



EndoftheLine

Terrorism in paradise

I was sipping rum with mango and pineapple juice when Paul told me the news. "Twenty people were kidnapped from a resort on Palawan today," he reported. "But don't worry – Dennis has a gun."

Dennis was the co-owner of the only resort on the island in the Philippines where we were staying, North Pandan Island. There were no TVs or phones on Pandan,

and newspapers came several days late, but the news spread quickly among the resort's guests. Contingency plans for a kidnapping attempt ranged from grabbing SCUBA gear from the dive shop and heading into the sea, to scrambling over the trail to Spanish Nose on the far side of the island.



But let me back up.

My then-boyfriend (now husband) Bryan and I had landed in Manila several weeks earlier. After spending a year teaching English in Taiwan, where conformity is prized, the exuberant individualism of the Philippines was refreshing. Brightly colored Jeepneys – a sort of half-jeep, half converted lowrider bus – showcased signs like "Big Boy" and sported Playboy stickers alongside Madonnas. Random signs along the highway proclaimed "Go Go Philippines!" or "SMB – Summer Means Beer," an ad for San Miguel Beer, the national beer of the Philippines.

Getting to North Pandan Island was challenging but fun. We had been exploring the northern section of Mindoro Island and had to charter a banca, or pumpboat, to take us to Abra de Ilog since there are no roads between there and Puerto Galera. The owner of the boat was Lodi, a hilarious local who announced as we boarded, "Like your home! You are my father, you are my mother and I am your son." Lodi ended up dropping us off on a deserted beach and telling us to walk around the island to the town where a bus would take us to Sablayan. It took a tremendous leap of faith to get off the boat, but sure enough, after about 15 minutes we emerged onto a crowded beach, where amused locals urged us, in English, to go swimming before cracking jokes in Tagalog, the local dialect.

The four-hour bus ride to Sablayan involved several river crossings where young people hooted and hollered and older women laughed and winked at us. In Sablayan, we chartered a barely watertight boat to take us on a short trip to North Pandan Island.

The place was low-key – a backpacker's paradise. We splurged for a \$20 bungalow on the beach, then copied the other island residents and put away our shoes. I took a saltwater shower, then doused myself with freshwater from the bucket provided. It was over dinner in the open-air dining hall that Paul, a retired Naval officer who supplemented his income by taking Japanese tourists on Hawaiian dive trips to feed hot dogs to tropical fish, told us about the abductions on nearby Palawan Island.

Paul's escape plan was to grab his dive gear and head out. "There's no way they'd



stop to pick me up,” he reasoned. After he wandered off to the bar, Bryan told me we should run into the jungle if we heard voices in the night. I told him I didn’t want the money we’d saved working in Taiwan to be used for ransom and that we should consider leaving.

We didn’t, but within a few days, all of the other guests did. It was late May, and the tourist low season runs from June to October, but we couldn’t help but feel the kidnapping threat had something to do with the departures. One way or another, it was a great place to have to ourselves.

Days were spent swimming and diving. There are more than 500 types of coral in the Philippines, and I only could identify three of them, so the coral gardens looked like food: crispy noodles, caramel corn, cabbage, fungus. Lionfish hung like ornaments in a hollow log, and anemone fish darted at our masks. One day we surprised an ancient turtle. “They’re from another time, those turtles,” Anya, a resident dive instructor, said afterward in a thick German accent. “They always look at you like, ‘What are you doing here, you tourist?’”

Evening clouds provided a brilliant backdrop for the sunsets. Bryan and I would walk around the island until we could see the sun dropping into the ocean while yellow flashes in the core of a pink thundercloud sparked lavender tentacles of lightning. Before dinner, we’d drink a few beers with some resident Filipinos, who taught me some Tagalog – “mabuhay” means “thank you,” and “mahal” is “love.”

At night, the fireflies came out with the stars – which included the Southern Cross and the Big Dipper – as Estrada, a lizard that lives in the thatch roof of the bar, clucked over the crooning of Tom Jones, a Filipino favorite. We’d swim in the dark water and watch bioluminescence swirl around our moving limbs before slipping under the mosquito nets for deep sleep.

For some reason, I stopped worrying about being kidnapped.

– Jen Reeder

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