A Piece of Paradise

In the tranquil isolation of El Nido, Palawan, VINCE AND LEIGH PÉREZ encourage the practice of socially responsible eco-tourism. 

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“I DON’T WANT to scare you, but later we’re going to come down quickly and get pretty close to the water.” It’s not exactly what we want to hear as we board the Dornier turbo-prop en route to El Nido, Palawan. But the way Leigh Talmage Pérez, president of the Asian Conservation Company, casually drops this bit of information, we can’t help but feel assured everything will be just fine.

As we fly over a chain of small islands, dots of emerald green glistening in the ocean’s deep turquoise blue, the advice of Vincent “Vince” Pérez, Leigh’s husband and ACC’s founder, to sit on the plane’s left side (for a better view) makes perfect sense. But it is on the boat ride to the twin resorts on Lagen and Miniloc islands that we get to see exactly why everyone falls in love with Palawan as Leigh surely did when she first arrived here more than twenty years ago.

In the late 1980s, Vince and Leigh were working as bankers in the U.S. and had just begun dating. Vince recalls thinking, “If this relationship was going to get serious, she might as well get to see the Philippines.” He arranged a trip sometime over the Christmas holidays, and their flight arrived in Manila soon after midnight. First thing in the morning, they headed straight to Palawan. Using the undeniable beauty of islands to full advantage, he made his move. He set up a private lunch on the secluded Entalula island and let the setting work its magic. “This is El Nido, and I’m your island boy,” Vince recalls saying. “The rest is history!” he then adds, and his wife of eighteen years joins him in laughter.

“It was all very rustic at the time, Miniloc was just a simple dive resort,” remembers Leigh. “But we came back many times after that, we really fell in love with the place, and brought our friends over too.”

Beyond the visits, Vince also got involved in the preservation of El Nido, though at first, he says, it was by sheer coincidence. One day, while working as a debt trader in New York, he received a phone call from the World Wildlife Fund (now known globally as the World Wide Fund for Nature) asking him to arrange a “debt-for-nature” swap. Vince explains, “The organization was interested in countries with high debt and high biodiversity. The WWF would buy the debt at a discount, then negotiate with the Central Bank of the Philippines for repayment in pesos. Essentially, it’s cancellation of a portion of the debt.” He further explains that the local proceeds were donated to the Haribon Foundation and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to support the training of conservation staff and protection of forest and marine sanctuaries of Luzon and Palawan. Vince’s love for nature seemed a perfect fit for the organization, and he joined the U.S. chapter before becoming one of the founders of WWF-Philippines in 1996, along with Jaime Zobel, Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala, Carlos Soriano, César Roque and Romy Trono. He assumed the chairmanship of WWF-Philippines in June 2008.

Leigh was also a member of WWF-US, but she remembers being aware of environment issues even as a child. “When we were in school, there was a commercial of a Native American looking over a river. Trash would float by, and then you could see a tear in his eye. It was part of a ‘Don’t Litter’ campaign. It affected a whole generation of children growing up in America at the time. That’s the power of reaching a child.”

As we watch the couple interact in El Nido, it is easy to see what makes them such a great team. They are a good-looking pair, but have different personalities. By his own admission, Vince is better with the “social” side of things, while Leigh can be publicity-shy. But when it comes to working for the environment, they share the same passion and vision.

It was through their involvement with the WWF that the Pérez couple got the idea to acquire the El Nido Resorts from its Japanese owners, who were managing it through the Ten Knots Development Corporation. Since it had become a protected site, Vince convinced the members of the WWF-US board to hold one of their meetings in Lagen. After dinner one evening, someone said in jest, “Hey, maybe you should find out if we can buy this place.” The joke
was taken seriously, and in 2000 negotiations with Nissin Sugar, the parent company of Ten Knots, began. The deal to acquire 55 percent ownership was closed in March 2001. "The entity we created was Asian Conservation Company. It focuses not only on making money, but also on protecting the environment," says Vince.

Acquiring El Nido was one of Vince’s long-time dreams. He says, "When I first started coming here—and this was just wishful thinking—I said maybe someday it would be nice to own this place. We believe in the power of visioning. My screensaver had a picture of El Nido for years. When I turn on my computer, it’s there. And it happened."

Celebrating the fulfillment of his dream had to be put on hold, though, as the very next day Vince had to resign from the company. "I had agreed to join the Arroyo cabinet. The President was my professor in economics in the University of the Philippines," he explains. Vince became, at the age of forty-three, the youngest to hold the position of Energy secretary. He served for four years until March 2005.

During his stint in government, the ACC had to find a new head, and its shareholders turned to Leigh for leadership. "I accepted and took over in May 2001. The first two years were tough, but we finally turned a profit," she says. As her husband had emphasized earlier, making money would be nice but the driving force of the ACC was increasing awareness of biodiversity conservation. Leigh says, "They (the shareholders) laughed because they said we’ll never get our money back. When we turned the company around they said it was the best investment in their portfolio. Imagine, two of them are Forbes 400 billionaires, and this tiny little investment, not even a speck in their portfolio, is what they brag to their friends about. When we turned the company around they said it was the best investment in their portfolio. Imagine, two of them are Forbes 400 billionaires, and this tiny little investment, not even a speck in their portfolio, is what they brag to their friends about. That is saying that we are going to commit to this and change the way people do business." At this point her husband chimes in, proud of his wife’s accomplishments. "She’s done very well with it, much better than I would have."

With her WWF background, Leigh borrowed some of its operating concepts and applied them to the ACC. She took the “quadruple bottom line” approach—financial, environmental, community and employee satisfaction—as the benchmark for the company’s success. Then it was through her efforts that El Nido received a US$4.5-million grant from the World Bank’s Global Environmental Facility, which will be used for biodiversity conservation and the development of livelihood projects within the community.

Leigh’s other initiatives include waste segregation, composting of the resorts’ biodegradable waste, and sewage treatment of all wastewater. In 2006, with the help of the community and the El Nido Foundation, the resort installed EcoReef artificial reef modules in Tres Marias, a once-thriving dive site devastated by dynamite fishing and coral bleaching. Last year, the Be G.R.E.E.N. (Guard, Respect, Educate El Nido) program was initiated, where-in all resort staff go through responsible environmental practices education and training. Also in 2008, solar panels were installed to help generate some of the resort’s power needs when the new cottages in Miniloc were built.

It is on one of the boat rides that Vince, an avid sailor and water sportsman, further explains what Ten Knots and the ACC are all about. “The name ‘Ten Knots’ comes from the perfect cruising speed to see the beauty of the islands,” he says. The leisurely pace allows tourists to marvel at the scattered islands with their spectacular limestone cliffs, green forests, rare exotic birds and white-sand beaches. Vince mentions that initially he had wanted to use a faster boat to shuttle guests to and from the resort, but Leigh refused. He now agrees with her decision to retain the relatively slow pace of interisland travel.

Within the protected sanctuary, there are hardly any signs of human life, and this unspoiled piece of paradise is what the ACC is trying to preserve. Vince says, “It might sound weird, but we’ve bought the surrounding islands so the place does not get developed. We acquired a lot of properties purposely not to develop them, what is called a ‘land trust.’ So we preserve the isolation, feeling of seclusion, the feeling of being alone—that is so hard to find in this world now. One of the definitions of luxury now is being isolated in a place. The luxury of space—that’s a form of luxury that’s getting harder and harder to obtain.”
Out of all the islands Ten Knots and the ACC have in El Nido, only two have undergone major development. Miniloc Island is set up like a fishing village, while most portions of the Lagen Island resort are set against a forest backdrop. A few of the other islands are accessible only during the day to guests who want to climb rocks, explore caves and sunbathe.

Like any other couple, Leigh and Vince have their share of disagreements, particularly on how things should be done at the resorts. Leigh may have won the “battle”—as Vince calls it—against faster boats, but he got her to agree to cellular phone service. She still bristles at it today. “The towers are so unsightly,” she says, pointing to two antennas on a hilltop far away in the distance.

Leigh points out that when there was no phone service “we used to have wives thanking us because it would be the first time their husbands would engage with the family. I fought not to have cell sites because we all know what happens when people whip out their phones, texting over dinner. The dynamics change as soon as phones come out.” Leigh also begrudgingly accepted Vince’s argument for guest access to Wi-Fi. However, she won a big one when she didn’t allow the big international cruise ships to use El Nido as a landing spot. “After the Bali bombings happened,” says Vince, “the cruise liners wanted to offer El Nido as another destination because tourists didn’t want to go to Bali. I was all for it, but Leigh said no. She was worried that the tourists would trash the place. The volume of passengers was just going to be too much for El Nido.”

The couple’s “friendly” competition also comes out in other ways. Sailing around the different islands, Vince gets the urge to try the wall-climbing rig set up on one cliff side. At some point while ascending the cliff face, he seems to tire, then shouts down to his wife, asking how far she went. “All the way up,” she shouts back. As expected, he scales the rest of the wall in no time.

A trip to the islands would be a dream vacation for most, but for Leigh there’s always work to do in El Nido. So when she and Vince want to get away, they visit other countries instead. Still, the resort is never far from Leigh’s thoughts. “Even when we go to Phuket, for example, I’m always taking photos, thinking of how we can do this back home. He’s always saying ‘Stop!’” There’s only one place where Leigh can count on doing “absolutely nothing,” and that’s at her mother’s place in Arizona. “I’ll just read a book or maybe head into town to see a movie,” she says with a shrug.

This tropical piece of paradise may not be Leigh’s idea of a vacation, but could it be considered a dream job? Her husband seems to think so. “There’s a photo I took of Leigh from a balcony in Miniloc, overlooking Bacuit Bay. I said, ‘This is Leigh’s office.’ How can you beat that?”

Waiting at the end of the pier are the boats headed to the El Nido resorts. A jeepney, modified to accommodate taller guests, ferry passengers from the airport to the pier.
An intricate play of shadow and light in El Nido. “We’ve bought some of the surrounding islands so that the place does not get developed...so we preserve the isolation, the feeling of being alone—that’s so hard to find in this world now.”