

## TRAVEL

S A T U R D A Y , D E C E M B E R 1 9 , 2 0 0 9

16



PHOTO: EPA

# QUEEN OF THE PRISTINE

*Despite recent development and a huge influx of tourists, the island of Boracay retains its allure*



BY **RICHARD HAZELDINE**  
STAFF REPORTER

For years Boracay was one of the Philippines and Asia's best-kept travel secrets.

The secret eventually got out and now the island is well and truly developed, with its once-deserted shores host to a championship golf course, dozens of upscale resort hotels and, much to the horror of Boracay pioneers, an open-air shopping mall.

A quiet, idyllic hideaway it may no longer be, but the development means that this still-beautiful island now offers something for everyone, and this is reflected in the wide variety of clientele — families, couples, wealthy Filipinos, Koreans, Taiwanese and backpackers — who can be seen strolling along the beachfront.

In spite of the huge influx of tourists, Boracay has managed to preserve what attracted people in the first place, its crystal clear, azure waters and the pristine nature of its centerpiece, White Beach — the secret lies in the dozens of workers who sweep along its 5km of caster sugar-like sand early each morning picking up the assorted flotsam and jetsam.

Known as “Long Beach Island” (長灘島) in Mandarin, Boracay is an ideal getaway for residents of Taiwan, lying just over two hours' flight time from Taipei.

Boracay is just 7km long, so it is impossible to get lost. White Beach is the center of most activity and is divided from north to south into three boat stations. Most of the shops, bars and restaurants are congregated around D'Mall, the open-air shopping mall, between stations two and three near the southern end.

Tourist seasons are dictated by the wind. In high season from October to May, the wind blows in from the east and White Beach is sheltered.

From June through October the wind changes direction, and White Beach is blighted by strong monsoon winds that bring frequent rainstorms and the occasional typhoon.

Beachfront hotels and bars counter this by erecting large bamboo screens, which may make for ugly photos, but provide welcome relief.

This presents people planning a Boracay adventure with a stark choice. Choose high season when the weather is more agreeable and battle the crowds, or low season when things are much quieter, but the weather is less predictable.

We went low and got lucky. It rained the whole week before our arrival but was sunny and dry during our five-day stay.

The year-round wind makes Boracay an ideal location for watersports, and the adventurous can try their hand at a whole range of activities, from the ubiquitous banana boat rides to parasailing and kiteboarding (surfing while holding a mini parachute canopy).

Other less strenuous activities include skimboarding (a kind of surfing along the shoreline), while pleasant three-hour, around-the-island boat trips to snorkeling spots and the gorgeous Puka Beach are also popular.

You don't even have to worry about arranging things, as there are friendly, not-too-pushy touts hanging around waiting to satisfy your every request.



After a busy day on the water you will probably be hankering for some sustenance, and, again, Boracay doesn't disappoint.

The area around D'Mall has a proliferation of restaurants where you can find just about any cuisine you fancy, from Cuban and Japanese to Italian and Mongolian.

Two of the most popular places are Cyma (above average Greek food, just don't expect an authentic “Greek” salad) and Aria (respectable Italian cuisine).

A meal for three (with drinks) at either will set you back around 2,000 pesos (US\$43), but there are plenty of other good places where you can eat for less, including an array of 250-pesos-per-head, all-you-can-eat barbecues.

Boracay is also famous for its fruit shakes, in particular the mango variety. You can buy them just about anywhere, but Jonas Fruitshake, situated on the beachfront about a 10-minute walk north of the mall, seems to hold the unofficial title of “King of Shakes.” The extensive menu features just about every flavor combination you could imagine.

Mango shakes sell out quickly, so I had to be content with a banana, coffee and peanut creation. It did not disappoint.

The good news for those on a low budget is that Boracay hasn't thrown off its backpacking roots altogether, as there is still a lot of inexpensive accommodation available. On the beachfront you can get an air-conditioned room for around 1,500 pesos (US\$32) per night in low season, less if you're prepared to barter. Just look for the signs.

At the other end of the scale and the choice for those wanting the utmost in luxury is Discovery Shores. An attractively low-key five-star hotel complex located at the quieter northern side of White Beach, it is far enough away, but not too far, from the hustle and bustle of the main drag. It is a perfect place to spend a few days unwinding while enjoying the kind of pampering that comes with five-star prices.

Discovery Shores is home to a branch of a Boracay institution, the Mandala Spa, where one can lose oneself in a range of luxurious body treatments. Be warned, the list prices don't include 12 percent value-added tax (VAT) and a 10 percent service charge, and nothing is guaranteed to snap you out of your spa-induced coma and spoil your relaxed holiday mood more than a bill almost a quarter more expensive than you originally bargained for.

## THINGS TO DO:

>> Watersports and boat rides can be arranged via touts on White Beach. **Banana boat** rides typically cost around 250 pesos per person. **Parasailing** is 2,500 pesos for 15 minutes. **Boat trips** go for around 500 pesos per person for a three-hour trip. Basic learner packages for **kiteboarding** start from around 3,000 pesos. For more information, go to [www.kiteboardingboracay.com](http://www.kiteboardingboracay.com) or [www.islakite.com](http://www.islakite.com).

**NOTE:** Most watersports move to Bulabog Beach on the opposite side of the island during low season.



PHOTOS: RICHARD HAZELDINE, TAIPEI TIMES

## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

>> **Caticlan and Kalibo airports** are used for flights to Boracay. Larger planes fly into Kalibo, from where you will need to take a bus (100 pesos) or hire a minivan (around 1,200 pesos per vehicle) for the 90-minute drive to Caticlan Port for the ferry. From Caticlan Airport a motor tricycle ride to the jetty costs around 50 pesos, from where you take the short boat trip to the island (125 pesos). Disembark for another trike trip to your hotel (around 100 pesos). Porters charge 20 pesos per bag.

>> Flights from Taipei via Manila to Kalibo or Caticlan can be booked online from **Philippine Airlines** ([www.philippineairlines.com/home/homejsp](http://www.philippineairlines.com/home/homejsp)), **Cebu Pacific** ([www.cebpacificair.com](http://www.cebpacificair.com)) and **Seair** ([www.flyseair.com](http://www.flyseair.com)).

>> **Wonderful Tours & Travel** (萬大旅行社), tel: (02) 2521-0100, specializes in Boracay packages and has a range of five-day/four-night packages including direct flights to Kalibo and transfers starting at around NT\$16,000 during the low season. A five-day/four-night stay at Discovery Shores starts at around NT\$28,000. Details can be found online at [boracay.tw/ugC\\_BoracayIntro.asp?hidMenuID=1](http://boracay.tw/ugC_BoracayIntro.asp?hidMenuID=1)

**NOTE:** Christmas, Easter and the Lunar New Year are particularly busy times; hotels and flights to Caticlan fill up quickly and hotel prices rise accordingly.



### WHERE TO STAY

>> **Discovery Shores** ([www.discoveryshoresboracay.com](http://www.discoveryshoresboracay.com)). Rates for the cheapest rooms (Junior Suites) start at US\$250 per night in low season.

>> **Two Seasons** ([www.twoseasonsboracay.com/main.php](http://www.twoseasonsboracay.com/main.php)) This hotel has superior rooms starting at US\$123 in low season and rising to US\$164 at Christmas, the Lunar New Year and Easter. >> **Fiesta Cottages** (63-36-2883818) offers rooms starting at around US\$46 in low season.

### PAMPERING:

>> **Mandala Spa** ([www.mandalaspa.com](http://www.mandalaspa.com)) has day treatments starting at 2,500 pesos, not including 12 percent (VAT) and 10 percent service charge. Cheaper massages (around 300 pesos per hour) are available at numerous places along the beachfront, while cut-rate manicures, pedicures and a one-hour foot massage (600 pesos) are available at **Footzeez** in D'Mall.