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PHILIPPINES

I am perhaps 20 feet below the surface of the Visayan Sea, suspended in front of a giant, mesmerizing cobalt jellyfish. If I were swimming, I'd be worried about a painful sting, but we are sharing this underwater space peacefully. The dive master, Alfredo, and I exchange OK signs and big grins from behind our masks.

We're scuba diving in a marine sanctuary called the House Reef just off the beachfront of the five-star, family-friendly Shangri-La Mactan Resort & Spa in Cebu, Philippines. Onsite is Scotty's Dive Centre, a PADI five-star training center and National Geographic Dive Center that guides guests in their watery explorations. During our 53 submerged minutes, we spy many spectacular creatures: sea urchins, luridly colored Christmas

wrasse, scorpion fish, lionfish, silver batfish, giant clams, pipefish, elephant ear coral, sea cucumbers, sweetlips and my favorite, chocolate chip starfish. The island nation has some of the world's best and least crowded dive sites, a new eco-preservation stance and a one-on-one guide/guest ratio that delivers a personalized experience. I've come for just over a week to get wet, eat well and enjoy spa treatments in luxury accommodations. The Philippines delivers — in spades — on all counts.

Finding Chi

After toweling off and enjoying a quick *dim sum* lunch on property at the lovely Tea of Spring restaurant, I head for the resort's famed Chi Spa. Located at the far, quiet end of the property, it's secluded and gorgeous, modeled after a Himalayan village with temple-like architecture. Incense perfumes the air and soft shades of amber predominate in the generous spaces. Chi refers to life force, and Rady, my therapist, performs a two-and-a-half hour treatment, the tropical linen and leaf wrap and massage, by slathering my body with a concoction of

fresh mango, papaya, pineapple, aloe vera, honey and yogurt — ideal for sunburned bodies. I am then wrapped in fresh banana leaves for 20 minutes. After a shower, her intuitive hands perform a Thai massage, working out unseen knots. By the time we are finished, night has fallen and candles illuminate the verdant pathways. I return to my suite with its panoramic views to a delightful surprise: fireworks are bursting overhead, courtesy of some corporate revelers.

Another day, another island — the Philippines has more than 7,100. I take a day tour of the Chocolate Hills, shaped like Hershey kisses, though they are green during rainy season when I visit. Light mist and fog settle above the peaks — more than 1,200 of them. Then I get up close and personal with the tarsier, the world's smallest primate, which looks like a cross between a rat and monkey, with enormous green-yellow eyes. Finally, I check into Eskaya Beach Resort & Spa on Panglao Island at the southern tip of Bohol. My lovely, comfortable detached villa faces the Mindanao Sea, has a private pool, AC, and an outdoor rain shower and bathtub scattered with jasmine flowers. After a spectacular papaya-colored sunset, I enjoy dinner by the resort's infinity pool, singing along with the guitarists covering John Denver and Beatles songs and chatting with a Brazilian mom and her two kids while eating teriyaki-marinated shrimp. Back in my suite, turndown is unabashedly romantic: the bed is draped with a wedding-like confection of white mosquito netting. Stars are scattered across the sky. I take a skinny dip in inky privacy.

The following morning, I am driven a short distance to Alona Beach and Sequest Diving. Dive master Nelson gets me outfitted for our dive and we hop in the boat along with a 20-something couple from Germany and motor out to the dive site, Bohol Beach Club, or BBC. Underwater,

there are schools of cuttlefish, sea cucumbers, shrimp, parrotfish and nudibranch among the coral formations. Afterward, back in my suite at Eskaya, therapist Eden gives me a *hilot*, a traditional healing massage technique, using firm finger pressure on key pressure points. It's another perfect day — both below and above water.

Dives and Massages

Amanpulo, recently named the best Asian beach resort in the world by *Conde Nast Traveler*, makes for a plush base to explore the clear waters and pristine coral of Palawan. Located 225 miles south of Manila, discriminating guests arrive at this private island by chartered plane, complete with

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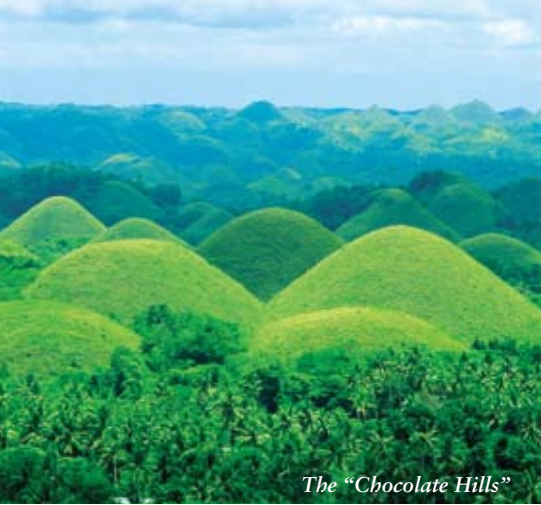


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The "Chocolate Hills"

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woven palm hand fans and chilled water in the seat pockets. Staffers greet the plane's arrival standing next to golf carts that double as guests' personal transportation for the duration of their stay. After being draped in a fragrant jasmine *sampaguita* (lei), my personal guest assistant Manuel whisks me to my casita. Filipino architect

Bobby Manosa has married traditional elements — pebble washed walls, coconut shell furnishings, a rattan headboard, *cadiz* (shell) lighting — with modern amenities in the spacious villas. A hammock is positioned to take advantage of the water's view; thick vegetation provides privacy. After walking the white-sand beach and testing out my private hammock, I hop in my golf cart and whiz to the five-star PADI Gold Palm Resort dive shop.

Bordered by the Sulu and South China seas, Palawan boasts rich marine biodiversity and visibility of nearly 100 feet; the calm, glass-like waters are ideal for both novice and expert divers. A drift dive with a gradual drop-off and a maximum depth of about 60 feet, our long bottom time allows us to appreciate tuna, jacks, enormous black sea slugs, table coral, giant fans, turtles, blue starfish and lots of colorful tropical fish. As is my practice, I follow up my dive with an hour-long massage, this one expertly delivered by Shy in the privacy of my room. The lemongrass, lavender and mandarin oil smells divine; at my request, she bottles some for me to take home, a fragrant reminder of my stay.

I am awakened the following morning by a sharp-pitched cry, which sounds like a child in distress. Is it a bird? A lizard? Something else? According to the staffer who brings my traditional Filipino breakfast of *arroz caldo* — rice porridge with sautéed chicken, ginger and spring onions, and *pan de sal* bread with *calamansi* (lime) marmalade — it's the "yellow bird." The small bird swoops by, in flashes of yellow, black and red, but I can't manage to move quickly enough to snap a picture. Later that day, I take a boat out to the floating bamboo bar where Marlon, the bartender, whips up a refreshing tropical mojito. Though I don't have a picture of the yellow bird or the chocolate chip starfish or the jellyfish, I have vivid memories.

— Suzanne Wright



VIETNAM

From its cosmopolitan cities and palm-fringed beaches to its mountain resorts, modern-day Vietnam bears the centuries-old legacy of Chinese invaders and French colonizers. But even as it holds to its unique cultural identity, Vietnam is rapidly modernizing as traditional dress, cuisine and modes of transportation compete with increasingly pervasive Western influences. Vietnam has become a red-hot travel destination and major hoteliers have constructed five-star properties to welcome discerning, well-heeled visitors.

Saigon and the Seaside

In Ho Chi Minh City, commonly known as Saigon, local haunts like the Ben Thanh Market and the Reunification Palace, with its retro War Command Room, are worth seeing, but the most popular excursions are the Mekong Delta and the Cu Chi Tunnels, both about 90 minutes away. A short boat ride along the Mekong River is followed by a stroll down a dirt lane where card tables are laden with snake wine and crocodile wallets. The underground network, known as the Cu Chi Tunnels, was used by the Vietcong in the 1960s to fight the Americans; a portion is open for tourists to crawl through. If you are so inclined, you can play "solider" at a firing range for a few *dong*.

The pretty seaside promenade of Nha Trang is



VIETNAM PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF SUZANNE WRIGHT

spoiled somewhat by the constant bleating of horns. After touring the Po Ngar Towers, built high on a hill by the Cham people between the 8th to 13th centuries, and visiting the White Buddha, I board a motorboat for the 25-minute ride to the exclusive Evason Hideaway, the antidote to auditory over-stimulation. Located on a rocky peninsula and surrounded by dense vegetation, it has a limited number of secluded villas, each with its own private pool and butler.

Love in Dalat

Mountainous Dalat is a change in every way from Nha Trang. The city of 200,000 is the country's most popular honeymoon destination. Once a popular resort for French commanders who were weary of the tropics, its

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at the Valley of Love and Lake of Sighs, where kitschy local cowboys pose with dewy-eyed newlyweds. The Dalat Railway Station, built in 1932, once had wood-burning steamer; now the train makes trips to Linh Phuoc Pagoda, a fantasyland glass and ceramic mosaic temple with a huge Golden Buddha.

Imperial Splendor

The imperial city of Hue was the capital of Vietnam from 1802 to 1945. There's a certain derelict grandeur to this leafy town located on the banks of the Perfume River. A full-day bus tour costs less than \$10 and buys you access to several fascinating imperial tombs and the imposing Citadel, the most popular attraction. Much like Beijing's Forbidden City, the walled structure reveals its temples and moats one at a time. I finish the day with a long-tail boat ride on the Perfume River and join locals perched on plastic red stools and crouched over plastic blue tables slurping beef *pho*.

Hanoi's streets remain dreamily poetic: slender girls with curtains of glossy black hair in *ao dai* stride down tree-lined boulevards. Request a room in the old wing of The Sofitel Metropole Hotel, built in 1901. The stately hotel is just a short walk from Hoan Kiem Lake, the city's nerve center, and the Old Quarter, where streets are named for various trades (blacksmiths, silversmiths, marble engravers). Women thread through the masses, doing a hip-led duck walk as they balance baskets laden with fruits and vegetables on a bamboo pole across their shoulders. During my stay, I also visit the National Fine Arts Museum, the Temple of Literature, the Lenin-inspired Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and the infamous "Hanoi Hilton," where Presidential candidate John McCain was imprisoned.

Ha Long Bay ("bay of the descending dragon"), is a three-hour drive from Hanoi. As I look out the window, I see farmers in rice paddies and water buffaloes pulling plows, an enduring image of Vietnam. I board a wooden boat for a three-hour cruise. The limestone outcroppings — more than 1,800 of them — are shrouded in mist. Save for the sound of the motor and the preparations for the on-board seafood lunch, the Gulf of Tonkin is tranquil on this winter afternoon. I exchange a smile with the captain; in response, he cuts the motor and lights a cigarette. We soak up the ethereal silence, suspended in time. **PN**

— Suzanne Wright



hilly pine forests remind me of the Appalachians or an Alpine resort. Dalat is sunny and cool — cool enough that the locals are wearing hats, coats and gloves, and cool enough to build a fire in my room at Evason Ana Mandara. The resort, a former 1920s hilltop colonial estate, has been open just a week when I arrive. The smell of roasting coffee from a nearby plantation wafts across the property (Vietnam is the second largest producer of coffee in the world). The room is simple, spare and elegant. My butler hands me a key: there's a pinecone on the ring.

Thanh serves as my guide on a daylong tour of Dalat. We take a cable car to Truc Lam Monastery with views of strawberry, carrot, cabbage and broccoli farms passing below us. The monks practice a unique form of Zen here, and the setting — the mountains, cobalt blue Tuyen Lam Lake and the gonging bells — enhance the peaceful feeling. A more amorous feeling pervades