

PARADISE FOUND

From Seoul to Sydney, from Tokyo to Hong Kong, cosmopolite Anna Ido Hyatt, with her family in tow, finds paradise on a hill gently sloping to a patch of white beach on the Mactan Channel.

By **AA PATAWARAN**
portraits **JON UNSON**

ISLAND GIRL. Global urbanite Anna Ido Hyatt gives up steel and glass for sea and sand. Photographed at her 'Aman-worthy' boutique resort on Mactan Island.



Antonio Pigafetta, Vicenza-born scribe, thought it worthy of note that in this remote part of the world, once non-existent to Western civilization, "Thai and Chinese porcelain service" was a fixture in entertaining and dining. Ferdinand Magellan, the first person ever to cross the Pacific Ocean, sailing westward from Europe to Asia, paid with his dear life to conquer this island paradise in what history would remember as the Battle of Mactan.

A PIECE OF PARADISE

Nearly five hundred years later, Anna Ido Hyatt, part Korean, part Australian, part Japanese, arrives on the island and, with her husband, American chef Jason Hyatt, her son eleven-year-old Kento, and her daughter nine-year-old Reona, obtains a piece of paradise, a hillside property that gently drops to a patch of white beach hogging the Mactan Channel.

For Anna, who lived many years on the fast lane in cities like Seoul, Sydney, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, the discovery of Mactan Island in Cebu is a life-changing adventure. "Of the three things I like most about Cebu," she says, "I should say the weather, the clean air, and the people." Her son Kento, who had difficulty breathing all his life in Hong Kong, was the proof of the pudding. All it took was a few days of vacation in Cebu for him to magically, miraculously exclaim, "Mom, I can breathe!" That did it for Anna. "I didn't realize how suffocating Hong Kong was until I came here," she says.

Late last year, in an opening so soft it was practically a secret, Jason and Anna opened a restaurant on their property, in which, at the moment, Abacá, the dream resort of the couple, is in the works. It took Anna's husband and their restaurant manager, Cebuano Glenn Ylanan, about a year and a half to build it and over two months of pre-opening preparations before the most discerning Cebuano palates had a taste, but all the effort yielded more than positive results. "Much to our delight," beams Jason. "We have been full from the day we opened."

CALIFORNIA MEDITERRANEAN

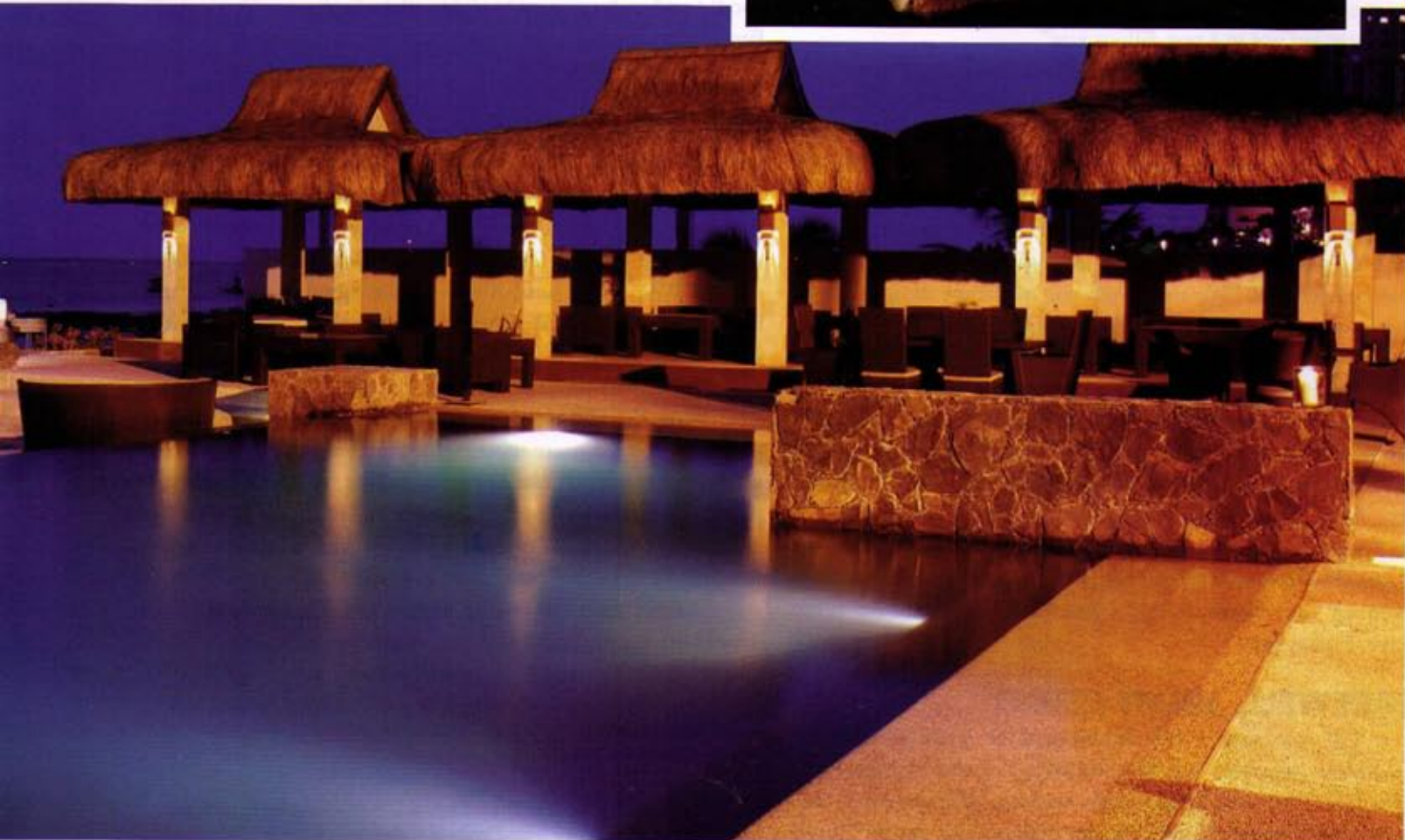
Now Abacá, a dining outlet that extends to the vast expanse of the blue skies and blue waters, is one compelling reason to visit Cebu. Its beachfront cuisine, what Jason and Anna call "California Mediterranean," is a collection of clean and simple dishes, of which the *papperdalle* with braised veal and *porcini*, rich and succulent, is the chef's signature. But, as Anna puts it, "people get bored easily," so Jason, along with his sous chef, a Canadian import, updates the menu on a daily basis, depending on the fresh produce of the day.

In charge of marketing both the restaurant and the soon-to-open resort, Anna is ecstatic about the response of Cebuanos, who have a fondness for dining and entertaining. "Sometimes,



FOOD AND PARADISE.

Anna, together with her chef husband Jason, creates the perfect island getaway with exciting cuisine and breathtaking vistas for the city-weary folk. Clockwise from top left: Anna with husband Jason Hyatt; making squid ink pasta; parmesan pizza; prime angus rib-eye on the grill; Abacá's poolside panorama.



we have people bringing their own secret recipe dishes from home to taste," she says. "Soon, we will feature a Philippine dessert, whose recipe one of our customers shared with us. We will name it after her."

Anna also takes pride in her husband's insistence to have everything homemade, from their bread to their pasta, from their handcut potato fries to their pickles and sausages, as well as their sorbets and ice cream. "It's so exciting," she says. "Because customers know we make everything, they know it's freshly made every day."

But it is Abacá, the boutique resort, Anna is most excited about. Designed to provide ultimate intimacy and exclusiveness, the nine-suite resort will feature such exquisite "extras" as butler service, a complimentary mini bar, complimentary wireless connection, along with either a Macintosh or a PC, depending on the client's preference, a plasma screen TV, an iPod dock, and complimentary breakfast in your own patio.

GLOBAL OUTLOOK

"When we first planned this venture, it was going to be a very casual B&B," recounts Anna, but after extensive study and consultation with many traveling friends, the couple decided to go full blast with luxury, without compromising comfort, relaxation, and the casual charm with which Cebu first welcomed them. "We have to present Cebu and the Philippines in our own unique way," adds Anna. "Everything has to be done tastefully, elegantly, but not in a pretentious way."

As a result, Abacá is promising to reflect the global outlook of Anna and her American husband. An architect from Canada is helping put the concepts together. An Italian design company with a satellite office in Cebu City, is in charge of the built-ins. And Kenneth Cobonpue furniture pieces, along with Philippine antiques, will provide functional and decorative touches.

To Anna, however, nature is what makes people relaxed and comfortable. "We always tell our landscape designer from Cebu to plant more than he is planning to, so we can keep this overall look of lushness," she beams.

After having lived many years of her life in the shade of towering buildings of steel and glass, such as in Tokyo and Hong Kong, where she lived the past five years, Anna finds nature to be among Cebu's main attractions. On a summer day in her sprawling beachfront garden in Abacá, she is particularly at home. "What I like most about Cebu is the weather, sunny and bright most of the days," she says. "But even on rainy days, it looks beautiful. Dramatic on rainy days, I must say."

FAREWELL, JIMMY CHOO

Life has taken a 360-degree turn for Anna in what she considers paradise. "My feet are happy! I was in high heels every day, but now I am mostly in flats," she exclaims. "My super high-heeled Guccis, Jimmy Choos, and Sergio Rossis

are now [at rest] in my shoe closet. I will pass everything on to my daughter later. They will be vintage items for her and she might appreciate them more than I do now." A fashion marketing specialist back in her Hong Kong days, where she spent five years on top of the international operations of Sanei International, one of the hippest fashion conglomerates in Japan, Anna, indeed, is no stranger to up-to-the-minute style. But in Cebu, where, according to her, overdressing can be a bit awkward, the fashionista has new clothes. "My fashion sense has changed from sharp and hip to tropical and sensual," she muses. She is particularly fond of the ladies of Cebu, whose taste in fashion she describes as impeccable. "Knowing more and more now, I realize sophistication comes from a graceful heart," says Anna, who spends her evenings entertaining Abacá diners, mostly the local who's who and ladies of leisure.

Once the resort opens and the tourists come in, Anna and her family will move to a new home in Maria Luisa from their beach house on the Abacá property. "We are really blending into Cebu lifestyle," she says. In her family's experience, this promise land has yet to reveal more surprises, although at the moment they have grown to love many things in the province. "*Lechon* is definitely our favorite," enthuses Anna. "Lately, my son has been into this barbecue pork that sells at five pesos per stick. We buy from this particular place he really likes and it's really good! I end up buying up to eighty sticks to share with my staff." Personally, Anna is in love with pork and chicken *adobo*, *kare-kare*, and garlic rice.

LIFE FROM THE FAST LANE

When there is no work, which is every Monday, when the restaurant is closed, the Hyatts spend the day exploring the many small islands Cebu is known for. "Our uncle owns a small islet behind Olongo Island called Kumungi," shares Anna. "We plan to send Abacá guests there on a picnic trip by bunker with a kayak. We also love Tongo Point, where it is best to snorkel, what with all the corals, the colorful tropical fish, and the sea turtles."

From the fast lane, Anna is, indeed, slowing down and picking up better, more meaningful things along the way. What keeps her life full of fun and promise now are the more important things, such as waking up at seven in the morning to send her children off to school or reading books like Barrack Obama's *Audacity of Hope*, her latest reading pleasure. *

"Rather than keeping up with others like I used to, I am now living my life," admits Anna. "Cebu has given me so many choices. It has turned me into a real person." ■

Abacá Boutique Resort + Restaurant is at Punta Engaño Road, Mactan Island, Lapu-Lapu City, Metro Cebu. For inquiries, call +63 32 495 84 56 or log on to www.abacaresort.com.

BAREFOOT IN CEBU. Opposite: Trading in high-heels for flats, Anna slows down to a leisurely island pace in Cebu.

