

Post Magazine/ Travel

Can the Philippine island of Boracay survive back-to-back lockdowns?

A mere 21 months after a first closure, for restoration work, the popular tourist destination is struggling with another

Now its resilient resort and bar owners are adjusting to a slower pace of life, as they watch the coffers empty

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White Beach, on Boracay, in the Philippines. Photo: Shutterstock

Boracay's White Beach would ordinarily be thronged with people: bronzed sunbathers lounging on the pearly sand; children splashing about noisily in the clear, shallow waters; blissed-out couples posing for selfies beneath the swaying palm trees. But today the beach is largely deserted, with nary a tourist in sight. Its pristine sands lie undisturbed. No *paraw* boats, with their distinctive blue sails, line the shore. All is quiet – far too quiet, many locals would say.

The eerie calm calls to mind [the enforced shutdown in 2018](#), when Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte ordered the island to close for six months so that environmental problems could be rectified. Although the controversial shutdown took its toll on the livelihoods of locals – most of whom depend on tourism in one way or another – some grudgingly admit that it was good for Boracay, bringing such benefits as a neater beachfront and greater visibility on the global stage.

The same can hardly be said this time round, especially with no end to the coronavirus pandemic in sight.

“When people stopped coming, we felt it hard. We already had a taste of it during the 2018 closure, so to have it happen again but with no timeline – it truly feels like a test of survival,” Maffi Deparis, hotel and restaurant manager at Deparis Beach Resort, tells *Post Magazine* by email. The resort, which is close to White Beach, has had to shut its doors and let go of its staff after initially trying to keep them on a rotating shift schedule.



Tourists arrive in Boracay on October 26, 2018, the day the island reopened after a six-month closure aimed at repairing the damage inflicted by years of mass tourism. Photo: AFP

“We’ve been operating for more than 35 years, and I have to say that this is the lowest point we’ve ever experienced,” says the 33-year-old, who grew up on the island. “It’s a different level of hardship.”

Some hotels, such as the Diniview Villa Resort, have continued to operate despite the dearth of tourists. “The reason we stay open is to support our staff, as they have no other means of making money,” explains its 51-year-old Swedish owner, Julia Lervik, who has lived on the island for 30 years. “Business is down to a trickle. We are just figuring out day-by-day how to survive.”

Before the pandemic, Boracay, which has a permanent population of more than 52,000, according to the 2015 census, received around 3,000 to 5,000 tourists daily, but visitor arrivals have since plummeted and remained at low levels even after the island reopened to residents from elsewhere in the Western Visayas islands region, on June 16.

According to government statistics, a mere 81 tourists visited Boracay between June 16 and 30 – barely enough to fill a single resort, let alone the hundreds of hotels on the island. On June 17, there were just two new visitors. And at the beginning of July, the province of Aklan, of which Boracay is a part, closed its borders anew after a spike in Covid-19 cases in neighbouring provinces, effectively restricting travel to the island.

“I see the same people every day,” says Deparis. “There is not much in the way of local tourism.”



Staff members sit in the empty Tita Magz restaurant on Boracay last month. Photo: Frank Hoefsmi

As a result, the bustling island has turned into a ghost town, with closed storefronts lining deserted streets.

“Most people still on the island are either part of the skeleton workforce or residents. Minors and those over 60 years old are required to stay home,” says 58-year-old Belgian yoga instructor Frank Hoefsmit, who has been living on Boracay for eight years. “There’s still a curfew from 9pm to 5am in place. And just under 10 hotels are actually accepting guests.”

Of course, it is not just hotels that are suffering; other hospitality businesses, such as restaurants and bars, are acutely feeling the pinch, too. Most venues have shut their doors for the time being.

“With no guests, and with locals struggling to make ends meet, we have no business. Hopefully we can ride it out,” says 39-year-old Filipino-American Patrick Cuartero, a managing partner at cocktail bar Prisma Boracay. “I’ve already heard of many businesses shuttering on the island. I’d only give it a few more months before things get critical.”



A gift shop on the island displays a “No face mask, no entry” sign at the end of July.
Photo: Maffi Deparis

His views are echoed by Filipino entrepreneur Nowie Potenciano, who, together with his wife, Odette, owns The Sunny Side Cafe Group of restaurants, which includes The Sunny Side Café and Spicebird. “Given that the island is closed again barely a year and a half after being shut down, I’m expecting that we won’t go through this unscathed. I would say that 95 per cent of the guests in our restaurants are tourists, and with no flights coming into the country, we have had no choice but to close all our shops – two of them [Popo Teahouse and Streetmarket Boracay] on a permanent basis,” says the 42-year-old, who divides his time between Boracay and Manila.

“Unlike businesses in cities like Manila, there isn’t a big enough local market for us to sustain our operations. We are providing some financial assistance to our staff who are out of work, but we can only last for so long doing this.”

With virtually no business, locals are having to fill their days in other ways.

“Before the pandemic, we were busy all the time,” Deparis recalls. “We had a full house of around 21 staff members. The reception area would be filled with the sounds of ringing phones and clacking keyboards.” Now, “most of us are getting to know a different side of island life, gaining a new-found respect for Boracay’s natural beauty. In fact, I’ve started a small YouTube channel for my family and friends, where I post updates on what life is like on the island.”



Everyone is running out of money. Our staff worry about their kids as no one can afford to enrol them in school without any income
Julia Lervik, owner, Diniview Villa Resort

With no yoga classes to teach, Hoefsmit, too, is appreciating a gentler pace of life. “We live more slowly now, and with more awareness. For me, mornings are for meditation and yoga. Afternoons are for work, learning and friends. Evenings are for relaxing. I actually prefer my current lifestyle,” he muses. “I have no income from yoga classes, but I’ll just ride it out on savings. The island is not such an expensive place to live.”

Not everyone is so financially secure. “Yes, everything is clean and quiet, but generally, everyone is running out of money,” says Lervik. “Our staff worry about their kids as no one can afford to enrol them in school without any income,” the school term having started at the beginning of June.

There has been some assistance from the authorities, says Lervik, but it has been patchy: “Out of our three companies, with 65 employees, only the staff of one company received financial help from the government’s social security programmes. The other staff and companies were declined. When we demanded explanations, they said we ‘should be happy that staff of one company received it’.”



A property for sale in Boracay. Photo: Maffi Deparis

No one knows for sure when the tourists will return, especially with many parts of the Philippines still experiencing an increase in Covid-19 cases. And even when they do come back, it’s unlikely there will be a return to business as usual. Boracay has been under modified general community quarantine since June 1, which means that businesses are allowed to operate only at 50 per cent capacity; they also have to observe stringent hygiene protocols.

“There’s a list of things we’ll need to do, such as install sanitising stations, conduct temperature checks and enforce social distancing – which is crazy, because our bar is small enough as it is,” says Cuartero.

Until then, as Deparis says, it is essentially a test of survival – but she is confident Boracay will weather the storm.

“We islanders are a hardy bunch. Despite the looming fear of bankruptcy and loss of livelihood, I believe that having experienced the 2018 closure, we can survive anything. Our spirit is strong and our community is stronger,” she says.

“We will make it through, and we will rise again.”