

# expat

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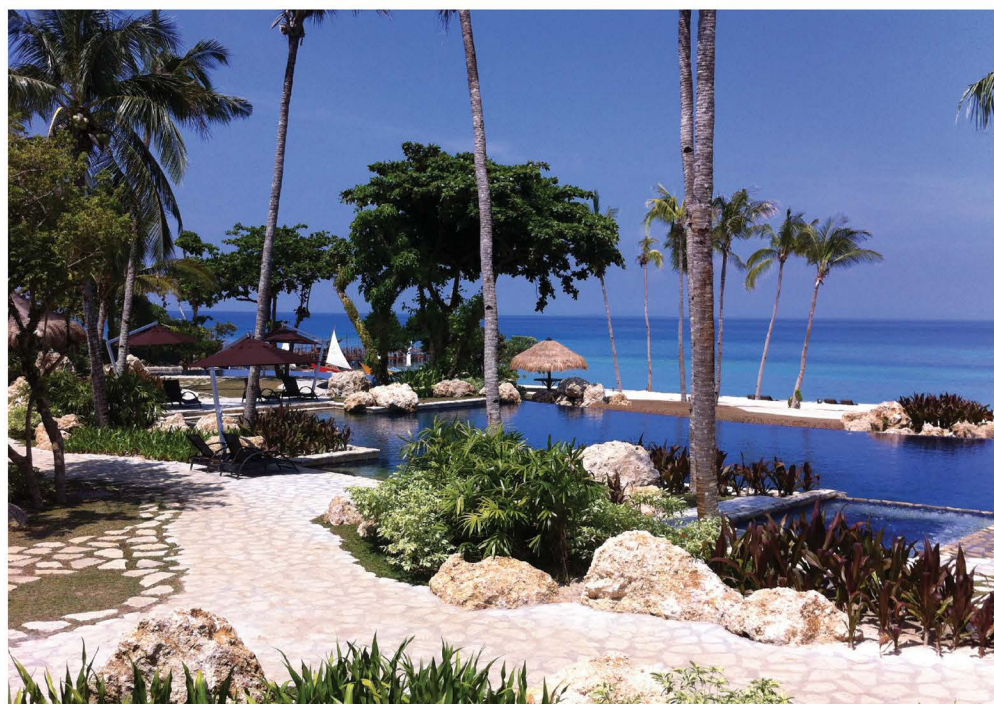
## PARADISE IN THE MAKING

Balesin has always been in the back of my mind, coming forward now and again with the notion of luxury combined with exclusivity. Way back in the '60s, I envied cousins who vacationed there. They were the sports-minded ones in the clan while we went only as far as Baguio if Hong Kong was not in the works. So when an invitation to visit Balesin came, I grabbed it, not caring how I would get there, how far it was, and who else was coming.

Text by LOUIE B. LOCSIN







(main) Glittering white sand from end to end. (inset) The clear blue water of the club pool entices like the Pacific alongside



Now owned by Alphaland, whose major stockholders are Ashmore Group of London and Roberto V. Ongpin, Balesin Island Club is just off the Quezon coast—a skip and jump after hopping on a plane; in this case, a nine-seater Cessna 208B Grand Caravan. Alphaland owns two; each one piloted by two not one. The model has the best safety record.

Why does Balesin Island stand out among island resorts? Aside from its former fame as the resort of a lucky few, now it is open to general membership and is just 25 minutes away by air. The airport has a 1500 meter runway, longer than most provincial airports, the tarmac smooth like a bald man's top, so passengers don't dig their heels in the frayed carpet to make the plane stop. The plan is to extend it further to international standards, making Balesin a direct international stop without the hassle of transfers from the big city airports where they can lose your luggage.

There is also the 7.3 kilometers of white talcum powder fine sand in the beaches all around, affording a privacy that few of resorts can offer. One side of the island faces the Pacific Ocean, the other the calmer waters of Lamon Bay.

For lovers of cultural diversity, Balesin Island Club is perfect. Six villages are planned, all going up as you read this, each one patterned after a known international playground.

There is St. Tropez, the haunt in the French Riviera of the rich and glamorous set; Costa Smeralda, a Sardinian hideaway; Mykonos, Greece's popular cruise destination, its rocky promontory speckled with dazzling whitewashed houses with blue roofs and



The private airstrip



The stables



The changing colors of the sky as the sun descends behind Balesin Village Sala Restaurant

windows along winding streets; Bali, the Southeast Asian paradise known for its magical mix of art, nature, religion and romance; Phuket, Thailand's bustling beach resort with a more select clientele and minus the carmine places for the carnal crowd; and lastly, a Philippine village, home away from home.

Each village will have 40 villas large enough, at 60 square meters, for four people to sleep in and throw a party. Each has its own sundeck with a jacuzzi, an outdoor garden shower, barbecue facilities and a big flat screen TV with all the cable channels. The bathrooms are spacious and expensively appointed, e.g., wide rain showerheads, indoor and outdoor shower cabins. The amenities have the feel of the

best, from bathrobes to coffeemaker and bed sheets and towels.

Three of the villages will have hotel facilities; all six will have a restaurant offering the best cuisine of the place it represents. The Clubhouse has family rooms comfortably fitting seven people. Although all the villages have their own specially designed pool, the Club's pool is the largest I have seen, possibly double the size of other resorts, offering a choice of dipping in freshwater or saltwater.

For those whose vacation vocabulary does not include doing nothing, Balesin Island Club has a sports center with tennis, badminton and basketball courts. Aquatic sports like sailing, diving, snorkeling and

wakeboarding are offered. There is a 22-seater speedboat to take guests around. Jet skiing is not offered because of the racket and the pollution it makes. The Equestrian Center offers horseback riding and lovers of the peace and quiet, bird watching is an option. Hectares of virgin forests were left untouched by the developers. You can actually catch a yellowtail or a bluebird whizz by.

This is a getaway from the things you need to do, not from the things you wish were done to you—like a good rub. The Balesin Island Club Spa in a white building with white lounge chairs and white umbrellas beckons. Aside from the usual spa treatments, yoga lessons, detox sessions,





#### HOW TO GET THERE

The Alphaland Hangar is in the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines (CAAP) and has a red gate with a guardhouse beside it. Parking is complementary.

#### From EDSA

If you are coming from Makati, take the flyover to Tramo and if you are coming from Pasay, take a right turn to Tramo. When you reach the intersection, turn right and go straight until you see a rotonda/loop. Take a U-turn and head back towards the Tramo intersection to reach the hangar.

#### From the Manila Domestic Airport/Paranaque

Go to the Domestic Road and go straight towards Airport Road. Turn right when you see a rotonda/loop. Just go straight until you see the hangar on the right side of the road, right along the Tramo and Airport Road intersection.

#### From SLEX/Newport City

Just go straight Airport Road towards Tramo. When you reach a loop along NAIA 3, just go straight ahead. When you reach the Tramo intersection, just go straight and you will see another rotonda/loop. Take a U-turn and head back towards the Tramo intersection to reach the hangar.

#### By Land

The road to Balesin Island starts with a drive down the Real-Infanta highway to Real Port, a scenic 2.5 hour drive from Antipolo.

A brand new highway directly over the Sierra Madre mountains is being completed that promises to cut down the journey to about 2 hours.

Weather permitting, an hour via speedboat service can be made available.

But this is neither cheaper and definitely not faster than the subsidized plane ride (Php4,000/round trip) to their international flights-capable runway on the island, E.L. Tordesillas Airport.

#### Membership Privileges

- 14 complimentary villa nights per year.
- 180 hospitality suites (villas) in six themed villages.
- Subsidized flights to and from Balesin Island on our private planes.
- Subsidized 22-seat speedboat with maximum speed of 30 knots for those who prefer to go via Quezon and cross the Lamon Bay.
- Reasonable installment plans ranging from 2 years to 5 years for those interested in getting a membership.

#### Project Timetable

2012

- Jun - completion of Mykonos Village
- Sep - completion of Phuket Village
- Dec - completion of St. Tropez Village

2013

- Feb - completion of Costa Smeralda Village
- Jun - completion of Bali Village

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Lounge chairs face the Balesin Spa

steam and whirlpool facilities are on hand.

For me, the best time of the day is early morning when the beach has just been combed and cleaned by a mini tractor. The rhythmic splash of waves as laps the beach is like a mantra, clearing the mind of yesterday and elsewhere. With hardly anyone awake to spoil the view, the beach looks to go on forever.

Sipping a cocktail at sunset at the Relic Bar, you are audience to the changing colors of the sky as the sun descends slowly behind rifts of clouds before slipping below the horizon. But sunsets, however grand, are repetitive diurnal events; it is the skilled bartender who can make them a sight to behold. Sunsets are seen to their best

advantage through the frosted glass of a proper martini...or through Leica lens.

Construction at Balesin Island Club is in full gear. Though not all the six villages have been completed, work is going on simultaneously and at super speed. All of the original residents in the island, along with experts from the mainland are trying to meet the deadline set by the owner who will never tolerate any work but the finest, most polished, enduring and the best. There are no ifs or buts for him.

But what there is—the Clubhouse, the Philippine Village and its restaurant Sala, the Equestrian Center, and the Spa—is already worth a trip. Balesin Island Club lays you a serene world at your feet.