

TEXT
 CELIA NACHURA
 PHOTOS
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THE VIRTUE OF PRESERVATION

The Acuzar passion of collecting ancestral mansions gives way for Filipinos to collect more than just a few memories for themselves

9 a.m. in Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar: The sun is beating down on the cobblestone streets. There is music wafting from somewhere, tunes that are faintly familiar. ‘*Tayo na sa Antipolo, at doon maligo tayo...*’ Employees in traditional casual clothing and guests on a daytime tour roam outside; the resort is buzzing with morning activity.

12 noon: Guests escape the noontime heat and gather round the table to enjoy Filipino-Spanish fare at Café Marivent or the Italian-inspired La Bella Teodora (only open on weekends). The food is set on the table, *putabe* that tickles the Pinoy palate and servings generous

enough for sharing with family and friends. Conversation is lively around the table.

1 p.m.: Those who are checked in retreat to their suite of choice for *siesta*. Outdoors, everything is calm and quiet, left alone for now in favor of soft beds and air-conditioning. There is the occasional burst of sound, but for the most part everyone is relaxing in their own private sanctuaries.

4 p.m.: Re-energized, people venture out to indulge in more of the resort’s amenities. Spot the guests in bicycles and golf carts, some are taking a dip in the *batis*-inspired swimming pool or the vast ocean just a few

steps away. When it is particularly hot, a number of the visitors will head to the restaurant for an order of specialty *gabi* ice cream.

Life at Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar flows differently. Easy and simple, it is a blast to a past that we do not even know. Visitors are introduced to life as it was, an authentic experience as much as it can be (which is a lot). It is more than just a collection; it is a preservation.

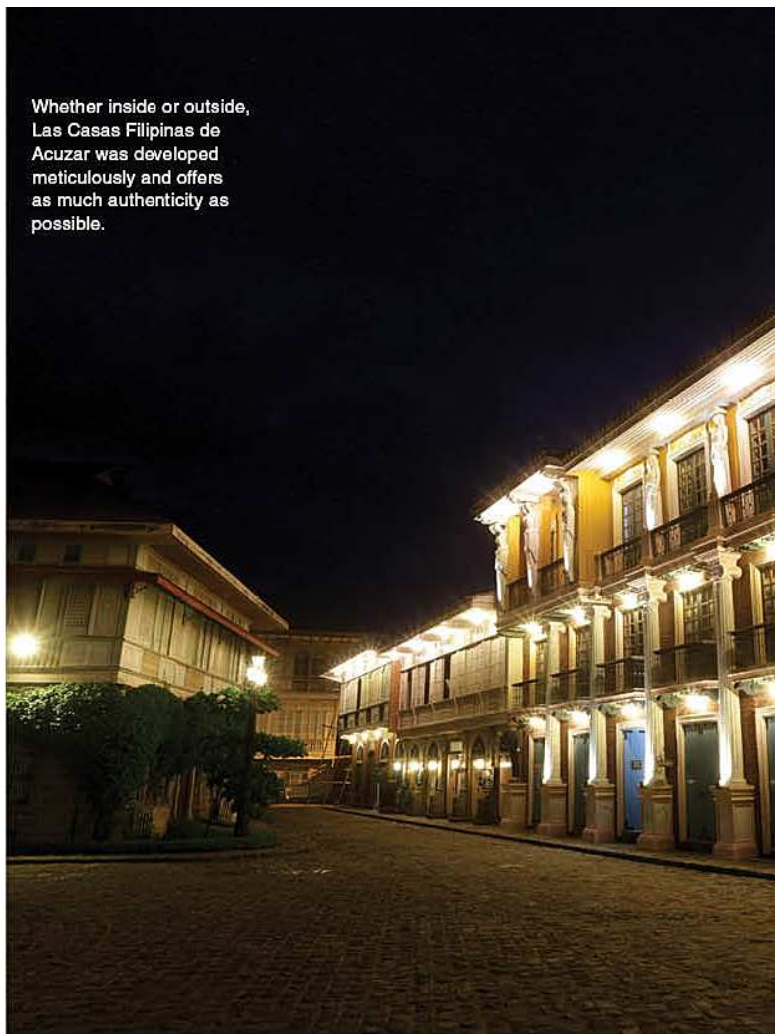
Ten years in the making, everything stemmed from owner Jerry Acuzar's passion for ancestral homes. Homes of the past, after all, are more than just buildings. They are doors to the past, with tales that tell of our heritage beyond the history books. Yet in so many occasions, many of these residences fell in despair for various reasons—lack of care, lack of funds, lack of initiative.

Nothing is as disheartening as a dilapidated home, so Acuzar set out to collect—no, preserve—ancestral homes from all over the country, with the intent of restoring them to their former glory. Focused on houses that is in one way or another significant to the history of the Philippines, Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar developed an array of houses that allows Filipinos to see a number of the country's greatest residences in one place: Bataan.

Naturally, a project as big as Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar has attracted some opposition along with praise. There are those who are against the relocation of the houses which are intrinsically linked to its provinces; they point out that the displacement takes out of the heritage of the residences. Of course, many of the houses in the estate were "saved" when they were already in ruin; most are already occupied with informal settlers or used as shops and markets. One can't help but ask, is it more important to keep it in its original location where it is slowly deteriorating or let it be restored in Las Casas Filipinas where it can be taken care of properly?

The restoration of all 27 houses from 1700s to early 1900s took almost a decade, but there is nothing half-hearted about this attempt; each house is chosen, dismantled and rebuilt with utmost attention. Everything is impressively authentic, the whole team of Las Casas Filipinas operates under the mentality of preserving as much of the original structure as possible. Details are meticulous, the houses painstakingly studied and executed. Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar, quite simply, is an ambitious dream that has become a grand success.

TOP-BOTTOM: Local men and women worked painstakingly on the mosaics and various fittings in the casas; A natural river flows through the resort, providing peace and calm all throughout.



Whether inside or outside, Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar was developed meticulously and offers as much authenticity as possible.





“Life at Las Casas Filipinas flows differently. Easy and simple, it is a blast to a past we don’t even know.”



Casa Bizantina, the biggest and grandest of all the houses in the heritage resort, has six rooms—each more opulent than the last. The mosaic art paintings on the walls and ceilings of the sala and dining area were inspired by some of the country’s most famous artworks.

Even the most hidden corner of the house reveals some sort of delightful treasure: a vintage telephone (that works), lamps made of green glass, antique mirrors, lavish chandeliers everywhere. The rooms all have beautifully hand painted walls and plush furnishings, even the bathrooms are extravagantly decorated to satisfy the whims of this period’s wealthy as well as it did the past century’s. The most luxurious suite is only accessible by a side hallway that was originally used by the *aliping sagigilid* who were not allowed to be seen in the main portion of the house.

It’s little bits of trivia like this that elevates the resort experience in Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar. Like every Filipino compound, there is scandal found within these walls. In the Casa Biñan, which belonged to Jose Rizal’s maternal family, the anecdotes are endless from marital fights to how the Alonzo family sold the house and eventually got it back. The original building of the University of the Philippines School of Fine Arts, now called Casa Hidalgo, used to host the likes of outstanding artists including Fernando Amorsolo, Guillermo Tolentino and Emilio Alvero.

The Paseo de Escolta is a replica of Escolta buildings in the 1900s. In Las Casas Filipinas, it serves as the hotel with the more affordable, but no less impressive, rooms. Patterned after a single photograph that was found of the original structure, this is a labor of love that lights up and looks best at nighttime.

The tour guides are knowledgeable and, perhaps more significantly, passionate about their stories, and it all comes alive under the roofs of these hundred-year-old houses. Outside, the 400-hectare property stretch showcasing the untouched Bataan. It is a complete natural sanctuary: majestic mountains framing the resort, and a natural river flowing out to the turquoise ocean.

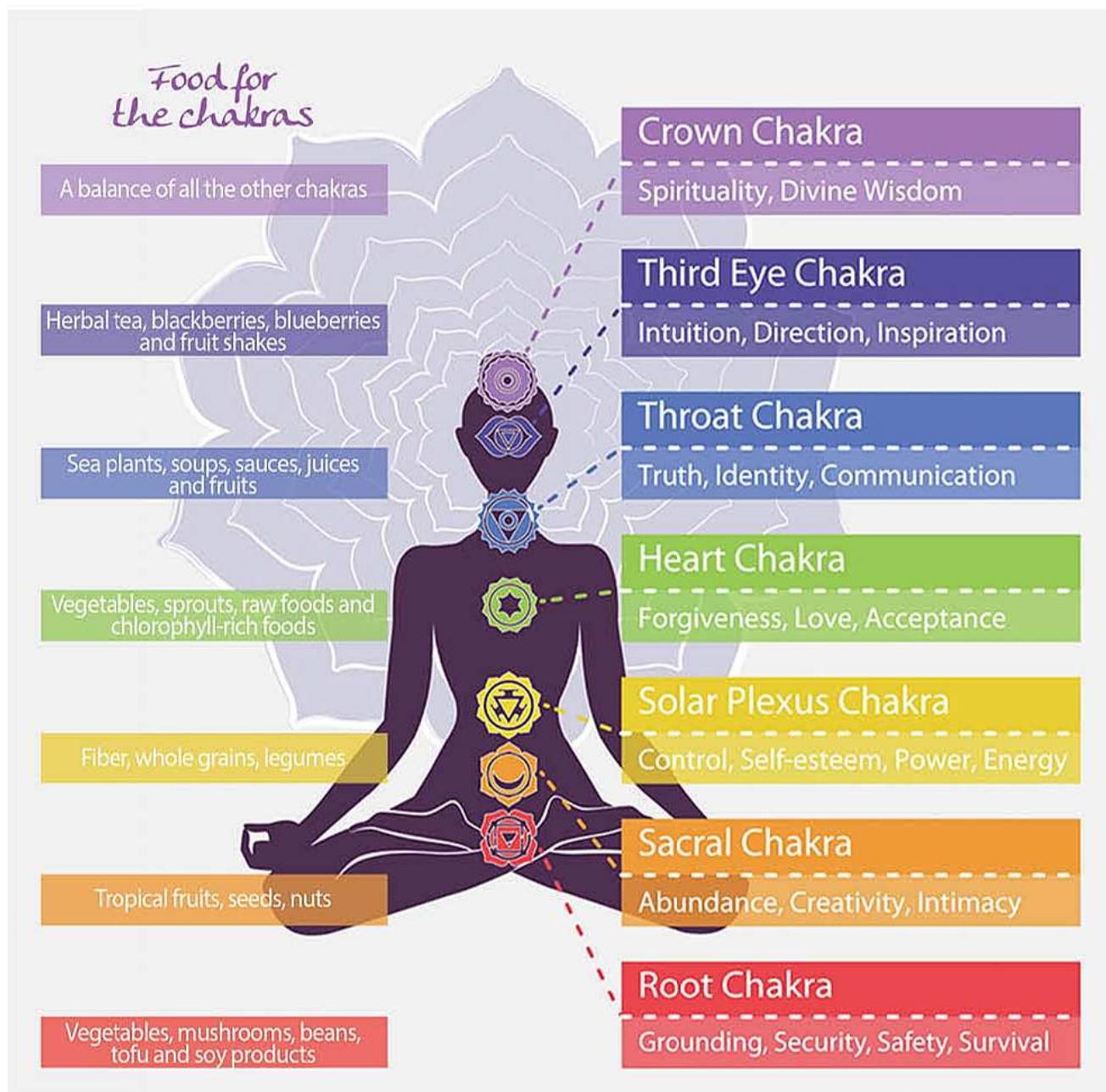
The resort is a perfect setting for weddings and various events, especially if one wants to be transported to a whole different world on the special day. There are function rooms for meetings and conferences, and tents can be set up on the sprawling helipad for outdoor functions.

Soon, Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar will have a church as grand as the rest of the property, plus another hotel that will enjoy a beachfront location. A man-made canal that opens up to the natural river will stream between two buildings, so guests can access the hotel via gondola ride as they do in Venice.

HOW TO GET THERE:

Those coming from Manila can drive to Bataan via SCTEX or the San Fernando exit. Commuters can hop on a bus (Bataan Transit in Cubao) and get off at Balanga, Bataan. From there, take a jeepney to Bagac, Bataan and then a tricycle to the resort.

TEXT
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THE PLEASURES OF EATING MINDFULLY

Find out how each bite can best rejuvenate your entire body



The Third Eye Wellness Center offers many services for the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional well-being.



Those who come in for treatments may grab a bite at the Chakra Café, a vegetarian bistro in the premises.



Chakra Café offers healthy dishes and refreshments, some of them focused on boosting energy in specific chakras.

“For those in the know, it’s not enough for food to be good for the taste buds—it has to be beneficial for the entire body as well.

“In this day and age, it is all the more important to be aware of how the food we ingest affects us physically, mentally and energetically,” says Angela Lichauco, the woman behind Rawlicious, a company that promotes inner health and eco-living with its nourishing and pure products. “Our diet affects the way we think and feel, and we need to take care of our body, mind and energy as a whole in order to live a happy, healthy and positive life.”

To emphasize the importance of a good diet, think of how whatever you eat fuels the entire body. When the body breaks down, the mind and spirit suffer soon after. Subscribing to a healthy diet does not only keep the stomach full, but helps maintain an overall fresh well-being and active lifestyle.

Conscious eating starts with stocking your pantry with the right ingredients. A handy tip is to shop on the outside section of supermarkets, where the veggies, fruits and most of the fresh produce are often located. Aisles in the middle are usually stacked with packaged consumables that are filled with chemicals and preservatives to ensure a longer shelf life.

Given a choice, it’s best to go for or-

ganic products, which are free of these harmful chemicals, fresher, eco-friendly and even taste better than their preservatives-laden counterpart. A plant-based diet can also go a long way in building a better lifestyle as greens are easy to digest, plus rich in alkaline and fiber.

Living food, also known as raw food, is also gaining acclaim. Those who enjoy the purely raw food diet believe that heat (and cooking) kills much of the life force in vegetables or fruits. Plant-based food in their original and uncooked state are said to be packed with nutrients that help increase energy and alleviate various diseases.

It is not necessary to give up meat completely, but Angela recommends maintaining a good balance through moderation, saying, “The only way to sustain healthy eating is through balance.”

As the healthy living trend sweeps across the nation, cafés have popped up in the city catering to those those who are discerning of what they put in their bodies. Chakra Café of the Third Eye Wellness Center is one of the cafés in the metro that whips up some of the most delicious vegetarian fare around. The name of the bistro is a hint on the concept it wholeheartedly promotes.

Chakras, from the Sanskrit word for “wheel,” are basically wheels of energy located in seven specific points of the body that

are charged with vitalizing the physical body and facilitating the flow of life energy. When all of the chakras are running smoothly, there is balance and vitality in the physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

Chakras can get blocked, too, reflecting a need to be nourished. Each chakra has a corresponding color, name and function, as well as specific types of food that help enhance them. Artists or writers seeking inspiration at work, for example, can target their third eye chakra by making herbal tea or fruit shake.

Advocating health and nutrition, the Chakra Café serves dishes that target the specific chakras. From green smoothies to pastas, this is one stop that aims to boost your holistic well-being.

CHAKRA CAFÉ’S TIPS FOR EATING MINDFULLY

1. Eat food that is real, natural, pure, fresh and organic.
2. Consume more living foods (raw and uncooked items) and whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, greens, legumes and grains.
3. Avoid meat, processed food, preserved food, fast food, artificial seasoning, sodas and sugar.
4. Give thanks by blessing the food.



THE SPIRIT OF



TEXT
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SANTORINI

Blending the best of nature and luxury, Thunderbird Resort Poro Point is a quiet oasis at the heart of La Union



Nestled on a cliff with views of the sparkling South China Sea, this tropical escape exhibits the boundless enchantment of Santorini.



Premiere suites and villas become a luxurious home to guests during their stay at Thunderbird Resort.

During sunset, the sky paints the famed Dome in magical hues.



The sun was beating harshly on the pavement when we rolled into the city of San Fernando, La Union. Just the thought of trekking, biking or exerting any sort of physical effort is exhausting in the wake of the mid-day heat. So, it's fortunate that this particular resort requires no effort from their guests other than to relax and enjoy the good life they offer to the fullest—and to do it in a spectacular landscape that is inspired by one of the most picturesque spots in the planet.

There is a reason why Santorini, Greece is on top of every traveler's must-visit list. This small archipelago illustrates perfectly the beauty that can result in the worst of disasters, since it resulted from a massive volcanic eruption thousands of years ago. What's left in the wake of the unspeakable tragedy is a caldera of equally unspeakable beauty: Santorini with its jagged cliffs, translucent seas and endless provincial charm. Even the architecture on the group of islands is one of a kind and original, with rows and rows of low, whitewashed houses tucked on the hillside and overlooking the sparkling sea.

Santorini may be halfway around the world, but there is an amazing alternative right here in the Philippines that does not feel like an alternative at all. Thunderbird Resort Poro Point, blessed with a premiere location on the shores of La Union, strives to capture the spirit of the elusive Santorini in its expansive property. The resort has the aura of a luxury playground to it with a sprawling golf course and a casino just a few minutes away, both enticing to those who have time and cash to spare for a few days of unparalleled leisure. Certainly a five-star, two-thumbs-up setting, but what sets it apart is the Santorini-inspired backdrop it is set against.



Enjoy lounging and swimming at the pool area, where a tropical vibe is present from morning to evening.

The facade of the resort's well-known Dome can be glimpsed even before you approach the gates, but as you drive up nearer and nearer the resort, it becomes all the more impressive. All of the villas and the hotel in the property are painted a Grecian white, with deep blue linings and domed windows that lend to the international allure of the place. Nestled on a cliff with views of the sparkling South China Sea, this tropical escape exhibits the boundless enchantment of Santorini.

Spend a few hours exploring the grandeur of the resort from the (mini) amphitheater that can house outdoor events to the beach club on the other end. On summer days, lounge chairs and tables by the swimming area may be filled with people enjoying the balmy weather. During the lean season, there are few people scattered around the place, and each group can enjoy a small corner of the shallow swimming pool—safe for kids: four feet deep all throughout, with a lifeguard constantly on duty. There is often a festive atmosphere around the pool, with music drifting from the speakers and food available throughout the day. Further down the property is an intimate stretch of beach. Untouched and quiet, it sometimes seems more than just a five-minute walk because it is away from the bustle of the resort. (Tip: The Boardwalk that overlooks the crashing ocean is a cinematic spot to watch the sunset.)

When you've tired yourself out from swimming or playing golf (or taking a nap), grab a bite at the Mediterranean-influenced restaurant Olives. With a variety of international and local dishes, it complements Thunderbird's overall ambiance. From the casino, guests can also check out Vegas Café.

While the Fiesta Casino was set up early on in 2006, the

hotel and the golf course only began operations in 2008. Living up to its promise as a leisure and entertainment center in the Ilocos region, Thunderbird Resort in Poro Point flourished within five years and continues to expand to accommodate not just more guests, but better amenities.

Five villas are now available for occupancy for bigger groups or families who want more space and privacy. Thunderbird Residences was launched in 2010, giving an opportunity to those who are interested in resort-style living all year round. A condotel is currently being constructed, and there are plans for an array of additional facilities to rise up including an event center, tennis court, playground and indoor clubhouse.

Although the rolling property is the perfect place for complete relaxation, there are plenty of activities to keep adrenaline-fueled junkies entertained. There is a basketball and volleyball court, while guests can also arrange for a trip to nearby San Juan for quality surfing lessons.

HOW TO GET THERE:

By car, the trip from Manila will take five to six hours. Take the NLEX and SCTEX, then drive through the National Highway until San Fernando, La Union. Turn left at Pennsylvania Avenue (landmark is the Monument of the Unknown Soldiers) and go straight until you reach the resort. One can also hop on the Partas bus, get off at San Fernando and ride a tricycle the rest of the way.

TRAVEL OCTOBER 2013

TEXT
CELIA NACHURA
PHOTOS
BEN REYNA

THE ULTIMATE HIGH

Cruise the skies the way you
always dreamed you would



The infinity pool of
Bellevue Resort
Bohol faces the
tranquil waters of
Cebu Strait.

I WANT TO FLY.

I am positive that I am not alone in this desire. Every child, every adult has uttered these words, at least once. And as impossible as it sounds, there's no reason why you can't just take the leap—figuratively and literally.

Just an hour or two from Metro Manila is Carmona, Cavite, a somewhat nondescript town that is a nearby hotspot for air sports enthusiasts looking for a place to fly. The untouched forested area and the expansive grassland provide the ideal venue for paragliding. Cows grazing in the field offer a special bonus to the experience, especially as they scamper away when pilots glide down after a flight.

Paragliding is an increasingly popular sport worldwide that lets licensed pilots take flight by being strapped to lightweight aircrafts or paragliders. While it is more popular in Europe where the wide range of climate and heights offer the best conditions for flying, paragliding and other air sports are slowly but surely gaining ground in the yet-to-be-discovered shores and mountains of the Philippines.

So far, air sports enthusiasts in the country are enjoying the exploration phase it is in, as the local and locally-based pilots search high and low—okay, mostly high—for fly sites where they can indulge in their air activity of choice. The most frequented paragliding venues are Carmona, Cavite and San Mateo, Rizal, plus Sarangani for Mindanao folk, but the possibilities are endless. Randell “Buko” Raymundo of Air Sports Adventure Philippines, who is known to be one of the top paragliders in the country, even flew off the peak of Mt. Apo in 2012.

There are a few misconceptions about the sport that have prevented some people from trying it out: it's expensive and dangerous. In reality, while taking to the air does require shelling out a bit of money, it is ultimately not pricier than other sports such as golfing and scuba diving.

As for the danger? Raymundo says calling paragliding “extreme” is a little inaccurate as the risks in paragliding are no greater than the risks in surfing or scuba diving. Like any sport, it only requires proper training and gear to ensure safety and comfort. Those who are interested in pursuing the sport can take a course to earn the license to play on air.

Like anything worth doing, conquering the fear is half the challenge. Being airborne seems intimidating, but if in the beginning the excitement does not overpower the fear, it will.

Tandem paragliding is an easy introduction to the sport, with an instructor and a “passenger.” First-timers can enjoy gliding in the wind as the licensed tandem paraglider controls the aircraft from behind. If the wind is mild and smooth, beginners can even give steering a try.

“It's that safe,” Raymundo assures as the 4x4 makes the short but rough uphill drive to the take-off point. “You'll see.”

The fly site in Carmona has the standard ridge, which pushes the wind upwards to allow the wings to take flight. Experienced paragliders develop an intuition with the wind, and as soon as the team hops off the vehicle everyone is crowing in appreciation at the prime conditions. The breeze is pleasant and the gust is not too strong, but undeniably there. Tandem paragliders Olivier Faucon and Uwe Klein lay out the equipment on the ground expertly and deliberately, before strapping themselves and their passengers in the separate harnesses.

Instructions are straightforward: “Resist the pull and then run when I tell you to run.” And a warning that sends the first flutter of nervousness through me: don't fall. I repeat it like a mantra in my head and brace myself for the pull.

“Run!”

I stumble forward, in the direction of the edge of the cliff. There's no time for hesitation. The pilot behind me pulls on the wing and in a blur of a moment, we are soaring.

Up in the sky, the nerves dissolve and give way to the ultimate high. Three hundred feet up, the wind is pleasantly cool, it is calm and quiet, and there is nothing but complete relaxation. Flying is in total disconnect from the frenzy of takeoff (or landing); this part is all enjoyment and fun. It was, as Buko explained beforehand, the easiest part of paragliding.

Paragliding is a lot like surfing, on air. Launching up feels a lot like launching a board on a wave, and gliding on a gust of wind is not much different from sailing smoothly on sea. One definite plus in paragliding is the length of the ride. While a wave can last mere moments, a paraglider can stay in the air for two hours or fly the length of up to a hundred kilometers. The sky's the limit.

Carmona's expansive grassy fields offer plenty of room for touching down. And although landing is a lot like the start of a flight, by the time your feet touch the ground you'll be itching for another exhilarating round.

“Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return.” -Leonardo da Vinci



Some cottages at the Pearl Farm Beach Resort are patterned after the homes of the Samals, which are built on stilts on the water.
Photo by Henrylito Tacio

Some cottages at the Pearl Farm Beach Resort are patterned after the homes of the Samals, which are built on stilts on the water.
Photo by Henrylito Tacio



CARMONA, CAVITE

WHEN TO GO

Paragliding is best in Carmona from November to April, the Amihan season, when the northeast monsoon from the Laguna de Bay provides optimal flying conditions.

BUDGET

P3,500 for tandem paragliding with Air Sports Adventure Philippines



5 MUST-BRING ITEMS

COMFORTABLE CLOTHES

This is an activity that requires plenty of movement, so dress for comfort over fashion. Closed shoes are a must, lest the field be muddy (and you don't want your sandals slipping off mid-flight). Your best bet are drift shirts, trekking pants or leggings.

SUN PROTECTION

Hopefully, the weather will be sunny when you get there. There is a shade where you can sit and wait for your turn at flying, but to be safe bring sun-block and/or a hat to prevent sunburn and irritation.

FOOD

Once you are in the fly site, it might be a little bit difficult to venture out for snacks or lunch. Make sure you're prepared with some grub to fill your stomach as you wait, or after your session.

ENTERTAINMENT

Paragliding is a sport that is totally dependent on weather conditions. While the group is waiting for the right kind of wind, keep yourself occupied with card games, a good book or animated conversation.

GOOD SPIRITS

It's supposed to be fun. Bring your best mood and enjoy!

OTHER HOTSPOTS

The area is beginning to make noise as a sports hotspot near the metro, even being dubbed as the Sports Capital of Cavite. The paragliding site is only one of the playgrounds in the city of Carmona. There are plenty more to see and do in this Cavite destination.

1 MANILA SOUTHWOODS GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB

Folks who are looking forward to enjoying the good life can sign up at the country club. With recreational opportunities for the entire family, this is a space where guests can play, exercise, swim, dine and relax to their hearts' content.

2 MANILA JOCKEY CLUB

Horse lovers can also drop by the country's leading horse racing club in Carmona. Splurge a little and join a horse derby for the experience, or check out the casino at the San Lazaro Leisure & Business Park.

3 CARMONA RACING CIRCUIT

This multi-purpose racing circuit is home to adventure-seekers on land. Those who are eager for a taste of the karting rush can give it a go in the top-notch track in Carmona, while experienced racing enthusiasts can participate in activities such as the "track day."

4 ULONG TUBIG

Natural spring water drizzles down the hill to create a pool that's a calm and cool place to take a dip in. The best time to go is in the morning, when the water is clear and clean, and there are fewer people angling for a good spot.

HOW TO GET THERE:

Most airlines offer daily flights to Caticlan or Kalibo, which is an alternative that will still take you to Caticlan by bus. From the Caticlan port, a boat will ferry you to the Boracay port where you can hop aboard a tricycle to your resort. To go by sea, 2GO Travel offers direct ferries from Batangas to Caticlan, a trip that should take around 9 hours.