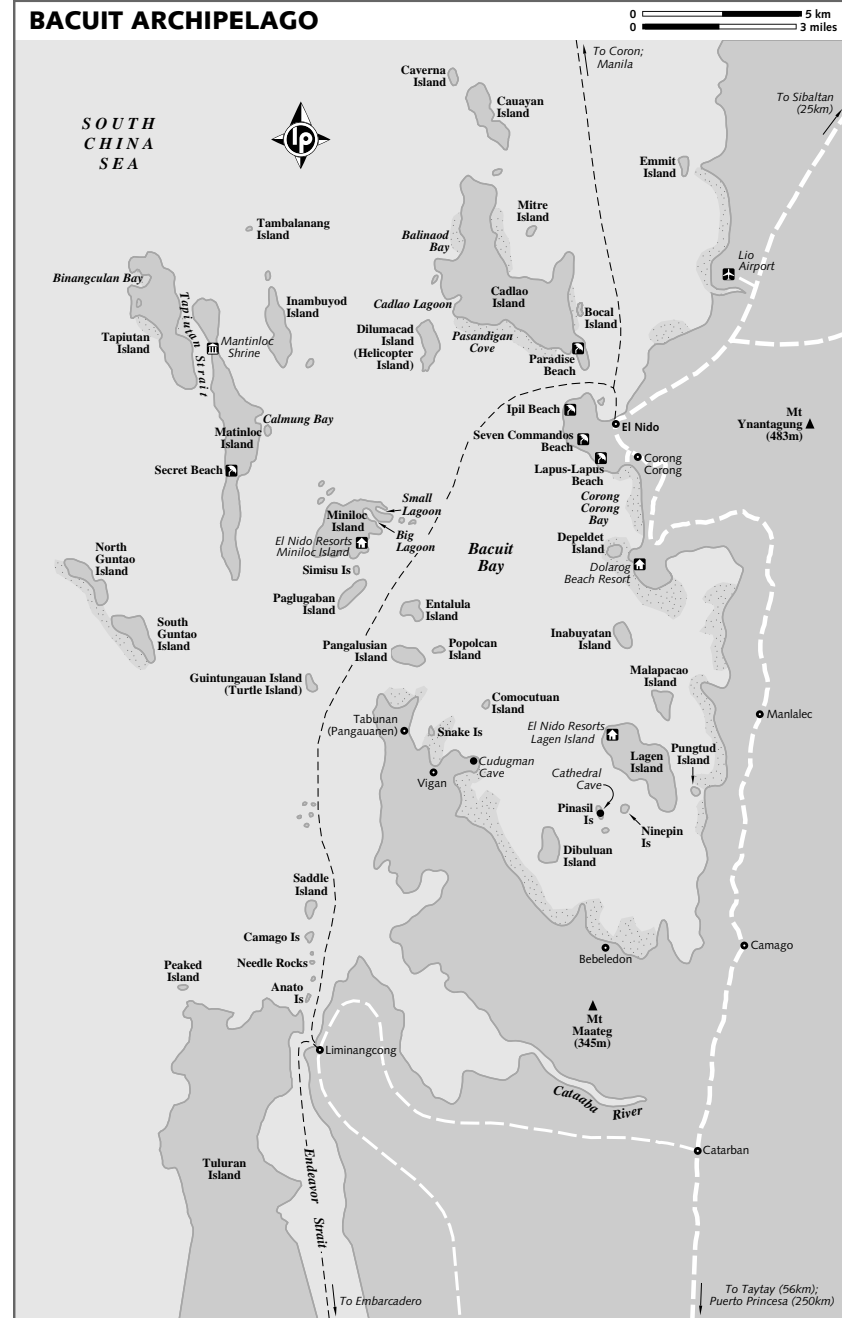
Flolitz Car Service (☎ 0916 232 0489; Real St) offers van hire and driver service for destinations around El Nido, including Sibultan, Batakalan, Taytay, Port Barton and Sabang.

BACUIT ARCHIPELAGO

The Bacuit Archipelago is a fantastic seascape where Mother Nature appears to have let her imagination run wild. It is a collection of jagged limestone islands that leap skyward from the crystal-clear waters of Bacuit Bay. The archipelago is similar to Vietnam's Ha Long Bay, or the Krabi and Phi Phi area of southern Thailand, only – dare we say it – more beautiful. Many of the islands have sheltered bays that conceal white-sand beaches, stunning lagoons and vivid coral gardens. A few days exploring the archipelago by bangka, stopping to snorkel the coral gardens and picnic on an empty beach is sure to be the highlight of any trip to Palawan.

There are resorts on three of the islands (two of which are mentioned in this section). All three charge premium rates. Thus for the budget traveller it is usually necessary to base yourself in El Nido, which is the gateway to these islands (even the most distant islands in the archipelago can be reached in about an hour by bangka from town, and many are much closer).

In this section, we describe some of the attractions of the more commonly visited islands. Of course this is only a start, and we highly recommend finding a boat driver



who is willing to let you explore the islands freely, stopping where the fancy strikes you (see right).

Miniloc Island

Miniloc Island is perhaps the most interesting of the islands in the archipelago. The real attractions here are **Big Lagoon** and **Small Lagoon**, two of the most photographed sights in all of Palawan. Big Lagoon is entered by an extremely shallow channel (depending on the tide and the size of your boat, you may have to swim into the lagoon and leave the boat outside). Once inside, you find one of nature's greatest natural swimming holes, surrounded by jungle-clad karst walls. Small Lagoon can't be entered by boat at all – you must swim through a hole in a rock wall. Inside is a wonderful hidden world, complete with a small cave that you can swim into and explore.

Matinloc Island

Like the back of a half-submerged stegosaurus, **Matinloc Island** snakes some eight kilometres along the western edge of the Bacuit Archipelago. Along with neighbouring **Tapiutan Island**, it forms narrow **Tapiutan Strait**, the walls of which offer some of the best snorkelling in the archipelago. Likewise, there is some excellent snorkelling and some good beaches on the eastern side of **Matinloc**. While you're there, be sure to check out the unusual **Matinloc Shrine**, a Christian shrine located on the western side of **Matinloc**. And the adventurous will surely want to check out tiny **Secret Beach**, which can only be entered by swimming through a keyhole slot in the western wall of **Matinloc**. But be warned, the entrance is lined with extremely jagged rocks and coral – do not even think of swimming through with any waves around as an accident could well be fatal.

Cadlao Island

Cadlao Island is like a mini-Tahiti miraculously relocated to the Bacuit Archipelago. In addition to being a wonderful piece of eye candy for those staying on the beach in **El Nido**, it's also home to lovely **Cadlao Lagoon** (also known as **Ubugun Bay**). This lagoon offers some good snorkelling in shallow coral gardens that lie off the beach at the head of the bay.

Other Islands & Beaches

Every island in the archipelago has secret spots that await the adventurous explorer. **Pangalusian Island** has some first-class snorkelling. **Tiny Pinasil Island** holds **Cathedral Cave**, an aptly-named cavern with soaring limestone columns and wall-climbing monitor lizards (calling to mind the gargoyles of an actual cathedral). If you plan on exploring the cave, be sure to bring shoes and be careful walking on the sharp rocks. **Helicopter Island** has a fine beach on its eastern shore, topped only by the wonderful **Seven Commandos Beach**, which is actually on the Palawan mainland.

Of course, there are many more beaches, bays and coral gardens in the archipelago. Our best advice is to pack a lunch, some snorkelling equipment, plenty of sunscreen, and find your own secret spot.

Sleeping

El Nido Resorts Miniloc Island (☎ 02-894 5644 in Manila; www.elnidoresorts.com; cottage per person US\$165-200; a) This is a luxury resort that occupies a prime spot on incredible **Miniloc Island**. A row of air-con native-style cottages is situated on stilts over the water. Prices include meals and transfer from and to **El Nido** airport.

El Nido Resorts Lagen Island (☎ 02-894 5644 in Manila; www.elnidoresorts.com; r per person US\$190-215; cottage per person US\$230-255; a s) A luxurious place with air-con rooms and concrete cottages built on stilts over the water. If you're squeamish about swimming in the crystal-clear waters surrounding the island, it's even got a swimming pool! Prices include meals and transfers from and to **El Nido** airport. You can make a booking for this place (and the **El Nido Resorts Miniloc Island**) at the **Ten Knots Travel Office** in **El Nido** (p424).

Dolarog Beach Resort (☎ 0919 867 4360; www.dolarog.com; cottage per person US\$60-70; a) On the Palawan mainland, a few kilometres south of **El Nido**, this low-key resort has nice cottages and a good restaurant. There are fan and air-con cottages, and the price includes meals, boat transfers and island hopping.

Getting There & Away

El Nido is the main access point for the Bacuit Archipelago. See p424 for details.

Getting Around

The best way to explore the Bacuit Archipelago is by **bangka** from **El Nido**. Any ac-

commodation owner can arrange a boat and boatman, as can the **El Nido Boutique & Art Café** (p422). Alternatively, a stroll down the beach should turn up several willing boatmen. It costs between P1200 and P1600 for small boats for a full day.

Jessie Boat Hire (☎ 0926 880 8564; Hama St, **El Nido**; island hopping per day from P1200), on the beachfront in **El Nido**, has a fleet of three boats and offers half-day and full-day island-hopping tours, along with beach cookouts and other activities. **Jessie** is extremely knowledgeable about the Bacuit Archipelago and can take you to the best snorkelling spots (he doesn't mind donning fins and a mask and jumping right in with you). There is a small sign in front of his house in the middle of the beach.

CALAMIAN GROUP

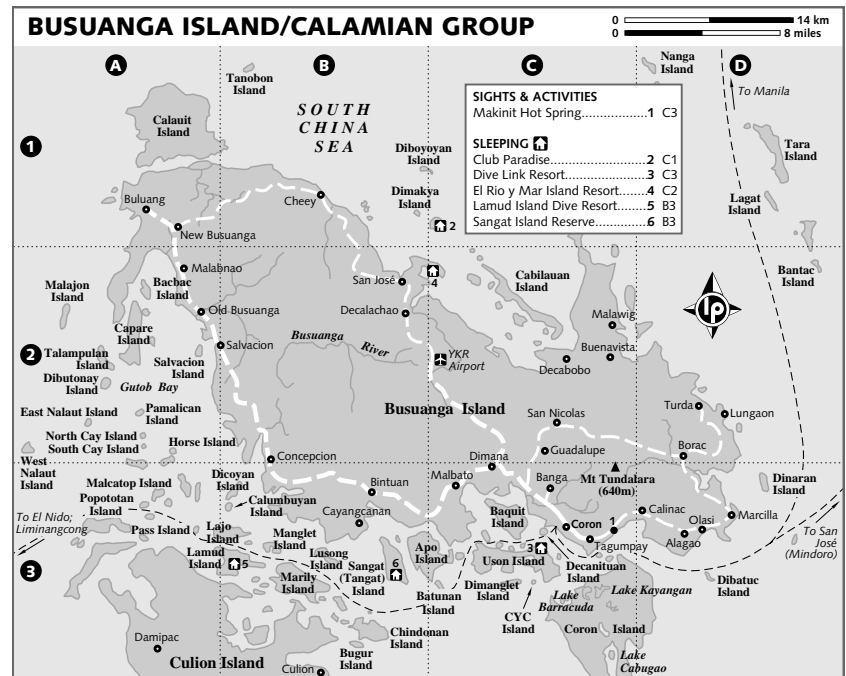
The Calamian Group is a concentrated version of the rest of Palawan. Within easy reach of **Coron**, the main town in the archipelago, you will find all the attractions of Palawan packed into a much smaller space:

white-sand beaches, great snorkelling and diving, private islands, dense rainforest and comfortable resorts. In addition, the Calamians boast several attractions that cannot be found in the rest of Palawan, including the crystal-clear lakes of **Coron Island** and some of the best wreck diving in the world. The Calamians are, in short, an adventure-sports paradise, and, best of all, they are easily accessible from Manila: flights from Manila to **Busuanga**, the main island in the Calamians, take just 65 minutes!

For information on transport to and from the Calamian Group, see p429.

BUSUANGA ISLAND

Diving – wreck diving in particular – is the main activity here. There are at least 10 wrecks around **Busuanga** – Japanese warships and merchant ships sunk by American planes during WWII. The depths at which the wrecks are found vary from shallow to quite deep, so there are diving opportunities for beginners and experienced divers. There are three dive centres in **Coron**, which offer wreck diving and other diving courses.



For information on transport to and from Busuanga Island, see opposite.

Coron Town

Coron Town is the main town on Busuanga Island and the commercial and population centre of the Calamian group. It is a convenient base for wreck divers, snorkellers, island-hoppers and other sun-worshipping explorers (the town itself has no beach). The best-value activity is to hire a pumpboat (around P1000 per day, holds a maximum of eight people) and snorkelling gear (about P250 per day) from the hotels or dive centres and inspect the nearby islands. Another activity that is often included in a pumpboat day trip is a soak in the Makinit Hot Springs just outside town.

INFORMATION

Sea Dive Internet Café (Don Pedro St, Coron Town; minimum 30min, per hr P50) Most accommodation places in Coron have their own Internet access. This was the only stand-alone Internet place in town at the time of writing. Machines and connections here are relatively fast.

ACTIVITIES

The **Discovery Divers** (% 0920 901 2414; www.ddivers.com; Coron Town & Decanitian Island; per dive from US\$20) dive centre is actually based on nearby Decanitian Island (aka Discovery Island), but it maintains a shop at the end of a pier in town. It offers dives to all the major wrecks, as well as various dive courses, and NITROX and other forms of technical diving.

Sea Dive (% 048 550 9207; www.seadiveresort.com; Coron Town), on the same pier as the Sea Dive Resort, is a long-running dive centre that also offers wreck diving, as well as instruction and technical diving.

The owner of the bar/restaurant **Busuanga BAAC** (baac_3@yahoo.com; Coron Town) runs an adventure-sports company that can arrange such things as jungle trekking (P1000 per person), mountain biking (P300/450 per person without/with guide), horseback riding (P1200 per day), and island hopping (P1500 per boat).

SLEEPING

There are several decent places to stay right in Coron Town. Otherwise, you can stay

on one of the islands nearby; one of them is listed here, since it's essentially in Coron Town. See p431 for details of the others.

Discovery Island Resort (% 0920 901 2414; www.ddivers.com; Decanitian Island; 2-3 person bungalow per person US\$30) Located on Decanitian Island, a 10-minute bangka ride from Coron Town, this excellent little resort is conveniently near town yet free of noise and stress. It consists of well-maintained, clean huts arrayed on a west-facing hillside. Each hut has a great view from its veranda, and the sunsets are lovely. This is mostly a dive resort, but non-divers will feel equally welcome. The communal meals with the owners are a real draw.

Sea Dive Resort (% 0918 400 0448; www.seadiveresort.com.ph; Coron Town; r with fan/aircon from P400/500) Built on a pier out in the bay, this place is popular with travellers and generally gets good reviews from readers. It offers clean, fairly spacious rooms (strangely lacking in mosquito nets or screens, though). One slight downside here is the open-air karaoke bar on the next pier over – either bring earplugs or become very familiar with the latest Filipino pop songs! On the plus side, the restaurant is pretty good and the location is quite scenic, with good views over to Coron Island, and they accept credit cards.

Darayonan Lodge (% 0919 247 2647; darayonan@i-manila.com.ph; National Hwy, Coron Town; r with fan/air-con P400/600) This place has native-style cottages in a garden setting. The grounds are pleasant, though the sound of tricycles on the surrounding streets still intrudes. The cottages show wear and tear but are otherwise clean and adequately maintained. All rooms are equipped with well-scrubbed toilets and showers and mosquito netting.

Village Lodge & Café (% 0918 920 1517; redfern@i-manila.com.ph; National Hwy, Coron Town; r from P750; a) Located right next to Darayonan, the Village Lodge consists of several structures, two of which are old traditional houses. Rooms in the new buildings are much better than those in the old houses. Most rooms are equipped with toilet and shower (with hot water). There are small gardens both in front and at the back of the property, but nothing as lush as Darayonan's.

KokosNuss Garden Resort & Restaurant (% 0919 448 7879; www.kokosnuss.info; cottage with shared/private bathroom & fan US\$12/26, bungalow with private bathroom & air-con US\$32) A 20-minute walk up the main

road from town, this is a decent place to stay if you don't mind the relative isolation. Accommodation in this sprawling garden compound ranges from simple nipa huts to large cottages complete with bathroom murals.

EATING

Most of the places to stay in town have their own restaurants, including the one at Sea Dive Resort, which gets favourable reviews from some travellers.

Bistro Coron (% 0918 305 0750; Don Pedro St, Coron Town; coq au vin P145) Run by Bruno, a retired French anthropologist, this excellent little bistro is easily the best place to eat in Coron Town. Some of the food is a little oily, but it's all good, including salads, sandwiches, schnitzel and steaks. Pull up a chair, order a glass of wine, and enjoy the nightly scene here as Coron's diving elite hobnob with locals and sunburnt tourists.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Busuanga Island, Coron Town and the rest of the Calamian Group are served by SEAIR and Asian Spirit, which operate out of tiny YKR airport on the north side of Busuanga Island. It's a one-hour jeepney ride between the airport and Coron Town; jeepneys meet incoming flights and run to Coron Town. In the opposite direction, jeepneys depart from in front of the airline offices to drop passengers off for departing flights (but it makes sense to confirm this with your accommodation or the airline office itself). Both SEAIR (% 0920 909 8639; Real St) and Asian Spirit (% 0921 691 4574; Real St) have offices in town.

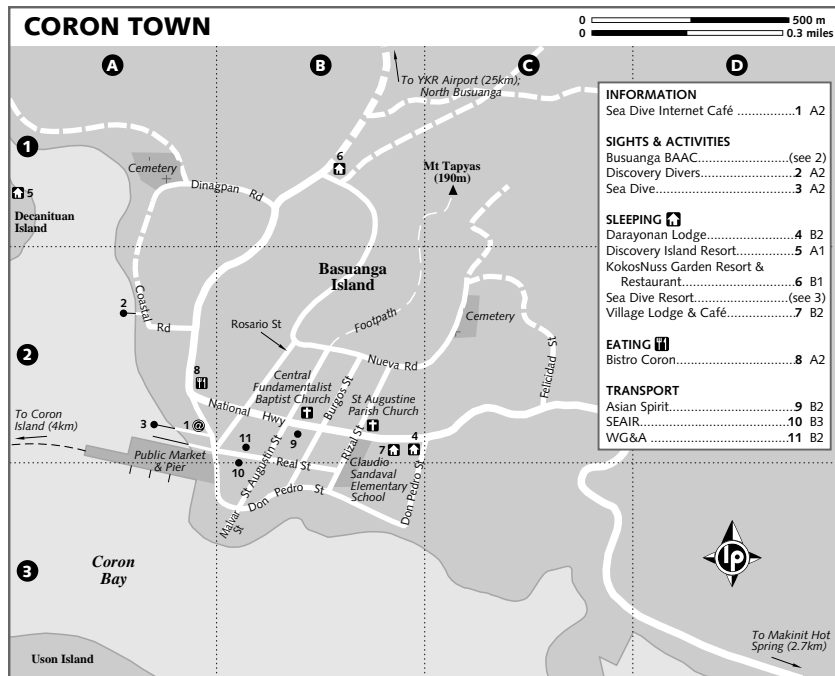
For details on schedules, fares, flight times and airline contact numbers and websites, see Getting There & Away (p408) and Getting Around (p409) at the beginning of this chapter.

Boat

A SuperFerry liner sails once a week from Manila to Puerto Princesa via Coron and back again. The office is in the WG&A Office (% 0919 540 1695; Real St).

San Nicolas Shipping (% 0918 216 1764) operates three trips weekly (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) between Manila and Coron.

Atienza Shipping Lines (% 0927 406 6036) operates a Liminancong–El Nido–Coron–Manila route.



THE SUNKEN FLEET OF CORON *Andy Pownall – Proprietor, Sangat Island Reserve*

During the war in the Pacific in 1944, heavy air strikes against Japanese shipping in Manila Bay resulted in the sinking of 15 ships, which forced the Japanese to move their remaining ships to other anchorages they thought would be out of range of US naval aircraft and land-based bombers. One of these secure anchorages was Coron Bay.

Most of the Japanese ships had arrived in Coron Bay by 23 September 1944. A convoy comprising 24 auxiliary ships of the Imperial Japanese Navy was dispersed in the coastal waters around Busuanga Island. At least eight ships were closely anchored together around Tangat Island (known locally as Sangat Island), a beautiful limestone island bordered by pristine white beaches and coconut palm trees. Despite their new location, US aerial reconnaissance detected the Japanese fleet and a surprise attack by carrier-based US Navy aircraft was planned.

At 6am on 24 September 1944, 180 Grumman H6F Hellcat and SB2C Helldiver planes took off from aircraft carriers of Vice Admiral William F Halsey's Task Force 38. At the time it was the longest range air attack ever launched from aircraft carriers, some 550km from target, requiring more than six hours' total flying time.

At 9am the planes reached Busuanga Island and surprised the Japanese fleet. After a 40-minute attack they left behind a scene of devastation, with 24 ships sinking or seriously damaged. Most of the ships sunk were in the vicinity of Sangat Island.

Several US planes were lost after running out of fuel on the return trip, and some were shot down by the Japanese fleet in Coron Bay.

Some of the ships sunk in this attack are now sites for wreck diving. The major wrecks are as follows.

The 150m *Akitsushima*, a flying boat tender lying at a depth of between 18m and 40m, is remarkably intact and penetrable through a large crack amidships, but is only for properly trained divers accompanied by an experienced guide.

The deeper of the other fleet wrecks are the 160m-long *Kogyo Maru* (between 20m and 34m) and the 150m-long *Irako* (between 28m and 40m).

Wrecks more appropriate for less experienced divers include the Tangat Wreck (between 18m and 30m); a photographers' favourite, the *Olympia Maru* (between 12m and 25m); and the Lusong Gunboat, which is suitable for both divers and snorkellers as it breaks the surface and rests at a depth of 10m. Further to the north, the *Tae Maru*, a tanker that was sunk in separate action, rests at a depth of between 10m and 26m in waters that are sometimes current-washed, making it one of the more attractively festooned wrecks in the area.

San Nicolas Shipping (☎ 0918 216 1764) does a weekly Coron–San José trip.

For details on all of these ferry companies and routes, see p408.

GETTING AROUND

See the Air section (p429) for details on getting to and from YKR airport.

Tricycles within Coron Town cost P5 for one trip within town.

Hiring a pumpboat and driver for island hopping near Coron Town costs P1000 to P1500 per day.

OTHER ISLANDS IN THE CALAMIAN GROUP

Coron Island, about two kilometres south-east of Coron Town, is one of the main drawcards in the Calamian Group. How-

ever, there are many other islands in the archipelago worth visiting, and there are many empty beaches and bays where you can pass a pleasant afternoon lolling about and swimming. Several of the islands are home to resorts, which range from fairly simple to quite luxurious.

Coron Island

A 20-minute pumpboat ride from Coron Town, this is the most fascinating island in the Calamian Group. The island's two main attractions are the magical Lake Kayangan and Lake Barracuda. Accessible by a steep 15-minute climb over a mountain wall, Lake Kayangan is a crystal-clear lake with three arms nestled in the rocky, jungle-clad ramparts of Coron Island. Lake Barracuda is of more interest to divers, for its unique layers of fresh, salt and

brackish water. It's accessible by a very short but tricky 25m climb over a jagged rocky wall of the island (bring good shoes).

Note that there is a P200 admission fee for Lake Kayangan and a P75 admission fee for Lake Barracuda. The first P200 fee should cover entry to Lake Barracuda and the beaches of Coron Island (fee collectors will not tell you this; you must inform them that you've already paid). The fee is usually collected as you dock on the island.

Uson Island

Located on Uson Island, a 10-minute boat ride from Coron Town. **Dive Link Resort** (☎ 02-4120644 in Manila; www.divelink.com.ph; cottages per person US\$258-378; Ⓢ) has decent cottages in different sizes and with varying amenities that sleep up to six people. There's a swimming pool (used mostly to train beginner divers) and a poolside bar.

Sangat Island

Located on a private beach on Sangat Island, **Sangat Island Reserve** (☎ 0919 205 0198; www.sangat.com.ph; cottages per person from US\$65, villa per person from US\$150) is an excellent, well-run resort, with a stunning location close to the wrecks. This place offers quite stylish beachside cottages, which include bathrooms and balconies. For honeymooners

and anyone after a really special experience, the resort has a small villa on its own private cove around the corner from the main beach. This place has its own dive centre and divers are well catered for here.

Lamud Island

About 1½ hour by pumpboat from Coron Town, Lamud Island is home to relaxing **Lamud Island Dive Resort** (☎ 0921 217 0404; www.lamudisland.info; r per person P1000, cottage per person P1200). This resort is a simple place for those who want to get away from it all. It's the only resort on the island and has its own private cove. The owner is a diver and can organise wreck diving. Rates include meals.

Dimakya Island

North of Busuanga Island, the glorious little Dimakya Island is a pocket-sized tropical playground with a long, white-sand beach and a good house reef. **Club Paradise** (☎ 02-838 4956 in Manila; www.clubparadisepalawan.com; per person US\$120-180; a Ⓢ) has a variety of rooms and cottages. The prices here include three daily meals at the restaurant. Transfer from and to the airport costs US\$20.

Note that the same company also manages a sister resort on the Busuanga mainland called **El Rio y Mar Island Resort** (www.elrioymar.com).

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