

MUCH ADO ABOUT Misibis

BY BLANCHE RIVERA-FERNANDEZ



WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?" I MUTTERED as the van traversed the long and winding—though, thankfully, paved—road to barangay Sula. It's been over an hour since we left Legazpi City. Dusk was settling, and there was now little light for us to go by. And still, all I see are... coconuts, plus a few solitary nipa houses and cows. This was, obviously, the road less traveled—by the rich and famous, or anyone for that matter. Why would anyone build a "luxury island playground" out here? More curiously, how did Misibis Bay, practically hidden on Cagraray Island in Albay, make it to the very exclusive Small Luxury Hotels of the World?

DAY 1: DONSOL, SORSOGON, THREE HOURS' DRIVE FROM MISIBIS BAY

I had it all planned: I would swim above the whale shark—the biggest fish in the world, which can weigh up to 34 tons—and have the boatman snap some gorgeous photos, which will be splashed on Facebook with a shoutout that says something like my Gucci perfume—Envy Me.

"Ready!" butanding interaction officer Omar Nepomuceno barked, disturbing my daydream. That was our cue to don our mask

and fins. It means the spotter had seen what we all came here for. I scrambled to put everything in place. "Okay, go!" Before I knew it, I was in the dark green water, swimming furiously after a dotted mass about two feet beneath me. The first whale shark—I saw three—was around 10 meters long. It came out of nowhere—all of a sudden, its dorsal fin was a ballpoint pen's length from my left arm. I was so tempted to touch it, like a pet, but that was against the rules of interaction. So I contented myself with swimming beside the giant, lost in the moment. I forgot I brought an underwater camera.

DAY 2: POTOTAN CAVE, BATAN ISLAND, 15 MINUTES BY BOAT FROM MISIBIS BAY

The last time I found myself on all fours, my legs swishing against mud, was 10 years ago, in Sagada's Sumaging Cave. Today, I'm again negotiating slippery rocks and cold, chest-deep water for the sake of someday being able to boast, "Yup, I did that!" I surveyed my surroundings with a flashlight: stalactites were everywhere and the walls looked like crumpled leaves—or witches' fingers, as the locals imagine them to be. The first

Misibis Bay boasts a kilometer of golden sand bordering some of its villas. Photo by Jojie Alcantara

Sundecks invite resort guests to laze around the beach. Photo by Paolo Feliciano



chamber had red spots all over. Iron minerals, our guide says. From there, it was a nice walk/float to the second chamber, which had crystallized limestone. I was about to touch the limestone when our guide warned: “Don’t. We have to preserve it, ma’am.” And as with the whale shark, I was content to be in its presence. I didn’t even bother to bring a camera.

DAY 3: HILLTOP, 25 MINUTES BY ATV FROM MISIBIS BAY

I don’t drive—not a car, not an ATV (all-terrain vehicle). But we had work to do—catch the sunset for that elusive photo of Mayon Volcano being enveloped in red-orange sky—so I started the ATV’s motor, pressed the accelerator, and off we zoomed. Higher and higher until, five minutes later, I found myself clasp the brakes, mesmerized by the view to my left: Albay Gulf in the fading light of day. I could sit here all evening and drink in the image before me, but we had to move on. Moments later, at the view deck, Mayon remained behind the clouds, crashing all hopes for a cover-worthy shot. However, something else was ready for a photo-op: Cagraray and Batan islands posed in the distance. They were silently, utterly beautiful against the blue-gray sky. I snapped a photo in my mind.

“At the end of all that play, you’ll want to come home to comfort, to privacy, to luxury,” Misibis Bay general manager Ian Varona tells me over lunch at the resort.



Early mornings are the best time to take an ATV ride from Misibis Bay to the hilltop for a great view of the nearby islets. Photo by Paolo Feliciano

“IT’S THE ADVENTURE EXPERIENCE WE’RE SELLING. PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING NEW, AND BICOL HAS ALL THE ELEMENTS.”

Misibis Bay has three pools, and this infinity pool comes with a bar where you can get your drinks.

Photo courtesy of Misibis Bay



I knew exactly what he meant.

A beachfront villa, Crabtree and Evelyn in the bathroom, drinks and desserts on the bedroom table, a perennially tidied room, a private sundeck, a private pool, an infinity pool—who wouldn't want to come home to such a life?

Misibis Bay has only 37 villas now, but in 18 months, this will hit 200. The resort is also testing the wind-generation capacity of Cagraray Island for a possible windmill that would power half the resort's operations. Tourism is slowly picking up in Bicol, and Misibis Bay is preparing to welcome them to a new Philippine destination outside Boracay and Palawan.

"It's the adventure experience we're selling," Mr. Varona says. "People are always looking for something new, and Bicol has all the elements. You want Mayon Volcano, there's Legazpi; the whale sharks, there's Donsol; pocket beaches, we have a lot in Cagraray. In three to five years, Bicol will become a diving destination. We've just discovered shipwrecks in the Sula Channel, and we've planted soft corals and relocated giant clams."

The Small Luxury Hotels of the World calls Misibis Bay the "tropical hideaway on Cagraray Island in the Pacific Ocean." "Hideaway" clinched it.

At the resort's restaurant on our last day, I recognized a former legislator vacationing with his family and passed a private dinner being set up on the beach for some society-page guests. There were the rich and famous here, after all.

And the road less traveled, it turns out, is the best one that leads home. ●

Misibis Bay offers an Escapade Package (Php19,888/person) that includes accommodations and full-board meals for three days, along with your choice of 30 activities, including the famous whale shark interaction in Donsol. To inquire or reserve, e-mail reservations@misibisbay.com or call their Manila office at +632 661 8888.



Many young guests enjoy exploring the resort on segways.

Photo by Paolo Feliciano



The well-manicured lawns of Misibis Bay

Photo by Paolo Feliciano