



Philippines: The islands less travelled

Active volcanoes and tales of political corruption have put many tourists off the Philippine archipelago. Michelle Jana Chan finds out what they're missing.

Last Updated: 5:26PM GMT 18 Feb 2008



Manila, the often overlooked capital

There are more than 7,000 tropical islands in the archipelago of the Philippines, with idyllic palm-fringed beaches and coral reefs teeming with fascinating wildlife - as well as classically beautiful rice-terraces, crumbling colonial towns and lively fiestas throughout the year.

Yet almost all have managed to slip off the tourism radar over the past few years. Why?

Active volcanoes, tales of political corruption and isolated terrorist activity have all helped darken the image of the country as a safe holiday destination. Yet the Foreign & Commonwealth Office travel advisory for the Philippines is no more cautious than that for many other more popular destinations - and that is as it should be.

When I visited, the military called an informal ceasefire with Marxist and Muslim rebels because of - wait for it - a boxing match. During the fight, shown live on television from Las Vegas and starring the Filipino golden boy Manny Pacquiao, not a shot was fired. That gave me a sense of the country's priorities.

Remnants of past Filipino battles are plentiful. I landed in the capital, Manila, which is littered with the megalomaniacal mistakes of the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos - gigantic, dysfunctional buildings that stand empty and are little more than talking pieces for tourists, of which there are admittedly few.

The city also has 400-year-old churches, courtesy of the Spanish occupation; a baroque Spanish fort with cannons pointing towards the sea; and a Chinese cemetery, whose mausoleums are as big as houses - air-conditioned and with full-time maids.

I was advised that, if I wanted to behave less like a tourist and more like a local, I should go "mallng" in one of the dozens of shopping complexes. Sitting at a noodle bar in the Glorietta Mall, I watched women meeting to



have manicures at cheap nail bars, then drinking mango smoothies together before window-shopping until the doors shut.

On Saturday nights, Catholic masses are held in the malls so that shoppers need not interrupt their purchasing to attend church.

Shopping malls are just one legacy of the Americans, who governed the Philippines for nearly half of the 20th century. Another is the fleet of old American army Jeeps, now brightly painted and operating as sturdy public buses.

And what better illustration of the indomitable Filipino spirit: take a relic of war, paint it a rainbow of colours, add some shiny chrome fixtures, hang a crucifix to the rear-view mirror - and away you go.

Banaue

I drove north out of Manila, away from the malls and burger joints, towards the mountainous Cordillera. Fields of papaya, sweet potato and sugarcane filled the landscape, growing twice as high as any I had seen elsewhere.

My guide told me that since the massive eruption of Mount Pinatubo in June 1991 farmers have benefited from fertile ash in the soil, giving rise to record-breaking harvests.

We climbed slowly into the lush, terraced hills. Grains of rice had been arranged to dry on the tarmac road after a vicious typhoon had swept through the area the week before, drenching the crops.

Local people were clearing rockfalls with shovels and pickaxes, and a shrine of flowers had been laid to a family of 10 whose roadside home had been swept away in a landslide just a few days earlier. It was a rather sombre start to my trip.

The next day, with the sun shining brightly, the lime-green mountains rose out of the mist. The dramatic rice terraces at Banaue are 2,000 years old and the crowning achievement of the indigenous Ifugao people, known for their beguiling chanting (called hudhud) of ancient epic tales, and the engineering feat of hand-cutting tiers into the steep mountains.

Both their oral tradition and the iconic landscape are on the Unesco World Heritage List.

But the strongest reason to journey here is the unaffected warmth of the people; this is South-East Asia as you rarely see it. I set off on foot for the village of Banga-an, walking along the ridges of the rice terraces, banked by dry-stone walls.

Along the trails I met children of all ages: young girls carrying baby brothers; others with baskets of pumpkins and peppers to sell at the market; some in school uniform, shyly casting their eyes down. Maricelle, a teacher who walked six miles a day to work, accompanied me for a while. When I passed her school later that afternoon, she had her class recite the 12-times tables in English to me.



At Banga-an, women were winnowing bundles of rice, flipping up flat baskets to dispose of the chaff, while others milled the grain in giant, stone pestles. Tiny children played tiddlywinks with flattened 7 Up bottle tops, stopping to wave and practise their English - another legacy of the Americans. I spent an hour chatting to the young mothers as they went about their chores, before they spontaneously invited me to lunch.

We shared black and white glutinous rice, flavoured with ginger and calamansi (a small lime), followed by the fruit of a rattan tree, which looks like a pine cone and tastes like a bitter lychee. When I thanked them, they shook their heads in embarrassment. One of them, called Marites, told me: "This meal is a gift from God."

Afterwards, she showed me inside her home, a thatched hut on stilts. Her family of 11 lived together in this tiny space, with a cubby hole above to store the stooks of rice. I peered inside, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the windowless darkness before I could make out the shine of the polished wood, the tidy arrangement of chicken eggs and the row of five carved bul-ol statues, or rice-gods, which guard their harvest. Marites smiled at me. "Next time, you must stay," she said.

Palawan

As we flew south from Manila I was mesmerised by the view of Palawan, known for its karstic island outcrops and rich marine life. It was as though someone had plucked the florets from a giant broccoli and thrust them stem-first into the Sulu Sea. As we came into land, I made out craggy limestone cliffs, clad in spindly trees, with flying buttress-like rock formations.

I was staying at El Nido on the northern tip of the island, with resorts so exclusive they have their own airstrip. The Lagen Resort has villas in the forest, on the beach or on stilts over water, but it is all rather manicured and I preferred the simple wood-and-thatch rooms at the lesser, four-star Miniloc.

It is the perfect place to choose your Desert Island Discs - or to sit at the bar watching swiftlets swooping over sunbeds, catching flies on the wing while emitting their soft pipsqueak call. It is for these tiny creatures that this area is named. Their nests (nidos in Spanish) are the key ingredient in bird's nest soup, and can fetch £1,500 per kg (2.2lb).

Jacques Cousteau said that Palawan was the most beautiful place he had ever explored, so it is hardly surprising that tourists spend most of their time underwater. For divers, there are spectacular drop-offs, limestone caves and whole fleets of wrecks to seek out.

Even snorkellers are spoilt. In the shallow, coral gardens of the house reef can be found large schools of jacks, each as big as a placemat, with ballooning shoals of ox-eyed scad and startlingly oversized Napoleon wrasse.

In the lagoons, reached by swimming underwater through tiny channels, I came across baby reef sharks patrolling in the dark shadows and almost bumped into needlefish hovering at the surface.

Boracay

Probably the Philippines' best-known destination - worshipped by backpackers, diving students and, more recently, South Korean honeymooners - Boracay's White Beach regularly features among the world's top 10.



Two and a half miles of fine white sand, which looks more like icing sugar and feels more like cotton wool, is fringed by a mere ripple of turquoise.

Mind you, Boracay is no desert island.

It has five-star establishments such as the luxurious Discovery Shores, and a Shangri-La due to open in the early autumn.

Set back from the waterfront are dozens of low-rise restaurants, bars and cafés serving every cuisine, from Greek to Mexican, Italian to Chinese. Favourites along this stretch include Calypso - a dive centre by day, buzzing sports bar by night; Summer Place, which draws the bright young things for sundowners; and Fridays hotel at the northern end of the beach, with the softest sand and the best views of the Panay hills.

Strong winds on the other side of the island have made Boracay a hub for kitesurfing, with excellent conditions for sailing, parasailing and windsurfing too. There is an 18-hole golf course as well as well-regarded dive centres offering boat trips to nearby reefs and advanced-level certification.

Throughout the day, massage therapists wander along the beach, offering hilot treatments, the ancient Filipino massage. For all its unchecked development, Boracay still reminds me of Thailand before The Beach was even conceived.

Bohol

I flew into Cebu, smack in the middle of the Philippines, to travel by boat to Bohol, a sleepy, tropical island across the Camotes Sea. It was almost midnight when I boarded the ferry, which looked more like a motorised banana boat than a hydrofoil.

As we chugged out into the inky darkness, The Lord's Prayer flashed on to the television screens, followed immediately by brief emergency instructions. I instinctively looked for the nearest lifejacket and then joined in as the entire cabin sang along to two hours of karaoke. The journey captured perfectly the Filipino joie de vivre - and fatalism.

My taxi-driver enthusiastically explained his island to me. "We are the religious heartbeat of the Philippines," he said, smiling in his rear-view mirror. "My wife goes to church six times a week, so we are definitely going to Heaven." "How about you?" I asked.

"She goes for me," he said, laughing.

He went on to tell me that all taxi-drivers must have religious texts painted upon their vehicles. As we overtook on a bend, I read the message in his: "Prepare to meet thy God." I went to church the next day to discover that my taxi-driver was right about wives going for their husbands.

The congregation was mostly women, wearing white veils over their heads and muttering quietly as they ran their fingers over rosary beads. It was standing room only and nobody seemed restless as they sang their way fluently through the liturgy without a hymn book in sight.



As well as Catholicism, the Spanish left behind some inspired religious architecture: the churches are built with pitted bricks, made of coral, and plastered with a mixture of lime, sand and egg white. Shells are pressed into the walls for decoration.

Yet for all its godliness, Bohol moves to a typically relaxed island beat: fishermen seemed to spend more time fixing their nets than out at sea; the museums were all closed during advertised opening hours; and at every restaurant, someone invariably pulled out a guitar.

I took in the island's highlights, driving to the oddly shaped Chocolate Hills, so named because they resemble Hershey's Kisses candy. I visited a butterfly conservation centre and saw cages of sad, slothful tarsier monkeys, the world's tiniest primate.

But as with most of the islands in the Philippines, what tourists really come here for is the underwater treasures. The reefs are charged with some of nature's most humbling creatures, from fearsome hammerheads to giant, but gentle, whale sharks.

The secret to the Philippines is far beyond the headlines - it's in what lies beneath.