

The infinite ocean view  
awakens such wonder.

# Private Paradise

Cebu's Abacá Boutique Resort+Restaurant calms the restless spirit with excellent food and impeccable service.

IT WAS A journey I did not expect. I flew into the island of Mactan as ribbons of light heralded the first traces of day. I had come with a team from *Town & Country* that dropped me off at the Abacá Boutique Resort+Restaurant, and drove away for a pictorial at some fabulous beach house in Cebu. The resort had not yet opened to the public and, except for an elegant couple whom I glimpsed by the poolside, I was the only guest.

This gave me a feeling of infinite space. I had never been alone like this, and I realized that being alone in a grand estate had an ethereal quality, a point of view. Wandering down pebbled pathways, I entered a world so close to nature that even the sky felt intimate. I listened to the chirping of unseen birds. I gazed at an ocean that touched eternity, and felt the stillness of its depth. Wherever I turned, hand-hewn stone and polished wood reflected the softness of nature. And I thought: any place that awakens such wonder can only be special.

This private paradise began some years ago, the way many things begin, with a dream. It happened when Jason Hyatt, a noted American chef, and his wife Anna, came to visit his uncle who had married a lovely Cebuana. What they did not expect was to find a world that

is fast disappearing, an enclave of giant old trees and flowering kalachuchi and a magnificent ocean but a few steps away. They had lived in great cities and splendid homes, but nothing was quite as charming as this raw terrain. Thus began the idea of creating, in this very setting, the harmony and beauty that we see today. The concept was to blend structure with nature and to give the landscape a rich organic feeling.

Fired by enthusiasm, the Hyatts formed a partnership with Jeni and Marc Compagnon, good friends from Hong Kong, where both couples were residing then. Marc is an industrialist, and Jeni, a Filipina with impeccably cosmopolitan taste. Through the years, she had frequented the most opulent spas around the world, and was keen on redefining luxury. Here she would design a refuge for the discriminating elite. Jason explained, "There was no master plan. What we had to conquer was having a dream and getting it done."

First they completed the airy Abacá Restaurant, which is gently nestled among bamboo clusters and lush wildflowers. Made of polished wood with a high, high ceiling, it feels sensitively Asian. Torches light the tip of the ocean view, and golden flames flicker everywhere. Nothing overwhelms you.

# TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

Jason Hyatt is the heart of this establishment. A gourmet chef with uncommon recipes of his own, he had worked in France, New York, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong, and had trained with the celebrated Wolfgang Puck. You see him in his chef's uniform working in an open kitchen with a wood oven. The atmosphere is friendly, yet an imperceptible quiet pervades.

In this genteel place, where the cuisine is California Mediterranean, dining is an Event. Among the choice items on the menu are: the Abacá French Cheese Tasting of camembert aoc, coulommier, pont l'evêque, and chaurce served with toasted country bread, apricot fruit mustard, and marinated olives; seared rare duck breast salad; wood-fired brick oven flatbread pizzas; saffron risotto with grilled prawns, asparagus, and oven-dried tomatoes; and Abacá bouillabaisse.

Legendary is the char-grilled certified Angus rib-eye beef served with "tobacco road" onions and balsamic glaze. Flown in weekly from the United States, it is dry-aged and never frozen. Other specialties depend on the day's produce in the local market.

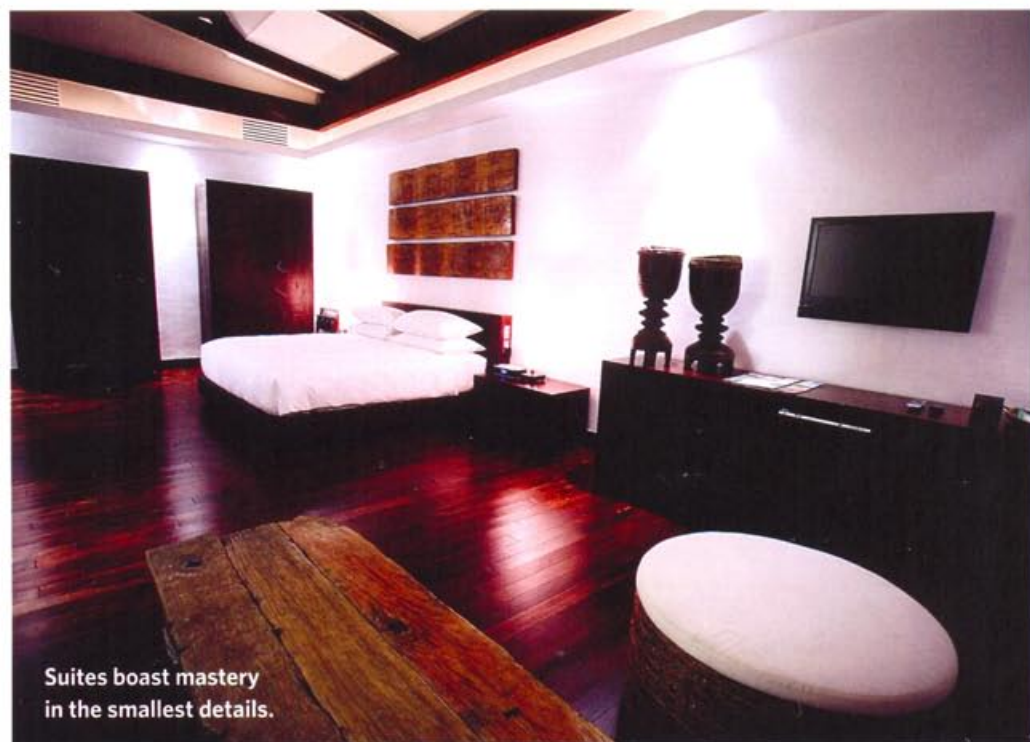
Familiar desserts, such as crème brulee and tiramisu, have a twist of alchemy that is indescribable. They tease the capricious spirit, and wait to be indulged.

The service was impeccable and discreet, with more than enough waiters for a full house. Each one was amazingly alert to a glance, a gesture, a hint of whatever was needed. They were never intrusive, and never interrupted a conversation to ask if you enjoyed your dinner. It was a superb evening.

Impressed by the sophistication of line and detail, I wondered how people had discovered a gem so well concealed. Apparently, it made news when a dramatic insert appeared in *Gracious Living*, the exclusive magazine of Maria Luisa Properties. Hyatt smiled, "I made this black postcard with white letters: 'Now Open Abacá Restaurant' and a phone number. That's all it said. The next day we were packed. Literally."



Abaca's nine rooms put a premium on privacy.



Suites boast mastery in the smallest details.

Two years into the success of the restaurant, the Boutique Resort was built. Nothing was spared to create an ideal getaway. It is the smallest resort in the Philippines, having only nine rooms of natural refinement. Six are suites, and three are villas with their own dipping pools.

The Amihan suite, opening to a private balcony and a clear view of Punta Engaño, enveloped me with warmth and welcome. It had heavenly pillows, a flat-screen TV, a hidden refrigerator, and an oversized armchair designed by Kenneth Cobonpue. I noted, with gladness, that there was no desk

or writing chair. The mastery in the minutest visual detail was so perfectly restrained that it stilled an impatient mind.

For me, the ultimate test of luxury is the bathroom. And mine was like stepping into the realm of pleasure. A pair of handsome doors, extending from floor to ceiling, slid open to reveal a room with smooth wooden floors and scattered rugs. Robes and gorgeous towels were luxuriously thick, they draped like soft blankets. Stylized fixtures were gleaming white: a bathtub at one end, two generous sinks, and a shower area of black Italian granite enclosed in smoky glass.



Chill-out space.



Excellent cuisine in a perfect restaurant.



The glorious bathtub.

Looking out from my veranda, I was struck by the same granite in the swimming pool below. The faintest ripple indicated that it was, indeed, a pool, but framed by towering trees and large Asian jars, it appeared like environmental art at its subtle best. I was told that black kept the water warm, but I simply delighted in the dramatic effect.

Hyatt said, "This boutique resort is geared toward adults who want to chill out." Villas have extra day beds, but there are no portable beds available, nor are there game rooms or facilities for children. There is a secluded area for massages and facials, although massages may also be had in the privacy of one's bedroom. Guests can go parasailing, jet skiing, or hire boats to visit diving resorts and the islands nearby.

But the lure of Abacá is the place itself, where stillness is as intimate as the palest of pale blue skies. By doing nothing, something beautiful can happen.

And then there was Don. Don—for Adonis—was my personal butler who moved with an easy sureness. He smiled when he spoke, and replied to every request with a genuine "My pleasure." He had a mysterious way of anticipating every whim—like serving my lunch in a cabana by the sea—and appearing whenever I needed anything. And yet I never felt his presence. Not only was he the ultimate butler, he was concierge, telephone operator, waiter and breakfast cook. He went home after the last T&C guest checked in at night, and came before anyone was up in the morning. He was matchless.

The Abacá Boutique Resort eases the unspoken struggles of the mind and heart. Meticulously designed, it is quietly splendid. Once when I was strolling down a verdant path, a stylish guest came by. She seemed to know that I was new to the place, and spoke kindly. "The restaurant is perfect. Everything is perfect here. I'm sure you'll be back." I felt the nearness of sea and sky, the sweeping silence that held me still. And I knew that she was right. **RITA G. LEDESMA**



## HISTORICAL AND HEAVENLY

Look up and you'll see a piece of heaven and history right inside some beautiful Bohol churches. What began as simple wooden churches in such towns as Baclayon and Loay in 1600 have continued to evolve from within and without, acting as mirror to the community that collaborated in the construction of its parts. An interesting and distinctive color palette makes up Bohol's churches, from such colors as *albayalde* (white lead), *azul de prusia* (Prussian blue), *bermellon* (vermilion), and *negro de humo* (lampblack) among many others, produced with the careful stroke of artists' paintbrushes and the carving of stencils on the church grounds and ceilings. Cebuano classical artists



such as Ray Francia, Canuto Avila and his sons rendered an array of religious and local historical scenery on the central ceiling of churches, in addition to painting classical motifs along the borders of ceilings corresponding to the nave, aisles and dome of the churches. Ayala Museum's "Kisame: Visions of Heaven on Earth" provides a look into this fascinating art form through the photographs of some outstanding ceiling murals found in 17 colonial churches in Bohol. Featuring scenes from the Book of Revelations, the collection is a comprehensive guide for travelers planning to visit Bohol specifically on a tour of the province's historical churches. The exhibit runs from May 28 to July 6, 2008, at the Ground Floor Gallery of the Ayala Museum. [www.ayalamuseum.org](http://www.ayalamuseum.org). **LOREN G. EVANGELISTA**