CARTOONIST Nigel Sutherland has had a lifelong love affair with islands — and is now dedicated to seducing others with the two closest to his heart. The 56-year-old moved from his childhood home on the Isle of Thanet in Kent to Bute, where he fell in love with Lucy Ramos — who'd moved there from HER native Philippines 10 years ago. And although the Clyde Estuary couldn't be more different than the Pacific, the couple (left) have joined forces to encourage holidaymakers to visit both. Here, Nigel tells KAY COX about the charms of the two destinations . . .

Butey AND THE East

HOW ROTHESAY AND THE PHILIPPINES BOTH CHARM

NIGEL'S first visit to the Philippines was "a real eye-opener" — and not because he was there to meet Lucy's family.

Similarities with Bute are limited to island boundaries, palm trees and a chance of spotting an Attenborough — although it's likely to be the more common David variety of the species among exotic animals.

Nigel explains: "Lucy goes home once a year to see her family so I went too. Wow. What an eye-opener.

"Walking out of the airport into the heat and bustling throng of expectant people, amidst a massive traffic jam — the air filled with the sound of car horns and excited voices — it felt like walking onto a James Bond film set!"

That was Manila, the usual entry-point to a country made up of 7,107 islands, home to 90 million people.

That's a bit like landing in London's Piccadilly Circus — centre of the capital of a country of 61 million people spread over several islands covering 93,638 square miles.

Spirit

Nigel says: "Manila is vast, very densely populated, and the contrasts can be pronounced. Fabulous hotels, skyscrapers and shopping malls with lively bars and restaurants can be just a short ride from slum shanty-towns, with families living in poverty."

So, a lot like London, then.

Except Nigel said: "I was struck by the spirit and pride of the people. There is a strong work ethic, and their friendliness, and politeness I found humbling. The fact that nearly everyone speaks English is a boon."

All the same, a few days there were enough excitement for the adopted Rothesay boy.

He and Lucy tried to see as many other islands as possible.

"It was the variety that appealed to me," Nigel says. "The Philippines Tourist Board describes the country as an archipelago of unique and delightful discoveries, and it's true.

"You can go from a high-rise hotel in manic Manila to a chalet on the beach on another island without another soul in sight. Some holiday hotspots have bars, restaurants and nightlife along with watersports

"There's some of the best diving in the world because of the diversity of marine life and the underwater landscape.

"And you can get around easily, airlines work like air-buses."

He enthuses: "There are physical wonders, like the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, or Taal Volcano, the world's smallest active one, on Luzon. It sits inside a lake, then the volcano itself has a lake inside its crater.

"The Chocolate Hills of Bohol are another spellbinding sight — they're usually lush and green but at certain times of the year they look brown, just like dollops of molten chocolate.

"Man-made wonders include the ancient rice-terraces of Banaue, Luzon, where huge hillsides are cut into steps. Many consider this to be the eighth wonder of the world.

"And there are animal wonders — 600 colourful bird species and native species like the Philippine Tarsier. It's the world's smallest primate and is under threat so found mainly in conservation areas on Bohol."

Then there's always a white sandy beach to escape to.

Nigel adds: "The most perfect was the imaginatively named White Beach in Boracay — complete with a sign proclaiming it to be the best tropical beach in the world."

In bigger places, the preferred mode of transport is a "jeepney" — part bus, part armoured vehicle, part messenger from God.

"There are thousands — brightly painted and covered with religious slogans," said Nigel. "In smaller places, they use tricycles, which are really motorbikes with a kind of sidecar driven by young lads.

"They're not always comfortable but they don't cost a lot, and the lads will wait for you all day long."

But, like Rothesay, it was the friendly people and timewarp effect that made the biggest impression. There is an innocence and simplicity in the smaller islands that matches Bute.

Nigel says: "They had such pride in showing their country. There is an enthusiasm to promote themselves as a tourist destination, even though that's a relatively new idea."

Like Thailand without the ping-pong bar sex tricks.

An enthusiast by nature, Nigel was whirled into a dizzy spin by the scope and possibilities of the place.

Potential

His eagerness sparked a flame in Lucy, who turned the trip she gave Nigel into a tourist itinerary.

Nigel says: "The Philippines are just a hop away from holiday spots like Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia, but full of untapped potential.

"I almost felt as if I wanted to become an evangelist for Filipinos!

"Lucy designed our tours based on her local knowledge. I do the website and marketing.

"We've received accreditation from the UK's Travel Trust Association. Most importantly, we gained the support of the Philippines Department of Tourism in London."

With everything in place, they are all set to fulfil the Eastern promise.

HIKE IT: Luzon Steps (left) and Jeepney (above)

STRIKE IT LUCKY: Beaches are fab

THE PHILIPPINES

SIZE: 115,831sq miles
POPULATION: 90 million
CURRENCY: Peso
LANGUAGE: Filipino, English
ECONOMY: Agriculture, mining, cash sent from Filipinos abroad
AVG TEMP: 25˚C min/32˚C max
AVG RAINFALL: 2,500mm

TRIKE IT: Nigel and Lucy travel in style

LIKE IT AND LUMP IT: Chocolate Hills, Bohol

>GETTING THERE

NIGEL and Lucy offer 13 nights — three in Manila, one in Tagaytay, six in Puerto Galera and three back in Manila — from £899 plus flights, based on two people sharing. Includes accommodation, land and ferry transfers, breakfast, excursions and tour guide. Call 0141 416 6009 or see www.philippinetrails.com