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Paradise *found?*

thegallivanter'sguide
by Philippe Servais

HONEST ADVICE FOR THE WORLD'S TOP TRAVELLERS

Many travellers see **Manila** as just a stopover en route to Palawan or Siargao, but this bustling city of over 14 million people offers rich history and vibrant culture. Intramuros, the historic core of Manila, is a must-visit, and stopping for a drink at the grand **Manila Hotel** is highly recommended, though an overnight stay is not.

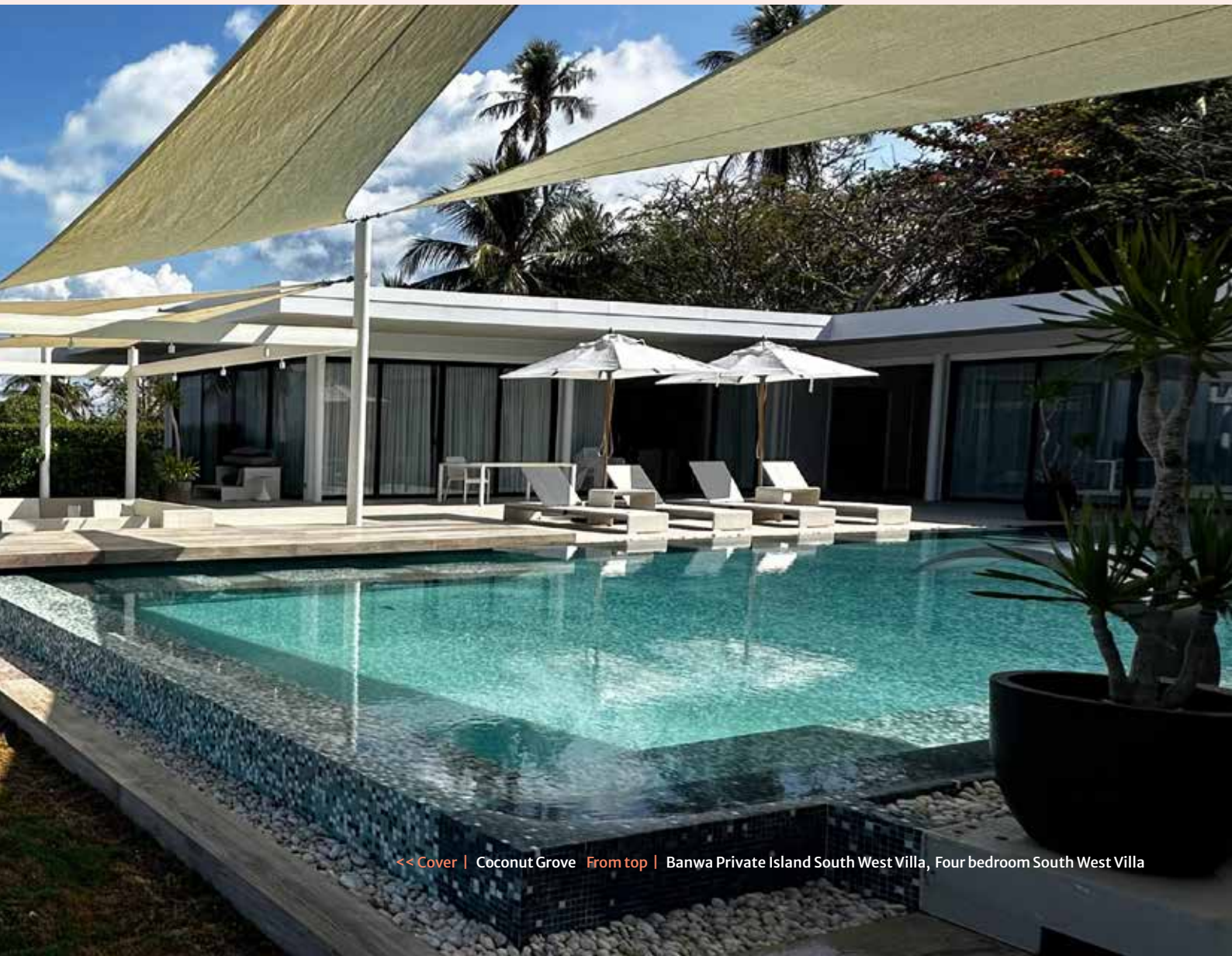
Manila's hotel scene includes many international brands but lacks ultra high-end options. **Makati**, with its skyscrapers, shaded boulevards, and upscale malls, looks like a mini-Singapore and is the best area to stay. The Fairmont and Raffles brands brought fresh competition 14 years ago but now show signs of age and need refurbishment.

On my recent visit, I opted for **The Peninsula**, a long-time favourite among Manila's high society. Unfortunately, the property seems stuck in 1976, with only minimal updates. The service and dining were also subpar. The food presentations in the Executive Gallery Lounge were poor, and the buffet at Escolta was disappointing. Service was equally underwhelming, with a poor welcome and no assistance with bags or transportation upon departure.

Following my feedback, The Peninsula's management offered a complimentary night's stay. While the second welcome was better and the suite more practical, the overall ambience remained outdated, and the bed was less comfortable. With a new general manager, Kevin Tsang, who arrived after a 14-year stint at The Peninsula Hong Kong, there may be positive changes ahead, but there seems to be a general complacency in enhancing both product and service across Manila's hotels.

My primary reason for travelling to the Philippines was to experience **Banwa Private Island** off the coast of Palawan. In an archipelago boasting over 7,000 islands, Amanpulo has long stood out as the only world-class resort since its debut in 1993. Despite occasional fluctuations in service quality, Pamalican's stunning beaches and natural beauty continue to attract many. I chose not to review Amanpulo this time, as it is slated for renovation. Nay Palad on Siargao Island, although intriguing, reportedly doesn't quite match Amanpulo's level of excellence, despite commanding steep rates. Banwa Private Island promises to change the status quo, offering unparalleled service, comfort, and exclusivity in the heart of the Philippines. Let's find out.







Banwa Private Island

GALLIVANTER'S
RATING



banwaprivateisland.com

Located in a secluded corner of Palawan, the intimate six-villa **Banwa Private Island** is surprisingly accessible. You can opt for a private helicopter or seaplane journey, or, if flying commercially, it's just a one-hour flight from Manila to Puerto Princesa. From there, it's a two-hour scenic drive along the island's picturesque coastline in a luxury van with reclining leather seats. We nibbled on a delightful light vegetarian lunch and soon found ourselves at Coconut Beach, roughly halfway between Puerto Princesa and El Nido.

Awaiting us was the **Iguana** – a high-tech amphibious vessel straight out of a James Bond movie – ready to take us on the final 25-minute leg of our trip. We also used this technological marvel for a trip to a sandbank, where we enjoyed a sublime sunset with champagne, oysters, and freshly prepared canapés.

Nothing on Banwa's website prepares you for the island's breathtaking allure. As you approach this tiny speck of coral nestled in the vast expanse of the Sulu Sea, you are greeted by a crystal-clear lagoon where harmless baby sharks glide elegantly among the corals. The shoreline, a spectacle of swaying coconut trees and bright red flame trees, creates a striking contrast against the sugary white sand beach. Stepping onto the jetty, an army of staff serenaded us with a melodious local tune, their voices blending harmoniously with the gentle breeze, and we immediately sensed that we were arriving somewhere truly special.

The welcome was nothing short of enchanting, complete with flower garlands, a chilled drink, and a cool refreshing towel before being whisked away to our villa. Our path



meandered past a short game 9-hole par 3 golf course, through a picturesque coconut grove by the sea, and by the Axis building, which houses several rooms—ideal for those accompanied by staff. Soon, we arrived at our **Northeast Principal Villa**, the epitome of seclusion, with awe-inspiring views of Palawan's mountain ranges from its elevated position beside a small nature reserve, a haven for the rare Tabon bird and Hawksbill turtles, both protected by Banwa's Aquos Foundation. The villa features expansive floor-to-ceiling windows, framing a vibrant riot of bougainvillea on one side, and an alluring pool overlooking the lagoon and Palawan beyond.

Our abode, distinctly contemporary, impresses with its white, low-rise **minimalist architecture**, expansive floor-to-ceiling windows, and sleek lines softened with turquoise cushions and bed runners, and intricate coral-inspired headboards and wall sculptures. The spacious 255 sqm One Bedroom Northeast Principal villa offers a notably larger and uniquely designed layout, making it the best choice in the one-bedroom category. Inside, warm wooden floors led us to an L-shaped living and dining area adorned with a plush sofa, a separate guest loo, and a bedroom with a sitting area that opens to a secluded jacuzzi on one side and a breezy outdoor dining deck on the other—the perfect spot for a leisurely poolside lunch. The ensuite shower-only marble bathroom featured dual vanities, a separate glass-enclosed loo, and a shower

with direct access to the outdoor deck. The villa is equipped with amenities such as a Dyson hairdryer, reef-safe sunscreen, and after-sun lotion, plus all the expected indulgences of a high-end resort in Asia. The vast dressing area includes a safe, yoga mats, and an exceptionally exquisite beach bag. The complimentary laundry service was impeccable, returning our clothes in immaculate condition.

The meticulous attention to detail is what makes Banwa truly special. The presence of vibrant flower bouquets that are refreshed every other day, the discreet room servicing during breakfast times, and the continuous replenishment of my ice buckets and the welcome treats without having to reach for the phone.

For entertainment, the living room was equipped with a state-of-the-art Bose home theatre sound system and a large flat-screen TV for those rare moments when the mesmerising ocean vistas are not enough. Instead of a typical minibar, a small fridge came stocked with essentials such as still and sparkling water, homemade iced tea, and fresh juices, alongside

irresistible homemade chocolate chip cookies and vegan Ferrero Rocher, replenished daily. An espresso machine and a selection of Organic Republic of Teas were at our disposal, along with a welcome amenity of champagne, fresh coconut water, and an assortment of cold cuts, nuts, and dried fruit. >>

Clockwise from top left |
The Iguana, Grilled Lobster,
Latitude Restaurant and Bar



The villa's design is not only aesthetically pleasing but also highly functional, featuring an intuitive lighting system, efficient air-conditioning, and whisper-quiet sliding doors fitted with mosquito screens. Interestingly, the island is kept **mosquito-free** thanks to strategically placed, non-toxic odour bait traps. I can personally vouch for their effectiveness, as I wasn't bitten once during my stay.

The outdoor pool, shaded by a canvas canopy, offers mesmerising vistas of the lagoon from its elevated location. Below the pool deck, the vast outdoor space is just as enticing, complete with a cosy circular pod nestled under a tree, an al fresco shower, and a sun deck with loungers. The ocean is accessible from three spots, but only one, a stone's throw from the villa, leads you directly to the **pristine beach**; the coral bed that lies in front of the villa makes reef shoes a necessity. During our visit, ocean swimming from our villa was optimal in the afternoons when the tide came in. This limitation didn't bother me in the slightest. However, if this concerns you, I'd suggest



staying in villas facing south, where the beaches are generally broader, and the lagoon deeper, although keep in mind that sands are shifting around the island.

Would I change anything?

Yes, in an ideal world, I would have preferred something more original than L'Occitane toiletries, local coffee instead of Nespresso, and exchange the thicker towelling bathrobes for lighter cotton ones. Also, the absence of a minibar means you must call upon room service for anything beyond the regularly restocked welcome amenities. That said, this was hardly an issue as room service was exceptionally prompt.

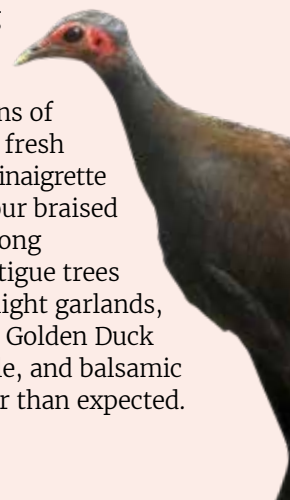
The remaining pair of north-facing villas also present stunning vistas of Palawan, though their beaches are somewhat narrower – at least, that was the case during my visit.

Venture to the island's southern shore, and you'll discover the **South One Villa**, complete with a sizable 10m x 5m swimming pool; the **South Two Villa**, which offers a spacious two-bedroom arrangement wrapped around an impressive 18m x 9m pool; and the magnificent four-bedroom **Southwest Villa**, accommodating up to eight guests and situated nearest to the island's central amenities. These villas continue the modern beach house vibe, with the primary distinction from the Northeast Principal being their cool tiled flooring as opposed to wooden ones.

Rates at Banwa include all meals, except for alcoholic drinks. The cuisine, overseen by **Executive Chef Martin Kaspar**, is of the highest quality. The menu is varied and changes daily, but you can, of course, request almost anything off-menu, with everything being customisable. Meals are typically served at **Latitude**, the resort's hub, which mirrors the villas' style with contemporary white chairs and glass tables set on a deck overlooking a communal pool, a wide section of the beach, and the pier. The second floor features a bar decked out with sofas and colourful cushions, making it an ideal spot for sunset drinks.

The salads are bursting with flavour, with vegetables sourced from Banwa's own organic farm on the mainland; the locally caught lobsters are grilled to perfection; and the cuisine is surprisingly sophisticated given the remote location. Breakfast options change daily and include baked oats or huevos rancheros, with breads and pastries accompanied by delicious local Fruit Garden jams.

One experience not to be missed is having your meals organised at various locations across the island. Enjoy candlelit dinners in the coconut grove, surrounded by dozens of lanterns. Here, we were served fabulously fresh scallops and fennel carpaccio with orange vinaigrette and red peppercorns, followed by four-hour braised lamb with Asian chimichurri and Turnabong vegetables. When we dined under the Bantigue trees by the beach, magically illuminated with light garlands, the menu included a succulent dish called Golden Duck in filo pastry with foie gras, Calvados apple, and balsamic glaze, which turned out to be much lighter than expected.





To complement the exquisite meals, Banwa also offers a world-class wine list, including some excellent **Côte de Provence** Rosés.

At the heart of the island, the airy **Meridian Spa** offers a double treatment suite equipped with a shower and a private terrace. Currently, treatments using local oils are somewhat limited and exclude facials, but unlimited massages are included. The complex also houses a compact yet well-equipped gym with Pilates equipment, a juice bar, and a floodlit all-weather tennis court. Additionally, there is a boutique showcasing local homeware, artefacts, and clothing. The resort also operates a 5-star PADI certified dive centre and a yoga deck in the coconut grove.

The region offers a plethora of activities. The nearby **Tubbataha Reef** is ranked among the world's top eight dive sites and is home to some of the most unique marine species. Guests may also visit the **Underground River** near Puerto Princesa, one of UNESCO's Seven Natural Wonders of the World; traverse the mangrove-lined shores of the Barbacan River; or witness the flying foxes on the neighbouring **Pagbo Island**.

The meticulous attention to detail is what makes Banwa truly special. The presence of vibrant flower bouquets that are refreshed every other day, the discreet room servicing during breakfast times, and the continuous replenishment of my ice buckets and the

welcome treats without having to reach for the phone. Each evening, thoughtful touches such as small gifts and personalised notes accompany the turndown service, alongside bottles of Banwa Water, sourced from the island's own artesian well.

The service on the island is incredibly **attentive**, under the experienced hands of island manager Janet Oquendo, whose background includes roles with Aman and, more recently, Cuixmala in Mexico. The staff, comprised of Filipinos—some from the local area and others from across the country, many with years of experience in high-end resorts around the world—are all impeccably trained. Al, our ever smiling and cheerful villa host, and Sally, the excellent head of food and beverages, were always a delight to talk to. Conversations with Bernardo, the dive instructor with a background in nursing and a late blooming swimmer were particularly captivating as he shared his passion for marine life and the natural wonders of Palawan.

While I am conscious that this review might read like the work of a rather uninspired PR representative, my time at the utterly enchanting and private Banwa Private Island was genuinely special. I can confidently say that Amanpulo, has finally a worthy rival.

Clockwise from top left | Golden Duck in filo pastry with foie gras, Calvados apple, and balsamic glaze, North East Principal Villa, Four Bedroom South West Villa, Flowers, Tabon Bird, South One Villa, North Two Villa, Sunset on a sandbank

gallivanter's gossip

Mandarin Oriental is making a grand return to Manila in 2026! After closing its previous property, which had served the city for 38 years, the brand decided it was time for a fresh start due to the old infrastructure. The new hotel will be in the heart of Makati and will feature 276 rooms and suites, along with a signature spa.

If you're looking for an unforgettable dining experience in Manila, make sure to visit **Txanton**. This wine and gourmet shop, coupled with a Spanish restaurant, offers an outstanding selection of Iberico hams and meats. Don't miss their Gambas tartare and the best codfish you've ever tasted, both served with caviar. For an extra special experience, book a table in their grotto-like cave, complete with rock formations. Plus, you'll enjoy a tech-free environment since there's no Wi-Fi or phone signal. txanton.com.ph

For those seeking an alternative to the eye-wateringly expensive hotels in Rome, consider **Maalot Rome by Shedir** Hospitality Group, the same group behind Hotel Vilòn. This boutique hotel offers 30 rooms, bold colours and patterns, a gym, and the Don Pasquale restaurant and cocktail bar. hotelmaalot.com/en

In Palm Beach, the former Chesterfield hotel is reopening as **The Vineta, by Oetker**. The smart decision to reduce the room count from 57 to 41 allowed for a top-to-bottom renovation by Paris-based interior designer Tino Zervudachi. Located just off Worth Avenue, it might be just what we need to return to this beautiful part of Florida. oetkercollection.com/hotels/the-vineta-hotel

Owned by a well-travelled couple, **Lupaia** is a romantic hideaway with 12 rooms and suites, perched on a hilltop with stunning views of Montepulciano in Tuscany. Dine in the restaurant where Chef Andrea creates daily four-course menus from an open-plan kitchen, or enjoy your meal on the atmospheric terrace. The most appealing suites include Suite Oliva and the ground-floor Garden Suite Vigna, which boasts a large living room, outdoor shower, and terrace. The property also features an outdoor infinity pool and jacuzzi, and you can arrange for massage and beauty treatments upon request. It looks like the perfect escape in Tuscany. lupaia.com

Housed in an angular-shaped glass skyscraper between the chic neighbourhood of Polanco and Chapultepec Park, the ultra-contemporary, all-suite **Alexander Mexico City** might be just what we need in a metropolis not exactly known for its wealth of inspiring high-end hotels. The facilities are somewhat limited, featuring only a Caviar Bar, a gym, and a La Prairie Spa with two treatment rooms. However, the 26 very attractive suites, furnished with Poltrona Frau pieces, boast floor-to-ceiling windows, large glass-enclosed bathrooms, and a Lutron lighting system. alexanderhotel.mx

Recently opened in Puglia is **Masseria Donna Menga**. Housed in a restored 16th-century farmhouse near the coast in Salento, it boasts 24 rooms and a swimming pool set among Mediterranean gardens, a farm-to-table restaurant, a gym, and a wellness centre. masseriadonnaminga.com/en/home

Also opening in Puglia, this time in 2027, is **La Maviglia**, set in a 202-hectare estate comprising a 16th-century Masseria, a newly built hotel, villas, and a golf course. It certainly looks good, but I find it a tad too large for these parts. lamaviglia.com

Stuart Procter has been appointed as the CEO of **The Beaumont Hotel** after serving as the General Manager and COO of The Stafford Collection for several years. Meanwhile, Duncan Palmer, the former excellent Managing Director of The Beaumont, has recently left his position. There is no news yet on who will replace him.



Lupaia, Tuscany



Philippe Servais – Our Editor in Chief

My aim is to honour the enduring legacy of The Gallivanter's Guide founders, Lyn Middlehurst and David Maslin, by continuing to provide honest and unbiased reviews of the world's top hotels, infused with a fresh and innovative perspective. Thank you sincerely for your valued support.

Warm regards, *Philippe*

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