



Boracay's famed white-sand beach

My love affair with *Boracay*

Text by **JAKE RAMIREZ**

It started in the early '90s, back when I first laid my eyes on the island paradise of Boracay. It was love at first sight. I kept coming back for more, until I became a certified Boracay junkie. As a matter-of-fact, I even tried living in the island for a month, blowing up my savings to experience the bohemian allure of Boracay, and I could not get enough of it. There was a time when I would take a Boracay trip at the drop of a dime, monthly at that. And then something happened to my paradise.

What was once a rustic island hideaway had become an over-commercialized modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, nay, and a hedonistic one. After countless summer days spent on the island paradise of Boracay, I can't help but feel nostalgic, longing for its old self. The island is now host to gargantuan hotels, fast food outlets, and an international coffee chain. Gone are the days when we had to bring a flashlight at night while walking to guide us as we headed for Beachcomber, Cocomangas, or Bazurra. Drinking in the old Kontiki Floating Bar and waiting for the sunset was the norm for the partygoers and swimming back to the shore after dusk, one would step on luminous algae or krills and see the organisms glow under darkness. It is all now just a distant memory. The main road then was pitch-dark come nightfall and a midnight curfew was strictly enforced for tricycles to avoid unnecessary vehicular noise. Boracay's present-day landscape is like a small Dubai, with all the construction going on despite the existing moratorium about new buildings. The main road has become congested not just by tricycles but with all kinds of vehicles and I was surprised to find not just one but three big gasoline stations. This was totally non-existent in the '80s since they were using the *takal* system (by the bottle) then for measuring gasoline. Welcome to the ever changing landscape of Boracay Island, where there is nowhere to go but adapt.

Location, Location, Location

Slowly, the thatched *nipa* huts clustered around a main dining hall to create a semblance of a resort have gone for good. Instead, bricks and stones creating multi-level hotels are rising. What used to be a lack of facilities of old Boracay, is now swiftly making up for lost time with modern-day conveniences such as WiFi connections. The days of "getting away" for a weekend

in Boracay are but a fleeting memory. Back then, one had to get to a single phone booth at the beachfront to make a call back home, and one can totally get lost in time literally, with only the sun's position to tell the time of the day. Now, anyone can update his or her Facebook or Twitter status anywhere in the numerous establishments lining the four-kilometer beachfront where WiFi connection is *de rigueur*. Maybe it's just me, but nowadays, I prefer spending more time inside my hotel room and lap in the luxury of the resort. Maybe I am getting old for Boracay, and Boracay has become too young for me. I have come full circle. Now, I prefer chatting over a bottle of wine or coffee, and quite unmindful of the crowd that whizzes outside of the hotel's perimeter. Unlike before, when I was itching to party as early as happy hour timed at sundown. However, one thing is still non-negotiable when a Boracay trip is in the offing: location will always be top priority. Gone are the



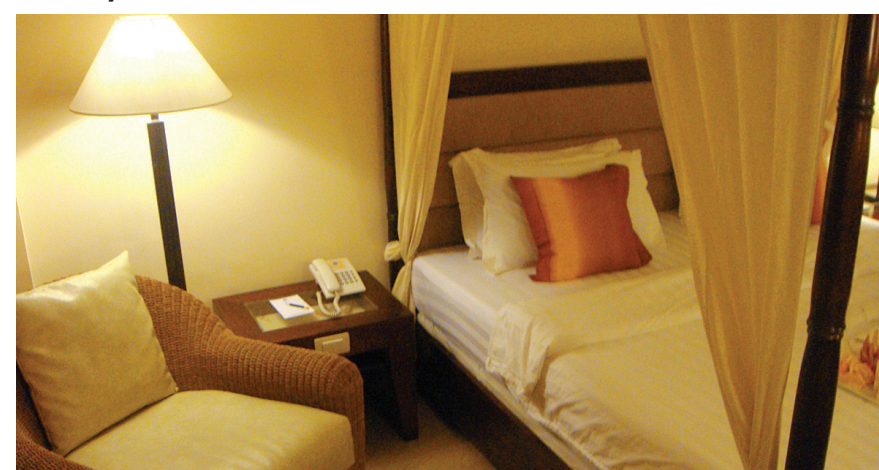
The author at the Kontiki Floating Bar in the '90s.

days of Station 1, 2, and 3, where the 1st station is supposed for the "haves" and the last is for the "have nots", and the middle station was for those who wanted the best of both sides. The present day reincarnation of Boracay boasts of five-star accommodations from end-to-end of the four-kilometer beachfront. And in the middle of everything is Boracay Mandarin Island Hotel, a 52-room establishment that captures the essence of luxurious living in a tropical island setting.

Modern Day Robinson Crusoe



Boracay sunset



Boracay Mandarin's de luxe suite

When the husband-and-wife team of Robert Po and Lily Ng-Po would spend summer in Boracay, they would bring their two daughters Christina and Khristine, as well as their youngest son Rob, traveling by land from Iloilo to Caticlan. Then one day, it dawned on the patriarch to open a resort of their own, and what started as a "mom-and-pop" bed and breakfast has evolved into a full-service hotel. From the present-day 52 rooms of Boracay Mandarin, the Po family has just purchased the old Tirol and Tirol Resort and is planning a 300-room expansion soon. Eldest daughter Christina, upon

graduating from Ateneo De Manila with a degree in Psychology, is busy lending a hand to mother Lily who is acting as their Managing Director. Khristine, on the other hand, is finishing her culinary studies at the College of St. Benilde and will be manning the hotel's kitchen anytime soon. Presently, father Robert, an avid fan of "The Godfather", has decided to name the hotel's fine dining outlet as Don Vito Ristorante Italiano, and their Ambassador Hotel Suite as Don Leon, in homage to Mario Puzo's novel. And for an Italian food lover like me, I must admit that Don Vito is one of the best in the island of Boracay. I even wanted to yell, "Roll the mattress", as Don Vito Corleone would say when going to war. For those who love to dine under the stars, Boracay Mandarin has their Buco Bar and Grill by the beachfront, where acoustic performers serenade diners nightly.

Mandarin Spa

And what is a Boracay vacation without the spa treatment. Yes, those who prefer the yesteryears of Boracay will be glad to note that the massage therapists plying the long beach are still there, offering their services. However, contemporary Boracay Island has become known for excellent spa treatments, and I must say that I prefer spa to drink-till-you-drop sessions nowadays. Mandarin Spa offers traditional Filipino treatments such as "Hilot" as well as foot spa with an ocean view to boot, no pun intended. The therapists of Mandarin Spa are well trained by a consultant who visits now and then for training and re-training in "Hilot". Mandarin Spa is located just at the entrance of Boracay Mandarin.

As the old adage goes, what happens in Bora, stays in Bora. However, some good things should stay out in the open, and Mandarin Boracay Island Hotel is one of those things. By the way, for those who need to know, Jonah's Shakes has closed its beachfront location and decided to relocate somewhere else. Do I hear loud cries from fanatics, given that Jonah's was the place to see and be seen? Welcome to Boracay 2010.

For reservations, please contact your travel agent or you may book online at www.boracaymandarin.com or email reservation@boracaymandarin.com. Boracay Mandarin Island Hotel is located at Beachfront, Station 2, Balabag, Boracay Island. Manila Sales Office is at Unit 36-G, 36th Floor, Pearl Of The Orient Tower Condominium, 1318 Roxas Blvd. corner Padre Faura Street, Ermita, Manila. Please call 5671672-73/5244759 or email infor@boracaymandarin.com



Boracay Mandarin Spa with the hotel at the background. (inset) Mother and daughter-tag team, Christina and Lily Po