



GOING GLOBAL

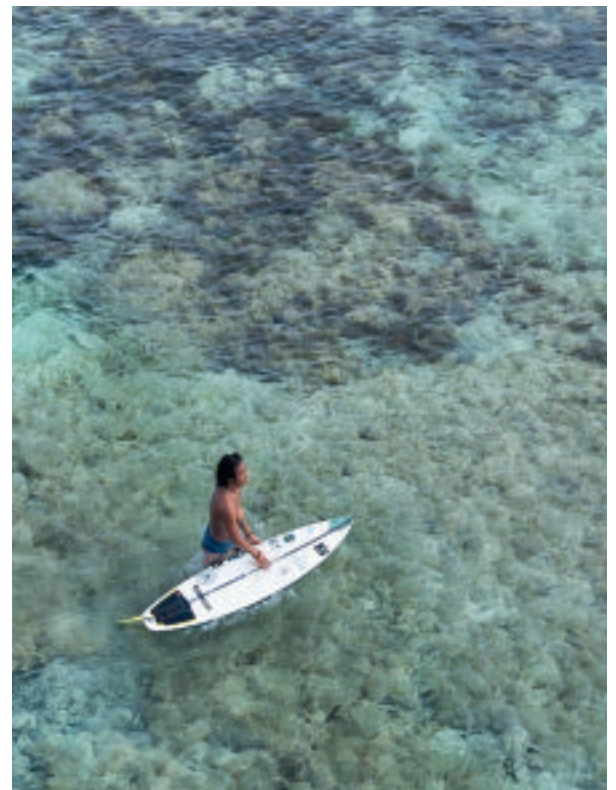
Siargao

WITH ABE NAVARRO TOLENTINO

Abe first moved back to his mother's hometown for the world-class surfing, but has stayed on. Now, as president of the dynamic local tourism operators' association, he's striking the balance between managing Siargao's tourism boom and protecting his childhood paradise

As told to **Alya B Honasan**
Photography **RG Medestomas**





It was the surfing that made me decide to live here years ago. But my earliest memory of Siargao is of being in my grandmother's house, in the old town of Dapa. I was about 10, in the garage, and looking up in awe at the blue marlin hanging from the rafters, seeing how big the fish were. My dad sent me out with the fishermen once at three in the morning and we were at sea half the day, fishing by hand. I also remember walking on the beach, picking up an abalone and shucking and eating it.

It used to be a real chore to come here. It took six to eight hours by slow boat from Surigao City, and the smaller, faster boats were scary. We only had electricity for half the day then. Despite the lack of facilities, though, there was a wealth of seafood, and the place was so pristine.

My mother is from Siargao, and I'm the fifth generation of my family to live here. Her dad – my grandfather – Constantino "Oging" Navarro Sr, was a congressman and governor even before Surigao was divided into Surigao del Norte and del Sur. I actually grew up abroad – Thailand, Australia, France – because my mother, Rora Navarro Tolentino, was a diplomat. But we came back to Siargao whenever we could.

By the time we returned to the Philippines for good in 1996, I had





decided to live in Siargao, even before I finished college, because I had fallen in love with surfing. I also loved the ocean and anything to do with fish, and am actually a BS Fisheries graduate from the University of the Philippines Visayas, College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences.

I graduated in 2004, came here, built a house and later built a guest house, where my family stays when they come to visit. I considered going into abalone processing, but it wasn't logistically feasible then, so I worked instead with the family cable TV business – and surfed, of course!

There was already some surf tourism at the time, especially after *Surfer* magazine featured us in early 1993. But Siargao still wasn't that popular – you really had to be into surfing to try to get here.

I went back to Manila and worked there for nine years, but I returned to Siargao in 2016. By then the number of flights had increased, and the social media boom had enabled people to post information and pictures of Siargao online. That was the real game-changer for the island.

So much has changed since I came back, especially in the last year. Infrastructure makes it easier to get to many spots now, but it also makes things a little less natural. That's the trade-off from development. Most of us who were here before miss how these places used to be. I am now president of the Siargao Tourism Operators Association (STOA), so I try to make it clear that we have a responsibility. It's kind of a double-edged sword; we came here for the beauty of the island, but we're also the reason why that beauty is changing.

STOA now has a seat on the Protected Area Management Board of the



Department of Environment and Natural Resources because this island has been a protected area since 1996. We have an interest in both the environment and business, and the only way we can balance these is by influencing policy. We push ordinances and work with local government. In the past, we've partnered with the Siargao Island Surfers Association on the regulation of surf instructors. We've also collaborated with our sister organization, Siargao Environmental Awareness Movement, and we're about to pass an ordinance banning single-use plastic.

If there's anything I've learned from my job, it's that it takes a long time to achieve something lasting, and you have to keep strengthening what you've built.

So what makes Siargao special? Number one, really, is the surfing. I can be objective about it, from a geographic perspective. We're on the edge of the





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Philippine Deep or the Mindanao Trench; we're one of the farthest Philippine islands out in the Pacific Ocean; and we have reefs all around us. A swell coming in through the ocean suddenly hits a shelf or a reef, and the water goes up. We get amazing waves in the right season. That's what makes Siargao unique – our location, combined with breathtaking beaches, one of the largest mangrove forests in the country and a surf culture that's still pretty open to everyone. It's not just beautiful – it also has action and sex appeal.

Yes, surfing is a sexy sport. Aside from the whole culture of the beach, that's what drew me – girls in bikinis. My wife, Megan was one of those girls! We met while surfing in La Union, although she's originally from California. We were married last year, right here in the garden of our home in Siargao, and we're expecting our first child.

In all seriousness, surfing attracts a certain crowd: young, healthy, fit people. These guys don't typically get drunk or wasted, because they like to wake up early and surf. Many consider it a lifestyle, and it's probably one of the ultimate forms of play. There's a thrill in it that only surfers can explain, the feeling of being "stoked" that surfers know. When you're surfing, that's the only thing you're thinking about. If you're not present, you're going to get eaten up by this gigantic wave. Surfing allows you to focus and disconnect.

I've mostly given up surfing of late, though, because it's hard to schedule. Are the waves good today? Is it high tide? With surfing, you just got to go. But I can't – I have a meeting at three in the afternoon. I've been busy with STOA projects and other personal ventures. Of course, surfing is always at the back of my mind.

I'm glad I got out of the rat race to come back here. For someone in their thirties, like me, it's a good place to be. Here, it's not quite a race, but a marathon for the sustainability of my home.

SATURDAY

6am

I check the tide the day before.

Depending on the schedule, I either



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CITY GUIDE

Saturday

Café Loka
Tourism Road,
General Luna
[fb.com/
cafe-loka-
1479590612316873](https://www.facebook.com/cafe-loka-1479590612316873)

**Lotus Shores Yoga,
Surf & Farm Retreat**
Tourism Road,
General Luna
lotusshores.com

Ono Poke Shack
Tourism Road,
General Luna
[instagram.com/
onosiargao](https://www.instagram.com/onosiargao)

Olas Banditos
Tourism Road,
General Luna
[instagram.com/
olasbanditosiargao](https://www.instagram.com/olasbanditosiargao)

Seawadeeka
Tourism Road,
General Luna
[instagram.com/
seawadeeka](https://www.instagram.com/seawadeeka)

Kudo Surf
Tourism Road,
General Luna
ph.kudosurf.com

Cantina Luna
Tourism Road,
General Luna
[fb.com/cantina
lunasiargao](https://www.facebook.com/cantina-lunasiargao)

Warung Siargao
Brgy Catangan,
General Luna
[siargaoislandvillas.
com/warun](http://siargaoislandvillas.com/warun)

Harana Surf Resort
Brgy Catangan,
General Luna
haranasurf.com

**Loose Keys
Moto Culture**
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General Luna
[fb.com/loosekeys
motoculture](https://www.facebook.com/loosekeys-motoculture)



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**When you're surfing,
that's the only thing
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watch the surfers from the boardwalk and the ❶ ❷ **Cloud 9 Tower**, have coffee and banana bread or muffins at ❸ **Café Loka** or surf at Cloud 9. If I have friends who want to learn to surf, I take them to **Jacking Horse**, a nice, shallow spot for beginner surfers that's easy to walk into, in front of the café. The instructors hang out at the tower – I make sure they get one who is registered with the Siargao Island Surfers Association.

10am

I rest at home, catch up with work or have breakfast at ❹ ❺ ❻ **Lotus Shores'**



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Kali Ma Café for some vegetarian food, like the matcha pancakes. I can also bring guests over to take the yoga classes offered here every day.

12pm

For lunch, I can choose among three different places, depending on my mood: **Ono Poke Shack**, where I order the basic poke bowl; **7 Olas Banditos**, a Tex-Mex place where I order the *carne asada* (grilled sliced beef) burrito and cheese nachos; or **Seawadeeka**, which shares the space with Olas Banditos and has good pad thai and iced tea. These restaurants are owned by surfer friends, who work with surfers elsewhere around the country, so you can find more branches of these restaurants in La Union and other surf destinations.

2pm

I get a motorcycle or car, and head to **8 Malinao**, a 10- to 15-minute easy ride from General Luna, where there's a scenic mangrove area and a river; perfect for kayaking or paddleboarding. Any resort can help guests find kayaks or boards to rent. Malinao's beach is also great for relaxing.

4pm

I drop by **Kudo Surf** to check out clothes and surfing equipment of quality. Kudo Surf makes official merchandise for international surf tours; its owners are American and Australian, but it's based in Siargao.



WHERE TO STAY: KERMIT SIARGAO

Doubling as a resort and a surf camp, Kermit Siargao is located near the island's best waves. Cloud 9 is just a five-minute motorbike ride away and Pesangan surf spot is right outside the resort. Kermit was founded by Gianni Grifoni, an Italian-Swiss biologist and dive instructor who runs the resort with his wife, Rosemarie. Apart from its individual and group surf lessons and yoga classes, Kermit is also known for its Italian restaurant with dishes based on Grifoni's recipes. Kermit's stone-baked pizzas and pasta meals are known throughout the island for their authentic flavors, and everyone leaves with a good impression of the restaurant's friendly and professional service. Kermit draws in crowds for its trendy yet chilled-out vibe and its variety of nipa hut-style accommodation for different budgets. kermitsiargao.com



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5pm

For cocktails, I head to **Cantina Luna**, where the cocktails have funny names like Bembol Coco, a nod to Filipino actor Bembol Roco, and Cocky Rooster. The *kinilaw* (ceviche) is also famous.

7pm

It's dinner at ⑨ **Warung Indonesian Restaurant** at the Siargao Island Villas, run by a lady from Java. The gado-gado and nasi goreng are good choices.

9pm

I end the night at ⑩ **Harana Surf Resort** where on Saturdays Harana Sound presents Sabado Sessions, which usually means live music or a DJ. It's either that, or I drop by ⑪ ⑫ **Loose Keys Moto Culture**, a coffee shop that becomes a bar at night, where people can rent café racers, which are modified bikes given a vintage look. They also have merchandise for sale, and I can spend a few minutes checking out shirts and shorts.

SUNDAY

7am

Breakfast is at ⑬ ⑭ **Kawayan Gourmand**, a café owned by Frenchman Pierre



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CITY GUIDE Sunday

Kawayan Gourmand
Cloud 9, Tourism Road,
General Luna
[fb.com/
kawayangourmand](https://www.facebook.com/kawayangourmand)

Galatea
Dapa-General Luna
Road, General Luna
[fb.com/galateasiargao](https://www.facebook.com/galateasiargao)

Lalay's Grill
The Boulevard,
General Luna
+63 921 796 9951

Bravo Restaurant
Tourism Road,
General Luna
[bravosiargao.com](https://www.bravosiargao.com)



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Waves ahoy!

Who discovered the waves in Siargao? Depends on who's telling the story.

Those in General Luna like to tell the tale of oceanographer Stanislav Kurilov, who jumped off a Soviet cruise ship one stormy night in December 1974 and was found off the coast of Siargao after he swam for three days.

The locals assumed he was American (even though he spoke no English) and called the US embassy, who sent servicemen to investigate the matter.

It was these servicemen, the story goes, who first discovered the impressive surf in Siargao, and who presumably returned for some R&R.

Kurilov eventually completed his defection and moved to Canada.

Others believe that the spotlight arrived with Mike Boyum, a surfing entrepreneur who found a haven in Siargao in 1988.

In fact, a Siargao surf camp named after him calls Boyum "the first foreign surfer to set foot between the village of General Luna and what is now known as Cloud 9, one of the world's finest surf breaks".

Cloud 9 is the top surf spot in Siargao, so named by an American photographer, John Callahan, who said the texture of the waves reminded him of a local chocolate bar.

Cloud 9 hosts both national and international surfing meets, including a World Surf League Qualifying Series event, where winners get ranked to qualify for the World Surf League Championship Tour.

This year, the local Philippine Surfing Championship Tour has the grand task of selecting Filipino athletes for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020.

For the first time, surfing will be showcased as an Olympic event. Needless to say, a good portion of that team will be from Siargao.

FOR THE NON-SURFER

If you're not into surfing, try island-hopping and visit nearby mangroves. After that, here are Tolentino's recommendations



Sugba Lagoon (on the cover)

Dip into the clear emerald waters of Sugba Lagoon while taking in the view of mangroves and limestone cliffs. There's a makeshift platform where you can practice your backflips – but if you want to keep it chill, there are also stand-up paddleboards for rent.

Magpupungko

This gorgeous natural rock pool formation in Pilar is about 15 feet at its deepest and only shows up at low tide, which can change unexpectedly, so come with waterproof footwear – the rocks can be sharp – and leave your gadgets at home. There's a ₱50 entry fee, and it's a 45-minute drive from General Luna.

Sohoton Cove on Bucas Grande island

Located on the northernmost of the Surigao group of islands, Sohoton Cove is a two-hour boat ride away from General Luna or Dapa and good for a day trip. It's a fine place for caving, kayaking through lagoons and boat rides to encounter stingless jellyfish.



Nather, with probably the best baguettes and croissants in the country! They also have éclairs and pain au chocolat. I order coffee and one of their excellent baguette sandwiches.

10am

I get on the ¹⁵ ¹⁶ **Galatea**, a souped-up giant *banca* (outrigger canoe) with a deck, seats and a quiet motor, for some island-hopping with friends. The route includes the three nearby islands of Guyam, Daku and Naked Island. Daku, which means "big", has a lovely beach, and people can get dropped off to surf on the reef right in front of the island. The boat provides lunch and a cooler full of drinks, but I also order grilled pork and chicken on the island. Naked Island, a beautiful sandbar, is where the tour usually ends for a jaw-dropping sunset.



How long should you stay?

For a true Siargao discovery adventure, Tolentino recommends five days. That won't include enough surfing lessons to be proficient if you're a newbie, as you'll only be learning to stand on the board by the time you leave.

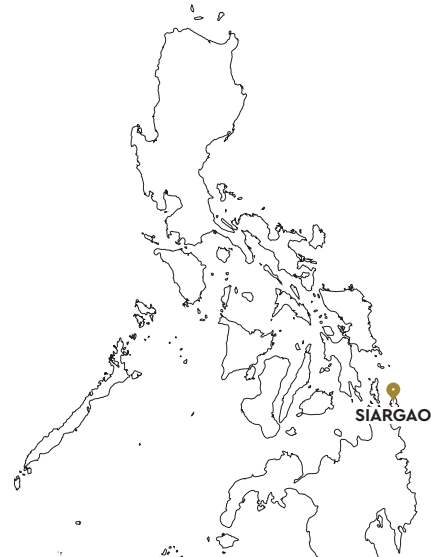
Instead, rent a car or motorbike – with helmets – and drive around the island, discovering small towns.

"Don't rush. Find little spots, a nice beach. Smaller towns have them, and nobody's there."

Tolentino describes Pacifico in the municipality of San Isidro as "a slight rewind – an experience of what General Luna was like 10 years ago".

When hunger strikes, international cuisine aside, you can't get more local than *kinilaw* and *lechon* (roast pig).

"Go to the market, buy fish, bring it to one of the stands to be *sugba* (grilled), *kinilaw* or *tinola* (cooked in a soup). Eat that with rice and some beer – the simplest and most authentic Siargao experience."



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5.30pm

Right beside where the boat docks, I pick up some fish at the market and take it down the "boulevard" to **Lalay's Grill**. I look for Uncle Lalay himself, who makes me *kinilaw* (ceviche) for some *pulutan* (bar chow) with a beer.

8pm

From the boulevard, I head on to dinner at **Bravo's Aftersurf Sundays**, where they serve paella by the plate. I order the house cocktail, Pomada – a refreshing calamansi slush with gin or a sangria to go with the Spanish food. It's a great way to close the weekend.