



Three of the best tropical island destination resorts, from under-the-radar Siquijor to the first eco-resort in the country, kick off 'Visit Philippines 2015.'

Coco Grove Beach Resort, Siquijor Fire and Magic

Don't let Siquijor Island's 'mystical' and 'fiery' rep stop you from seeing this upscale beach resort.

By JACKY LYNNE A. OIGA
 Images by PINGGOT ZULUETA

Grotesque images of witches and shamans, dark magic and sorcery dominate people's perception of Siquijor, but as our posh Coco Princess yacht approached Coco Grove Beach Resort (a sprawling beach property fronting the pristine shore of the misconstrued island), all the talk and careful warnings about *kulam*, *barang*, and *tawas* seem daft. All fear and pretenses were blotted out by the postcard-pretty beauty of this "mystical" place framed by a long stretch of white sand beach, crystal clear ▶ F2



BE ENCHANTED Clockwise from top: There'll be no trouble finding your own little space to relax at Coco Grove's 800-meter white sand beach; The newly opened Casa Coco resort; Guests are greeted with cool drinks and cold towels upon arrival to the 'mystical' island of fire.

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'Isla de Fuego' (Island of Fire), stunned Spanish colonizers used to call it hundreds of years ago.



ISLAND ESCAPE Clockwise from top: The resort's sun-drenched beach, kissed by crystal-clear waters; Tropical-inspired furniture pieces at the Casa Coco Penthouse; The koi pond is one of the many tranquil nooks in the five-hectare property

PARADISE FOUND ◀F1

waters, a vast tract of lush forest, and an assembly of toothy resort staff with trays of iced lemongrass tea and cold towels.

"Welcome to Si-qui-jor!" they announce gaily. We grab our welcome drinks and the cold towels too eagerly. We take in our surroundings closely this time, snapped one too many shots of the same sun-drenched beach. Paradise as far as our eyes can see. That's when they got us. There came their magic. The real magic of Siquijor.

"Yes, there is magic in Siquijor," says Camille Butler-Storms, marketing and sales director of Coco Grove Beach Resort. "But it's all good magic. The kind of magic that makes people come back. Everybody who comes to this island and to Coco Grove always comes back."

And who wouldn't? The resort now has its own fully airconditioned 30-passenger yacht that will take guests from Dumaguete (there's no airport in Siquijor) to the resort in an hour and a half. The island landscapes are

many and varied, from coral atolls (there's the Tubod Marine Sanctuary straight out front of the resort) to the majestic Mt. Bandilaan (you can go hiking or swimming at Cambugahay Falls). The amenities and facilities are ample and well-thought of. The five-hectare property is vast. The 91 well-appointed rooms for couples, families, and groups are spread out so you won't feel cramped or harassed. There's always a nice spot under a palm tree or by the beach that you can lounge on. Oh, and there's no signal on the island. But you're too busy doing nothing and relishing every minute of it to care.

"We don't do any advertising at all. I think the pattern for Coco Grove is like one family comes and we meet all of them. Next year we'll meet that family's aunts and they're like 'Oh! I'm going to tell my friends about this place!' And then next year we meet their friends. It's been like that since my dad opened this resort in the late '80s. It's amazing," Camille says.

So, right, no signal. We're sure that bit of information is still nagging at you. There is an enclave with a WiFi signal in the resort for those cannot-wait-for-another-minute calls or emails or selfies. But soon as you realize how silly it is mindlessly tapping on your phone or tablet in a full-featured resort replete with a spa, dive shop, and water sports center, maybe you can try diving, kayaking, surf skiing, snorkeling, wind surfing, sailing, or try riding the glass bottom boat (Yes, that glass bottom boat you keep on reblogging on Tumblr).

"We can also arrange day tours for the guests," Camille says. "They can go check out Cambugahay Falls or the Butterfly Sanctuary. We can take them to nearby Apo Island for diving and snorkeling if they want to make the most of their trip. We have a hotel in Dumaguete and a dive resort in Apo Island so it's easy for our guests to hop on from one destination to another."

The resort has two restaurants that serve breakfast daily: Salamandas Restaurant and Sunset Restaurant. Guests, however, prefer to have their eggs and toasts by the beach or

in a private hut or by the pool. "You can have your breakfast at any part of the resort, just make the necessary arrangements with our staff the day before and your breakfast will be served to you as soon as you get settled," Camille says. For those who want to enjoy a moment of solitude or some honey-and-me-time, there are plenty of quiet spots with pretty views. You can hang out with your beau at The Cove, a secluded beach area surrounded by overhanging trees making

it perfect for intimate dinners or even small weddings.

Craving for some fun human interaction? Play a game of beach volleyball or table tennis with the other guests or go bird watching, caving, or island hopping with your newfound friends.

Before the sun sets the resort lights up with activities and beach parties at the Sunset Area where they hold dinners, live entertainment, and where guests are treated to a bewitching view of the sunset that could rival Manila Bay's.

Right after the sun dips to make way for the stars, the fire dancers come out ostensibly mimicking the multitude of fireflies that used to gather on the island to douse the night with a warm glow. *Isla de Fuego* (Island of Fire), stunned Spanish colonizers used to call it hundreds of years ago. An island simply breathtaking, we say. And no, we didn't encounter witches and healers. But we're definitely enchanted. www.cocogrovebeachresort.com, 63 35 226 36177, 63 35 422 9820



EASY TRAVEL From top: Arrive in style at the island from Dumaguete via Coco Grove's Coco Princess yacht; There's always a nice spot by the beach to lounge on and doze off.