

## Marine Eyes: El Nido Resorts

El Nido Resorts ([www.elnidoresorts.com](http://www.elnidoresorts.com)) are run by Ten Knots Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Asian Conservation Company, of which ex-banker Leigh A. Talmage-Perez is president. "ACC's mainly American shareholders are investing in the business, as an alternative to making donations," Perez explains. "They are investing in the future; and when we make a profit, rather than taking the money out, we reinvest it back into the project." El Nido is their first project that involves working with the local community; if it succeeds, the concept can be transplanted to anywhere in the world.

Ninety-five percent of El Nido's staff come from the area, making the local community their workforce as well as spokespeople. They get trained in F & B, housekeeping and massage techniques - acquiring skills they can be proud of. Perez explained that environmental awareness can only be raised through education. "It's all about respect - we have to be careful to not be too tough on the locals, either." The resorts offer them alternative occupations to fishing and farming; staff are taught why illegal fishing methods are short-sighted.

Dotted with 250-million-year-old limestone formations on the northwest tip of Palawan Province, El Nido consists of two resorts: Miniloc Island Resort and Lagen Island Resort. The location was discovered by the owner of a Japanese sugar company and his partners who were avid divers at a time when El Nido was one of the best places in the world for diving. They used to organise live-aboard dive trips until a boat broke down in 1980. They then decided to build a dive camp in Miniloc, which evolved into the resorts of today.

While there are only 50 species of coral in the entire Caribbean, the Philippines can claim up to 300. In 1998, when El Nido was recognised as one of the most important sites of biological diversity in the country, the Philippine government elevated its status from marine reserve to protected area, thus prohibiting commercial fishing. Lagen opened that same year, but due to the lack of government funding, protection laws weren't reinforced. "We've become the eye of the protected area," El Nido Resorts' General Manager Etienne La Brooy explains. "We're the helpers - if we notice anything, we'll immediately inform the authority." A portion of the

profits made by the resorts goes to the El Nido Foundation, which looks after the well-being and livelihood the local community, by stipulating that anything that they do should protect and enhance the environment as well as make gains for sustainable development.

The corals at El Nido have been through a series of disasters: they got bleached by El Niño in 1998; then they were wrecked by a freak typhoon. In 2003, divers carefully removed up to eight tonnes of crown of thorns, fast-breeding parasites that kill whole corals. Just like the Filipinos themselves, the corals of El Nido proved to be resilient: they are growing back and maintaining the great diversity for which these waters are known. Scuba diving and snorkelling are still amazing here. The Sulu Sulawesi seas have the highest number of species of fish and corals in the world - and they come in large quantities. Divers can expect an average visibility of 60 to 100 feet from March to April.

This year, El Nido Resorts plan to revive the coral population with the installation of artificial corals modules in the north of Miniloc Island. This will be the second such project in the world; the first was successfully carried out in Bunaken, Indonesia. The modules look like big snowflakes: Made only by Eco Reefs, they are one metre in diameter and sustain live corals that have been transplanted into the ceramics, and that have a similar pH level as that of seawater. The corals grow one foot every 50 years, and can shelter fish immediately after installation. If it works, El Nido will add more in the area.

The support is there: Seacology Foundation is providing a grant for the EcoReef installation and a specialised marine biologist is helping out. "But the main thing is to get the local community involved, educate them about the no-take zone, explain to them how and why we're putting in artificial reefs that will replenish the fish stock," La Brooy explains. "We're just here to help because we have the resources, but it's the local community that's leading."

El Nido is simply a beautiful place. There is the centrally-located Beach Club on Pangulasian Island with a look-out to staggering sunset and sunrise scenes. There are plenty of water sports on offer: you can kayak out to two lagoons where concerts are often held (thanks to the excellent acoustics). Over 103 species of birds and 12 species of mammals live in the thick forests of El Nido. Guests can explore the mangrove forests near Lagen Island by dinghy. After dark, the North Star, the Southern Cross and the Milky Way can all be spotted due to the equator's proximity.

The dive masters here are more than happy to share their thorough knowledge of the sea, and snorkellers will be thrilled by what can be observed in the shallows of Miniloc Island Resort: schools of one-metre Jack fish, numerous corals, enormous puffer fish, barracudas and large clams.

Not only are visitors surrounded by natural beauty, they are also treated to the sincere hospitality of the staff, and to entertainment from groups of excellent local musicians. El Nido Resorts directly enhance the lives of 3,000 local people in the area - as well as every lucky visitor, the author included.



Picture by Vicky Wong



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