

P A R A D I S E

F O U N D

*Asia-Pacific Boating* journeys to the Filipino island of Palawan and the hidden retreat of Banwa Private Island, a resort that boasts more than a few yachting credentials

STORY BY NICK WALTON





superyacht now stands in pride of place in the resort's rooftop lounge. Other yachts that have visited include a Lagoon 63, the 85m luxury expedition mega yacht Bold; and the 38m Benetti yacht Family.

Whether you're arriving by air or on your own superyacht, 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 a sustainable, caviar-topped exile. The all-inclusive resort only caters to 36 guests at a time (down from the original 48), with support staff and boat crews 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.

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 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

**T**here 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. The name of this paradise? Banwa Private Island, once the world's most expensive resort.

When Banwa quietly opened its doors back in 2019 (after a decade of painstaking development), it came with a price tag north of US\$100,000 a night. For that, lucky souls had their choice of six sprawling 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 Commuter launch, part speedboat, part tank and the only one of its kind in Asia.

In fact, the Iguana Commuter is part of a fleet of pleasure vessels at the resort, which was developed by Richard Graham Beattie, owner of Aquos Yachts, which crafted his own 45-metre Big Fish and 50-metre Star Fish superyachts back in 2010 and 2012 respectively. Beattie's Big Fish remains one of the most popular charter yachts in the South Pacific (he sold Star Fish after a shipyard fire slowed construction) and a model of the stunning



**Clockwise from left:** Paddleboarding at Banwa; Palawan offers great diving and snorkelling opportunities; the pool villas boast extensive terraces





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.

**M**y villa, South One, faces its namesake prime meridian and looks over a heavenly strip of white sand and a sizable private pool. As the afternoon wanes, the barefoot-chic white and turquoise interiors by 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. Within, a king-size bed and a duo of sofas are joined by a double-height bathroom-cum-dressing room that boasts double vanities 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 sun sets, I join Peter back at the pier, where we try our hand at eco-golf, with balls made of biodegradable material and fish food. "It's a pretty special place isn't it?" says Peter as we sip champagne and watch the skies steadily darken. "It can be so hard to escape the modern world but at least here, you can pretend like none of it exists."

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 down those garden-lined pathways. Tardy fireflies resemble navigation beacons in the dusk gloom, flying foxes flitter about in the canopy of palm fronds, and endangered tabon birds, which the resort helps conserve, dash across the path ahead of me like late commuters.

I slip past the resort's main building, which houses the alfresco Latitude Restaurant & Terrace and a communal infinity pool, and make my way



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 inhabited islands and countless  
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**Clockwise from  
 bottom left:** Latitude  
 Restaurant & Terrace  
 incorporates ingredients  
 from a local organic  
 farm; the beach offers  
 privacy and tranquility;  
 Banwa's villas feature  
 welcoming white and  
 turquoise interiors







along cool sand towards the coconut grove and its beachfront yoga terrace where, for the next hour, I work hard to contort myself out from a posture cemented by hours spent hunching over a computer. The serenity, it seems, can be surprisingly inspiring.

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. Originally created to help the critically endangered Hawksbill turtles that return generationally to Banwa to lay their eggs, Aquos is clearly close to the Swede's heart and he takes great pride in showing me some of the 400 'reef balls' – concrete structures designed to encourage coral growth in a region that was all but decimated by decades of dynamite fishing – that have been planted on the house reef.

In the light of midmorning, seven metres below the waves, the balls look like giant amphoras cast from a Roman shipwreck, and are now home to young snapper, clown fish, shy lion fish and even an inquisitive moray eel,

while on their surfaces, coral is already growing, a testament to nature's ability to bounce back in the face of adversity.

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.

Back at the resort, before boarding the Iguana for our journey back to the real world, I meet Banwa's beekeepers, who take me through the process of harvesting honeycomb from hives located on the island's chip-and-put 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.



**Clockwise from top left:** The resort's beachfront yoga terrace; a diving trip reveals snapper, clown fish and lion fish; Banwa's marine initiatives include protecting Hawksbill turtle eggs; produce from Tumarbong Organic Farm on Palawan