

# asianTraveler

June 2012

## Baring Balesin

I heard accounts from locals of the Polillo Islands about an island in their region which you can spot even an hour away from reaching it, not by seeing the island itself, but by seeing a distant lush tree afloat in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the ocean. Slowly, as your boat approaches, you notice the tree being surrounded by the greenery of palm trees, but still towering all over them, I was told. Further on as you get nearer, the tree disappears from view, now totally hid by a thick forest, the rims of which are laced by a thick and long belt of white sand.

That mysterious tree would have to be the legendary centuries old banyan tree in the heart of the forest of Balesin Island, south of Polillo Island and east of Luzon in the Philippines. From the local name of banyan (*balete*) and from the white-beach island being surrounded by salt waters (salt being *asin* in Tagalog), the name of the island was coined. But there is more now to Balesin than its mysterious banyan trees, especially since it has come to the attention of one of the country's leading property developers, Alphaland Corporation. From its roots as the stopover of ancient treasure hunters, and from being the virgin jungle-and-beach island that it was for ages, the island is now called Balesin Island Club, and will from hereon be the haven of an exclusive group of shareholding members and their guests.

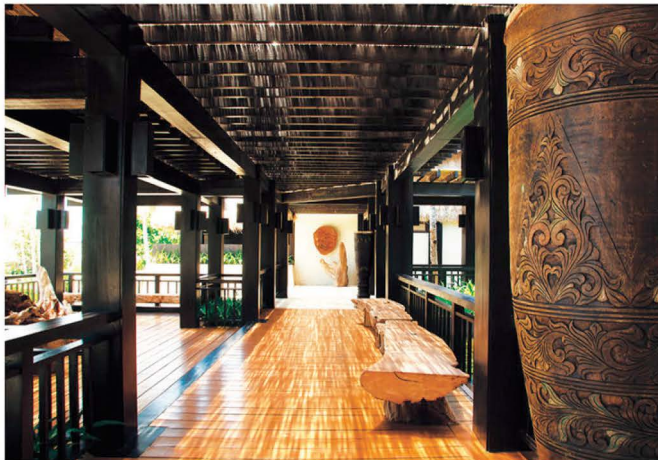
Words by Jen Balboa Images by Lisa Cruz











(clockwise from top L) A view of Lamon Bay from the Clubhouse; weavings and wood lend a natural touch to the Clubhouse's dining halls; the Sakura's Dragon Maki; Balesin's spa center; sunset at the beach; Balesin Village's earthy-hued grand bed; chef Edwin Ogarte; driftwood are gathered from the beach and used in Balesin as furniture and decor



IT FELT QUITE BITTERSWEET FOR ME, therefore, to head to the Club, knowing I can only have a taste and a glimpse of all the fine things it has to offer-how can such a thing of beauty be solely for a chosen few? But once I set foot on what may be a last frontier of raw beauty, saw how it was being cared for, and met some of the people to whom it has been entrusted to, the exclusivity of Balesin Island Club made perfect sense.

### VILLAGES OF THE PRIVILEGED

Assuming the role of a member during my assignment, this was how I was transported to Balesin Island Club-riding one of the Club's private Cessna Caravan turbo jet-powered private planes and reaching the island just 20 minutes from Manila. It was a hassle-free and flawless ride, and though it did not afford me of the boat ride-mythic vision of the island's oldest banyan tree afloat in the middle of nowhere, I wouldn't have it any other way. This is actually one of the biggest draws of the Club; members are given easy access to six\* international seaside villages. Apart from a Philippine village, there are Greek, French, Italian, Thai and Indonesian villages in the Club. Why those six villages? Because they represent the best that the world offers when it comes to island or seaside living. So, if I were a member, I no longer need to go in hiatus for days. The Club has laid down the six finest places for me, in one island, just minutes from the capital. An international island-themed playground for the rich and famous? Not at all. Alphaland's realization of its ambitious blueprint shows that the mission is more than just building high-end structures – Alphaland is after authenticity, to afford members real experiences from six unique ways of experiencing one island, through the six villages.

Balesin Village, the Club's Philippine village, stands as a proof of that commitment on authenticity, and the first to be completed from the six villages. I was billeted in one of its 40 villas – a luxurious rendering of the bahay kubo (thatch roofed stilt house), impressive for its warm and earthy vibe, exuded by being built with dark wood and native weavings, from the ceiling down. It was complete with all the requisite five-star amenities: Jacuzzi, wide flat screen television, a liquor and coffee bar, and a feather pillowed grand bed. But its grandest feature is the view – all villas in Balesin Village are front and center to the island's longest stretch of white beach at 7.3 kilometers. This strip of beach, called Long Beach in the island, surpasses the length of some of the Philippines' longest white sand beaches, and is made up of fine creamy white sands, with smooth little white shells generously washed to the shore by the blue waters of Lamon Bay everyday.

I was told that during planning, the designers, landscapists and architects saw to it that all six villages

in the Club will have a view of the island's many beaches and coves, and the sea. They knew this was imperative to ensuring the authentic island getaway feel of every village.

By that standard, Bali Village (the Indonesian village) will not only have villages sharing the northern part of Long Beach, it will also have villas standing on stilts on the water. Phuket Village (the Thai village) is taking form on its own private white-sand cove facing the Pacific Ocean. Mykonos (the Greek village) will have its blazing white villas crowned by round blue domes on the hillside part of the island, overlooking the sea. St. Tropez (the French Riviera village) is being set up seaside as well after the fashion of South-of-France and boutique-inspired hotel destinations, and near a fishing lake. In between Mykonos and St. Tropez will be Costa Smeralda (the Italian village) which will have a centerpiece neo Sardinia-style hotel.

All six villages are a few minutes walk (or drive via electric powered golf carts) to a spa, the aquatic sports center. The spa has started offering full massage and body treatments. Members can avail of snorkeling and surfing gear from the sports center and enjoy the rich swells of the waters surrounding the island. Should they be not the beach fan types, members can borrow horses from the stables and ride through the jungle at the center of the island.

Each of the villages is set to have its own restaurant serving authentic regional cuisine, so that those in mykonos can have their fill of souvlaki, while those in St. Tropez can indulge on crepes at the café. Members, regardless of what village they are staying, can crisscross the island to sample everything from any of the six villages' specialty restaurants. Should they still not be content, they can proceed to the Clubhouse, which in itself has a restaurant, apart from suites with lofts, private function rooms, and a Japanese restaurant – the Sakura. Bubbly half-Japanese, half-Filipino chef Edwin "Edu-San" Ogarte firmly believes "the Sakura completes the one-stop concept of Balesin", and that because Japanese food is international, members will definitely crave it, no matter how good the Italian pasta and Thai chili are in their own villages.

With Balesin Village already complete and open along with the Clubhouse, and by the speed at which the five villages are comping to completion, I could imagine a population of totally satisfied members, whose only inconvenience in the Club might be the difficulty in choosing what village to stay in or what adventure to embark on.

### THE ISLAND'S TRUSTEES

In order to enjoy Balesin Island Club, you need to be a member. The club employs a strict screening process for one to qualify. This is why I did not hear about it - there

are no advertisements announcing it, since most of the shareholders earned their membership through referrals and invitations. The only way a non member can experience Balesin is if he or she is invited as a guest by a member.

Even these guest invitations are strict. Say I am a member, I cannot just sign an endorsement for my guests, serving as their ticket to the island – I have to accompany them throughout the duration of their stay. Of course, this holds me accountable for the actions of my guests, and any irresponsibility on their part can revoke my membership.

The Club's strictness is justified. It possesses a gem that has gone rare in this age of reckless property developments. Beyond the man-made luxuries of Balesin Village and the promise of the five others, the island's real treasure is its wealth of coral white beaches and coves, crystal clear waters teeming with shells and eye-catching rock formations, and a lush and mysterious jungle-forest of giant banyan trees. Alphaland is aware of this, which is why it has committed to develop only 10 percent of the island and leave everything else as is – raw and ruggedly beautiful. Alphaland is also bent on applying green strategies – water is collected from the runway and desinated, driftwood is gathered from the shores constantly and crafted as furniture and décor, organic farming will grow the island's produce, and renewable energy will soon power the island as the Club explores the installation of solar panels.

The Club will also not allow more than 1000 members and guests occupying the island at a time. This is the Club's measure for ensuring sustainability in the 424\*-hectare island. What's more, the locals, the original Balesin community, was not displaced – they are partners of the Club in preserving its pristine state, employed by Alphaland as construction workers and operations staff, with their children sent to schools.

I asked general manager Wilhelm Bolton what has been the best thing that the creation of Balesin Island Club has done for the island and its people. Quickly, with conviction, he replied, "It is a 100 percent turnaround for the local people. They have livelihood, they have much more than what they had before, [and] they are passionate. They are enjoying something they built from scratch. It (the island) is as much theirs as it is the members."

From worrying about the locals being out-of-place in the now-luxurious-island, I had to laugh – they are in a way better off than me, I realized, they live in Balesin.

Not being a shareholder nor a native, I don't know if I'll ever be able to come back. It comforts me to know, though, that there exists this beautiful white sand island of enchanting giant trees out there, within the waters of my country, taken care of by an elite Club who know how to live the good life, with the help of the islands' own daughters and sons – all of them people worthy of admiration and trust.



*\*Editor's Note*

- 1) As of July 2012, Balesin Island Club will be adding a seventh village for the enjoyment of its members. Named for Spain's world-famous coastal region, Costa del Sol will be located on the Pacific side of Balesin Island, not far from the Phuket Village.
- 2) Balesin Island Club is 500 hectares, not 424 hectares.



