

By Dr Martin Chio

Mabuhay*!

I count myself fortunate to have generous friends. When N proposed that he celebrate his 40th birthday by co-paying (learning to be Uniquely Singaporean) a trip to his home country, a group of friends and I leaped at this opportunity to be part of the festivities. True to being Uniquely Singaporean again, we took advantage of the Deepavali long-weekend which happened to coincide with his actual birth-date. The island-resort of Boracay was chosen as there were quite a few sun-and-sea lovers in the group.

You can imagine coordinating a trip for 20 working professionals would be a logistical nightmare but N was assisted by PR-extraordinaire J who made it almost a breeze. This trip was a veritable United Nations with people originating from Singapore, East and West Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Macau, Hong Kong, France and questionably Mongolia.

Despite its proximity, the trip to Boracay was fairly lengthy. We flew into Manila via Philippine Airlines with a 4-hour stopover; a few of us munching on delicious local hot dogs to pass the time. The flight to Kalibo departed on time but unfortunately due to inclement weather, we were diverted to Iloilo and spent an hour on the tarmac waiting for the weather to improve before we finally landed in Kalibo. This was followed by a 2½-hour winding bus ride to Caticlan for a boat ride over to the island.

Arriving at the Boracay Regency hotel, I was struck by the unusual mix of party vibes and serenity, enhanced by the charming friendliness of the locals. This was definitely a welcome break before the extreme hectic-ness of November. We ended a long and tiring day of traveling with drinks and dancing at the Summer Palace bar.

The next morning was spent on the beach – not having been in the sun for more than 6 years, described as being white as Oreo filling and despite generous lashings of SPF 50+ sunblock, I still managed to get a mild non-blistering sunburn on my back – it just goes to prove that other physical means of sun-protection are always necessary☺. We proceeded to the beach-side Nigi-Nigi for lunch; the highlight being the jero-boam-sized signature mango margarita – thirst quenching and leaving us headily intoxicated. Suitably relaxed, I decided to try out the hotel's Kai spa and was thankful I did not squirm or laugh while the masseuse expertly massaged the knots from my back as a result of hours of mouse-use.

That evening, on the careful instructions and co-ordination of the expert party-planner A, we gathered in the hotel function room (as the outdoor location was rained out) replete with banners and balloons to surprise N. The evening's programme included a sumptuous buffet dinner, touching tributes and 'cultural' performances emcee-ed by yours truly. We ended the night by taking over

Martin aspires to be a food and travel photographer but is 'bonded' to serve for many years to come...

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Crystal Cove



Mango margarita

and dancing on the platforms outside the Summer Palace bar again, having photos and videos shot by passers-by, which are now probably lurking on Facebook and YouTube.

The next day was spent recovering from the revelry with a half-day boat trip around the island to Crystal Cove, Puka beach and snorkeling. Thereafter, we managed to relax by the poolside, sample more local food and watch the sunset.

We headed off early to Manila the next day and D managed to secure excellent rooms at the Intercontinental in Makati. From this, I managed



to explore the gold exhibit at the Ayala Museum, wander and shop around Glorietta before finally stocking up on dried mangoes at S.

This was indeed a memorable trip celebrating life, camaraderie and reinforcing friendships. I look forward to the next 40th celebrations, hopefully in Mauritius ...

*Hello and welcome! ■