EL NIDO: The Other Face of the Philippines' Last Frontier

By : Janis Ordonez

A more adventurous, budget-friendly way to vacation in El Nido, Palawan, Philippines.

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Imagine sitting on the roof of a bus, amidst the bundles and boxes owned by passengers below, the warm wind rushing through your face, an endless expanse of blue sky hovering above, and tree tops spread along the dirt road coming within your arm's reach, as the bus speeds by them. Imagine rich, green rice paddies, tranquil rivers and streams, bamboo houses on stilts and rolling hills dotted with tropical plants of all kinds, on one side; and islands with pristine beaches distributed across a vast, calm sea, where an eagle or two can be spotted circling above the water in graceful flight, on the other side. This is the adventurous traveler's experience to El Nido.

Still unknown to most, El Nido is not just an expensive and exclusive destination of plush 5-star resorts reserved for the rich and famous. Its other face may be experienced by the average budget-conscious traveler by staying in the town proper resorts and experiencing the well-kept secrets of this paradise - secrets whispered to the ears of only a handful of travelers.

The rural town of El Nido is located near the northeastern tip of the island province of Palawan. Named by the Spanish who arrived in Palawan during the 18th century, the term El Nido means "The Nest", describing the home of birds called swiftlets, which live in the crevices of the cliffs. Their nests are used to make the popular Asian delicacy, Nido soup.

El Nido is the place of my countless childhood memories of summers past. My grandmother was a native to this town, so my brothers and I would come to visit her at her resort cottages whenever school went out for the summer. The place was even more rural then - some 20 years ago. All one would find were a sparse few shops and cottage resorts, a restaurant or two, and bamboo houses sitting along dirt roads and on the shores. In the mornings, a display of hundreds of dried fish would be baking in the sun, at the beachfront, while the fishermen waited for their takers.

Today, upon entering the little town, one would immediately find a host of souvenier shops, tour agencies, beach resorts, and restaurants lining paved roads. There is a town market as well, a one-stop shop for fresh food. Tourists outnumber the locals in population during the peak season - yet the rural feel of the town is not lost. There are no shopping centers or movie theatres to be found here. The average tourist will also be well-greeted by the smiling, hospitable faces of the locals, largely giving El Nido its homely atmosphere.

The main mode of transportation are the *tricycles* found on the street corners or that can be hailed as they run along the road; but El Nido is a small town and can be just as easily toured on foot. Moving down the main road, one would find, at the end of it, the beachfront, boasting a breathtaking scenery of limestone-cliffed islands sitting on clear, emerald-green waters, and a sandy shore accommodating a vast array of quaint beach

resorts. Affordable, native-style resorts - ranging from 500-1500 PHP (US$11-35) per night - with wooden fences, bamboo cottages, and coconut trees carrying woven hammocks, for a rural town feel, are plenty; but there are also a few higher-priced resorts available for those who would rather lodge in more comfort and luxury. Restaurants are in abundance as well, ranging from 100-250 PHP (US$2.50-5) for the average one-person meal.

El Nido boasts of one of the world's rarest and most appealing sceneries of limestone cliffs and caves and vastest array of wildlife, both in and out of its waters. Though a popular site for divers and snorkelers for its wonderfully diverse marine life and endless stretch of coral reefs, El Nido is also fast-becoming a haven for bird-watchers, with its hundreds of species finding their natural habitat in the lush forests surrounding the area. As for other interesting wildlife: on occassion, one can spot a sea turtle bobbing its head above water (sea turtles are abundant and well-protected here), a family of monkeys rolling around on a deserted beach for their afternoon frolic, or a monitor lizard looking for scraps of food left behind by other tourists who have stopped at an island beach for lunch; or even a team of dolphins swimming alongside the boat playfully.

The three well-known lagoons (Big Lagoon, Small Lagoon, and Secret Lagoon) are a must-see for the traveler. Tour boats are easily made available by resorts, restaurants, and freelance tour guides alike. Or if you would rather avoid the parade of tour boats carrying large groups of other tourists and taking a set course for their tour, there are the options of either hiring a private *banca* boat, or renting a kayak where the freedom to explore any island you wish is unparalleled (though may also result in very sore muscles at the end of the day).

Camping at one of the islands is an equally available and enticing activity for travelers, giving them the chance to witness a wildly star-studded sky and an enchanting gathering of fireflies that brighten the trees like Christmas lights in the absence of the town's artificial lights; night sounds of nocturnal animals populating the forest; a cool, calming night breeze; and bright phosphorescents that illuminate the sea when disturbed by even a foot's dip into the water. A signed permit would be needed from the tourism department before camping. Activities in El Nido are not limited to island-touring, however; there is just as much to do on the mainland, if you prefer to have a day of rest from all the sea tours. It is easy to find a deserted spot of sand to lie on, to read a good book and bask in the quiet early afternoon warmth even on the town beachfront, since all the tour boats would have left for the islands, carrying along most of the tourists. Afternoons are generally a sleepy time of day in town, as most locals are in the tradition of having their naps during these hottest hours.

For the more active tourist, there are a number of activities to choose from, such as:

· Hiking down the coast starting from the town beachfront, bringing one to more and more uninhabited beaches and a soul-searching experience in the gentle prodding of the serene waters and the sight of tropical forest creatures and flourishing evergreens swaying in the backdrop of picture-perfect shores;

· Renting a motorbike and, either alone or accompanied by a local guide, touring the waterfalls, hot springs, and other beaches (the locals' secret excursion getaways), and enjoying a scenery of the rice paddies and grassy hills while driving along the dirt roads;

· Taking a stroll to Corong-Corong beach in the back of town to watch the sunset, as it makes a marvelous display of bright orange, pink, yellow, purple and blue hues, all in one, against the sky, until finally settling behind a picturesque silhouette of mountain-islands.

· Or, for the brave soul, taking an unharnessed 30-45 minute climb to the top of a limestone cliff - a well-rewarded climb with a bird's eyeview of the whole town and a stunning exhibition of limestone islands scattered across the green waters.

At night, the sleepy town wakes up to a show of tables spread on the beach, candlelight, brightly-burning torches, and the growing sound of live music from the line of beachfront restaurant-bars. The feel of El Nido's nightlife is a celebrative, yet very laid-back one. A friendly atmosphere pervades restaurant-bars like Ricson's and Sea Slugs, where locals frequently meet for a drink, as well as make new friends in the tourists; while musicians play reggae, classic alternative, and other acoustic sounds that are both easy and upbeat. As the night progresses, one may be witness or participant to people dancing on the beach floor or on the platform next to the musicians, while the latter start to play livelier mainstream music, acoustic-style. This tops off a day of a pleasant mixture of relaxation and solitude, adventure, and communal merrymaking.

The only question left then, is how to get to this Last Frontier of Philippine paradises. The first option is to take the Island Transvoyager, Inc. (ITI) private company plane, a direct 1-hour flight from Manila to El Nido that costs about three times as much as the second option (though once in awhile they have flight promos that cost even lower than commercial flights, so keep updated) ; the second option being, to take a commercial flight from Manila to Puerto Princesa, Palawan, and from there, take either a bus or an air-conditioned van at the town terminal for a 5-7 hour trip all the way to El Nido at a small cost. There are private vans available for more comfort and space, though these cost much more.

Whichever traveling option you choose, it will be a guarantee of a truly memorable and unique rustic experience into the heart of Mother Nature. Travelers that have come and gone have left a piece of their own hearts in the tranquil natural beauty and homely charm that El Nido offers to the adventurous and rest-starved souls alike; and for the same reasons, I keep coming back.

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