

Surigao Del Sur's Sanctuary for Restive Souls

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It was low tide at Kansilad Beach Resort (KBR) and the sun was murderous, making the sea retreat from a shoreline in paler shade of brown to a silvery expanse where it became a mirage. And thus, exposed before me was the sea's underbelly of muddy rocks, weeds, and driftwood. Out there, in the subterranean chambers that my eyes cannot see, were skulk fish, crustaceans, and mollusks that, in time, would become parts of the local food chain.

Such was KBR's seascape when I arrived one Thursday noon in August, sweating under the flimsy cerulean sky.

We were on a two-day teambuilding seminar and the service vehicle that Gov. Bebe Pimentel lent us was a squeaky non-aircon, box-type L300 that was older than my officemate's teenaged son. But we had no reason to complain; our office doesn't have a vehicle of its own for almost half a decade now. Unlike my officemates, I was tightlipped, unfazed. But like them, I also had a bagful of Alaxan stashed in my backpack.

The ride from Tandag to KBR was bumpy, dusty, and infernal. Crammed with humans, training supplies, utensils, and provisions, the car had limited legroom. For over two hours, I had to point my toes like a ballet dancer on freeze. This must have prevented the blood from circulating because when I got off, a funny sensation tingled my feet, almost paralyzing me. But as if in reflex, I licked my index finger and drew a cross on my dusty feet, just as Lola had taught me. I've been hearing a lot of nice things about KBR but I remained unconvinced. Yes, I had to see it to believe it. Back then, my friend Sammy Dolano said that KBR was "isolated but accessible." There goes an oxymoron, I remember saying to myself. But it turned out to be an apt description because KBR is a cove secluded by the backwoods of Sitio Kansilad in Lianga.

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The gate of roughly sawn coconut wood was wide, tall, uneven, and unimpressive. But it did not jar my senses as did most provincial resorts whose attempt at urbanity and flair was gaudy, one that displayed a bad business sense. Refreshing too was the absence of large signs telling me what not to do. I couldn't even recall seeing the ubiquitous "Welcome Visitors." Is this a good sign, I asked myself.

Against a backdrop of rock formation that stooped from having to carry on its back all those trees, the arrival area was spotlessly clean, making me suspect the caretaker catch leaves in midair as they fall.

The girls were billeted at Room 4 and we, at Room 5. With rails of naturally wrought branches, a walkway led us to our room's patio that had a table and stools of round magcono timber.

The room had two double beds with wall lamps that went well with curtains in floral coordinates. The white tile floor gleamed under a nice main light. The bedsheets and towels were thick and clean. To my surprise, the toilet flushed and the faucet worked. Ditto with the hot and cold shower in the bathroom. Funny, but I felt dismayed because for once there

was practically nothing for me to fret about. Good change, if you ask me. Really.

I went out of the room and was promptly serenaded by cicadas, stoking in me a nostalgic sense of home. Suddenly I was a kid on summer vacation in our farm in Sagbayan where the same hymn would lull me to sleep in our lantay.

As I sat in one of the white metal swings, I had a good view of the area whose uneven contour was carpeted with Bermuda grass and was made even more beautiful by random vignettes of rocks and flowers. Not far from me was the powder blue swimming pool that received water cascading from a large basin camouflaged and perched on faux stalactite similarly camouflaged with paints, rocks, and Mactan stones. It was an inviting sight, one that would make children wish they were sea creatures.

Trees were everywhere. And up there, carved from a rock formation, was a grotto niched so high I had to crane my neck to appreciate it. All the concrete structures were given treatments that blended well with nature's texture and color, making me appreciate the painstaking effort that went with it.

The function room had the sprawling vista of the sea with a view deck that waves lapped at high tide. The precision by which the beams and trusses were engineered trumped the profession of the owner's husband, a top honcho at the regional office of the Department of Public Works and Highways.

Looking around, I saw more vignettes. But now they included stumps and wood slabs whose beautiful defects wrought by tatud were what made them de rigueur in posh hotels and opulent homes. One of the owner's sons said that KBR used to be a log pond when Lianga still whirred with logging operation. This explained the source of the driftwood and the not so nice seabed!

When we requested Lala Ambray to negotiate for our stay at KBR, she said there were only three downsides of KBR, namely: the price, the shallow beach, and the tagnok. The last is a tiny nocturnal insect that take buffet meals on human bodies. And so when night fell, I was on "Off." But then the caretaker made a fire in a contraption designed to emit smoke and repel the tagnok which then had to salivate from a distance as we held our first session for the night.

It was almost midnight but the air was still sultry. Most of my peers were itching to try the videoke that rated one's vocal prowess or lack of it. But our boss said we had to get the session over and done with or else the auditor would disallow the activity and we had to refund. We came here to build a team, he said. Argggg

When happy hour finally came around, I was ready to shoot the breeze. But then two officemates who, like me, don't have the right attitude to compensate for the wrong vocal chord, egged me to a card game. I had a few coins to lose, so I played. And won.

The next day, with sleep still clouding my eyes, I hit the beach. Though it was too shallow even if it was already high tide, it wasn't as bad as I had thought. In fact it was perfect for children as it ruled out death by drowning because even though I was already far away from the shore, the water was still waist-deep.

I searched for shells to bring home and reached a bend peppered with boulders embroidered with crazy vines. Farther away, I saw some driftwood, some with holes in the middle, making them perfect materials for tables with glass tops. Others had haphazard cracks that, with just the right incandescent light, would add panache to a home. I wished I had the power to flatten, roll, and bring them all home!

With permission from the owner, Anna Murillo-Lala, I brought goodies home where they joined the ever growing mementos I had amassed over the years.

As our service vehicle wobbled to the direction of the highway about 30 meters from KBR's gate, I felt a surge of pride. Surigao del Sur has finally made a sanctuary for restive souls without having to apologize for the state of its amenities. And that, to me, is good business sense.

(Note: For sure, things have improved at KBR since this article came out.)