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GLOBAL NOMAD:
VISITING THE
PHILIPPINES

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IBÁÑEZ

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Global Nomad: Visiting the Philippines

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From an early age, Lorenzo Urra, the Hong Kong-based creator of tour company Global Nomad, found himself the designated travel planner of his geographically widespread family. "I was in charge of sixteen-plus headstrong characters coming from London, New York, Israel, Hong Kong and the Philippines, so I would start planning these trips up to a half or whole year in advance," he says. "We traveled all over, from Bali to India, but as my parents grew older, I began exploring destinations closer to our home, the Philippines." Impressed by the incredible places he discovered in his own backyard—albeit a large backyard, seeing as the Philippines encompass more than 7,000 islands—Urra launched **Global Nomad** (www.global-nomad.com). Today, the company helps visitors navigate a country that is among the lesser-known in the Southeast Asian tourist circuit and offers an incredible unspoiled habitat to explore. And Urra still implements all that he learned during his early travel planning: "I truly believe that if we treat our guests as if we were hosting our extended family or friends, they will fall in love with the place and make memories of a lifetime." Urra spoke to Indagare about what makes the Philippines such a unique travel experience.

What is the biggest misconception about the Philippines?

The biggest misconception, due to negative and incomplete press accounts, is that the Philippines is an unsafe place. The country and its islands are misunderstood. We send our guests to places where we can guarantee their safety completely. What surprises our first-time guests most is the genuinely warm and friendly nature of the Filipino people, especially the generosity of the locals in remote islands who welcome foreigners into their humble villages; a dignified graciousness is ingrained into the local Filipino culture. Visitors are also impressed with the level of English; we have one of the highest literacy rates in Asia and are the third-largest English speaking country in the world (after the U.S. and U.K.).

What would be your ideal itinerary for a first-time visitor?

To experience such a geographically vast country with several thousand scattered islands, you should spend at least a week to hop around the major provinces, using the capital Manila as your base and entry point. You can fly up to **Batanes** or **Ilocos**, then down south to **Palawan** and if you have more time, explore or linger in such islands/cities as **Cebu** (the second largest city after the capital) and **Bohol** and the **Visayas** region.

What are your own favorites?

My favorite spots can be found in **Palawan** province, the last frontier for unspoiled white sand beaches and jungles. It boasts the longest underground river set in a limestone cave, national parks and mangrove forests that can easily rival the **Caribbean**, **Maldives**, **Costa Rica** and **Hawaii**. The province has the highest number of endemic coral species known on the planet, making it a top dive spot. My other favorite is **Bohol**, in the Visayas region. With its laid-back provincial atmosphere, white sand beaches and the world-famous chocolate hills, a unique geologic wonder. It has stunning coral and limestone churches dating back to when the Spanish explorer Magellan first landed in the Philippines.

What are some great hidden islands?

Batanes at the northernmost tip of the Philippine archipelago is a personal favorite. Imagine a *Wuthering Heights* setting with craggy, windswept cliffs and crashing waves with endless views, where the South China Sea meets the Pacific Ocean. Guests from Scotland, Ireland and Cornwall swear that if it were not for the warm tropical weather they would have thought they'd been transported back home!

Another favorite is **Albay** in Bicol Province where you can swim next to the world's biggest fish, the docile and gentle Whale Shark or drive over the still smoldering vents of Mt. Mayon volcano. **Siargao** is also a hidden gem and known by surfer connoisseurs for the best tunnel wave and desolate white sand beaches. Whether you are a surfer or beach bum, you will feel like a Robinson Crusoe castaway. The **Cordilleras** (in the Northern Mountain Province region in Luzon) are ideal for the ultra adventurous trekker, as accommodations there are rustic home stays. You can visit the rice terraces and exotic tribes, dating back almost two millennia.

What are your favorite resort hotels?

The brand new **Shangri-La Resort & Spa** (www.shangri-la.com), with its own private beach, is set in a quiet area of the world famous Boracay Island. It has Filipino-inspired design in the Hilltop suites and a Chi spa that serves traditional Philippine Hilot massage (similar to a local shaman shiatsu style) which is pure bliss. If you want to check out the local party scene, you are only a five-minute speedboat ride away from the infamous White Beach.

Fundacion Pacita (www.fundacionpacita.ph), in Batanes, is a ten-bedroom boutique B&B perched in the most scenic spot on the island. It has lots of personal charm and is a place where you can curl up with a great book, write or simply meditate and stare at the 360-degree views. It was the former atelier of an internationally renowned Ivatan artist. And of course, there's the jetsetter's all time favorite, the **Amanpulo** (part of the Aman resorts group), though I am also excited for the upcoming **Banyan Tree Resort** in Northern Palawan slated for 2012.

What kinds of tours does Global Nomad design?

At the heart of our Global Nomad experience is people. From top Filipino chefs who create inventive menus based on the uniqueness of ingredients in provincial cuisine, to local insider experts in art, culture and history. We support the work of social innovators who are forging a new direction in their communities and also artists and handicraft communities that add color to our local shopping experiences. We design everything, from family celebrations in exotic and exclusive locales, or adventure and nature holidays, to intimate destination weddings or romantic honeymoons, or chilled weekend escapes, or women-only exotic shopping adventures.

What are some examples of insider access that you can provide?

Last New Year's eve, we cordoned off the world's longest underground river set in a limestone cave for our guests who wanted to have it privately for the night. On another occasion, we asked special permission to visit the private ancestral home of the former President Marcos. The guests were surprised to find themselves staring at the glass crypt of Marcos at the end of their tour. We also have organized a gourmet candlelit dinner under the stars, on a stunning remote sandbank in Palawan; the sandbar disappeared during high tide long after the guests had returned to their romantic over-water villas. In China, we have organized private viewings of Emperors' palaces within the Forbidden City for some museum directors and also had lunch with the designer of the "Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium in his atelier. We've had a private section of the Great Wall with martial arts students performing a Shaolin style demonstration, and we rented a flat riverboat in Guilin, where we had a section of the Lijiang River cordoned off just for our group to float serenely down to the town of Yangshou, just like a scene in *The Painted Veil*.

Can you talk a little about the philanthropic aspect of Global Nomad?

Over the years, we have been planting seeds of change and building our alliances and support base with like-minded social entrepreneurs. Most of our boutique resorts have begun to trust and partner with us, and we have helped institute programs that will positively affect local communities in several ways. We operate a number of initiatives including teaching the local fishing villages to recycle/compost, providing alternative sources of livelihood, like growing organic vegetables to provide the resort guests with farm fresh organic produce, conserving the marine environment, taking our guests directly to women's weaving cooperatives, and training qualified tourism guides, reviving oral folk storytelling traditions and helping resorts incorporate a minor fund to their room rates for the preservation of old historic churches, heritage villages etc. There is so much one can do to help on a grassroots level, once you identify what the communities immediate needs are.

What other travel destinations (in Asia or beyond) do you find inspiring?

Mongolia for its desolate and barren plateaus, Bhutan for the hermetic kingdom's spiritual tranquility and the fact that the King measures their country's wealth in GNH (Gross National Happiness), Myanmar (Burma) for the fantastic and unexplored temple complexes, Hue in Vietnam for the preserved world heritage towns and the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, China. I am dreaming of Samarkand, Bukhara, **Machu Picchu** and the Himalayas too!

Read about Urra's favorite places in Hong Kong where he is based.

Read a member postcard about a stay at **Amanpulo**

Read about contributor Tiffany Schauer's recent trip the the **Philippines**

Read a discussion board post about **safety in the Philippines**

Simone Girner 09/21/2009

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- **New on Indagare:** A destination report on *Telluride*, five restaurants *not to miss* in Los Angeles, Top Ten Not To Miss in London and New York. Plus, authentic restaurants en route from *Vienna to Graz* an interview with New York insider and author *Judith Stonehill* about the city's unexpected places; discoveries and finds Just Back from *Santa Fe*, contributor *Elena Bowes* about a company whose *journeys give back*.
- **Indagare Journeys:** Three exclusive trips available to the Indagare community this Fall include a Patricia Wells-led culinary journey to *Vietnam*, a philanthropic trip, partly guided by Gandhi's grandsons, to *India* and an insider tour of *Delhi*, *Jaipur*, *Udaipur* and *Jodhpur*. And only two spots remain on the *Indagare-hosted trip* to Mexico's Riviera Maya and Yucatán jungle. Plus, a special offer for Indagare members by the *Royal Oak Foundation* that grants access to *British Houses and Gardens*.
- **Postcards:** From *Amsterdam*, *Tanzania* and *Zanzibar*, member discoveries in southern France, including *Arles* and *Corsica*, giving back in the Philippines.
- **Indagare Insiders:** *Bonnie Gokson*, owner of Hong Kong's lofty *Sevva* on hong Kong, *Culinary Insider: Budapest*, fashion designer *Anya Hindmarch* on her favorite getaways, an interview with non-profit *Reach Grenada*, which gives back on the Caribbean island and culinary expert *Wendy Lyn* on dining off-the-beaten path in Paris.
- **Reviews:** An insider report on *Litchfield County*. In-depth guides to *Boston*, *Savannah*, *Santa Barbara*, *Paris*, *Prague*, *Istanbul*, *Tuscany*, *Marrakech*, *Peru*, *Sydney* and *Jaipur*.
- **Member Advice:** Calling all experts on *Aspen* and *Sun Valley* to weigh in on member queries under *Ask Advice*. They are seeking holiday tips and favorite restaurants and activities. Indagare members can share their advice by logging in first, then clicking here: *Ask Advice*.
- **Indagare Plus:** Remember that hotels marked by an Indagare Plus symbol offer preferential rates and benefits to members.
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- **New feature:** Members share your profiles, comments, favorite articles and IQs. Just click on the Profile tab on the upper right of your screen and look for the Edit My Profile blue tab.
- **Indagare** means to discover, explore, seek, scout in Latin.