



# Busuanga Bay Lodge Palawan

We booked a long weekend at this brand new resort which is managed by Aura Hotels and Resorts, initially to celebrate our anniversary at the end of September but because of the stormy weather we decided not to go so when we re- booked it for later in November and then the region was hit by the tragedy of Typhoon Yolanda, we had to make a decision as to whether or not to make the trip at all. We knew the island was without electricity and that some of the roads and many of the buildings, including the airport had been hit badly, however, after having been reassured by the owners that all was now well at the resort, we went ahead. It's always an adventure going to a brand new place and sometimes you just have to have faith that it lives up to its website pictures but when you know the destination has suffered enormous damage it is

always slightly more worrying. I am sure that many of us feel it is even more vitally important now more than ever, to support these lovely island resorts and their employees, especially when tourism is their only source of income. It's a very short flight to the very small Francisco B. Reyes airport at around an hour by Cebu Pacific. We noticed on landing, that many of the letters on the roof were missing and there were massive holes too. At that time their radar was still out, so they were relying on visual only but it didn't seem to affect the efficiency of the flights or arrival procedures. The BBL driver and coach were ready and waiting for us and a Filipino couple who, I somehow got the feeling, were on their honeymoon as they cuddled together and gazed into each other's eyes for most of the hour long journey. We, on the other hand, surveyed the hectares of forest which were stripped bare of greenery, with houses flattened, telephone and electricity poles and wires were left hanging across roads which themselves seemed to be mostly in a state of "under construction". We were assured by the driver that all would be fixed soon as the power was restored.

On arriving at the resort, which is pretty much on its own, we were met by the entire staff who were singing and smiling and welcoming us into the impressive reception/lounge/bar and dining area in front of which is the infinity pool and decking. We were then given welcome drinks and cold towels and we met Sebastien, the general manager, who greeted us like old friends. We had booked a Deluxe casita which was on the top level of the hillside - the picture shows the building which is actually two casitas "semi detached" but each with its own large terrace. Smaller individual casitas cascade down the hillside, each with their own balcony and furniture, some with sun beds. I think by now they will have their second bar and running, which is further down the hillside but at that time, part of the roof had sustained slight damage and was not being used. More casitas are being built on the shore front which is level with the jetty and while there is still a lot of landscaping and beach front works to be finished, the overall look of the place is very Mediterranean, pure white buildings and modern, stylish interior decor.

The casita was immaculate and consisted of an extremely large bedroom and large individual wardrobes and plenty of storage space with an equally large bathroom which strangely had no bath, as there would have been ample room to fit one in however, there was a lovely big wet room/ walk around shower with two huge separate "rain shower" heads, plenty room to splash around ... We had a walk down to the jetty where the resort's speedboat and watersports equipment is located and on the way back up the hill, took a look at the other casitas. We had a very tasty lunch and it was so quiet and peaceful everywhere that it seemed like we were the only ones around. Relaxing on sun beds by the infinity pool, we were approached by the "activity manager" whom we had been discussing a possible island hopping tour for the following day and he told us that the three guests on the other side of the pool were also keen and if we joined together it would be more economic. Seemed a great idea so we soon introduced ourselves to our new friends who were a young Swedish chap and his English girlfriend and his father who was visiting and decided on a time to meet in the morning. Dinner was again, very tasty and reasonably priced, served by the shimmering pool and overlooking the beautiful ocean. The clear air and the star filled sky was really lovely and we finished off the first evening with our coffee and drinks on the terrace watching the twinkling lights of the other houses across the water and counting the stars. OK, I was counting the stars and my better half was reading his iPad book!

The varied cuisine, which relies on sourcing the freshest, home grown ingredients locally is carried out under the directions of Chef Chris Locher, famous for his culinary wizardry at the celebrated "My Kitchen" at the Oasis Hotel, Manila. Do expect a wide range of styles and flavours from the resort's head Chef.

Our island hopping tour started after a lovely breakfast and after about a half an hour on the boat, we stopped at a tiny sand encircled island where we disturbed several

rays who quickly skimmed across the front of the boat - we all got off and did a little bit of snorkelling but sadly saw no more of the rays. After that they found us a couple more places to snorkel and then we spent some time on the main island where we had a bbq. I combed the beach for colourful shells and pieces of coral and took pictures of bright blue kingfisher birds sitting on top of weird rock formations. We stopped at another island but there wasn't much to see apart from a very flattened shack. It had been planned to take us somewhere else but the weather was beginning to look ominous so we headed back to the resort, accompanied by shoals of tiny flying fish.

Next morning, the Manny Pacquiao fight was on and it seemed to attract three other guys who perhaps owned nearby resorts but obviously didn't have the required sports channel on TV or the large generators that we did to power it! A few rounds of drinks later, the match a good result - Happy Sunday! More sunning by the pool and another delicious dinner, with a juicy steak and very fresh salad, a simple sweet and a lovely bottle of wine - bliss....

We left the following day after enjoying yet another gorgeous sunrise and sunset over sparkling blue waters, just when we were just beginning to feel at home in a beautifully peaceful, quiet and relaxed situation. The jet skis parked at the jetty, we are told, are only there for show!

Busuanga Bay Lodge, Sitio Lawi, Brgy. Concepcion, Busuanga, Palawan

Nightly casita rates range from 8,000 ++ to 14000++ (10%SC + 12% government tax)

Use of non motorised marine sports equipment (kayaks etc) are free of charge

Meals, drinks and Spa treatments, are extra.

To book - go online to the website Busuanga Bay Lodge or head to Trip Advisor for more reviews.

**Diane Ross**

