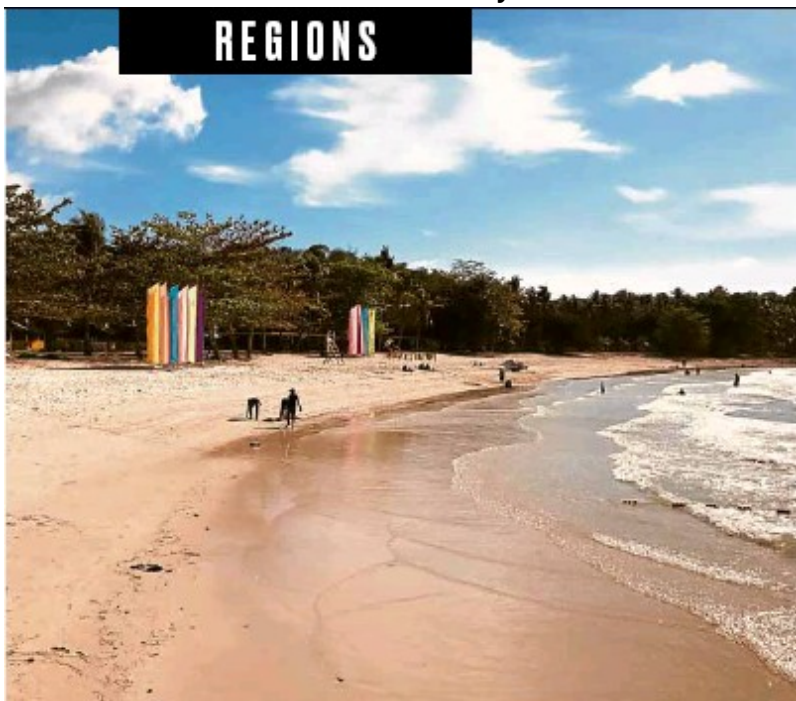


Basilan's perfect beach

[Editor's Note: This series, called "AltBoracay," introduces readers to alternative sites they may explore in different parts of the country, following the six-month closure and rehabilitation of Boracay Island in Aklan province, the Philippines' top tour

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ZAMBOANGACITY— No Boracay for six months?



Seekers of perfect beach spots need not look farther, says Jon Natividad, a local disc jockey. She has found a gem not far from this city.

"I lost my slippers on its white sand beach," Natividad recounts her latest getaway to Malamawi in Basilan's Isabela City. To her, it is the "real white beach."

Top tourist spot

"The place is so cool," she says. But the coolest part, she adds, is spending only less than P500 in going there, not the thousands of pesos in airfare to Boracay or other famed destinations.

"White Beach is our No. 1 tourist spot in Basilan," says Roy Tan, who owns two hotels in Isabela. "[The] water is pristine, so clear and clean."

Tan adds: "The entire island is still virgin. The coastline is a cove and you will enjoy the best sunrise and sunset there."

It costs P160 for a round-trip boat ride from Zamboanga City to the port in Isabela. Travel time is one hour and 45 minutes.

At the small wharf, pump boats ferry passengers to Malamawi for P5 each. The ride is less than 10 minutes.

A “habal-habal” (motorcycle) ride costing P25 brings visitors to the pristine, unexploited waters and the long spread of fine white sand.

Cottages can be rented for P150 to P300. There is a hotel with eight family rooms, an event hall that can accommodate more than 200 people, and other amenities.

It even has a zip line for the more adventurous, and restaurant and transport services.

Peace and security

Tan says local and foreign tourists need to take a second look at Basilan, pointing out that celebrities and high-ranking government officials have already visited Malamawi.

The problem in Isabela, he says, is not really about peace and security, but the image of violent incidents that had happened in the city (population: 112,800 as of 2015). The stigma, he says, has affected not only tourism but the entire island’s economy as well.

“There are so many beautiful places to explore in Basilan, but a single negative report, even of an ordinary crime, tarnishes the whole [province],” he says.

Far from being a war zone, Isabela is as safe as other areas, Tan says.

Malamawi has no criminal past, says Senior Supt. Rufino Inot, Basilan provincial police director.

The place is safe, Inot says. The community, he points out, has not only established measures to protect visitors going to the beach, but also a system to guard their resources, including the setting up of a barangay intelligence network.

Since Malamawi was opened to the public, there have been “no reported cases of terrorism on site,” according to 1st Lt. Ron Villarosa, public affairs officer of Joint Task Force Basilan.

Villarosa, however, reminds visitors “to avoid becoming targets of opportunity by practicing utmost vigilance and by reporting suspicious activities to security forces.”

“At the end of the day, security will always be a shared responsibility,” he says.

Antipollution measures

With the closure of Boracay, Tan wants as many people to experience what Malamawi offers. To prevent the area from getting polluted, measures have been adopted this early. For one, the use of plastics is forbidden.

“Everyone is required to bring their own trash bag. No one is allowed to return home with an empty trash bag,” Tan says. “The only obligation they have there is [to] pay [for their] entrance and [to] bring home their garbage.”

After having their fill on the island, visitors can stay in Isabela and experience its night life.

The city has seven hotels so far.

The newest hotel, Basilan Business, was opened in March by an investor based in Zamboanga City. “It’s a bit highend, with restaurant and coffee shop. Connectivity is OK, food is cheap, it brings something new here,” says the hotel’s Pamela Grace Biel Almanoché.

“For this summer, you don’t need to go far to enjoy and explore the best, it’s within our backyard. Security is assured, coupled with best seafood, fresh catch by our fisherfolk,” says John Teodoro, the hotel operator.