



Strolling the island's heart at D'Mall. Opposite: A wall of silence surrounds you at the secluded Shangri-La Boracay.

# BORACAY WITHOUT BOUNDS

ON THIS PHILIPPINE ISLAND DREAMLAND,  
MAY THE WIND UNDER YOUR WINGS  
BEAR YOU WHERE THE SUN SAILS  
AND THE MOON WALKS. BY  
STEPHANIE ZUBIRI.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHILIPP ENGELHORN



**A**

s the sun sets on the horizon, silhouettes of sails dance against a backdrop of Rothko-reminiscent designs. In the shallow waters, the happy flap of mermaid fins catches your attention as they swirl around the bathing men. Ashore, on the long stretch of blindingly white sand, a jester juggles amid the strolling crowd. It is the witching hour. For on this island, it's at dusk when magic happens.

Where not far, in the village, the Hobbits start making their rounds peddling beer and the pirates begin singing their rum-soaked songs.

No, this is not some *Pirates of the Caribbean*-meets-*Lord of the Rings* dream sequence. This is Boracay. A smallish island of roughly 10 square kilometers, some 315 kilometers south of Manila, it has an unparalleled paradisiacal beach, crystalline waters and a lifestyle of pure abandon. And in 2012, it had 1.2 million tourist arrivals—a record.

People have been coming to the island for years with hopes of getting lost, disappearing into themselves, just letting go. For some, it is the ultimate Robinson Crusoe fantasy but with all the comforts of modern living. For others, it's the allure of sheer relaxation: massages on the shore while sipping a rum, Malibu and pineapple concoction called White Beach through an angled straw. And for many, Boracay is the gateway to decadence: a parallel universe where alcohol is cheap, where time is indifferent, where the days and nights meld into each other like a kaleidoscopic party scene from a Baz Lurhman movie. Where friends find themselves at the airport departure area pinky-swearing, "What happens in Boracay stays in Boracay."

There's wholesome fun to be had, too, I swear. Minimal waves and shallow waters cascading along the best sand for building castles and a plethora of water sports from parasailing to mermaid swimming lessons make the island very kid-friendly. I, for one, practically grew up with Boracay, having regularly visited for the past 15 years. My parents loved taking family vacations there because days would be spent lounging about the beach with kids and grandkids; come cocktail hour, we'd venture off with our friends and be back in time for family dinner. At night, as I got older, we'd party with our pals until the sun came up and no one would worry where we were or how we'd get home, because everything was—and still is—a walk on the beach away.

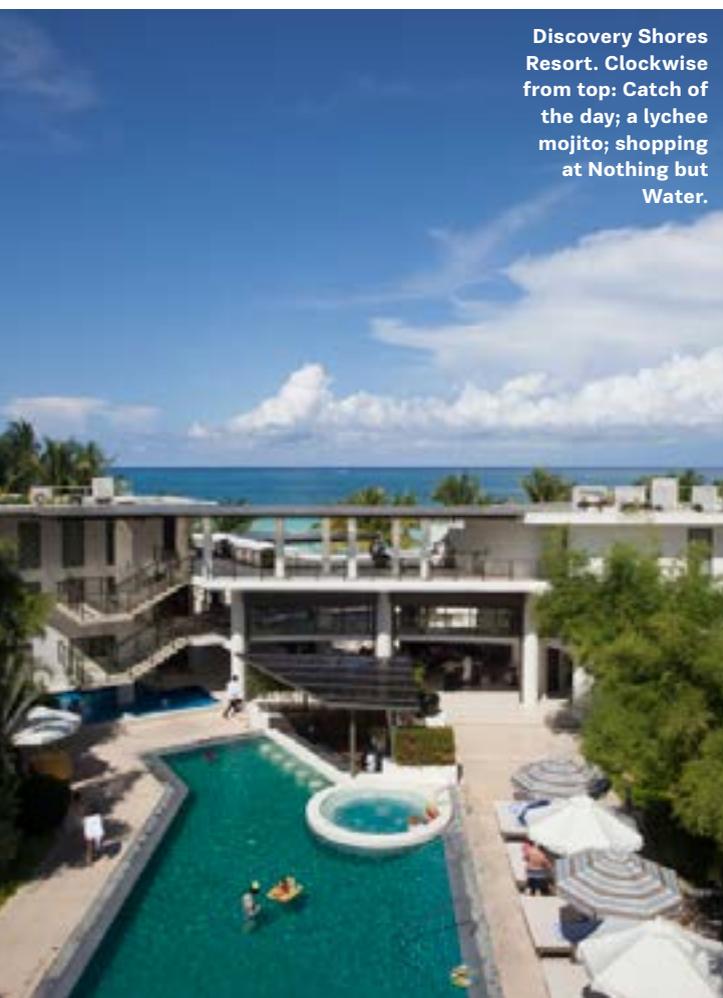
Then there are the sketchier memories: Fresh out of high school, passed out in the bathroom of the iconic Cocomangas only to re-emerge after a 20-minute disco nap refreshed and ready for another round of Jam Jars and Illusion Shakers. A few years later, swaying to deep house music on the beach at sunrise surrounded by elegant poi dancers after a night that included a limbo battle with Hobbit House staff and a pole-dancing lesson from a drag queen. Or the strange evening we spent parading around dolled up like Greek gods the day

after Halloween—when no one else was costumed—creating a traffic jam at D'Mall as we posed for admiring Korean tourists. Our flight had been canceled due to inclement weather so we didn't make it in time for the other ghouls and costumed gentry, but we wore our outfits anyways. It didn't matter. We were in Boracay. So on November 1, Zeus, Hercules, Dionysius, Hades, Aphrodite and Athena drank some cold beer and danced the night away barefoot in the sand.

I must admit that the appeal of crazy crowds and constant techno-pop mash-ups has worn off with age. Luckily, my most recent trip kicked off with chill house music playing softly on Discovery Shores' air-conditioned boat, an auspicious start to a modern, glamorous and impeccable stay. Discovery Shores has the fluffiest pillows around and amazing food. For example, the steamy tropical weather always makes me crave *kilawin*—a local version of ceviche—large chunks of fresh *tanigue*, or Spanish mackerel, curing in lime juice, vinegar and coconut milk, mingling with some fiery hot chili and ginger. Here they served it up nicely chilled in an open coconut husk—it's a dish that screams beach vacation. The one place that combines ultimate luxury and centrality, the resort is smack in the center of all the action with the famous White Beach at your doorstep. The service was spectacular—especially Jigs, our waiter, who served us their gorgeous and deceptively potent cocktails on the shore (tip: cut the alcohol's impact with Crispy Bang Bang Shrimp dipped in sweet chili sauce) and made sure our slippers were always in line and our sunglasses spotless. The beach I'd always remembered was still perfect: the sand still as fine as flour, the water still turquoise... and there was that breathtaking sunset.

Which is why I was a bit surprised to find that the wall of silence that surrounded us when we moved to Shangri-La Boracay came as welcome relief. Entirely secluded from all the action, the resort doesn't quite provide "the Boracay experience." However, with its gorgeous infinity pools, peaceful private beach coves, world-class restaurants and breathtaking villas, I found the resort a complete destination in and of itself. CHI, The Spa is an oasis of modern Asian design

Discovery Shores Resort. Clockwise from top: Catch of the day; a lychee mojito; shopping at Nothing but Water.



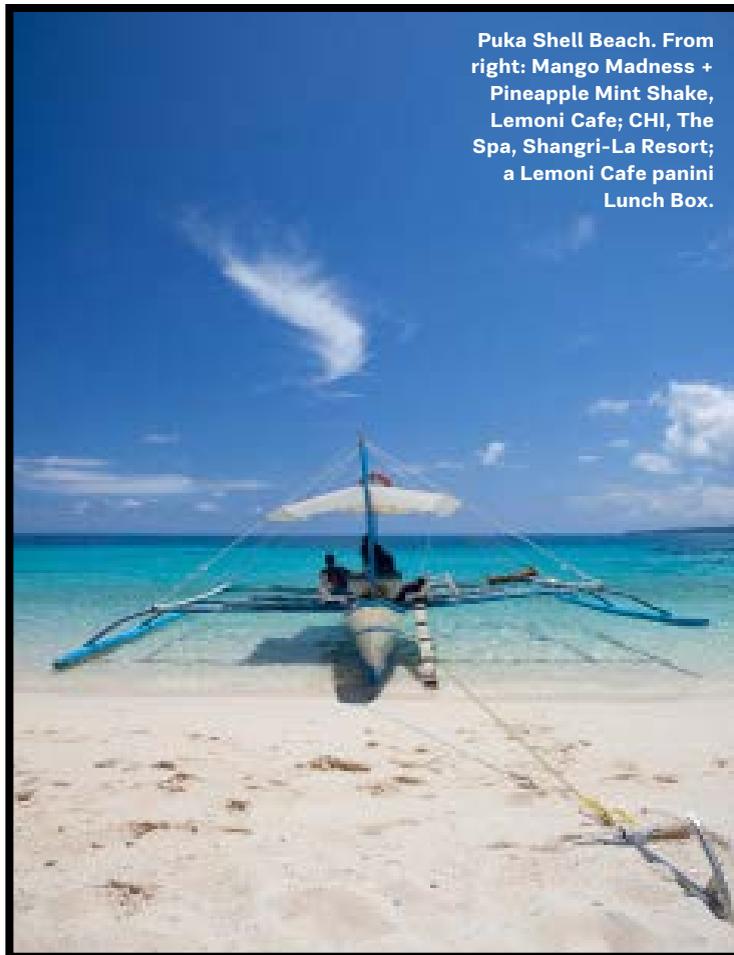


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Puka Shell Beach. From right: Mango Madness + Pineapple Mint Shake, Lemoni Cafe; CHI, The Spa, Shangri-La Resort; a Lemoni Cafe panini Lunch Box.



## I'D GIVE ANYTHING RIGHT NOW TO BE BACK ON SKIN, INTOXICATED FROM THE ATMOSPHERE

stand-alone villas, complete with feng shui gardens. I arrived in the evening, into a welcoming cocoon of darkness, punctured by intricate stone carvings and large sculptural palms standing like opera singers in the limelight casting enchanting shadows. As I lay face down on the massage bed, I let the chanting of monks take over and drifted slowly away to a floating state. “Mmm... beach? What beach?” I was in a universe of my own...

### BUY ONE, TAKE ALL: BORACAY'S

ultimate appeal seems to be as a one-stop-shop. “As far as I know,” says Bacchus Zulueta—a local construction magnate who found his “excuse to live in Boracay” 10 years ago, building Mandala Spa, Asya Premier Suites and Fridays Boracay, among others—“there is no other Asian island destination with the unique combination of a beautiful long stretch of white beach, with a beach path all the way through giving people a wide array of dining, drinking and accommodation choices.”

“There is something for everybody,” Zulueta says, “whether you want to party or just relax on the beach. And the island is just the right size to easily explore. Not too big, not too small.”

You can buy pearls, designer swimwear and live lobsters all in the same center. You could get inked (or henna tattooed if you're non-committal), Rasta braids, a manicure and a massage practically simultaneously while wiggling your toes in the sand. Start the evening with sunset cocktails over house music. Most resorts offer happy hour, and at sunset White Beach turns into one big party. Walk around, mingle and rock up to any establishment that looks like fun. You could also buy a few beers or a bottle of wine and settle down on a sarong.

For dinner, eat Greek food and shoot some ouzo, have beers while listening to Bob Marley, dance on the tables to Rihanna while guzzling champagne, then camp out on the windy Bulabog beach to watch the sunrise all in a span of 24 hours. Cramped away in a scraggly side street of D'Mall, Cyma looks every bit the Greek taverna it hopes to be: the clanking of pots from the open kitchen, the strains of Mediterranean guitar and the occasional Gypsy Kings, the smoky smells punctuated by bright citrus and heady olive, and the occasional scandalously surprising shouts of “Opa!” as they bring out their signature flamed cheese—it's all one crazy feast. Just around the corner sits Hobbit House, where the staff is tiny (as in midgets) and service is big (as in -hearted). Continue down the surreal path by hopping on a tricycle to

## THAT BEACH WITH THE WARM SUN KISSING MY AND ONE TOO MANY LYCHEE MOJITOS.

Area 51 on Bulabog Beach. Make sure it's a full moon and watch the crowd transcend all barriers: beneath the stars and black-lit unearthly trees, all walks of life—tourists, locals, businessmen, models, hoteliers, bartenders, socialites, vagabonds—come to sway rhythmically and ritually to the pulsating deep house music. Forget fancy cocktails, it's beer and rum-and-Coke in plastic cups, and plenty of it to keep your joints well-oiled for the intense dance session til daylight. Oh, and don't forget to grab a street-side *chori* burger before stumbling home.

The next day, if your hangover doesn't kill you (thank goodness for the *chori* burger!), go kite-surfing, banana boating or—in a new addition—live out your *Iron Man* fantasies by strapping on a water powered jet pack. Basically, a high-powered vacuum sucks up water, which in turn is spewed out of your feet and hands at such intense pressure as to propel you up to 6 meters out of the water and thrust you nearly 50 kilometers per hour. Ingenious or insane? That's your call.

For those wanting a less daring water experience, wiggle into a mermaid fin and learn how to glide up and down the water gracefully while getting a serious ab workout at the same time. If you're still a little worn out from the night before you could just pose for a few nice pictures fin up against the sunset. No one's judging.

If you're feeling a little adventurous, head out to Ariel's Point some 30 to 40 minutes away by boat where, near a quaint fishing village, where rocky cliffs and small white sand beaches meet some of the

bluest waters on earth. Makeshift wooden platforms jut out from the formations inviting visitors to take the plunge and embrace the sea. Above all, one cannot visit this island without doing *the* classic Boracay activity: sailing by sunset. With hardly any real room on the slim boat, you find yourself sprawled out on nets strung out on the outriggers skimming the ocean's surfaced, refreshed with every splash. Un-motorized, the wind takes you at its will. Nix the iPod and speakers and enjoy the serene whoosh as you cut through orange waves gliding into the sunset. Captain Joey, a.k.a. Red Pirate, is a local icon. Skin the color of a dark coconut husk, ripped and lithe, with long hair and a wide toothy grin, he puts Johnny Depp to shame. A true native of Boracay, which is something becoming as rare as an ortolan, he's passionate about its nature and is probably the best person to show you around. If you're looking for that hidden piece of paradise, untouched by development, he's the living treasure map. He and his crew will grill some fresh fish on the beach, serve you some

cold beer, and he'll personally climb up the tree with his bare hands and feet to fetch you a fresh coconut. Like a true pirate, lacking any form of contact, he simply is found happy, rum glass clinking, jamming to music at his pub.

#### FOR THOSE SERIOUSLY SEEKING

peace and quiet, come slightly off-season or just settle in the secluded Shangri-La, where, in fulfilling all your needs, they give you no real reason to leave the resort except for two things: the nightlife and, of course, the white sand.

Right. Back to that sand.

"Ultimately, Boracay is about the beach," says Marc Nelson, something of a local celebrity who has been an adopted islander for the last 13 years and recently opened his own kite-surfing resort called Bahari on an island close by. "The sand is still some of the best in the world, especially if you see it way up past Station One. The crystal clear turquoise water is gorgeous."

The true beauty of Boracay is that its key asset is also democratic. Despite the rising number of luxury resorts and their simultaneously rising prices, anyone can enjoy the powdery sand and warm waters regardless of budget. Sure, you could fight to reserve that 2-square-meter space of prime real estate in that first row of sunbeds in a chic resort, by tipping the waiters and ordering lots of cocktails; but the fact is, for absolutely nothing at all, armed with a sarong you could plop yourself down anywhere and momentarily own a piece of paradise.

Yet that very "come one, come all" appeal is taking its toll. "I remember a time when everything was homegrown and fast-food chains were not allowed in order to protect the local businesses, when the main road only had pedestrians, bicycles and tricycles," Mark Santiago, a businessman and Boracay resident since 2007 says. "Traffic came very suddenly. Food chains started opening left and right. Then came the large hotel chains, direct international flights and hordes of tourists. It has definitely changed too much, too fast."

Locals cite waste management, illegal constructions, poverty and displacement of the indigenous population as some of the major issues that come with the Boracay's rapid growth. Last April, the local government issued a one-year moratorium on building construction. However, there are exceptions for outsider investments worth P20

brehtaking sunset. Most of the resorts and activities are here. Divided into three distinct stations: Station 1, quieter, more relaxed with upscale resorts; Station 2 is centered around D'Mall where most of the bustle is; and Station 3, where most of the locals and backpackers hang out.

#### STAY

##### Discovery Shores Boracay

Beautiful rooms with a sleek design coupled with top-notch service that is always friendly, efficient yet never intrusive. The attention to detail is astounding, from the small bites and chilled towels passed around during the day to the servers who clean your sunglasses without you asking. The food is equally excellent and their cocktails are deceptively deadly. *Station 1, Balabag Boracay Island, Boracay Highway Central; 63-36/288-4500; discoveryshoresboracay.com; doubles from P19,962.*

**Shangri-La Boracay** Don't miss out on CHI, The Spa, a true haven on a bustling island. Indulge in a two-person massage in their Asian inspired spa villas. A plus is that they have their own pier and their private speedboat service takes you directly to the resort without having to pass the back roads of the island. *Barangay Yapak, 63-36/288-4988; shangri-la.com/boracay; doubles from P21,800.*

**Punta Rosa** A "secret favorite"

among long-term expats, there are comfortable rooms, some with large terraces and open showers. Located on White Beach close to the very end of Station 1, it's a great compromise between prime location and fair pricing. With no real beachfront, however, most guests camp out on the sunbeds of other resorts earning their rights by ordering food and drinks. *Sinagpa Balabag; 63-36/288-6740; puntarosaboracay.com; doubles from P3,950.*

**Villa Kaloo** Feel at home in a four-bedroom villa with maid and cook service right on White Beach Station 1. *Sitio Pinaunon; 63-36/288-5798; boracayvillas.biz; P35,000 per night for the villa.*

**7Stones Boracay Suites** For the more relaxed vibe of Bulabog beach without having to rough it, this is a well-run resort with seaview rooms and a pool. *Bulabog Beach, Balabag; 63-36/288-1601; 7stonesboracay.com; doubles from P6,900.*

**Hey! Jude Resort** Perfect for those on a budget who still want to be in the heart of the action. There's no beachfront, but the rooms are nice and the service friendly. *D'mall D'boracay, Balabag; 63-36/288-5401; heyjude-boracay.com; doubles from P3,177.*

#### EAT

**Baling Hai** A local favorite, nestled in a cove where you can set a budget and they can grill up a

million (US\$500,000) and up. Which means: anything is possible as long as you have the money.

Still, we're all staying optimistic. "Even though I miss how it used to be, I notice that there is still a magic that is essentially Boracay," Nelson says. "Sometimes you just need to look for it a bit more carefully." That's especially true for nostalgic regulars like me, who love to complain about the "new," "overrun" Boracay—perhaps we think it makes us sound cool?—yet, whatever we may say, just keep on coming back. Stuck in my small office in the scorching heat of Manila summer, I'd give anything right now to be back on that noisy beach with the warm sun kissing my skin, slightly intoxicated from the invigorating atmosphere, not to mention one too many lychee mojitos.

"It's just a matter of remembering and seeking out what you love," says Santiago. "Residents have to make an effort to play tourist once in a while to appreciate where we are and not take it for granted."

I already have my next plane ticket booked. ✚

## IT IS THE WITCHING HOUR. ON THIS ISLAND, IT'S AT DUSK WHEN THE MAGIC HAPPENS.

storm of fresh caught seafood. Sail there with a *paraw* and arrive directly on the beach in time for sunset cocktails. You must book ahead and it's best to have your resort contact them and organize this for you. *Yapak, Malay; 63-36/288-3646; balinghai.com; dinner for two P1,000.*

**Cyma's** chicken souvlakis, lamb ribs, *metzedes* platters and fried *saganaki* cheese easily make for one of the best meals on the island. *D'mall; 63-36/288-4283; cymarestaurants.com; dinner for two P1,500.*

**Aria Cucina Italiana** Go for the wood-fire oven pizzas and a nice glass of wine. *At the beachfront of D'Mall; 63-36/288-6223; aria.com.ph; dinner for two P1,500.*

**Lemoni Café** A light, refreshing lunch after shopping. Order their hearty sandwiches and don't miss out on their Pineapple Mint Shake. *D'Mall; 63-36/288-6781; lemonicafeboracay.com; lunch for two P750.*

**Real Coffee and Tea** Local institution that has been made famous by their delicious freshly baked calamansi muffins. It's a nice place for breakfast and brunch as well. *Located in Station 1 near Willy's Beach Resort. 63-36/288-5340; breakfast for two P500.*

**Dos Mestizos** One of the pioneer restaurants on the island serving rich slow-cooked classic Spanish cuisine. Their paellas are fantastic but for large groups order in

advance their *cuchinillo* or roast suckling pig, or the roast leg of lamb. *Remedios St.; 63-36/288-5786; dosmestizos.com; dinner for two P1,500.*

**The Lazy Dog Bed and Breakfast** Filipino breakfast in a laid-back atmosphere. Try their Adobo and Tinapa Flakes. *Bulabog Beach, Balabag; 63-36/288-4128; lazydogboracay.com; breakfast for two P400.*

**Ti Braz** Crêpes and really good French Malongo espresso. *North end of Station 2; 63-36/288-1667; www.tibrazboracay.com; lunch for two P600.*

#### DRINK

**EPIC** The heart of Boracay's nightlife. With different events and parties, the glamorous crowd is always rocking it to mainstream club hits. You could also choose to ease in to the evening by grabbing a few bites and cocktails on their nice beachfront set-up. *epicboracay.com; drinks for two P350.*

**Juice Bar** Local favorite, the dress code is laid back but the vibe certainly isn't. Beware of the Waterfall, a towering concoction of spirits that will sure have you dancing on the bar. *Get dropped off at D'Mall, walk to the beach front and turn left, walk further down past Shakey's Pizza and you'll hit Juice Bar. Drinks for two P260.*

**Area 51** on Bulabog beach is probably the closest you can get to

what people mean by the "true Boracay." Best during their full moon parties when locals and tourists come together for a night of deep house music under the stary sky with a really barefoot beach bum vibe. Ask any tricycle driver to take you there; they might also know it by its former name, Jungle Bar. With no real website to check, it's best to ask locals or your resort if there are any fun parties or events happening there during your stay. *Drinks for two P150.*

**Hobbit House Boracay** is a nice pub with a good selection of international beers and average but tasty bar chow, but the real highlight is their staff. Fully staffed by midgets including the kitchen, Take some photos; they love to ham it up! *D'Mall; 63/90989-44834; sam\_hobbit20@yahoo.com; hobbithousemanila.com; drinks for two P250.*

#### SHOP / DO

**D'Mall** is the central nerve of activity on the island. Several pathways of little shops, bakeries, restaurants, bars, cafés, arcades, pharmacies, optical shops, ATM cash dispensers... whatever you need, you'll find it here.

**Nothing But Water** is a great store for locally designed and made, high quality swimwear with prices for bikini tops starting at a reasonable P1,500. They also sell nice cover-ups, the famous comfy

Tom's Shoes and cute beachwear for kids. *Station 2, D'Mall; 63-36/288-5942.*

One of the latest additions to the watersports scene is the **Philippine Mermaid Swimming Academy**. Wriggle into a mermaid tail and learn to swim in the warm waters by the shore. *63-917/324-3947; philippinemermaidswimmingacademy.com; P1,500 per person per two-hour class inclusive of tail rental, minimum two per class.*

**Ariel's Point** is a 30-minute boat ride from Boracay with a famous cliff that drops to pristine waters. It's a wonderful escape from the hustle and bustle of the main island and a chance to experience a quaint, unspoiled fishing town. *arielspoint.com; P1,600 per person.*

Rent a *paraw* or local sailboat and go for a sunset cruise. You don't need to look far and wide to find one to rent, as the local captains wander the shores offering their boats to the tourists. The most famous one is Captain Joey of Red Pirate Tours. They organize beach barbecues and if you're lucky some live music on deserted beaches. He's almost impossible to reach by mobile phone or email; it's best to go visit him at the **Red Pirate Pub** (63-36/288-5767) on Angol Beach Station 3. You could also ask your resort to organize this for you. *Around P1,000 for one to two persons for 30 minutes, prices vary depending on the captain; you can usually negotiate directly with him.*



## T+L Guide

### Places of Interest

**Puka Shell Beach** Most people sail over by the local *paraws*. Bring a picnic, some cold beer and sarongs to lay out on the pinkish coral sand and watch the sun set.

**Bulabog Beach** Perennially windy, this is kite-surfers' paradise. It also

has a more relaxed, bohemian vibe to it. Although the sand isn't as white, the beach has its charm. Be careful of the seasons and the tides; during high tide, you may not be able to cross from one end to the other without swimming!

**White Beach** The island's main beach, famous for its pure white sand, clear-blue waters and