

**LIKE DOWNTON!
BUT WARMER.**
(like a sudden need for cheese ice-cream) Yes please, says Emma Reid



Morning coffee in my nightie

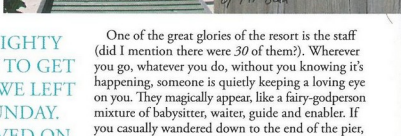
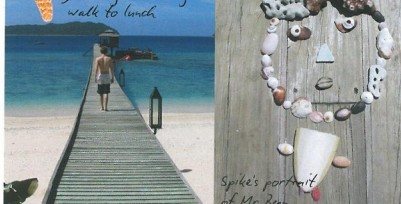
One of Ariara's eight cottages

Plus children and mine, Howard



Do you remember where you were the first time you heard about Richard Branson's island utopia, Necker? I do. I think I went into spiritual shock at the idea of a fully staffed desert-island paradise entirely geared up for one party of visitors. Since then, I've been dreaming about finding my own island. Thank the lord for Twitter. When I told my ridiculous brother Matthew that I was going to Ariara Island in the Philippines, he checked out the website and said, 'So what's wrong with it?' 'What are you talking about, you weirdo?' I retorted (I always speak to him like that – someone has to, and it turns out to be me). 'There must be something,' he said. 'It's an exclusive island resort for the dedicated use of one group of visitors with a staff of 30, six boats, everything included in the fee, including massages, scuba-diving, food and drinks, and it's 15 per cent of the price of Necker. What's wrong with it?' Being a stupid younger brother, he asked the wrong question. It's not 'What's wrong with it?' It's 'What's different?'

First, it's East. And, controversially perhaps, my sincere belief is that for the greatest holidays of all you should go East, my friend, not West. West is expensive, glamorous, polished – it's the Bahamas, Barbados, Antigua and Necker. East is cheaper, friendlier, weirder – it's Thailand, Bali, Vietnam, India, the Philippines, and Ariara. Second, the Philippines is rightfully famous for funky backpacking, but not completely known for holiday heaven... yet. Third, it's a mighty journey to get there. But, 'The mightier the journey, the bigger the adventure', said my travel agent. And I believed her. We left on a Sunday. We arrived on the Tuesday. If we had had to leave on the Wednesday, it would still have been worth it. I only remember nothing else from this article, please remember that. The journey started at Heathrow with a business-class British Airways flight to Hong Kong, and from there on to Manila, where we spent the night at the divine Mandarin Oriental hotel, with its heavenly spa seemingly specifically designed to offset jetlag, in a beautiful suite with two gorgeous bedrooms – Richard and I in one, our small sons Charlie and Spike in the other. The next day, Saturday, we were met by Jake, had a grown-up room of their own. The next morning, we took a domestic plane to the island of Coron, where we were met by Ariara's 100-foot wooden Filipino fishing boat for the four-hour sea journey to what I am now calling Our Island. The boat is vintage, rustic and local, but has five air-conditioned ensuite rooms below and a beautiful deck above with bean bags on which to sleep, sunbathe or read. We drifted past hundreds of tiny, perfect jungle islands – it was like sailing through *Journeys to Aster*. And then, just as the sun started to set, we moored on in to Ariara. And do you know, dear reader, rather unexpectedly, it was just a tiny bit like arriving at Downton Abbey. The staff (THERE REALLY WERE 30) lined up to greet us. We shook hands, I tried to hug them all, we drank fresh coconut water and were taken to meet our new home. Every house is on the beach and backed by jungle. They all have glass walls that can be made private with double-layered curtains, or opened fully so that the inside feels like part of the outside. The resort sleeps 18, but with only six of us there, my children had a house each. They were thrilled about this – until there was a thunderstorm during the night, at which point our bed had to sleep six (FYI, there is no bed in the world so massive it can sleep six without pain). In the centre of the little houses is the Lodge – a sitting room with floor-to-ceiling windows, a square of beautiful white sofas, games, a cinema screen and views out past the charcoal-stone infinity pool to the beach, the pier and the horizon sprinkled with more tiny islands.



IT'S A MIGHTY JOURNEY TO GET THERE – WE LEFT ON A SUNDAY. WE ARRIVED ON THE TUESDAY you settled down to watch a movie, Macy would appear with popcorn. I've often wondered what life must be like at Downton, where there is always an under-footman-valet-butler in the corner of the room looking earnestly into the middle distance. Now I know. It's really nice. So here's an average/compiled day on Ariara. **9ah Breakfast.** If you are a male, Curtis, breakfast is fluffy waffles, proper pancakes, crispy bacon and a bucket of maple syrup. If you are a female, breakfast is four slices of exquisite watermelon and an espresso. What can I say? My body is sadly one of those temples in need of resurfacing, scaffolding and a little underpinning. **10ah Poolside.** books, coffee, games, mini water polo, lurks. **11ah Snorkelling and scuba-diving.** Spike, Charlie and Jake scuba straight off the pier – swimming gracefully (I apart from Spike, who scuba much like a squid) through shoals of tiny neon fishes, passing like starfish, graceful striped angelfish and dramatic sea urchins. Amaze. **12ah I ask Mylene,** the island therapist, for a facial. She sets up the massage table on my balcony, and arrives without a single bottle or jar. >



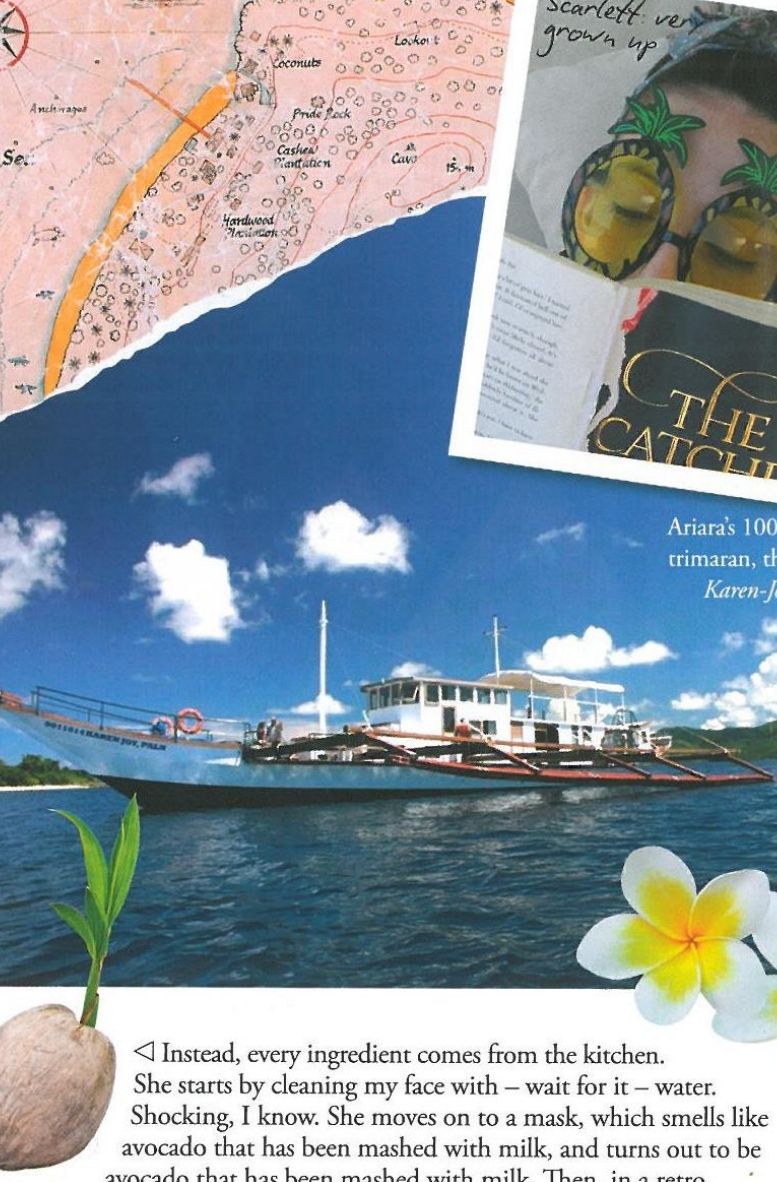
My bath

Charlie's breakfast starter

My day for a swim

Richard trying to get rid of one of our children

One of the boys still comes to me to ask for a piggy back ride



Ariara's 100ft trimaran, the Karen-Joy



Onboard the Karen-Joy

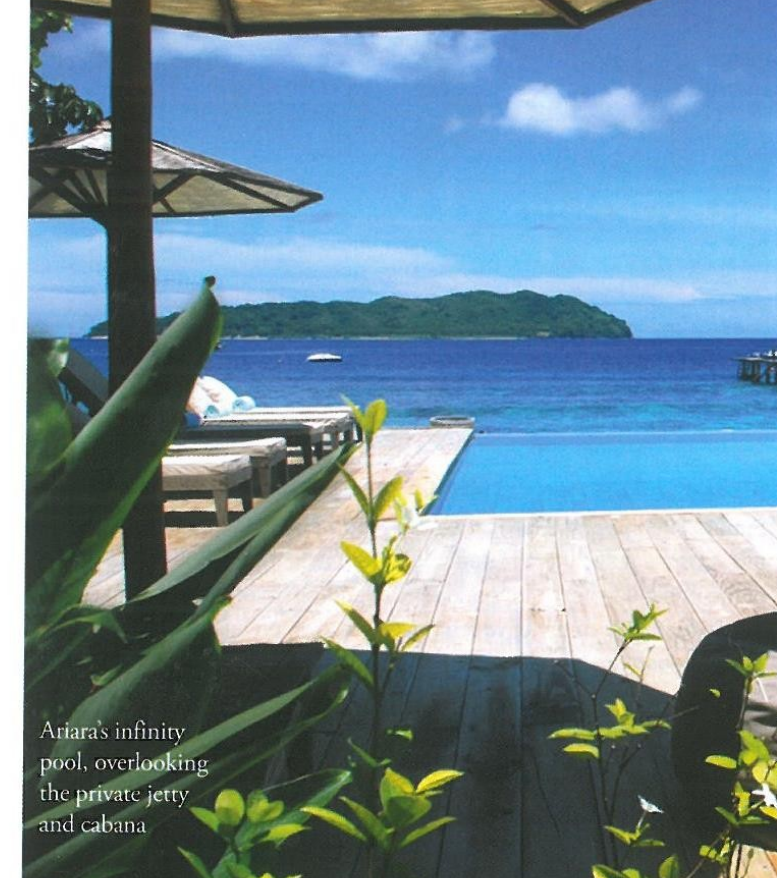
< Instead, every ingredient comes from the kitchen. She starts by cleaning my face with – wait for it – water. Shocking, I know. She moves on to a mask, which smells like avocado that has been mashed with milk, and turns out to be avocado that has been mashed with milk. Then, in a retro moment, she puts two cucumber circles on my eyes. The mask is followed by a scrub of halved calamansi limes, which are brushed onto my skin in a circular fashion, after which I'm refreshed with a toner of ice-cold cucumber water. Finally, I am massaged with a glorious virgin olive oil. When I open my eyes I see that she also has some chopped tomato in a dish. I'm not sure if she's already used it on me, or just has it there so she can turn the remains into a guacamole for her lunch.

- 1ish Lunch.** It's served at a different venue every day, but today it's in the open-sided hut at the end of the pier. Gazpacho, a Thai salad of prawns and mango, homemade pizza for the children and a fragrant lychee jelly. At the end of the meal, we throw the pizza crusts to the baby sharks basking under the pier. They are adorable, in a 'give me some more bread or I will kill you' kind of a way.
- 2ish Richard** goes for a healing therapy massage with Mylene and returns having clearly slept through it, but smelling of cinnamon – and with that attractive massage-bed-head-rest shape etched into his face.
- 3ish Scarlett** (17) and **Jake** (15) take out the jet skis. They return after an hour, having discovered village communities on tiny islands, deserted beaches and the joy of the well-fuelled accelerator in the hands of a teenager.
- 4ish Chef** emerges from his jungle kitchen and asks us what we would like for supper that night. Spike says, 'Can you make ice cream?' 'Yes,' says chef. 'How about cheese flavour?' 'Yes, of course,' says

THE SHARKS ARE ADORABLE, IN A 'GIVE ME SOME MORE BREAD OR I WILL KILL YOU' KIND OF A WAY

chef. And off he goes. We eat it later, and everyone says it's like ice cream but it tastes of cheese. Spike reminds us he only asked as a joke, but the problem is everyone here says 'YES' to everything. **5ish** We are intrepid, we are fearless, we are foolish, and we decide to trek to the highest point of the island. It's a fabulous climb through proper, real *George of the Jungle*-style jungle. Marco and two of the staff lead the way, armed with big machetes to cut through the vines and undergrowth. We climb up rocks and along tiny tracks, coming across occasional ropes that have been hung from trees to steady us, and eventually arrive at the top. The view is unreal. We gaze out across the panoramic vista of the endless sea, peppered with immaculate islands like archery targets. Each one is a bullseye of jungle green, ringed with the bright white of the beach, surrounded by a circle of turquoise shallows and fringed with the deep royal blue of the South China Sea. Marco hands round homemade cinnamon biscuits, and the beauty of the moment is pierced only by Jake screaming: 'Aaaaaaagh, I've been bitten by a scorpion!' The reactions from the party are interesting. Marco moves calmly towards him to assist; Richard (self-appointed Curtis Health and Safety Officer) goes into a blind panic and begins working out the best position for the Medevac air-rescue helicopter to land; I think, 'Hooray, a dramatic event for my travel article'; and Charlie and Spike stream something along the lines of 'Cut it out with the machetes and let us seeee!' Jake, you will be relieved to hear, makes a full >

WE COME ACROSS A FIFTIES GENERATOR, A SIXTIES TV SET AND WOODEN BENCHES: THE VILLAGE CINEMA two-person bath hewn from local wood and polished to the softest of finishes. I throw in sea salt soaked with local oils and gaze out through the glass to the enclosed jungle garden at the back of the villa. A small lizard gazes back at me. **8ish Supper** – like lunch, it could be anywhere, but tonight it's on the beach. Bean bags surround the hammock chair hanging from a palm tree in front of a glowing bonfire, and the sand is scattered with candles. A wooden table is brought down to the water's edge and we feast on barbecued lobster, Thai vegetable curry and rare steak, all cooked on a pile of wood lit right in front of us. Also, to the absolute delight of Charlie – who is 10 and had almost forgotten about sweets entirely – big, fluffy, white melted marshmallows. **10ish Movie time** – in the sitting room. The doors are open so we are cooled by the gentle wind from the water. The cinema screen is viewed, and we watch a local copy of *Cool Runnings*, complete with a view of the tops of the heads of the people in the cinema where it was pirated. **Midnightish Bed** (four-poster), sheets (linen), mosquito net (phew), the sounds of the geckos (geck-o), air conditioning (phew). So that is roughly how it rolls – until our last day, when we are taken to a neighbouring island to have our minds blown a little. This tiny and perfect dot of land sits about half a mile across the water. Nestled on its beach are around 40 thatched cottages, where a community of fishermen and their families live pretty much as they have done for hundreds of years. The men fish all day, trading the excess for rice and



Ariara's infinity pool, overlooking the private jetty and cabana

clothes and living almost entirely self-sufficiently – seemingly without money, electricity, computers, newspapers, phones, land rights, taxation or governance. It's a harmonious, gentle coexistence between animals and people, and there, in the middle of this ancient community, we come across a Fifties generator, a Sixties TV set and rows of wooden benches: the village cinema. No lights, no mobiles, an average of eight children per family, a few pigs, a vat of coconuts and, once a week, a *Mr Bean* video. So, to sum up...

THE FIVE BEST THINGS ABOUT ARIARA (According to Scarlett, Jake, Charlie and Spike Curtis)
 1 Every meal was in a different place.
 2 The beds fit six people.
 3 There are lizards.
 4 There are virtually too many things to do, even though it's teeny.
 5 No one tells you off when you lick the plate.

THE FIVE WORST THINGS ABOUT ARIARA
 1 The cheese ice cream was a little disappointing.
 2 There was this enormous, man-eating scorpion.
 3 There are lizards.
 4 It's still 15 per cent of the price of Necker.
 5 Er... that's it.

Website ariara.island.com **Book it** Cleveland Collection (clevelandcollection.co.uk or 020 7843 3531) specialises in bespoke holidays and has extra-ordinary experiences. It can arrange seven nights' private hire of Ariara Island from £2,760 a person, full board, based on a minimum of 15 people. This includes flights, transfers, accommodation, staff and water sports.



Virtually George of the Jungle

