

OPINION

Eco-tourism: A tale of two gardens

Traveling off the beaten path could be a good alternative this Holy Week. For those who are tired of going to the usual vacation hot spots where they can hardly have a moment for Lenten reflection, taking the eco-tourism route is highly recommended.

The International Eco-tourism Society, a 25-year-old nongovernment organization based in Washington DC, has redefined eco-tourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests." It's all about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel.

Serendipitously, I discovered two such eco-tourism destinations this year. Both are in natural garden settings relatively close to central business districts: one is perched on an upland district of Metro Davao, while the other is just east of Metro Manila on the slopes of the Sierra Madre mountain range.

MALAGOS GARDEN RESORT

Nestled in the cool highlands on the periphery of Mt. Apo, the country's highest mountain, Malagos Garden Resort has become the preferred getaway

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place for many Dabawenos who want to escape the bustle of downtown Davao City.

As an accredited wildlife center, Malagos hosts a wide variety of exotic flora and fauna. It is the first property in the Philippines to be certified by Audubon International, a New York-headquartered global environmental organization with a cooperative sanctuary program for business and properties.

A leisurely stroll around the resort leads to a bird park, petting zoo, butterfly sanctuary, and bee farm. Throughout the 12-hectare nature park and its adjoining flower farm are lush landscapes of assorted tropical plants, towering forests and century-old durian trees.

Davao's Puentespina family owns Malagos Garden Resort and pioneered the culturing of the Waling-Waling orchid, widely recognized as "the Queen

of Philippine Orchids." Clan matriarch Charita Puentespina was instrumental in rescuing this plant species when it lost its natural habitat. She gave it a home in Malagos and successfully cultured the orchid in 1985, after which she established the world's only Waling-Waling Forest. The resort has air-conditioned cottages and two restaurants. Day tours, recreational activities, seminars and wedding receptions can be arranged through the online inquiry form at www.malagos.com.

Charita's son Rex Victor Puentespina heads Malagos Agri-Ventures Corp. that produces 100% pure, all-natural chocolates literally from tree to bar. Malagos Chocolate is proudly Filipino-made from single origin Trinitario cacao beans on the foothills of Mt. Talomo, Davao's second highest mountain.

Another subsidiary, Malagos Food, Inc., specializes in artisanal cheeses using raw materials from the Puentespinas' dairy farm. Its most sought-after products are feta and blue goat cheese which are used by Philippine Airlines for its long-haul and regional business class flights.

What I least expected to see in Malagos were the rare sculptures of National Artist Napoleon Abueva. The joint project started in 1997 when the Puen-

tespinas invited Mr. Abueva to exhibit his masterpieces for the very first time outside Manila.

Since then, the "Abueva in the Gardens" exhibit has become a permanent fixture in the resort, which currently houses more than 60 arts works. In this sense, Malagos truly portrays a delightful blend of nature and the arts.

FLOR'S GARDEN

Located on a picturesque hillside property overlooking the valleys and mountains of Rizal province, Flor's Garden has a rustic ambience with touches of Thai design and Balinese architecture. It is owned by Philippine National Bank Chair Florencia Gozon Tarriela.

Among its attractions are God's Pharmacy, a garden of medicinal plants; Hardin ng Buhay, with its array of "weedibles" or edible weeds; pomelo, calamansi, and carissa orchards; coffee nursery, mini-forest, and vermiculture farm. Flor's lawyer-husband Edgardo Tarriela has an adjacent farm where he raises hogs and poultry the natural way with no chemicals that pollute the environment.

In their passion for wellness and food security, the Tarrielas live by the mantra "No Filipino should be hungry."

Within the premises is the Earth School run by Dr. Jimmy Galvez Tan, former Health Secretary under the Ramos administration. Seminars on natural farming are conducted quarterly by Davao-based organic agriculture advocate Andry Lim and his wife Josephine, whose goal is to develop 100,000 natural farmers by 2016.

Flor's Garden has dorm accommodations for seminar participants who can also use the swimming pool and other facilities. Food during seminars is catered by Gil Castro, an occasional chef and Ms. Tarriela's retired colleague at Citibank Philippines. Educational tours are available by appointment via florsgarden@yahoo.com.

Recently, international eco-design authority Hitesh Mehta was in the Philippines to conduct a workshop on sustainable tourism attended by more than 40 architects, landscape architects, designers and resort owners. Flor's Garden was the site for the workshop's field practicum segment, which resulted in several design plans to develop the property into a world-class eco-tourism haven.

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