

Boracay reopens for business

TOURISM

AFTER A SIX-MONTH closure, Boracay's 'soft opening' took place on October 26, 2018

after a government-mandated clean-up of the resort island previously deemed a "cesspool" by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte.

The catalyst for the closure was poor sewage management – high levels of *E.coli* found in the beach waters, linked to unlicensed establishments depositing their waste in storm drains that run directly into the sea. Besides that, a basket of other issues related to overcapacity and insufficient regulation also had to be addressed.

Now, only 243 hotels and guesthouses are open for business and visitors are down to 7,000 (from 100,000 at peak times in the past). All are asked to sign an optional "Oath for a Better Boracay" that pledges proper trash disposal, protection of wildlife and the natural habitat, refraining from smoking and drinking on the beach and recruiting fellow travellers to do the same. Single-use plastics are now banned, while food vendors, furniture, massages, performers, and open fires are no longer permitted on the beach. Businesses have been pushed further back

from the beach, banned from a 30-metre zone above the highest tideline, while also needing to be six metres from the centre of the road.

The restoration and upgrading of Boracay's infrastructure is ongoing, including the laying of new pipes, storm drains, cable and phone lines, the installation of electrical posts, and the re-concreting and widening of roads.

There are however reports from various news sources, including *The Straits Times*, that piles of rubbish can still be seen dotted around the island.

The shutdown has put a great strain on both locals and businesses in Boracay. Only those that did not rely purely on tourism stayed open, like hardware and construction suppliers, banks and markets. Some businesses were closed by decree; others are now trying to rebuild their custom. No income for six months meant that the many residents working in tourism became unemployed or were forced to work in low-paying jobs.

Nenette Graf, owner and manager of resorts and watersports schools in the area was one local able to keep her businesses afloat. "We are proud to announce that we are kiting and windsurfing again," she says. "But sadly, no [watersports]

school can operate a business because all the centres are inside the 30-metre beach encroachment [zone]. The government issued notices of violations and demolitions. Aside from demolishing our buildings, we also have to comply with tedious requirements."

There is new paperwork to fill in, expensive sewage treatment facilities for hospitality establishments with over 50 rooms to be constructed, and a pollution control officer to be employed before being accredited by the Department of Tourism.

"I am hoping to open Greenyard [Inn] soon and more centres will be back in business in December," says Graf.

Still, Graf and others are optimistic that the cleanup will help restore Boracay's former beauty. Previously, before it became known as a party island, tourists went simply to relax or enjoy watersports like diving, parasailing and kiting. Mövenpick Resort & Spa Boracay told *Action Asia* there has been "high demand from guests", while Graf appreciates another new rule, keeping sailboats off the beach during sunset – "the result of which is beautiful", she says. – Mavis Au-Yeung

