

# Desert island dream in remotest

After more than 24 hours' travel, **Jemima Sissons** arrived on the paradise island of Ariara

As the plane rumbles along from Manila to Busuanga in the Palawan peninsula in the Philippines, the smiling stewardess at the front starts playing a game of "Show and Tell" to an enraptured audience. In the absence of TVs to divert us, first person to hold up a... pen, wins a thermos flask. Next person to hold up a... passport gets a cool bag with a natty airline design on. Half the passengers shoot their arms up waving them furiously. I ask my next-door neighbour if this is normal? "Why, what do you do in England when you fly?" she says, as though I am completely mad. I join in with gusto.

I then take one look below at the endless clear blue sea punctuated with perfect islands, white sands glinting and coral reefs abundant, and the jet lag from the epic journey (three flights, and more journeying to come) disappears. As we come to touch down over the islands, the sun casting a glint across the turquoise waters, Bing Crosby starts crooning on the sound system "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas". This is surely the most surreal flight of my life.

Busuanga airport is a tiny cement building, cows grazing alongside, waxy palms shooting into the sky. From here it is a jolly van ride to the jetty, the young drivers merrily singing along to Beach Boys and Hotel California, the oldies are clear favourites here.

I don't look much of an adventurer, crumpled shirt and mucky white jeans, but I certainly feel like one, as I step onto the graceful hull of the KJ. The boat, a local Banca (fishing boat with outriggers), is the last stop before we finally reach our paradise isle. We change into our bikinis and sarongs and tuck into an unbelievable lunch of kilawin na tanigue, a sort of ceviche using Spanish mackerel (not as nasty as it sounds, it's rather like tuna), marinated in coconut milk and chili, washed down with a sweet mango smoothie.

The final destination is the private island of Ariara. Owned by English couple Charles and Carrie McCulloch, if you are looking for a secluded Robinson Crusoe getaway - with manicures, jet skis and gourmet food thrown in - it doesn't get better than this. Bought in 2005 and opened as a



hotel last year, Ariara sleeps up to 17 in seven villas and cottages, and comes fully staffed. The island is based around the philosophy of feeling like it is your own home, but with all the comforts of a hotel. There is all you expect such as air-con, clothes are washed and pressed daily, the staff are wonderful: the only downside is that not all rooms have wifi, which is

annoying, though all communal areas do. Yet unlike most other private islands, it is (relatively) affordable. A week at full capacity works out at an exceptionally reasonable £195 per person per day, which includes all meals (minus booze, petrol and massages), and watersports.

After feasting, we set off, stopping at a breathtaking James Bond-esque

lagoon, flanked with towering volcanic shards. After 24 hours of travel (although it's possible to significantly shorten travel time with private planes), a swim has never felt so good. A four-hour gentle ride on the KJ (owned by the McCullochs for use on the island) or hour-long zippy speed boat ride then takes you to Ariara.

The property is built on the western

side of the island. A long jetty invites you into the main villa, built on the traditional "anyhow" roofing design, with a round table that would turn King Arthur green with envy. Dinners are communal and taken here, the cool breeze coming through the open doors; vases of purple orchids adding colour. I was staying in a raised jungle villa, an outdoor lounging area below,

## TRAVEL NOTES

BY ZOE STRIMPEL

### Graydon Carter's Monkey Bar

Heading to New York? You really mustn't miss out on the hottest new-old restaurant in town. Manhattan's legendary Monkey Bar, with a list of regulars that has included Dorothy Parker, Tennessee Williams and Marlon Brando, has been given an overhaul by none other than Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter, the new owner. Along with his partner Ken Friedman, Carter has assembled dream team of the best chefs and mixologists. Damon Wise's cooking draws on the bold flavours and ingredients of America's regions and heartlands: think roast grouper with heirloom beans, cockles, quanciale, sour-dough and celery leaves; Colorado lamb with matsutake; Swiss chard and horseradish, and cinnamon parma cotta with roast pumpkin and rosemary. *The Elysée Hotel, 60 East 54th Street, monkeybarnewyork.com*



### For Italian style try the Amalfi Coast monastery hotel

For an Italian getaway this spring or summer, book in at the hotly tipped Monastero Santa Rosa Hotel and Spa, opening in May. Suspended over the Bay of Salerno, the hotel was a 17th century monastery and consists of 20 guest rooms and suites, all with sea views, a restaurant, a heated infinity pool, stunning landscaped gardens spread over five tiers, a historic herb garden and a private 12th century chapel. The spa incorporates a labyrinth of historic monastic spaces and outdoor pavilions.

Opening 17 May. Rooms start from €375 plus tax on a b&b basis. [www.monasterosantarosa.com](http://www.monasterosantarosa.com)

### ITC opens a new flagship venture in Chennai

Chennai is to gain a 600-room luxury hotel from April with the opening of the ITC Grand Chola, located between the airport and the business district. The 10-storey property is named after the Chola Empire, which reigned over most of south India from the 9th-13th century. [www.itc-hotels.in/ITCGrandChola](http://www.itc-hotels.in/ITCGrandChola)