

- VOLUME ONE 2017 -

# GRID

*"There was nowhere to go but everywhere" - Jack Kerouac*

A man in a green shirt and light-colored pants stands next to a blue motorcycle on a dirt road. The motorcycle has a sidecar and a backpack on the back. In the background, there is a lush tropical landscape with many palm trees, a sandy beach, and a body of water. Mountains are visible in the distance under a cloudy sky.

PALAWAN BY LAND SEA & AIR  
TRAVELING DIFFERENTLY MEANS SEEING DIFFERENTLY

SAN VICENTE, PALAWAN

20 OFF THE BEATEN PATH 17

*Words Nina Unlay  
Photography Sonny Thakur*

Some people have been waiting a near decade for the slow, sleepy town of San Vicente to catch up. MAYI PICAZO, and his Urals, aren't waiting any longer.







AS A FIRST-TIME SIDECAR PASSENGER, I quickly learned that there are few things worse than the agony of sitting still. In the beginning there were a few hang-ups that meant moving wasn't an option—mainly this was the trudge and grudge of noontime traffic, which is an unfortunate experience anywhere in the Philippines, it seemed. When you are riding in a sidecar, no matter how pretty the sidecar, there isn't much leeway around smog or heat. It is impossible to sit pretty. My bandana started to build a layer of sweat.

"I call this part 'Mini EDSA,'" our host, Mayi Picazo would later tell me; traffic, he says, is the unfortunate reason that Urals, or motorcycles with sidecars, might never be a hit in a bustling metropolis like Metro Manila.

But here on the island of Palawan, the traffic is only a minor precursor to the show; once we had gassed up these bad boys and left the city center of Puerto Princesa, it was all open, wonderful roads and wind that sounded like thunderous applause, with a little shriek that said "FINALLY." There was a moment before Toto, who was driving my Ural, revved up and cut loose. The tricycle driver next to me, and a couple of bystanders, were looking at the sight of us: four colorful Urals and one Royal Enfield zooming past in a row, eight people in full gear. Mayi might have let an excited, crisp "Yeah, boy!" loose. I noticed a kid watching us, rubbernecking like in the cartoons as his

**Clockwise from top:** On the road to San Vicente, gear safely stowed away; Mayi has been coming to Palawan regularly for nearly ten years; Long drives are best done fully equipped, gloves included.

head turned...left, right, left, right.

These Urals are deceptively fast, or at least I think that's what the boys had been saying over breakfast, the lot of motorcycle enthusiasts that they were. There had been some heavy talk about countersteering and somethingaboutbrakes that I, not a motor head, didn't catch. In any community, there is bound to be the jargon of insiders, but motorcycle speak is particularly hard on the technicalities. To the regular human being, it sounds like an entirely different language.

*Isn't driving a Ural like driving a motorcycle?* I innocently asked.

And I was told, adamantly: *This is not a motorcycle.* It became my imaginary tagline for the iconic vehicle: *Not a car, but not a motorcycle. It's a Ural.*

Sitting in the pastel blue sidecar, as we let out til we were running at 100 kilometers per hour on the road to San Vicente, even I, not a motor head, could appreciate this language.

A HUGE PART OF THE APPEAL OF THE Ural-not-a-motorcycle is that you can just be its happy passenger. Motorcycle tourism, which has been a popular medium of touring as early as the 1980s, might finally be catching up in the Philippines. Local motorcycle enthusiasts have been alluding to a sudden burst from the community in recent years: small garages popping up, subgroups forming, #RidingGroups getting together for long-distance leisure trips that go on for hours. Motorcycle riding, despite



















the hang-ups, and despite the rage of city traffic, is in. Granted, touring bikes like the Ural have been around for ages—motorcycle tour packages in most Southeast Asian countries, like Vietnam or Indonesia, are regular terrain in their landscape of tourism. In fact, long-distance motorcycle touring is particularly popular in countries with long coastlines and coastal roads, of which the Philippines ranks among the top ten in the

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world, at least for the former. But oddly enough, motorcycle tourism in the Philippines has remained quite the pipe dream—even more so for a complicated not-a-motorcycle like the Ural.

“I haven’t been allowed to ride these on national highways, or even areas like the Fort [in Metro Manila],” says Mayi. “They don’t understand that it isn’t a tricycle.”

It isn’t a tricycle, isn’t a motorcycle...but it also isn’t unlike either. The Ural is in the gray area of non-car vehicles, and in the Philippines, where our transportation system is easily confused, that has too easily translated into the most familiar: a tricycle. And by the LTO’s definition, it is a tricycle, even if the one we picture in our mind is a different kind of iconic in its aesthetic, dingy and decorated with stickers, sampaguita and the wear-and-tear of everyday hire. Mayi’s breed of tricycle costs him an arm and a leg: the Ural is worth roughly US\$9,999, more for more specialized editions. Current laws have national highways stopping vehicles that run at 400 cc and below, but the

underappreciated Ural has the engine capacity of 749 cc.

When did our transportation laws get so lost that this alternative, and in so many ways superior, means of transportation got lumped in with the pedicabs, sputtering harmful emissions, huffing and puffing at 40? Who knows. But on the Puerto Princesa North Road, we were breezing at an average of 100 kilometers per hour for a little over 150 kilometers, stopping only for gas breaks, gear checks, and a hot lunch. Food was Vietnamese cuisine, of which Palawan does especially well; Palawan continues to have strong ties with this culinary culture thanks to the Vietnamese communities that have stayed and formed since the 1970s conflict in Vietnam.

And so we had a fitting lunch at an authentic Vietnamese-Filipino restaurant, like a subtle throw to the motorcycle country. The boys downed their warm bánh mì sandwiches and

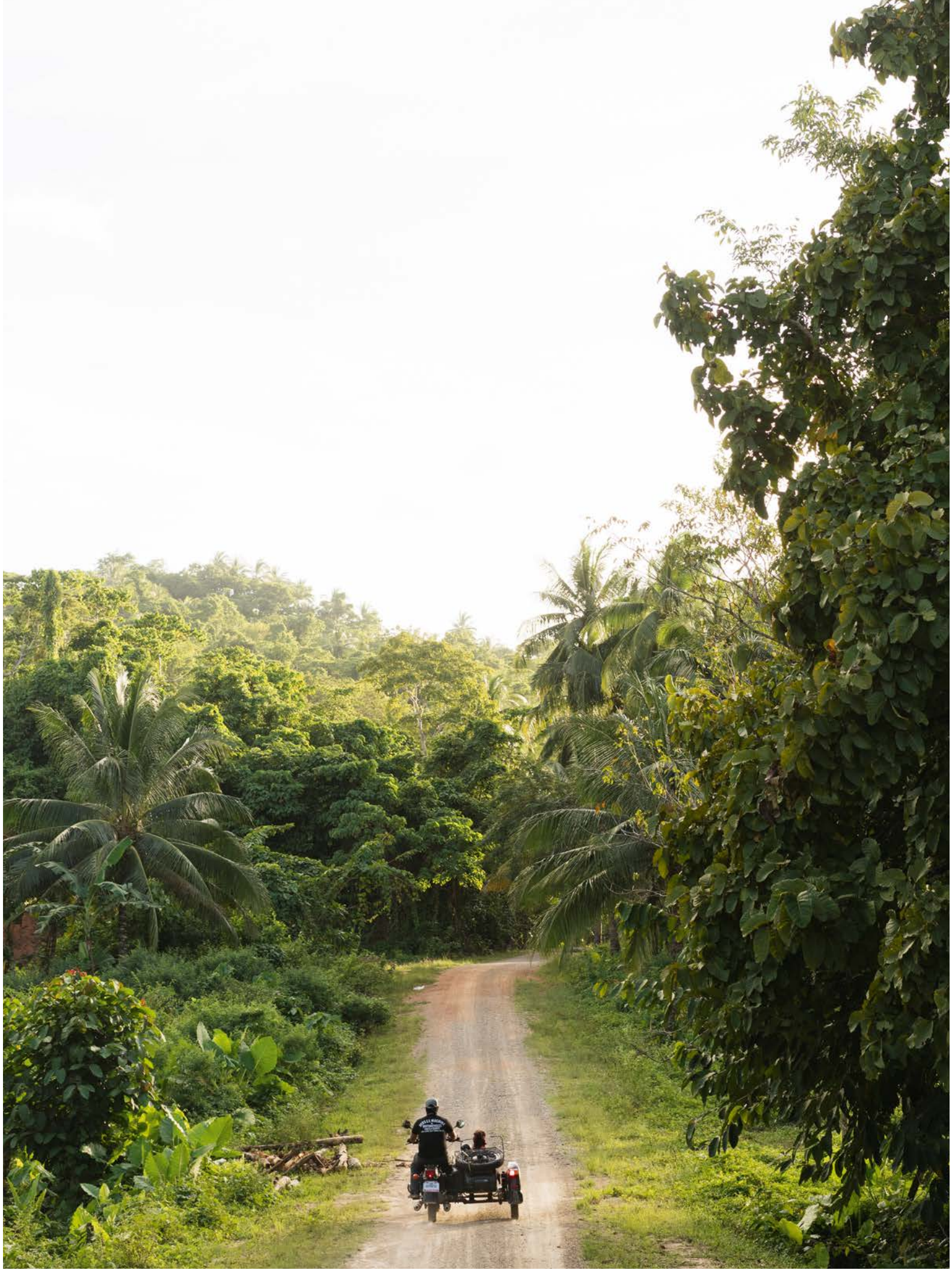


















fresh shrimp rolls, dipped in an ultra-spicy sauce that had them coughing and sweating. “It’s okay,” Coco, one of the other riders, commented, pounding his chest a couple of times. “Pampabilis yun sa bikes.” And on we went.

MAYI IS HOPEFUL THAT WHAT THIS dream needs to take off is a change of scenery, the quintessential alignment of place and bike. And for that he’s found our destination: San Vicente, Palawan, which many other people would call a pipe dream in itself. For almost ten years now, this slow, quiet town in

And there has been noise. For the past three years, the municipality of San Vicente has been working fervently with the design experts at Palafox Associates, and the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (TIEZA), crafting a masterplan that prioritizes ecotourism and environmental conservation, learning from both the successes and the failures of Port Barton, where the coastline has thinned with sporadic boat parking and smaller establishments. The new masterplan includes limitations such as a 50-meter setback from the high tide for permanent

WE CAME RIDING IN ON NARROW ROADS, SOME STILL UNPAVED. I COUNTED CARABAOS AS WE ENTERED; THERE WERE MORE ANIMALS THAN THERE WERE CARS. FOR ALL THE NOISE THAT SURROUNDED IT, SAN VICENTE WAS RELATIVELY QUIET.

the northern part of Palawan has been called time and time again The Next Big Thing, compared to big contenders like tourism hits Boracay and Siargao. And all it takes is a visit to believe it: San Vicente boasts of the longest coastline in the Philippines, aptly named Long Beach; 14km of soft sand and crystal clear waters, which is almost thrice the length of Boracay’s White Beach at 5km. A little further down north, there is Port Barton, a former fishing village turned tourist hub that attracts primarily foreign backpackers; currently, and it has been since the 90s, tourism is the main source of economic activity in this area. But Port Barton is a bit of a distance from Long Beach, most popularly accessed via shuttle from El Nido or Puerto Princesa.

The most of San Vicente has remained underdeveloped. We came riding in on narrow roads, some still unpaved. I counted carabaos as we entered; there were more animals than there were cars. For all the noise that surrounded it, San Vicente was relatively quiet.

structures (the standard setback in the Philippines is 25 meters), and building heights that increase further away from the coastline.

So well-marketed, so diplomatic has San Vicente been in their approach that I spotted the word “awesome” on its website, and somehow it managed to get away with it. Their mayor, Carmela “Pie” Alvarez, was elected two terms past as the youngest mayor ever in the country’s history. Her concise social media profile reads: Palawan, mayor, Tequila Kween. Though I laughed, I think she got away with that too. San Vicente, on paper, is trying hard to be noisy. And it works. Mayor Tequila Kween sold me, like many other people, on the Masterplan.

All the parts have been in place, ready to baked for quite some time. So why not? Or at least, beyond Port Barton, why does the town still appear untouched? From the moment that I heard about the myth of San Vicente, this has felt like the big question. And for all its glaring obviousness, no one seems to have quite

## BE THE BEST PASSENGER YOU CAN BE

**1. Gear up**—some sidecars have a windshield to help protect your face, but it’s best to be prepared with a helmet and visor, bandana, long-sleeved top or jacket, and closed shoes. You’ll be a pretty boring passenger if you’re too busy eating dust.

**2. Lean with your driver.** The sidecar motorcycle can take more speed on left turns, and may easily rise during right turns. If the bike is making a sharp turn, you want to put as much weight against the turn as possible to make it easier for the driver to steer.

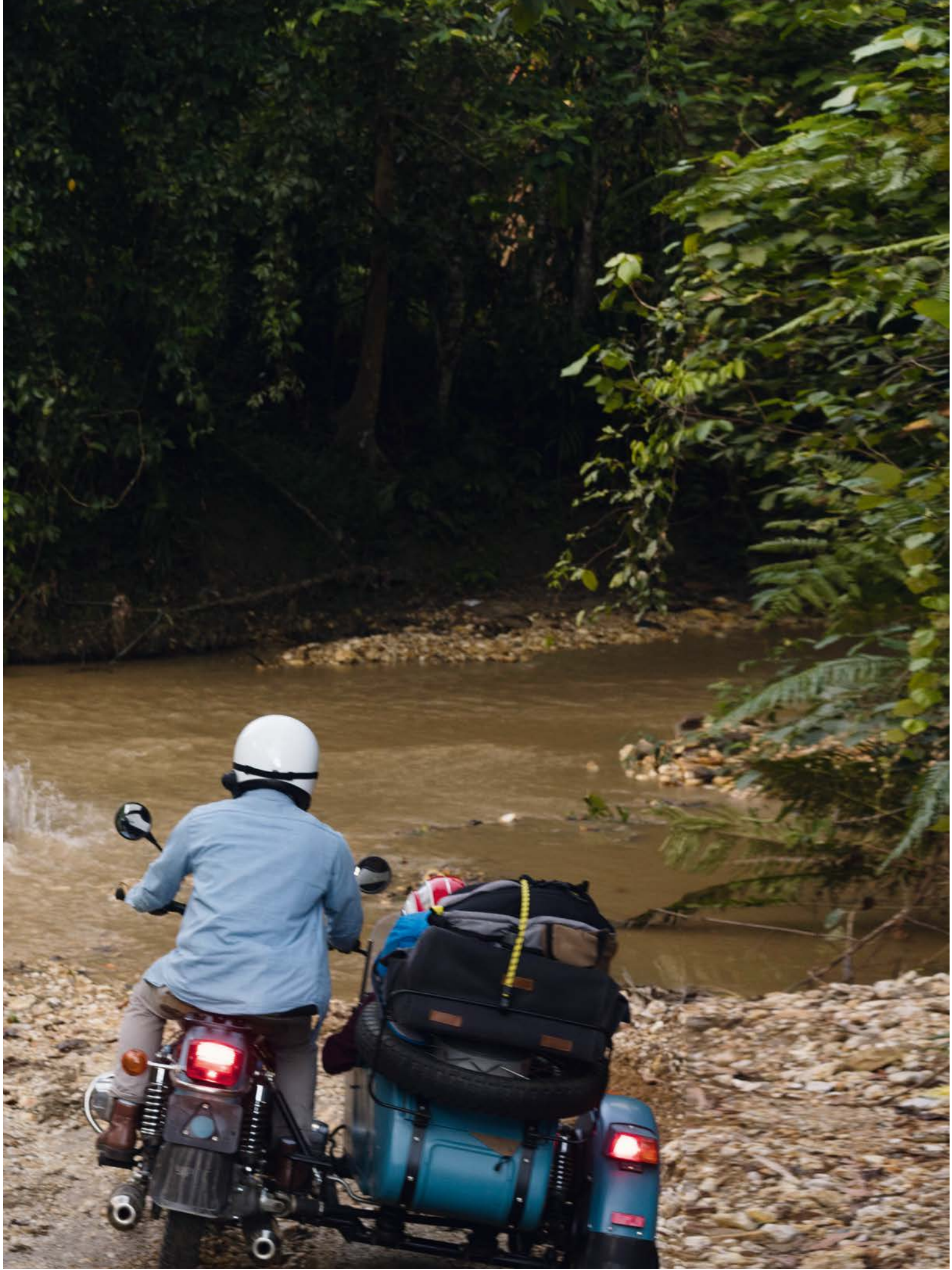
**3. The fundamental position** for a passenger has your right leg out on the outer step, knee bent, and the left leg stretched out inside the sidecar. This is the ideal way for you to lean and maneuver your weight to help your driver during turns.

**4. Safety first.** In as much as it’s fun to ride with another person, try not to distract your driver with conversation, questions or badass selfies when he/she’s concentrating on the road.











OUR RIDE  
**2013 URAL GAUCHO  
RAMBLER**

Displacement, cc:  
**749**

Engine type:  
**OHV Air-cooled, 4 stroke,  
opposed twin cylinder**

Valve per cylinder:  
**2**

Max output (hp):  
**41 @ 5500 rpm**

Fuel system:  
**Carbureted, dual Keihin  
L22AA, 32mm**

Starting:  
**Electric & Kickstart**

Clutch:  
**Dry, dual disc**

Transmission type:  
**Manual**

Speeds:  
**4 forward, 1 reverse**

Engageable  
sidecar wheel drive:  
**Yes, driveshaft**

Wheels:  
**2.15X19 Aluminum rims  
with steel spokes**

Tires:  
**Duro HF-308, 4.0x19"**

a grasp of the answer. Only shapes of it. Is it a question of time? Of priorities? Of business strategy?

"When the airport opens," is Mayi's, who has been invested in San Vicente for nine years. When the airport opens; this is the theoretical future that has been referred to time and time again by most of the people we meet on the way. Like many other smaller provinces in the country, San Vicente has an unfinished, inactive airport. The San Vicente Airport, which was constructed under the

WHEN THE AIRPORT OPENS; THIS IS THE THEORETICAL FUTURE THAT HAS BEEN REFERRED TO TIME AND TIME AGAIN BY MOST OF THE PEOPLE THAT WE MEET ON THE WAY. LIKE MANY OTHER SMALLER PROVINCES IN THE COUNTRY, SAN VICENTE HAS AN UNFINISHED, INACTIVE AIRPORT.

Arroyo administration, was put on hold indefinitely. It has somehow become the most tangible way to quantify when this place will be ready to be The Next Big Thing; a lot of the expectations have hinged on the idea that the town will become easily accessible, more than just a midpoint.

"Look what's happened to El Nido," Mayi says. "It's awful. They didn't account for all these people, so now there are always vans, ugly-looking colored vans, shuttling people to and from El Nido." When you exit the Puerto Princesa Airport, there is an actual barrage of people, shuttle drivers and tour operators, asking, "El Nido? El Nido? El Nido?" so fervently that it's become more of an exclamation. Toto, Mayi's assistant and the best Ural driver on this trip, used to be one of them. "There are more than enough shuttles."

The completion of San Vicente Airport, it is believed, will help this situation, giving tourists and alternative right on their current route. But the question of when has many answers.

**Top to bottom:** The 14km Long Beach spans the baranggays of New Agutaya, San Isidro and Alimangoan, where only few resorts have started to take up residence; This is the view at sunset.

The municipal office says to expect completion in early 2017.

"It's a chicken-and-egg thing," says Mayi, "Between the airline operators and the resorts. The airlines are waiting on the developers to start building, and vice versa." It's an explanation I heard many times, in different ways, from different people, during our trip. A decade seemed like an awfully long time to play chicken-and-egg. In any case, Mayi didn't need to play chicken or egg. He had a plan in place, and it didn't require an airport. It could ride.

But right now, the road remains a long one, at least a three- to four-hour drive. It takes us the better half of a day to get from point A to point B, and by the end of it the boys are aching for their Salon Pas. Mayi plans to park his Urals in Puerto Princesa, and pick up guests from the active airport, until he sees where the plans are going.

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## Stories from a Hotel Room

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And then, because he's in the business of running hotels, lunch would be at one of the five star hotels as a part of his sort of market research to figure out what the restaurants are like. He always presented it that way, like food was a gateway into a culture. Your attitude to food is linked to your attitude to culture in general, and we always had to try everything once. We also tried not to compare places because when you hold a new city to the standards of the last one, the new one will always be disappointing.

So I don't have memories of homes as such. We don't have a home that we go back to; hotel rooms would kinda meld into one room. That's always been the way it is. As a hotelier, you don't get days off on the holiday, obviously. So our Christmases and New Years are always spent at a hotel lobby, at a hotel restaurant, with my dad who's working. My dad was friends with other GMs who had kids, and we'd hang out with them. So one day, we could be hanging out at the Marco Polo with one friend, have dinner, go for a swim, and the next day be at the Shangri-la with another friend—it sounds really posh, but it's essentially our version of a house. We didn't have anywhere else to go. We really enjoyed it when a friend would invite us to their homes and they'd have a home-cooked meal. The menus in a hotel are designed for, maybe, two weeks shelf life. After 2 weeks the buffet repeats, after 2 weeks, you've eaten everything on the menu of the restaurants, really. So the food gets pretty kinda boring. Stay at a hotel for 2 weeks and you've pretty much eaten everything, on average. That's also why we ate out pretty often.

A LOT OF THE PROPERTIES we lived in no longer exist. Pines Hotel in Baguio is now an SM. The Silahis on Roxas Blvd. sits abandoned. Batulao in Tagaytay is now a golf club. It's always a disorienting experience, revisiting some



of the hotels I lived in. Mainly because these hotels have usually undergone a renovation and the staff have rotated out. So while the space feels familiar it's not like visiting your Lola's house, where things stay the same. If anything, it emphasizes how temporal the idea of home can be. Some people's memories of home are tied to a street, a structure, a friend, a neighbor. But as a third culture kid who grew up in other areas, you feel a different sense of home in different places. So when I moved back to Bangkok, which I did for a year, I felt at home, but in a different way. Same goes for KL and London. The memories of home, or the idea of home, aren't locked into one physical place or multiple physical places. It's more a specific confluence of time and space, and once those elements have changed, the feeling of a place being home changes. More than the hotels themselves, I suspect my memories of home are more closely linked to the cities I have lived in; the familiarity of the streets, the food, the sounds. Traveling for a living was a natural evolution, really. You get hooked on the idea of being a stranger in a strange place; that you're lost and don't know anybody. The anonymity and sense of unknown is enjoyable. You don't know what's around the corner, or what you're gonna do tomorrow. 🌐

## Off the Beaten Path

*CONTINUED FROM PAGE 90*

Eventually, he means to expand his business to include bikes for single riders. The current set-up is not the best or the most economical for the Urals, having them brave the trip back and forth the highway every time. It's also not where these babies get to shine.

Coastlines and dirt roads: that was interesting, challenging terrain, that was where the boys whooped and yelled the loudest. San Vicente had more than enough to last our three-day trip. I asked Mayi if he was worried that the roads, and the network, would change after the long-awaited development. "They say they're going to pave some of the roads, but there's always going to be the off-beaten path. And I'll find it," He laughs.

Philippine Tricycles are currently banned in San Vicente, but motorcycles remain the main mode of land transportation, so much so that in Port Barton you can find plenty of spots that loan motorcycles to tourists, mostly backpackers, who are looking for a way around. "In Puerto Princesa, there are a lot of motorcycle rentals but no tours. In my opinion, it's actually dangerous to loan motorcycles [to just anyone]—and you're not even showcasing anything. My point is to showcase San Vicente. Not



even Palawan, just San Vicente. So right now, the Urals are like an investment; I use my Urals to open up San Vicente to potential investors. I want them to see what it's about."

And for that there was no place much better than Long Beach, where the sky looked near pastel and the empty shore was ripe for a drive. There we were: four Urals in a row, pushing limits, egging each other on and making circles upon circles—they called them donuts—in the sand. If riders ever got tired, I knew then for certain that it was never during the ride. The sun seemed to set faster than usual that day, matching our speed, and before we knew it, it was time to go home. And like most travels, this one ended at the airport, even if it didn't have the capacity to fly us out.

The stopover at the unfinished San Vicente airport was almost serendipitous, just a suggestion by our new guide; the Urals and their riders had to leave a day prior, and I was back to four-wheeled vehicles, suffering a rather bad hangover for the wind in my hair and views unencumbered by windows. The long, completed runway was book-ended by mounds of dirt, dust in shades of orange hovering in the air. The glass-walled terminal was entirely empty and the airstrip was unoccupied; there wasn't much beyond that to see, I commented. "No, but we drag race here sometimes," our guide said offhandedly. It would have probably been a great place for a ride. 🌐

## The Odyssey

*CONTINUED FROM PAGE 107*

Considering that we are islanders surrounded by more water than land, I wonder if perhaps we are less the water folk that we like to think we are.

Back at the pier, Chanley was calling us back to the boat; the sky had turned into a menacing shade. "What an intriguing town," I said to Paco, looking back at the faded walls of red and aquamarine. He nodded. "It is like a beautiful and interesting girl who simply won't tell you anything about herself."

Upon reaching our camp site on Ginto Island, we huddled in conversation as the rain droned on. "Here's what's good about having no signal," Montri pointed out. "Back home, we would all just be on our phones. Not talking, not really here." Suddenly, Paco grabbed his camera and rushed towards the shoreline. "Damn, when God shows up, She really puts on a show." And there it was. The rain had cleared, and reaching across the opposite ends of the horizon was a perfect rainbow. Seconds, minutes, half an hour passed. We all sat quietly, caught in a state of sheer awe, knowing that a moment like this could never be packaged, scheduled, or purchased. Maybe, if you're lucky, it chooses you.

THE NEXT MORNING, we lingered around the campsite: We sat around; had one cup, then two cups, of coffee; dozed off on the hammocks that hung close to the shore. It was close to noon by the time we roused ourselves to get on the boat, wherein we would sail out north towards Busuanga Island.

The ride through the crossing was rough; the waters were choppy as the swells grew by the minute. Along the way, we stopped over a few more islands, such as Caseledan to inspect the ruins of a 17th century Spanish fort that had once been used as a lookout for pirates and invaders.

This is usually the part of a journey when the strains of being in transit starts to take a toll. Over the next hour and a half, the boat was silent. Some of us had dozed off, which wasn't easy when you were bouncing over choppy waves or getting splashed every now and then. I was somewhere in the middle of a meditative lull and the onset of vertigo when my ears perked at what sounded like music. Sure enough, Paco had connected his device to the speedboat's sound system and Dave Matthews Band's Where Are You Going was pouring through the speakers.

THIS WAS NOT ANOTHER LOVE AFFAIR WITH PALAWAN. We reached the end of our journey, after which, we all returned to our regular lives, just like all the others who come to explore its islands and appraise the clarity of its waters. Nothing crazy or dramatic happened; no life-threatening encounters in the open sea or serious challenges on our survival abilities, albeit the weather concerns at the start of the trip. I did not radically transform into an avid water enthusiast, like a prodigal child of the sea. Yet on the rare occasion that I am buoyant and in eye contact with a fat snapper, I've learned to recognize that the overwhelming feeling that threatens to make my heart explode isn't fear—but more likely a rolled muddle of awe,

