

The Best of Caribbean Ecotourism

# ISLANDS

*An International Magazine*

October 1998

*The sun,  
the sea,  
the moment...*

# Greece!

**Hawaii's  
Secret Gardens**

**Going Wild  
on Dominica**

**Plus: Tony Hillerman  
goes to the Philippines**

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# ISLANDS

An International Magazine Volume 18/Number 5 September/October 1998

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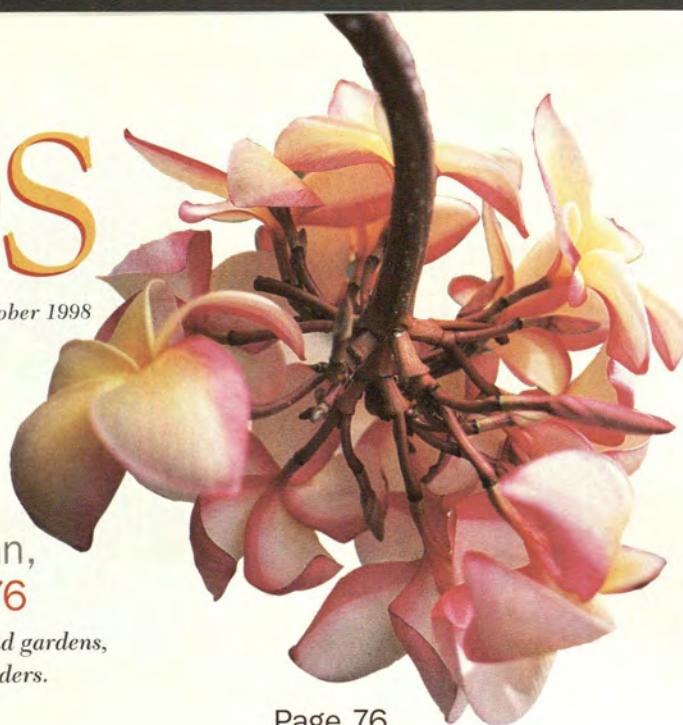
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**Web site:** [www.islandsmag.com](http://www.islandsmag.com)



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Plumeria in Hawaii (top) and bathing at Koussou, Lesbos (bottom), by Macduff Everton





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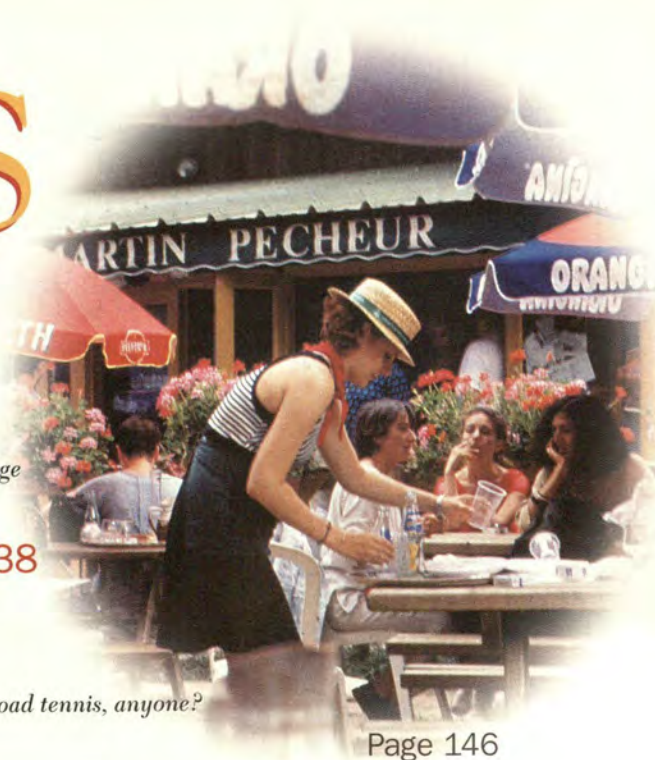
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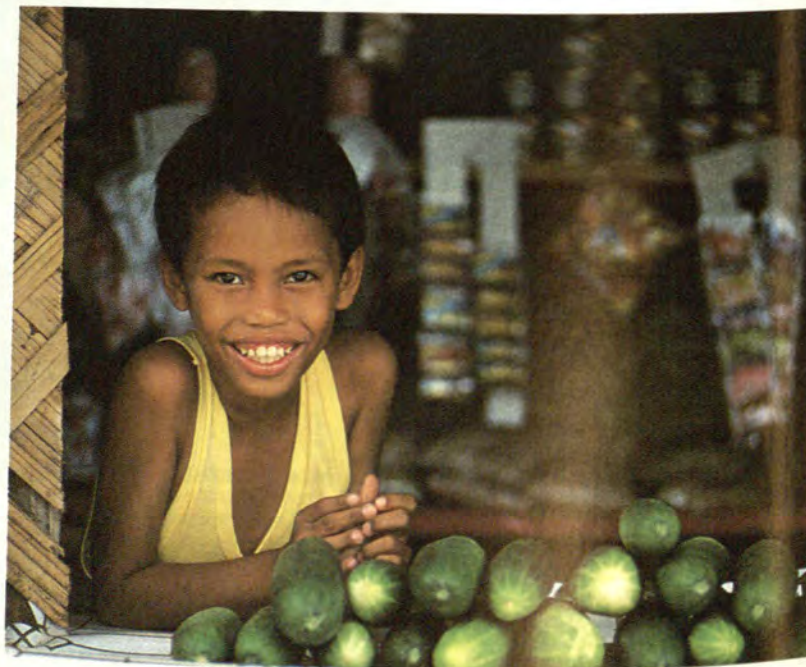


Reflections by Tony Hillerman

# PALAWAN

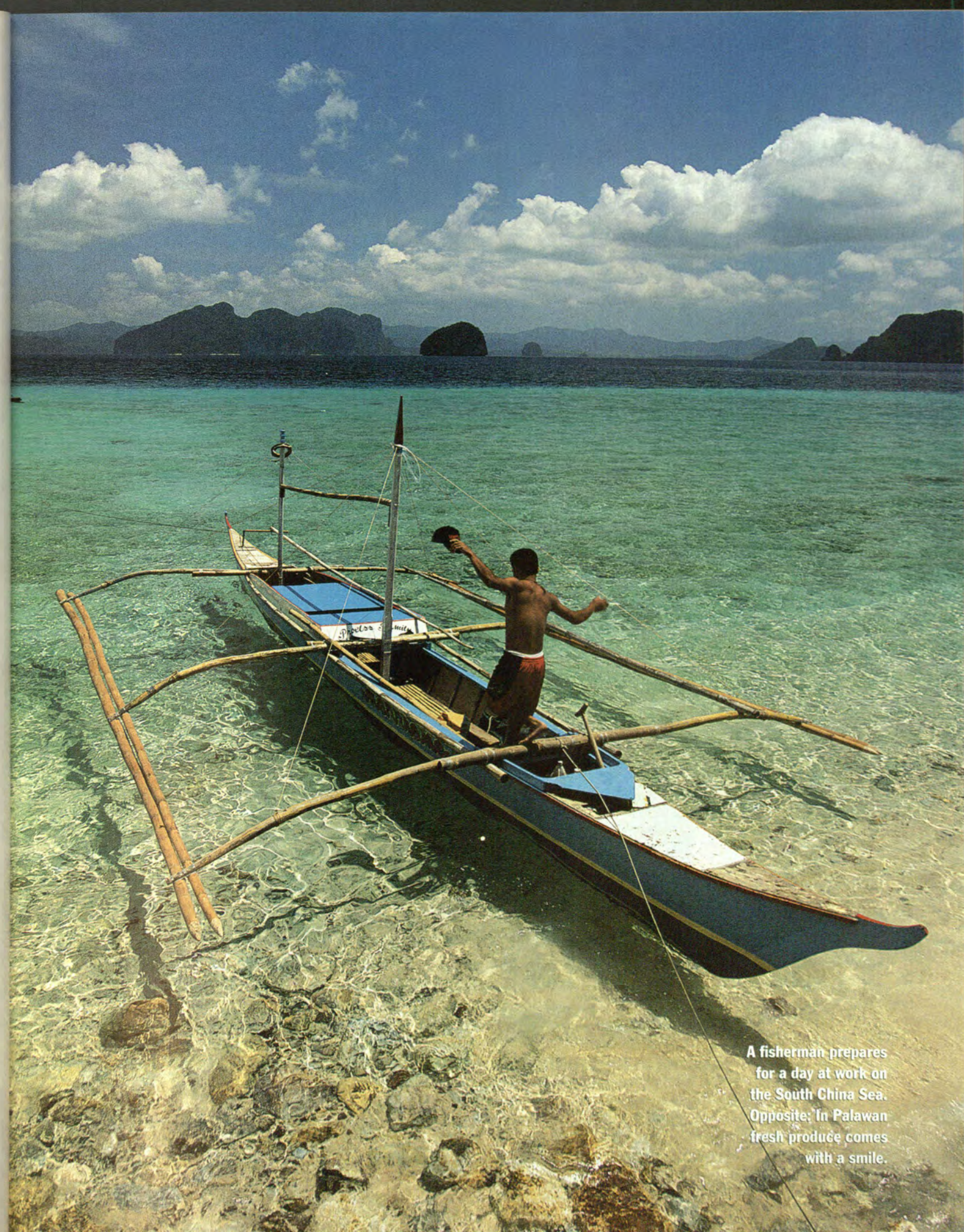
**I**N 1986, I LANDED IN A MANILA THAT WAS BUZZING WITH rebellion. President Marcos and Imelda had fled to Hawaii, abandoning her famed collection of 4,000 shoes, and the city was endorsing reformist Cory Aquino. Meanwhile, I was hunting for the proper locale for a novel to be called *Finding Moon*. I wanted to write about an average man in a place where civilization had ceased, to examine how surviving amid chaos changed him. The fall of South Vietnam offered a background, and I had the first three chapters and the finale in mind. That left a 30-chapter middle that was empty of ideas or locations. Since Vietnam wasn't issuing visas to folks like me, I had tagged along with a group of writers on a Philippine junket to see where that would lead me. It would lead to Palawan.

I had already decided to use some sort of jail escape in the plot, if I could work it in. Visitors were not welcome at Manila's notorious Bilibid prison, but someone told me that the correctional center on Palawan was where the real criminals were sent anyway. The warden there was said to be an amiable fellow, and, yes, one could fly there.



Photographs by Robert Holmes

ON AN  
ISLAND JOURNEY,  
CHANCE ENCOUNTERS  
PROVIDE THE  
INGREDIENTS FOR  
A THRILLER.



A fisherman prepares for a day at work on the South China Sea. Opposite: In Palawan fresh produce comes with a smile.



## Reflections

**P**ALAWAN, 275 MILES LONG, IS ONE of the largest of the 7,000-plus islands of the Republic of the Philippines, angling southwest between Luzon and Borneo. To get there I started island-hopping south from Manila, then headed nearly 300 miles over the great blue emptiness of the Sulu Sea.

My seatmate — an exporter of “ethnic items” sold in places like Tokyo and Singapore — had boarded at Zamboanga. He was headed to Palawan for a quality-control discussion with his supplier.

“Look,” he said, extracting from his bag a bamboo tube and a woven pouch containing four thin sticks. “Shameful. Shameful,” he said. “Not even a tourist would believe it would work.”

Before I could ask him just what sort of work it did, he was showing me Mount Mantalingajan, rising through scattered fog patches. “Two thousand eighty-five meters high,” he said. “We’ll be over Palawan now.”

And we were.

Just below us was an odd jumble of buildings roofed with sheet metal, palm fronds, and tiles, and the docks of a seaport, mostly occupied by barges and a gaggle of small craft. The biggest ship was a rusted navy minesweeper.

What caught my eye, though, was a two-masted sailing ship, its fresh paint as white as snow, a pearl set in a field of barnacles. Even before our plane touched the weedy landing strip at Puerto Princesa, I had collected two characters — my seatmate and this dazzling vessel.

The airport existed, my seatmate explained, because Imelda Marcos had wished it. Imelda owned the island’s only lodging and was the aunt of the fellow developing a resort 20 miles away on the South China Sea. The plan had been to pave the road to the resort, thereby more than doubling

lowed a narrow road crowded by rice paddies that stretched to jungle-covered mountains on both sides. The cabbie, having explained the significance of the various saintly statues welded to the jeep’s hood, spoke with disapproval of the way the men cultivating the paddies were handling their water buffalo.

“All city people,” he explained. “Nobody taught them how to plow.”

I wondered why these urbanites were plowing so far from home.

“They’re convicts,” he told me.

Unlikely as it seemed, they were.

The gate of the prison was a palm log laid across the road. When the cabbie blew his musical horn, a plump, middle-aged man emerged from a bamboo shed, chatted, then pulled aside the log and waved us through. A mile or more onward we reached a compound of buildings that looked as if they were built by the U.S. Army during the Philippine Insurrection at the turn of the century. The amiable warden, it turned out, had his office in the largest of these. He was amiable indeed and full of information.

Those plowmen were farming plots assigned to them after establishing good behavior records. As sharecroppers, they could build a bamboo house, bring in their family, put

their kids on the Puerto Princesa school bus, and bank their share of the rice harvest.

I’d seen no walls, fences, or armed guards. Wasn’t escape a problem?

“Sometimes they go for a while,” the warden said, waving at the lush green mountains. “But after a day or two



Outriggers line a sandy cove backed by the lush mountains of one of the biggest islands in the Philippines.

Palawan’s pavement from its present eight miles, but he suspected Cory Aquino would now pave a road to the property of her family instead.

The route to the Palawan correctional institution was not among those paved. The old jeepney taxi (Puerto Princesa claimed six, I was told) fol-



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## ISLANDS

### PHOTO CONTEST ENTRY FORM

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P.O. Box 4728, Santa Barbara, CA 93140-4728

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Entry Fee: \$2 per photo. Number of entries \_\_\_\_\_ X \$2 = \_\_\_\_\_  
Special offer! Every 10th entry is FREE (also 20th, 30th...)

Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard ☐ AMEX ☐ Enclosed is a check or money order.

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Signature \_\_\_\_\_

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Winners will be featured on [www.islandsmag.com](http://www.islandsmag.com)

For contest rules, see page 148.

## Reflections

they're back. No food out there, and they can't swim the ocean."

The cabbie took me back to the harbor in Puerto Princesa, and I spent the twilight hours prowling the wharves, watching hordes of roaches migrate past my feet, listening to the night sounds from town and jungle, sitting on pilings as I gazed at the sailing ship, knowing I had my novel's midsection virtually written. Lovingly inscribed in gilt paint on the ship's bow was its name: *Glory of the Sea*. Any novelist could get a character across the South China Sea on that.

THERE WAS TIME TO KILL BEFORE the next flight to Manila, and I needed more local color. The next day at the town market, a U.S. dollar bought a workable (the tube was straight) model of the unworkable bamboo blowgun my seatmate had been carrying. (The sticky poison the mountain tribesmen apply to the dart tips when hunting wild pigs cost a dollar more.) Then the cabbie and I headed for the South China Sea beaches.

The road led, naturally, to the resort Imelda's kinsman was developing. The road was bad and, luckily, a pedestrian noticed that the rear wheel of our jeepney was extending beyond the fender. Not to worry. The cabbie extracted the broken axle, pulled a spare from the back of the jeepney, inserted it, and we were on our way again.

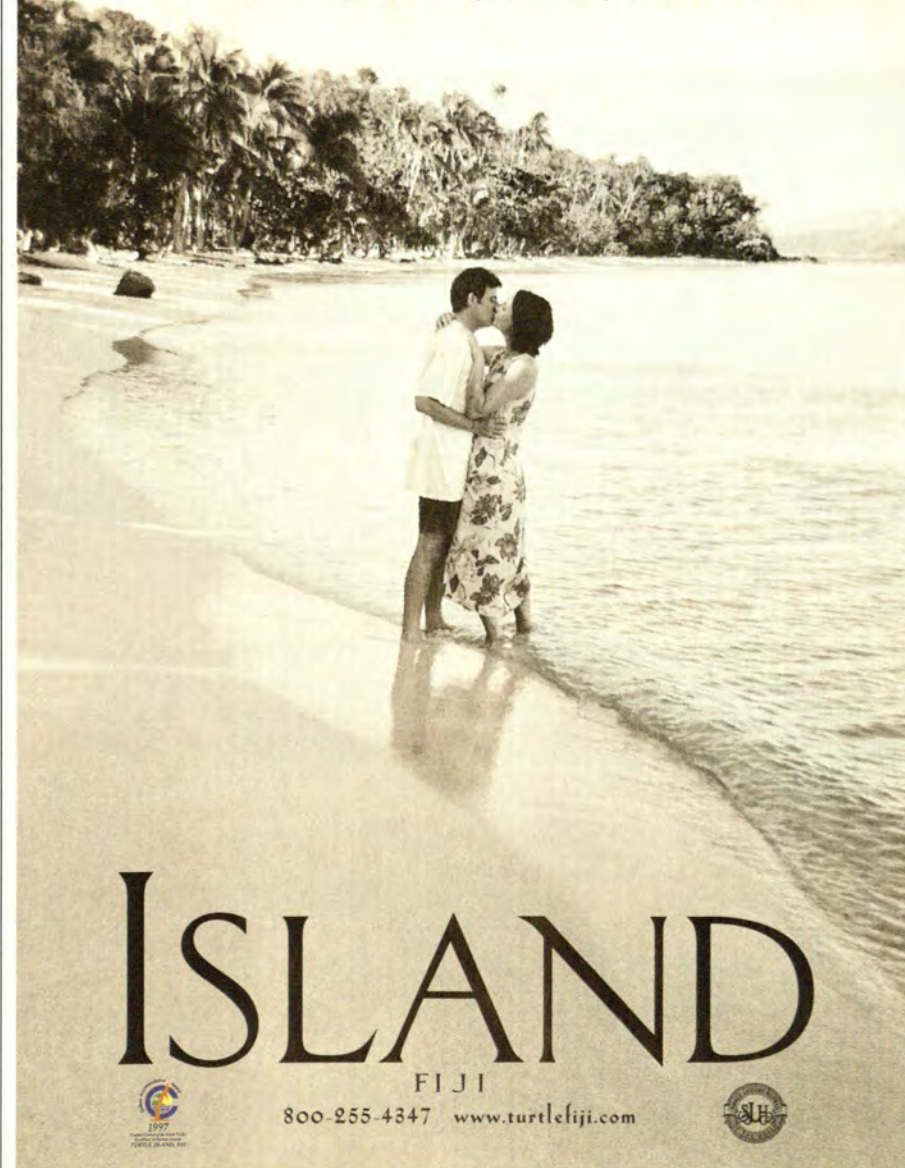
The resort proved to be a scattering of thatch-roofed bamboo shelters raised on stilts about waist level, in the event the sea invaded. The only visible humans were two fishermen throwing nets out in the surf. They provided us sea bass to be grilled for lunch.

From where we sat eating our hot grilled bass, the cabbie and I could see the South China Sea rolling westward toward the brown water of the Mekong. It was 800 miles to Vietnam, but it no longer really mattered if I got there. I had converted the cabbie into the captain of *Glory of the Sea*, and Palawan Island had provided me with the headful of images a writer needs to build his book. ♦

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 1998

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