

The Philippines attracts divers and surfers – but on unspoilt Bohol you'll find natural wonders and some of the cutest wildlife on Earth

By Louise Atkinson

A HUGE photo of King Charles stares down from a wall at the wildlife sanctuary on the island of Bohol in the Philippines. He's captured cradling a tiny, fluffy creature called a tarsier – an endangered monkey-like animal.

Then Dolly, our guide, drops her bombshell: 'Of course, it is possible that this particular tarsier committed suicide.'

It turns out one of the main reason tarsiers, which can live to the grand old age of 24, are endangered is because they get stressed by loud noises and human contact.

When they are anxious, they bang their heads against trees until they die. So it is with reverential silence that we tip-toe through the beautiful Bohol rainforest, marvelling at the Yoda-like stares aimed at us from the bamboo thickets.

The Philippines has more than 7,000 islands – 20 per cent inhabited – and most edged by white sand and clear blue seas. The eastern beaches are pounded by the Pacific Ocean, making them popular with surfers, while the western resorts attract divers.

But after flying 18 hours to get here, you can't just fritter away your holiday on the beach. Where to start though? The island of Boracay is said to be the place to go for nightlife and kitesurfing. Then there's El Nido – a cluster of 45 islands chock full of glorious turquoise lagoons.

But Bohol is my pick. It's a 90-minute flight from Manila with the flight path going over an eye-catching 20sq mile expanse of giant cone-shaped hills, proudly proclaimed to be 'the eighth natural wonder of the world'. These are nicknamed the Chocolate Hills for the brown colour the grass turns during the dry season.

Arriving just before dawn, we watch the sun rise over these strange and captivating treeless hillocks from a viewing platform. It is a silent, deserted, ethereal experience.

Later that day, we chug down Loboc River in a floating restaurant. Think more rickety sheds lashed to rafts rather than retractable glass ceilings.

Your £13 ticket seats you at an all-you-can-eat Filipino buffet of piquant adobo curries, pork belly, grilled fish, rice, noodles, fresh mango and sticky rice cake desserts.

Each boat has its resident crooner, too. Ours looks about 14 but packs



7,000 islands ... so where do you start?



TROPICAL TAPAS: The traditional Filipino fare combines seafood with local produce

an impressive baritone and sings convincing Frank Sinatra covers accompanied by an equally adept youngster on guitar.

Dolly tells us that when the Spanish colonised the Philippines in the

16th Century, they brought Christianity. Hymn-singing forms a central part of the school curriculum and youngsters are big music fans.

During a break in the performance comes a surprise: blood-curdling screams from a zipline 400ft above our heads, which launches fearless tourists a quarter of a mile across the river valley.

But I choose a calmer pursuit: paddleboarding. It is fun, especially when Dolly swiftly reassures me that the river is devoid of crocodiles and piranhas.

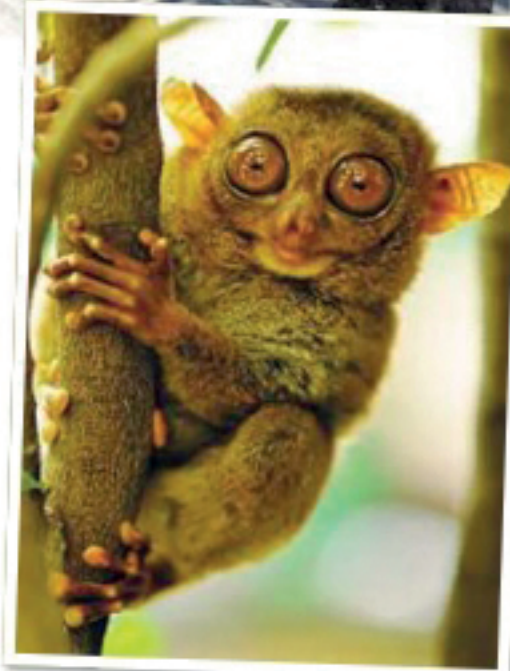
Island-hopping on one of the many white wooden outrigger boats is another joy. These take you through beautifully clear seawater along

the quiet coast. The Filipino tourist board is keen to project an image of its country being a super-luxury destination to rival Thailand. Yet, wandering along the sandy Alona Beach, it's down-to-earth, non-flashy, with hour-long foot massages available for just £5.

On the final night, I try the street food – pavements here are buzzing with vendors grilling tantalising-looking skewers over hot coals. 'What are those?' I ask, pointing. 'Deep-fried chicken feet,' the stallholder says.

'And those?' The reply? 'Grilled slabs of chicken blood.'

Playing it safe, I reach for what looks like a hard-boiled egg. But it's



SENSITIVE LOCAL: A tarsier. Top: The white sands of Alona Beach

balut – a ready-to-hatch duck embryo waiting inside.

Some of the culinary creations on Bohol may require an acquired taste, but I would defy anyone not to be enthralled by this unspoilt island.

● Return flights to Manila start from £800, with the Manila to Bohol (Panglao airport) shuttle costing about £34 each way. Double rooms at Amorita Resort cost from £160 a night B&B based on two sharing (amoritaresort.com). For more information, visit thephilippines.online/destinations/bohol.