

JETSETTER



SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

The Land
of Coffee
& Chocolate

NO PAINE NO GAIN

Preserving
Chile's Parque
Nacional Torres
del Paine

DEVINE DOWNUNDER

AUSTRALIA'S MOST INDULGENT HIDEAWAYS

VIENNA



PHILIPPINES



DUBLIN



BANGKOK



PARIS

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to another issue of JETSETTER magazine, and one of my favourite times of year to plan travel.

The balmy days of the Northern summer are tantalisingly close and yet in the South, the leaves are turning, and the ski fields are being spruced in anticipation of winter visitors. No matter where you go or how you like to travel, in spring there's nothing but opportunity and our latest issue is sure to inspire some of your future adventures. We have a little something for every world wanderer, from Banwa Private Island in the Philippines, a beacon of future-looking sustainable luxury; and Dublin's most indulgent boutique hotels; to Australia's most remarkable island, Outback, and rural retreats; and Bangkok's newest galleries, tours, and kitchens. We go thrift shopping for luxury labels in Paris with Elyse Glickman; talk inspiration and travel escapades with author Pico Iyer; and join Helen Dalley for a dose of timeless culture in Vienna. Kofi Dotse heads north from his base in Ghana to visit São Tomé and Príncipe, a lively Atlantic locale famed for its coffee and chocolate production, while Lola Méndez delves into the crucial role eco-tourism plays in the conservation of



Chile's Torres del Paine National Park; and Cindy-Lou Dale slips behind the wheel of a roaring Lamborghini to tour Italy's Le Marche region.

Above all, we hope you'll remain curious, intrepid, and open to all the opportunities the season ahead has to offer.


Nicholas Walton
Group Managing Editor

Contributors



As a professional editor, writer and photographer, **Cindy-Lou Dale** creates non-fiction for numerous publications around the world. Her specialist genres include high-end travel, luxury motoring and affluent lifestyles.



Kofi Dotse is a freelance writer and travel blogger based in Ghana. Kofi has a strong storytelling suit, evident across video, photo, and editorial production for several media publications.



Los Angeles-based **Elyse Glickman**, an S.I. Newhouse School at Syracuse University graduate, has an extensive print and online media portfolio that encompasses luxury and business travel, food and beverage, wellness, entertainment, and interior design features.



Lola Méndez is a journalist who writes about sustainability, travel, culture, wellness, and more for many print and digital publications such as *CNN Travel*, *USA Today*, *Lonely Planet*, and more.

JETSETTER

www.jetsetter-magazine.com

Denis Fahy
denis@jetsetter-magazine.com
Publisher

Nick Walton
nickwalton@artemismcomms.com
Group Managing Editor

Helen Dalley
helen.dalley@jetsetter-magazine.com
Group Deputy Editor

Don Pierre Riosa
don@jetsetter-magazine.com
Creative Director

Paul Lo
paul.lo@jetsetter-magazine.com
General Manager (Shanghai)

Darryl Scott
d.scott@jetsetter-magazine.com
Advertising Director

Fatima Cameira
fatima@jetsetter-magazine.com
Marketing Director

John Murphy
john@jetsetter-magazine.com
Advertising Director (Thailand)

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mail@jetsetter-magazine.com



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PARADISE FOUND

Nick Walton journeys to the Filipino island of Palawan and the hidden retreat of Banwa Private Island, a resort quite unlike any other.



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There's space for half a basketball team in the walk-in shower

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There is a place, or so the legends go, where the ocean meets the sky. Here, in the turquoise waters of the Sulu Sea off the coast of Palawan in the Philippines, a tiny slither of paradise prevails. And it's this wafer-thin profile that slowly comes into view, little more than a mirage on the balmy horizon, as I race across calm seas under a robin's eggshell sky. As we inch closer the distant apparition begins to take form. Elegant palms topped with emerald rise from the horizon and low-slung buildings in brilliant white begin to take form, giving the silhouette definition. However, even as our vessel slows on its approach, it's evident that our destination revels in its seclusion, for this is Banwa Private Island, once the world's most expensive resort.

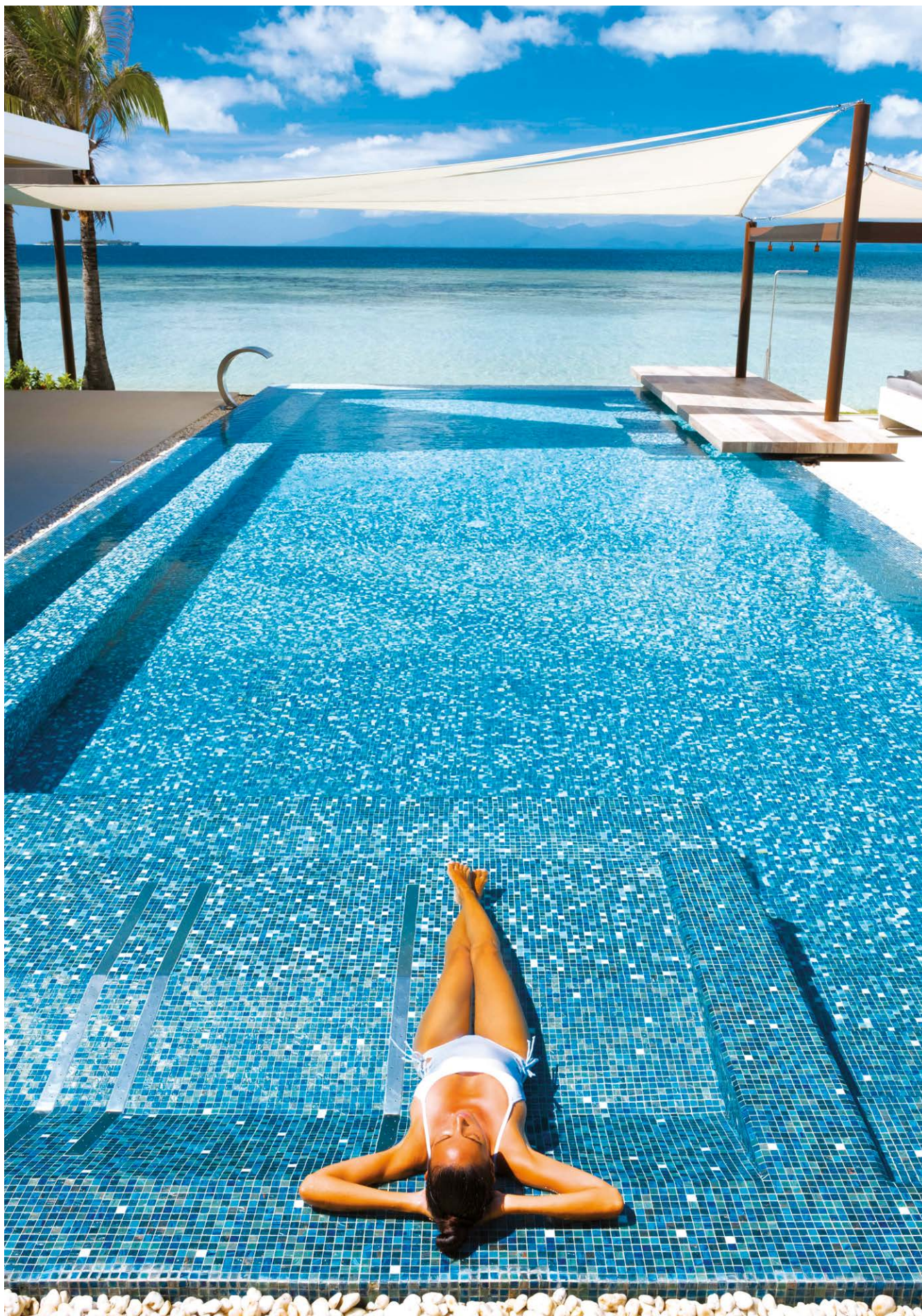
When Banwa first quietly opened its doors back in 2019, it came with a price tag north of US\$100,000 a night. For that, lucky souls had their choice of six sprawling, low-profile beachfront villas, intimate dining destinations, a pint-sized golf course, and access to pristine private beaches. Fortunately for me, the pandemic set the resort on a new course, and now Banwa offers per-villa bookings to luxury travellers who arrive either via helicopter from Manila or Puerto Princesa, or, as I have, on the

island's innovative Iguana, part speedboat part tank and the only one of its kind in Asia.

Banwa couldn't be better suited for post-pandemic travel. At a time when travellers value space, privacy and seamless luxury, Banwa Private Island offers breathtaking seclusion (in a marine sanctuary of its own making no less), a sustainable caviar-topped exile for city living for the affluent jetset. Today the all-inclusive resort only caters to 36 guests at a time (down from the original 48), with support staff accommodated in comfortable hotel-style rooms and principles elegantly marooned in expansive residential-style villas that range from one to four-bedrooms and boast heated Jacuzzis, plunge pools, cavernous bathrooms, and direct beach access.

A HEAVENLY RETREAT

Helming this tiny nirvana (the whole island is only six hectares) is Peter Nilsson, an experienced hotelier who has managed some of the world's most exclusive retreats, including Fiji's Laucala Island (now a Como resort) and the Maldives' Soneva Gili. He and island manager Janet Oquendo meet me as I step up onto Banwa's pier, the entire staff assembled beyond to lay flowers around our necks and to escort us down verdant frangipani and hibiscus-lined



From far left:
Reef balls are encouraging the return of coral; George and Georgina, the island's resident Mantanani Scops owls; the pool at Banwa's premium villa

pathways to our villas, each of which is named for an indigenous Palawan tribe. The tranquillity is immediate and infinite; there is no sound, save for the sea slapping a distant coral reef and the whisper of wind through the gently-swaying palms.

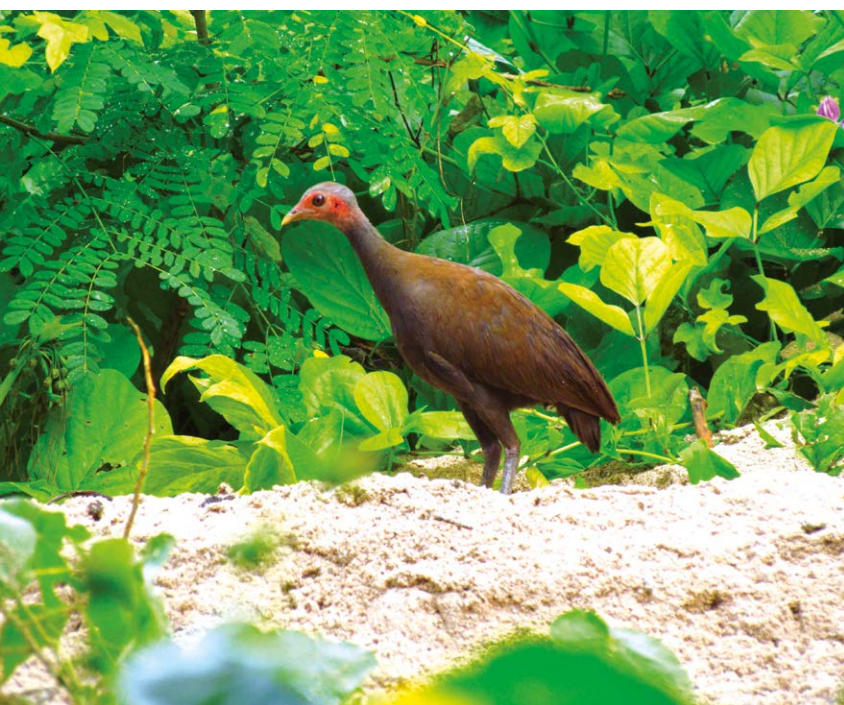
My villa, South One, faces its namesake cardinal point and looks over a heavenly strip of white sand. On a sandbank revealed by the retreating tide, herons and egrets strut like catwalk models and the shadows cast by sails of awnings drift and stretch across the white stone patio that wreaths the pool. Inside, past a king-size bed and a duo of sofas, I set up my laptop beside jars of homemade cookies and a fridge packed with sparkling water from the island's own bottling facility, which taps into a 500 feet deep artisanal well. I throw a playlist on the Bluetooth speaker and unpack in the double-height bathroom-cum-dressing room, which boasts a double vanity and leads to a shaded, secluded deck and bubbling hot tub. There's space for half a basketball team in the walk-in shower. As the afternoon wanes, the barefoot-chic whitewashed and turquoise interiors by design firm Manosa & Co are bathed in glorious golden syrup sunshine through floor-to-ceiling windows that wrap the villa and dissolve the line between guest room and the great outdoors.

I head out for a dip in the sea and watch the late afternoon sun sink towards the horizon. To mark its departure, I join Peter back at Banwa's pier, where the resort offers an eco-conscious approach to golf, with balls made of biodegradable materials. At the heart of each is a ball of fish food that marine life can eat if they are driven and chipped into the sea. "It's a pretty special place isn't it?," says Peter as we sip champagne and watch the sky steadily darken. "It can be so hard to escape the modern world but at least here, you can pretend like none of it exists."

BEACHFRONT YOGA

The next morning, before the sun's even had a chance to resurface on the other side of the resort, I'm making my way back





From bottom left: South One villa; intimate dining within the coastal forest; morning yoga at the Coconut Grove; the Sulu Seas offer a bounty of marine life; a protected tabon bird



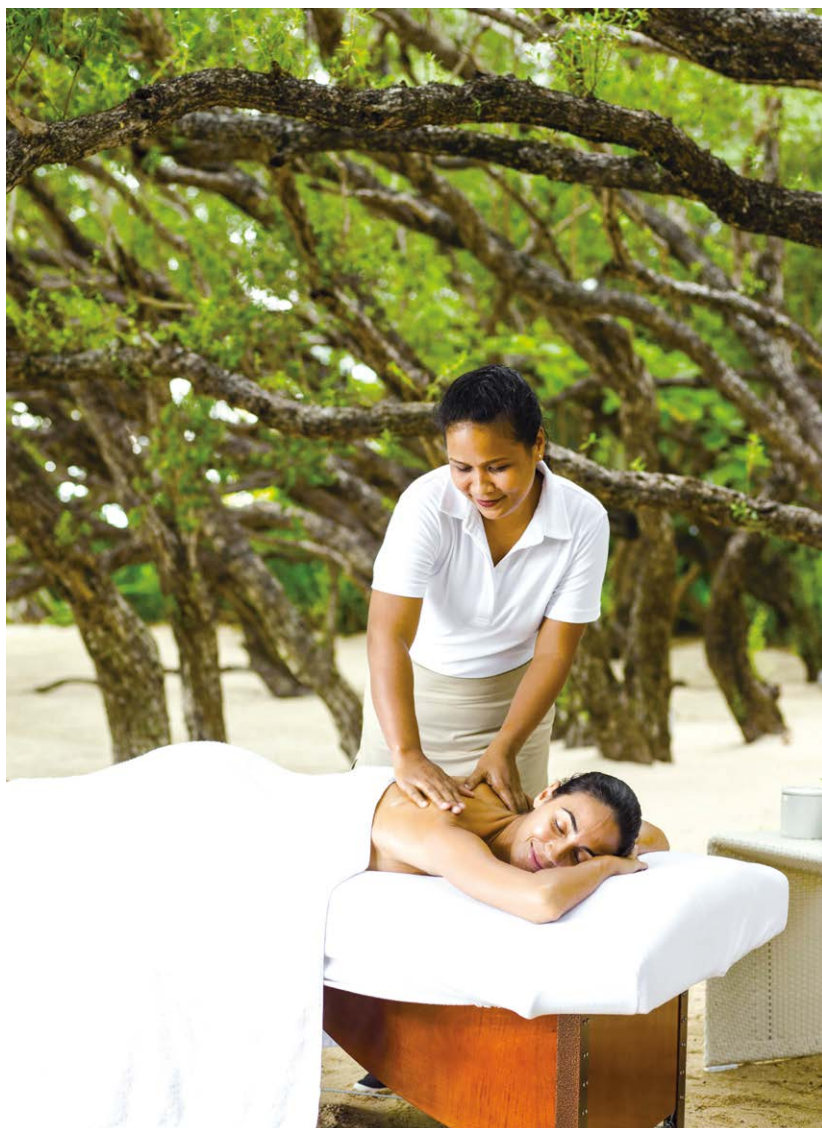
down those garden-lined pathways. Tardy fireflies resemble navigation beacons in the dusk gloom. Flying foxes flutter about in the canopy of palm fronds, chirping farewell to the night, and endangered tabon birds, which the resort helps conserve, dash across the path ahead of me like late commuters or echo my passing with their forlorn call from within the darkened flora.

I slip past the resort's main building, which houses the alfresco Latitude Restaurant & Terrace, a rooftop lounge, and a communal pool where introductory scuba diving lessons take place, and make my way along cool sand towards the coconut grove and its beachfront yoga terrace. Here, for the next hour, I work hard to contort myself out from a posture cemented by hours spent hunching over a computer and I'm sure I scare away what curious tabon birds dare approach with the stretching and realigning of both vertebrae and chakras. However, when the session finishes, and I take a seat, my bare feet nestled in the sand, I greet a new day feeling pretty bloody magnificent, and that's what it's all about, right?

CORAL RESURGENCE

After a breakfast laced with ingredients brought over from Banwa's own Tumarbong Organic Farm on Palawan, I join Peter in the watersports centre where we prep for a dive on the island's house reef, one the property is working hard to resuscitate as part of its foundation, Aquos. The conservation foundation, which was originally created to help the critically endangered Hawksbill turtles that return generationally to Banwa to lay their eggs, is clearly close to the Swede's heart and he takes great pride in showing me the 'reef balls', concrete structures designed to encourage and bolster coral growth in a region that was all but decimated by decades of destructive dynamite fishing.

To date, the resort has 'planted' 400 of these balls, and in the light of midmorning, seven metres below the waves, they look



From top:
the island boasts an intimate spa; part of the resort's conservation efforts protects Hawksbill turtle nests; guests can arrive by helicopter from Manila; the property's pint-sized golf course; a resort gardener

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The Sulu Sea, with its tiny inhabited islands and countless sandbanks, is an aquatic eden in need of some cheerleading

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like giant amphoras cast from a Roman shipwreck. Young snapper, clown fish, shy lion fish and even an inquisitive moray eel now call the balls home while on their surfaces, coral is already growing, a testament to nature's ability to bounce back in the face of adversity.

The foundation, which works with local communities and researchers to create sustainable policy, also has programmes to protect those traumatised tabons, who love to nest in the dunes at the eastern end of the island, the Mantanani Scops owl, and the endemic beach forests in which they nest; the island even has a resident pair of the beautiful owls, named George and Georgina. Rumour has it they're an item.

While the coral gardens that wreath the island are a shadow of those you'll find in other parts of the Philippines, the resort's staff take the foundation seriously and for good reason: the Sulu Sea, with its tiny inhabited islands and countless sandbanks, is an aquatic eden in need of some cheerleading. Efforts by Banwa have led to a fishing exclusion zone around the resort and another nearby island and fish stocks are already returning, which will benefit everyone.

In addition, a new series of activities, dubbed Unscripted Adventures, which range from sandbank picnics and snorkelling with turtles to the protection of Hawksbill eggs, enable guests to celebrate the best of Palawan and become advocates for the region's conservation. I'm sold when we board the Iguana again and jet across the bay to a nearby sandbank, where the waters are translucent and the sand baked white by the tropical sun. Despite its remoteness, it's one of the most beautiful landscapes I've encountered.

Back at the resort, before boarding the Iguana for our return journey back to the real world, there's a chance to meet Banwa's beekeepers, who take us through the process of harvesting honeycomb from hives located on the chip-and-putt golf course, and filtering it into silky, golden nectar that's used throughout the resort as part of its slow food philosophy. Watching the bees work in harmony with nature to create something so delicious and healing sums up this unique slice of paradise to perfection. banwaprivateisland.com ■

