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01 A bird's-eye view of Shangri-La's Boracay Resort & Spa

02 The sun-drenched interior of a unit at Aqua Boracay by Yoo

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BORACAY REVISITED

The Philippines' crown jewel has become a perennial favourite among local and foreign tourists. With an influx of visitors each year, luxury developments are also on the rise.

STORY **APPLE MANDY**

Travelling to Boracay isn't as convenient as it seems – but you'll be rewarded for your patience. From Hong Kong, you need to take a two-and-a-half-hour flight to Manila, then an hour-long domestic flight to Caticlan. Once you reach the airport in Aklan province, Panay island, you still need a short drive to the ferry station, followed by a 15-minute boat ride to the resort island. The whole journey may sound gruelling but it is well worth the wait as travellers are greeted with talcum-like white sands, clear turquoise waters and verdant surroundings upon their arrival.

The boot-shaped island, measuring 10.32 square kilometres and 7.25 km long, has long been known for its pristine beaches. The four-kilometre White Beach on the island's western side is often swamped with tourists, while the 2.5-km Bulabog Beach on the eastern side is full of athletic types enjoying adrenaline-filled water sports. Since this side of the island is known for its seasonal winds, the location plays host to a number of major sporting events such as the Boracay International Funboard Cup (every January) and the Boracay Cup Regatta (every March).

TOURISM BOOM

Tourism is the heart and soul of Boracay's development. According to the Department of Tourism, visitor headcount and tourist receipts have been consistently increasing since 2001. Based on the report, last year saw an additional 108,751 local and foreign tourists arriving,

totalling about 1.5 million visitors, with Koreans and mainland Chinese dominating the numbers of foreign tourists.

Before Boracay became a global hotspot, the island was almost bare and tourists were sparse. It was relatively unknown except to vacationing families from the neighbouring Panay island. Tourism began to develop in 1970, when US film director Robert Aldrich's war movie, *Too Late The Hero*, was shot on location in Boracay and Caticlan. Backpackers from Europe started to arrive and the word spread like wildfire. Tourism boomed in the 1990s and properties have sprung up like mushrooms ever since.

Today, the island has significantly changed with numerous commercial developments. Various accommodations have opened in Stations 1, 2 and 3 – named after docking zones for boats. Station 1, the northern section of White Beach, is dotted with high-end beachfront resorts. Station 2, the middle part known for its vibrant nightlife, is crowded with bars, restaurants and clubs, as well as shopping centre D'Mall, while Station 3 is quieter, where the mid-range and boutique hotels are.

While the lure of the good life, influx of visitors and fresh developments are constantly grabbing headlines, Boracay started receiving notable awards from international travel publications and agencies. The island first snatched a title on *Travel + Leisure's* World Best Awards 2011, ranking fourth in the Top 10 Islands in the World, and ranking second in the Top 10 Islands in Asia. More recognition was given through the years and, recently, Boracay was chosen as the world's seventh best beach in TripAdvisor's 2015 Traveller's Choice awards.

MOVING FORWARD

As the island gains recognition, foreign developers are propelled to build more luxury developments in order to meet the growing demands of travellers. Shangri-La's Boracay Resort & Spa opened in March 2009 on a 12-hectare site far north of Station 1, offering 183 guestrooms, 36 villas and one of the most pampering spas this side of the central Visayas region of the country. Depending on the type of accommodation, the units are opulent but intimate, most of them boasting a balcony, a Jacuzzi or a pool.

Shangri-La's Boracay Resort not only

provides travellers five-star accommodation and amenities; it also organises a yearly event called "Reservations in Paradise", dedicated to all things gourmet. Now in its fifth year, the weekend festivity treats Manila's high society, business elite and influencers – and a smattering of foreign guests – to a series of wine-pairing dinners and performances. Two months ago, world champion dancers Riccardo Cocchi and Yulia Zagoruychenko entertained guests with their Latin dance moves. The next "Reservations in Paradise" is scheduled for March 2016.

7Stones Boracay Suites on Bulabog Beach is another luxury property that opened in the same year. This apartment-style accommodation offers rooms and suites with fully equipped kitchens, ideal for families or larger groups.

The soon-to-open Aqua Boracay by Yoo on Bulabog Beach is the latest luxury accommodation on the island, inviting travellers to invest in their contemporary beachfront apartments designed by Yoo's international team of designers, including Philippe Starck, Steve Leung and Jade Jagger.

"We knew from our previous developments on the island that there was an investor demand for a branded residence, so we wanted to fill that space," says Marco Biggiogero, chairman of Aqua Boracay and developer of Aqua Boracay by Yoo. "This property will create primary and secondary residences to those who want to call Boracay and Bulabog Beach home."

In the midst of a major growth period, with the extension of Caticlan Airport's runway, the upgrading of Kalibo International Airport, the expansion of jetty ports and the construction of new roads, Boracay still has the charm and the energy that attracts those seeking a balance between quaintness and vibrancy. Despite the recent changes, the friendly islanders still serve their customers with a smile. ☺

The writer was a guest of Philippine Airlines and Shangri-La's Boracay Resort & Spa. Philippine Airlines flies daily from Manila to Caticlan, departing every hour. Return flights are available at various times.

www.shangri-la.com/boracay/boracayresort
www.7stonesboracay.com
www.aquaboracay.com



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