

COVER STORY

Fun in the

# Philippines

Historic charm, island life and outdoor pursuits – the Philippines has every base covered.

STORY | TONI KRASICKI

**W**hen you've visited the Philippines, you can't help but come away with the knowledge that you've just found the ideal holiday destination.

The country is truly blessed: welcoming, happy-go-lucky people, indescribable natural beauty and as a result of 350 years of Spanish rule – colourful fiestas and impressive Spanish-Filipino colonial architecture. A South-East Asian country sitting to the north of Borneo and Indonesia's Sulawesi, the Philippines is made up of over 7000 islands and is a cultural fusion of mega-malls, fast-food chains and the slow-paced lifestyle that still exists outside the metropolises. Thanks to 50 years of American occupation up until WWII, English is one of the official languages alongside Tagalog.

An abundance of churches across the country makes the Philippines easily recognisable as the most predominantly Christian country in all of Asia, with approximately 80 per cent of the population Christian (mostly Roman Catholic). With names such as 'Jesus' and 'Gift of God' splayed across windscreens of the colourful jeepneys (taxis) that ply the city streets, it's also hard to miss how seriously the locals take their religion.

The country's capital and major hub, Manila, is a chaotic blend of old and new and, like any developing world city, continues to grow. Glitzy malls and shiny high-rise buildings of the new millennium share the same sidewalk as the city's layered history.

The oldest district and true historic heart of the city is the walled city of Intramuros. Founded by the Spanish in 1571, the stone citadel is almost totally surrounded by massive stone walls which have withstood successive waves of colonial invaders and natural disasters. Explore Fort Santiago's historic park including Rizal's Shrine and walk parts of the restored walls.

Wander or take a kalesa (horse and cart) through the cobbled streets past colonial houses and plazas, dropping into one of the myriad of museums. Be sure to stop by the Minor Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (Manila Cathedral), and San Agustin Church, which is said to be the oldest standing church in the Philippines.

For a taste of quirky Manila and for those with a footwear fetish, you can't bypass the Marikina Shoe Museum in the heart of Manila's shoemaking district. The Philippines' controversial former First Lady, Imelda Marcos, is the star of the show with 749 pairs of her footwear collection on display. There's also a pair of shoes from each president of the Philippines in chronological order, and from celebrities and political figures.

#### Adventure seekers

The Philippines offers far more than the perfect beach, as the diversity of terrain makes for an assortment of accessible adventures. One day you can be trekking to the top of an active volcano in Luzon and the next be meandering through the rice terraces in Banaue. And why wouldn't you? Although having recently erupted in 2006, Mt Mayon volcano is classified as the world's most perfectly symmetrical cone, and the rice terraces in the lush Cordillera mountain range have been around for thousands of years and many villages still hold on to traditions. →

Caving, or spelunking, is big business with over 1500 caves to explore across the country. Sagan, in northern Luzon, is home to the mysterious 'hanging coffins' and has at least 60 caves to explore. Grab a good headlamp and delve in to the Burial Cave to discover the incredible rock formations in the Sumaging Cave. Be prepared to get wet as there's water flowing through and deep pools of water if you'd like a swim.

Undeniably, many of the activities are centred on the islands and their surrounding waters. There is kite-surfing, windsurfing, kayaking, world-class dive sites, and even an opportunity to get up close and personal with the gentle giants of the ocean, the mighty whale sharks of Donsol. You'll be surprised at the endless opportunities for adventure.

Although it's not the first place that comes to mind as a surfing destination for Australians, with several well-known breaks, there's a surf spot suitable for all levels. Having the most consistent breaks has crowned Siargao Island as the surfing capital of the Philippines. Home of the famed Cloud 9 wave and other popular breaks, the best months for surf are from August to November.

### Island time

You don't have to travel far in a country comprising of 7000 islands to find a place to put your feet up, enjoy fresh coconut water and feel the soothing ocean breeze.

### Boracay

A popular island destination for both Filipinos and international travellers is award-winning Boracay. *Travel + Leisure* magazine's 2012 best island winner, Boracay is a gem. Undoubtedly the biggest drawcard and main tourist beach is White Beach. The four kilometre stretch of blissful powdery white sand is a magnet for beach bums who love to people watch and enjoy a lively nightlife. But if it's tranquillity that you're after, there are another nine beaches to choose from that are ideal for snorkelling and, depending on the time of year, for kite-surfing and windsurfing.

### Palawan

If you are up for a little more adventure, rugged and rustic far-flung Palawan is the Philippines' last frontier. After entering via the gateway city of Puerto Princesa, most visitors head north to the World Heritage listed Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park. One of the few rivers in the world that flows out into the sea from an underground source, the river measures up to 8.2 kilometres long and some of it is accessible by guided boat trips. The cave is a thrilling five kilometre walk through jungle from the sublime Sabang beach.

Further north, the stunning Bacuit Archipelago's monolithic peaks rising from the ocean can be compared with Thailand's Krabi or Vietnam's Halong Bay, minus the tourists. El Nido is the jumping off point for island-hopping tours that are a great way to visit the abundant coves, caves and small islands in the area. Explore lagoons by kayak, or snorkel or dive any of the beautiful unspoilt coral reefs and if you have time and fancy a *Survivor* experience, do an overnight island-hopping excursion where you get to camp on a deserted island.

### Busuanga Island

To swim in the cleanest lake in the country, head to Coron on Busuanga Island. It's hard to fathom that the waters in Kayangan Lake can be any clearer than the crystalline depths of the ocean where you leave the Bangka (boat) that you arrive on. Put on snorkelling gear and marvel at the endless visibility. For solitude and long white sandy beaches, Banana Island has some amazing snorkelling just a few metres from shore with plenty of Pacific giant clams to keep you enthralled. ●●●



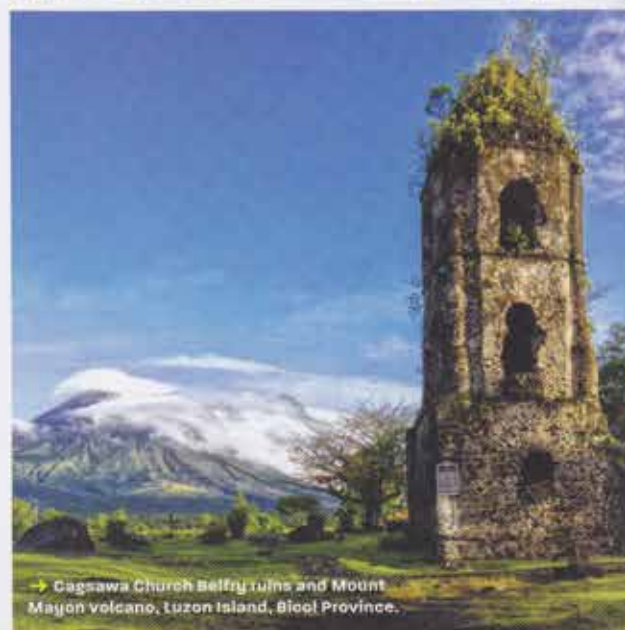
→ Palawan, Sabang Town, Subterranean River National Park, entrance to Riverine Cave—longest navigable river traversed tunnel in the world.

## Getting there

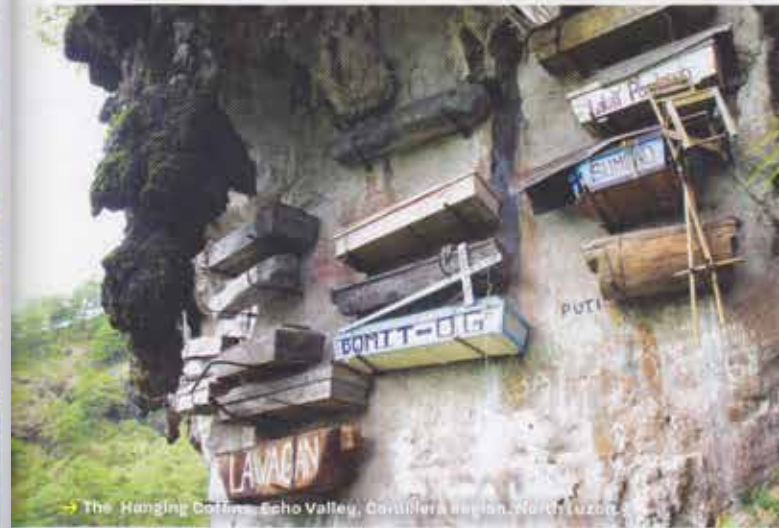
- Singapore Airlines flies via Singapore to Manila and Cebu City.
- Cathay Pacific flies via Hong Kong to Manila and Cebu City.
- Malaysia Airlines flies via Kuala Lumpur to Manila.
- Jetstar and Tiger Airways fly to Manila with stopovers in Singapore.
- Philippine Airlines flies from Perth to Manila via Darwin.



Chocolate Hills, Bohol Province. Geological formation of more than 1200 hills over an area of more than 50 square kilometres.



→ Cagsawa Church Belfry ruins and Mount Mayon volcano, Luzon Island, Ilocos Province.



→ The Hanging Coffins, Echo Valley, Cavillera region, North Luzon.



→ Boat in the El Nido Islands.

## Our top 3



→ Local cuisine available at SM Mall, Manila.

### Shop 'til you drop

Filipinos simply love to shop! No wonder Manila has become one of the best destinations in Asia for shoppers. Whether you're looking for local handicrafts or a whole new wardrobe, visit any mega-mall in the big cities such as Manila and Cebu City and you'll be hard pressed not to find something to take home. Like any Asian city, all budgets are catered for, from the inexpensive street markets and bazaars to the gigantic SM Mall of Asia, touted as one of the biggest malls in the world.



→ The Tarsier's long fingers are tipped with nails for grip.

### Tarsiers of Bohol

The cute bright-eyed Tarsier looks like a friendly gremlin and is small enough to sit easily in the palm of your hand. Endemic to the island of Bohol, they're a protected species and a visit to the Philippine Tarsier and Wildlife Sanctuary will give you an up close and personal experience with these critters in their natural habitat.



→ Coral reefs will capture divers' imaginations.

### What lies beneath

One of the most diverse diving regions in the world, the Philippines has it all. From coral reefs to wrecks, the variety will keep the most jaded divers content. Diving is never too far away from the capital with the wrecks of Subic Bay to the north and the reefs of Anilao to the south just two hours away. Believe your guide's advice that you'll only need a short wetsuit, water temperatures just keep on rising the deeper you go. Coron Bay wins hands down for the place for wreck diving as it's studded with Japanese shipwrecks that were sunk during WWII.