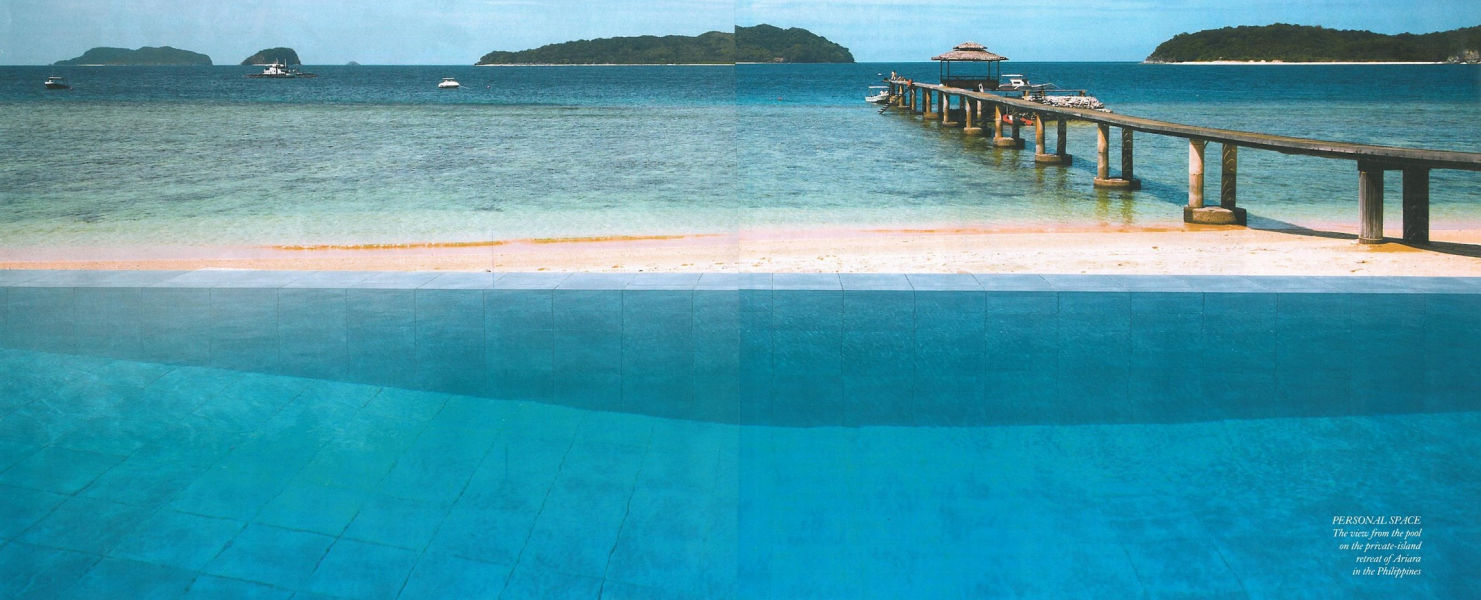


Castaway's paradise

At a dreamy private-isle resort in the Philippines, **LISA GRAINGER** finds herself the mistress of her own personal domain – the ultimate in heavenly seclusion and blissful relaxation with no one but her friends for company
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEU SALVAING



PERSONAL SPACE
 The view from the pool on the private-island retreat of Ariara in the Philippines

Swinging in the sea breeze beneath a fig-tree in my finely woven 'nest' of rattan, soft cushions beneath my head and a glass of fresh mango juice in my hand, there is nowhere else I would rather be. Other than a few tiny white crabs dancing at the water's edge, I'm alone. To my right, the fine, creamy sand stretches a few hundred metres, fringed with coconut-palms and hardwoods whose fat, glossy leaves shimmer in the sunlight. In front, a long wooden jetty reaches the sea; above it, cloudless skies. And a few metres from my feet glimmers the clearest water I've ever seen, the liquid equivalent of a bowl of blue gems: pale tourmalines that meld into emeralds, jades and then a deep iridescent sapphire. It's picture-postcard perfect, and even better because it's all mine: a private island that, for five nights, will be home to just me and my friends.

What seems to have passed us by is that the Philippines is one of the most beautiful places on Earth: an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands just north of the equator, with temperatures that rarely dip below 21 degrees Celsius and rarely rise above 37. It has a bigger coastline than the United States, fringed with white beaches, and such a rich diversity of wildlife that it's known as the Island Zoo of the Pacific (there are more than 1,000 species here, 243 of them endemic). Jacques Cousteau declared it's underwater topography the most spellbinding he'd ever explored. And the food is delicious: there are sweet coconuts and buttery, orange mangos, and fishermen regularly catch big tuna, sea-bream, lobsters, crabs and prawns – and, on our island, these are brought straight to the chef to whip into seafood feasts.

When I say 'our island', I mean Ariara: the private retreat of British couple Charles and Carrie McCulloch, who fell in love with the remote Palawan region of the western Philippines in 2005 and six years later (having bought four islands and built a home) opened Ariara to guests who want to take over the sandy idyll in its entirety.

Flying over the tiny dots of land sprinkled in seas of luminous blues, it's not difficult to see why the Berkshire farmers succumbed to the charms of the Philippines. The land is hilly and densely forested, with dramatic cliffs pounded by waves, and sandy beaches littered with piles of coral and shells. Many islands are uninhabited – or lived on by just a few families who eke out an existence fishing in their hand-hewn canoes. There are thousands of miles of reefs, ablaze with multicoloured corals and sealife. And there's plenty to explore on one of Ariara's six boats: nearby islands full of giggling children who have rarely seen a Caucasian; the town of San Miguel with its peppermint-painted Catholic church and stilted houses of

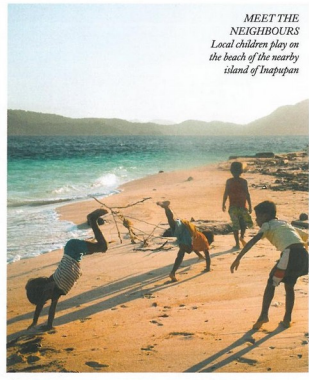
the fishermen; a 500-year-old Spanish fort crumbling in the jungle; and natural attractions, from the azure freshwater Kayangan Lake to the volcanic cliffs at Coron, whose soaring, sculpted edges are every bit as dramatic as those in Vietnam's Halong Bay. Not that any of these attractions is compulsory. The point of having an island to yourself – and up to 17 friends – is that you do precisely what you want, when you want. And there's plenty of space on the 125-acre island in which to spread out. Rather than building a single house to accommodate guests, the McCullochs contracted revered Filipino architect Jorge Yulo to create a number of white-walled thatched villas for guests to sleep in, as well as a central communal living area in which to hang out, read or party.

Carrie McCulloch, clearly a perfectionist, decorated the interiors herself in a simple, elegant style. Everything was locally sourced and made by the 30 staff who are now chefs, waiters, boatmen, diving instructors and masseuses, but who in the beginning built the place. Even the baths were made on-site, some from local woods, others hewn from a single piece of local marble.

The bedrooms, opening on to the garden or raised on pillars, are every bit as comfortable as those in a luxury hotel. Beds are four-posters, swathed in cotton netting and made up in supersoft linens. Bathrooms are floored with pale-grey marble and feature outdoor showers in private courtyards. There are walk-in wardrobes, safes, minibars and fans, as well as verandahs with big round sofas on which to laze and hammocks on which to swing.

Best of all for those who can't sit still for long, there are countless activities to take part in. A hike up a 500-metre hill, on a steep path hacked through the jungle by the gardeners, offers incredible views. Marlene, a delightful local therapist, offers mani-pedis and strong deep-tissue massages. Jet-skis and kayaks are on hand for guests to explore the islands alone. There's a RIB boat, a speedboat for excursions, and a big dive boat for group trips, as well as a 100-foot cruising trimaran, the *KI*, with cabins sleeping 10, bathrooms, and a deck littered with bean bags made for snoozing; it's this boat that collects new guests who have flown to the island of Coron, gently lulling them into island life on the four-hour cruise to Ariara.

Although the scenery around the Palawan islands is spectacular, it is nothing compared with that in the sea. German dive master Florian Mueller says he has dived all over the world and never seen coral as magnificent, or sealife as diverse. 'It's like Madagascar, in terms of incredible wildlife,' he says, 'but underwater.' Having dived with him for three days, I see what he means. One only has to walk down the jetty steps into the sea to see spectacular coral: great golden brain-shapes, man-size trees of lilac with pink 'blossoms',



MEET THE NEIGHBOURS
 Local children play on the beach of the nearby island of Inapagan

Many of the islands in the vicinity are uninhabited – or lived on by a few families who eke out an existence fishing in canoes

Ariara to guests who want to take over the sandy idyll in its entirety.

ESCAPE

barrel sponges in the shape of Greek urns, and walls of twinkling live coral, heaving with fish. Rainbow-hue parrotfish crunch on coral. A rare leatherback turtle floats by like some strange Stone Age creature, and a manta-ray pops its head out of a hole. And wherever you look, brilliantly coloured fish dart and flash: single spotted show-offs with white fins and slothful nudibranchs striped in iridescent purple and yellow.

If it wasn't for the fact that a tank of oxygen lasts just 50 minutes and the meals are too good to miss, I would have dived all day. The chef, Jonnel Sotto, was formerly head Asian chef in the Amanpulo hotel, and is a whiz at turning fresh local ingredients into healthy, tasty feasts. With cocktails, he might serve kilawin na tanigue (ceviche, made with local lime, peppers and red onions) or tuna carpaccio. Dinner might be grilled lobster with green and mango salad, or slowly roasted pig, finished off with home-made chocolate ice-cream, or creamed coconut with pandan jelly. But then, as he says: 'I can cook most styles,

Rainbow-hue parrotfish crunch on coral. A leatherback turtle floats by like some Stone Age creature, and a manta-ray pops its head out of a hole

from Japanese to Indian, so if the guests tell me their favourite dishes, I am happy to make them.'

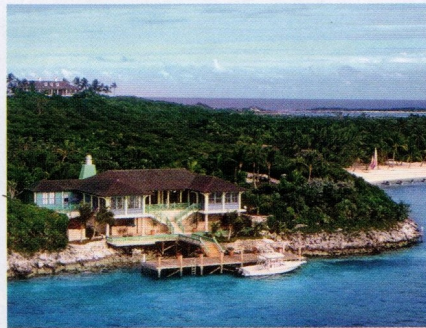
His attitude is typical, I learnt, of Filipinos. They are naturally hospitable people, but at Ariara this is particularly pronounced because they built the retreat, and care about its success. As we finally sailed away, watching the white-clad staff waving goodbye, I resolved to start saving to return. With 17 guests, it costs about £195 a person a day (excluding alcohol, petrol and massages). Which, for your own private island staffed by super-friendly people, is a bargain. My advice is to round up friends quickly, and book before the McCullochs put the price up – or realise what a paradise they have created, and move there permanently. I would have... □
Seven nights at Ariara Island cost from £2,250 a person full board (for 15–17 sharing), including international flights with Cathay Pacific, domestic flights and boat transfer to the island, use of all water-sports equipment and two drives a person a week, with Audley (01993 838155; www.audleytravel.com).

REST OF THE BEST: Private party retreats



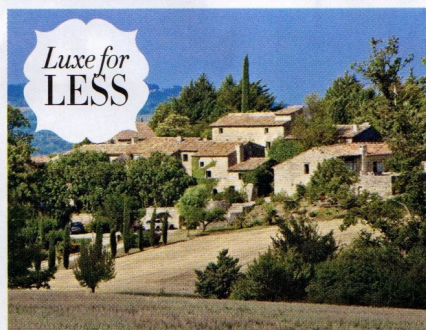
Best for ALL-OUT LUXURY Laucala Island, Fiji

This 3,000-acre private isle has 25 timbered and thatched villas, overlooking lagoons and powder-white beaches. The hilltop spa offers authentic local treatments, and there are five fine-dining options, an equestrian centre, a luxury fleet of boats and an 18-hole golf course.
From about £2,425 a villa a night (sleeps three); or the whole island is available to rent (sleeps 80; see www.laucala.com for details).



Best for BEACH EXPLORING Musha Cay, Bahamas

Brought to life by its owner, the illusionist David Copperfield, this chain of islands is available for private hire for up to 24 guests. Within its lush 700 acres – spread over 11 isles – there are five luxurious guest houses, all with their own private beaches, and over 40 other beaches to explore.
The whole resort is available to rent; visit www.mushacay.com for details.



Luxe for LESS

Best for PRIVACY Le Grand Banc, France

This totally secluded hamlet in the Luberon is a collection of stone houses grouped together, sleeping up to 24 comfortably. There are staff on demand, rooms of cool contemporary art, dining options to sit 40 at one table, and a pool with glorious views. Venture out for walking, cycling and local food markets.
Le Grand Banc (www.legrandbanc.co.uk), from £1,000 a night (sleeps 24).



Best for DECADENCE Blue Bay, Spain

This spectacular estate has just been transformed into one of the most exclusive properties available for rent in Ibiza. Blue Bay is three original fincas sleeping up to 16, with cliff-top views, four-and-a-half acres of landscaped grounds, a 3-D cinema, DJ station, two pools and a powerboat, plus VIP entry to clubs, bars and restaurants.
The whole estate is available to rent (sleeps 16); visit www.bluebayibiza.com for details.



Best for FAMILIES Ezzahra, Morocco

The Palmeria is Marrakesh's tranquil corner, away from the wonderful mayhem of downtown. This large private villa is set in extensive gardens with a large swimming pool, spa and a games room. Everything is included in the price, from laundry and the hammam to meals and treatments.
Ezzahra (+1 212 661 221 714; www.ezzahra-morocco.com). Seven nights, from £24,000 full board (sleeps 14), including transfers.