

Welcome to the Philippines

The Philippines is defined by its emerald rice fields, teeming megacities, graffiti-splashed jeepneys, smouldering volcanoes, bug-eyed tarsiers, fuzzy water buffalo and smiling, happy-go-lucky people.

A Land Apart

The Philippines is a land apart from mainland Southeast Asia – not only geographically but also spiritually and culturally. The country's overwhelming Catholicism, the result of 350 years of Spanish rule, is its most obvious enigma. Vestiges of the Spanish era include exuberant town fiestas and centuries-old churches. Malls, fast-food chains and widespread spoken English betray the influence of Spain's colonial successor, the Americans. Yet, despite these outside influences, the country remains its own unique entity. The people are, simply, Filipinos – and proud of it. Welcoming, warm and relentlessly upbeat, it is they who captivate and ultimately ensnare visitors.

Island-Hopping Paradise

With thousands of tropical islands to choose from, the Philippines is a beach bum's delight. There's an island to suit every taste, from marooned slicks of sand in the middle of the ocean, to volcanic fantasy-scapes concealing hidden lagoons and sprawling mega-islands. Sun worshippers and divers should head straight to the Visayas, where island-hopping opportunities abound. More adventurous travellers can pitch a tent on a deserted stretch of coastline in Palawan and play solo *Survivor* for a few days.

Life in the Tropics

We've all had it happen: your trip to paradise is ruined by monsoon rain. Rather than let the weather defeat them, in the Philippines travellers can embrace meteorological uncertainty and use it as an excuse to go with the flow. This is a place to dispense with advance bookings and, when the going gets rough (or wet), migrate to fairer climes. Domestic travel is cheap and fun, and is best done spontaneously. Do your homework too – Palawan and the western seaboard are pretty darned wet from July to September, so go east during this time (unless there's a typhoon brewing).

The Great Outdoors

The Philippines is justifiably famous for its beaches, but sporty types need not feel left out. While surfers are just catching on to the tasty (if fickle) waves that form on both coasts, divers have long been enamoured of the country's underwater charms. Northern Palawan is perfect for sea kayakers, and Boracay and Pagudpud (North Luzon) are world-class kiteboarding destinations. Back on terra firma, trekking can be done just about anywhere, while mountain-bike and canyoneering tours are gaining popularity. And the Philippines is also, unofficially, the zipline capital of the world.



Why I Love the Philippines

By Greg Bloom, Writer

With 7000 tropical islands on my doorstep, I find the Philippines easy to love. But as much as I like perfect beaches, it's subtler things that keep me planted here. It's those long roof-top jeepney rides through the mountains of North Luzon, followed by a round of gin shots with indigenous elders in the *da-pay* (meeting area). It's that fresh-fish lunch on an interminable *bangka* journey through Palawan. It's a frosty San Miguel at sundown. It's friends with names like Bing and Bong, and phrases like 'comfort room'. It's – dare I say it – karaoke. Now that's love.

For more about our writers, see p480



Around Manila

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Antonio's (p106)
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- ➔ Feliza Taverna y Café (p108)
- ➔ Red Bus (p106)
- ➔ Aling Taleng's Halo Halo (p111)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Sonya's Garden (p105)
- ➔ Alvin & Angie Mt Pinatubo Guesthouse (p118)
- ➔ Lilom Resort & Gallery Cafe (p110)
- ➔ Paradores del Castillo (p108)
- ➔ Tagaytay Garden Mountain Breeze (p104)

Why Go?

If you've spent a bit of time in Manila, you're probably clawing to get out to the countryside for some fresh air and relaxation – as many locals and expats do on weekends. Surprisingly, you don't need to go too far to leave the city and most of its traffic behind.

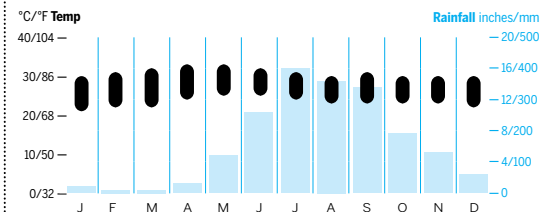
South of Manila, the volcanic lake below hilltop Tagaytay is a highlight and there are some sea- and townscapes worth visiting, notably Anilao Peninsula and Taal.

Head north and you'll find the most notorious volcano of them all, Mt Pinatubo, in the underrated Zambales Mountains. The developing free port of Subic Bay offers a surprisingly diverse range of activities from diving to hiking, and the Bataan Peninsula is a fascinating historic site.

Though it's possible to do day trips, getting in and out of Manila can take hours, so it makes sense to do overnight stays.

When to Go

Manila



Dec–Feb

The coolest months are particularly welcome.

May

Local peaks become places of refuge in the height of the hot season.

Aug–Oct

Some surf on the Zambales Coast within range of Subic.



Around Manila Highlights

- 1 Mt Pinatubo** (p118)
Rising early for the dramatic climb up the caldera of this brooding active volcano.
- 2 Tagaytay** (p103) Enjoying stellar views of Taal Volcano and sumptuous cuisine in this laid-back hilltop town.
- 3 Corregidor** (p103)
Immersing yourself in WWII history on a day trip from Manila.
- 4 Pagsanjan** (p110)
Paddling along the heart of darkness up the Pagsanjan River to Pagsanjan Falls.
- 5 Subic Bay** (p115) Going to extremes amid the virgin forests and sunken wrecks in and around Subic Bay.
- 6 Anilao** (p109) Spending a weekend diving in the best conditions close to the capital.
- 7 Taal** (p107) Wandering the relaxed streets of Taal, lined with heritage ancestral houses.



Boracay & Western Visayas

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Best Places to Eat

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- Lab-as Seafood Restaurant (p267)
- JD&G Italian Food (p279)
- Tyrol (p254)

Best Places to Stay

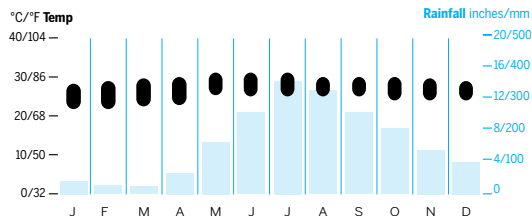
- Lind (p225)
- Cabugan Adventure Resort (p249)
- Kookoo's Nest (p263)
- Coco Grove Beach Resort (p274)
- Aglicay Beach Resort (p277)

Why Go?

Western Visayas tends to attract three types of visitors. The most common is the holidaymaker drawn by Boracay's gorgeous White Beach and the fiesta hubbub that surrounds it: a collection of resorts, restaurants, bars, masseuses and tour touts lined up along one great stretch of sand. And as the latest tour group will attest, it's the perfect place for that selfie in the waves. Next comes the diver drawn to world-class undersea destinations, from Romblon Island in the north to Dauin and Apo Island in the south. Finally there's the off-the-beaten-track traveller braving endless miles of roadside shacks to discover the region's discrete rewards, including mountain trekking and cave exploration, pockets of vibrant nightlife in cities such as Iloilo, some fascinating architectural history, alluring beach resorts and oases of fine food. If you have the endurance to hit them all, pack your compass, snorkel, ear plugs and motion-sickness tablets.

When to Go

Bacolod



Dec–Apr
Best diving conditions.

Jun–Oct
Tropical storms and occasional typhoons make this the off-season for a reason.

Oct–Jun
High tourist season. Bring your wallet to Boracay.

BORACAY

☑ 036 / POP 30,100

While only 7km tall and at its bikini line 500m wide, tiny Boracay is the Philippines' top tourist draw, fuelled by explosive growth and a tsunami of hype. The centre of the action is dreamy White Beach, a 4km, postcard-perfect stretch of sand lined from one end to the other with hotels, restaurants, bars and dive shops several blocks deep. The beach path is typically awash with visitors, including large groups of package tourists from across Asia – most commonly Korea, Taiwan and China. The ocean is full of romantic *paraws* (an outrigger sailboat) giving rides; colourful parasails fill the air. After perfect sunsets, live music breaks out, and fire dancers twirl their batons. The party goes on all night. This can be great fun and easily occupy your entire visit. Grab that Weng Weng cocktail, sink into your waterfront beanbag chair and just marvel at the spectacle of it all.

👁 Sights

Believe it or not, Boracay has other beaches that are almost as pretty as White Beach, if not quite so endless. A scenic walk around the headland at the island's north end brings you to lovely and secluded **Diniwid Beach**, where you'll find excellent accommodation and dining. On the north tip of the island, pretty **Puka Beach** is popular in the off-season and has a few eateries. Some of the best *puka* jewellery (popular necklaces, anklets and bracelets made from the tiny shells of the cone snail) is found in the handicraft stalls here. Other northern beaches are well off the package-tourist radar and nearly deserted. The formerly hard-to-reach **Ilig-Iligan Beach**, in the northeast, looks on to a couple of scenic limestone islets that are snorkelling distance from shore. However, much of it is now essentially property of the Newcoast development.

★ White Beach

BEACH

(Map p227) With its glorious, powdered-sugar sand, White Beach is the centre of the action in Boracay and the only sight most visitors ever see. Beach locations are defined relative to three former boat stations, where bangkas from Caticlan used to arrive. The area south of Station 3, known as Angol, contains most of the budget accommodation, including a few remnants of Old Boracay.

Mt Luho View Deck

VIEWPOINT

(Lapus-Lapus Rd; P120) Looming high above the east coast, this viewpoint has stunning views across the island, though the steps up were designed for giants. The lush cross-country road linking it with the main road is quite a contrast to the coast.

🏃 Activities

You can try your hand at a broad range of outdoor activities. Annoyingly, touts will tout these (Zorbs? 4WDs? Helmet dives? Banana boats?) in your face, every few metres along White Beach. Daily games of football, volleyball and ultimate Frisbee kick off late afternoon on White Beach. Yoga classes are common. For more far-flung adventures, consider a tour to Antique Province or take a *bangka* to Romblon Province.

Sailing

Sunset *paraw* (traditional outrigger sailboat) trips are a quintessential Boracay experience. Trips start at P800 per hour for up to five or six passengers, and you can usually haggle. Boats depart from Station 1 and 3 in season (October to June), and from Bulabog Beach in the off-season (June to October). D'Boracay Sailing offers a much more personalised and luxurious experience.

D'Boracay Sailing

BOATING

(☎ 0906 308 8614; www.boracay-sailing.com) MAHAL, a 13m luxury catamaran, is the passion project of Lilyan and Steve, a Chinese-American couple who run sunset cruises, including wine, beer and canapes (\$100 per person). They can also organise half- and full-day trips (US\$170/245 per person) or customise overnights for groups of four. Reserve online.

Red Pirates

BOATING

(Map p226; Station 3, White Beach; per boat P800) Run out of Red Pirates (p231) bar, their supersized *paraw* (12-person capacity) does the standard cruises off White Beach, plus longer trips to secret spots around northern Panay and Carabao Island.

Diving & Snorkelling

Diving around Boracay pales in comparison with more renowned hotspots such as Puerto Galera, but there are some OK spots around. **Yapak**, off the northern tip, is a sheer soft-coral-covered wall running from 30m to 65m. Big-fish lovers adore this spot, though depth, currents and surface chop restrict it to advanced divers. There are also



Cebu & Eastern Visayas

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Best Places to Eat

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- Cafe Laguna (p293)
- Mimay's Seafood House (p333)
- Canto Fresco (p331)
- Anzani (p294)
- MJ Square (p305)

Best Places to Stay

- La Luna Beach Resort (p347)
- Tepanee Beach Resort (p303)
- Yellow Doors Hostel (p330)
- The Henry (p292)
- Sogod Bay Scuba Resort (p336)

Why Go?

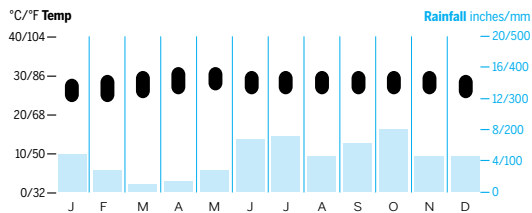
Home to dazzling beaches and astonishing coral walls, the world's smallest mammal and its biggest fish, eastern Visayas are the aqua heart of an island nation. This region's natural appeal is utterly compelling – the Chocolate Hills of Bohol and shimmering millions of sardines of Moalboal, waves and caves of Samar and waterfalls and rice terraces of Biliran.

Cebu City has a certain cosmopolitan allure, but elsewhere the region's towns are eminently forgettable. Instead, make time to explore distant corners: beach-blessed Bantayan Island, dive-mecca Malapascua, surf-blessed Calicoan and the unique pink-sand bays of remote Sila.

Twin disasters (Typhoon Yolanda and the Bohol earthquake) battered eastern Visayas in 2013 but today all areas are very much welcoming travellers again. And with new flight routes and expanded fastcraft connections there's no better time to visit this fascinating, underexplored region.

When to Go

Cebu



Jul–Sep

Barring a typhoon, Samar and Leyte are dry while most of the country is sopping.

Apr–May

Flat waters for divers in Bohol, Cebu and Southern Leyte.

Jan

The coolest month, plus there's the Sinulog Festival in Cebu.



Cebu & Eastern Visayas Highlights

- 1 Bohol** (p314) Taking in teeny tarsiers, rolling Chocolate Hills, cove beaches and reefs teeming with fish.
- 2 Malapascua Island** (p301) Experiencing close encounters of the thresher-shark kind and offshore islets.
- 3 Moalboal** (p306) Enjoying this freediving heaven, party

town and home to a swirling vortex of sardines.

- 4 Biliran Island** (p338) Saddling up and exploring this emerald isle on two wheels before island-hopping.
- 5 Calicoan Island** (p347) Surfing the country's best surf spot not called Siargao.

- 6 Catbalogan** (p344) Swimming, scrambling and sloggng through the caves of western Samar.

- 7 Cebu City** (p285) Experiencing Cebu City's quixotic appeal, underground clubs and fine restaurants.

- 8 Padre Burgos** (p335) Searching for whale sharks.

On the Road





Manila

02 / POP 12.95 MILLION

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- Van Gogh is Bipolar (p88)
- El Chupacabra (p83)
- Locavore (p87)
- Corner Tree Cafe (p83)

Best Places to Stay

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- Henry Hotel (p74)
- Red Carabao (p74)
- Element Boutique Hotel (p75)
- Hive Hotel (p78)
- Our Melting Pot (p75)

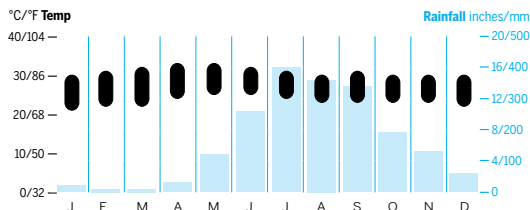
Why Go?

Manila's moniker, the 'Pearl of the Orient', couldn't be more apt – its unappealing shell reveals its jewel only to those resolute enough to pry. No stranger to hardship, the city has endured every disaster humans and nature could throw at it, and yet today the chaotic metropolis thrives as a true Asian megacity. Skyscrapers pierce the hazy sky, mushrooming from the grinding poverty of expansive shanty towns, while gleaming malls foreshadow Manila's brave new air-conditioned world. The congested roads snarl with traffic, but, like the overworked arteries of a sweating giant, they are what keeps this modern metropolis alive.

As well as outstanding sightseeing, visitors who put in the effort will discover its creative soul – from edgy galleries to a lively indie music scene. Combine this with a penchant for speakeasy bars, artisan markets and single-origin coffees, and it's clear to see that Manila is not only one of Asia's most underrated cities, but one of its coolest.

When to Go

Manila



Dec–Feb

The coolest, most pleasant months.

Mar–Apr

Holy Week is no time for packed beach resorts, so spend it in Manila.

Jul–Aug

Some say it rains too much; we say it's the best time to escape the searing sun.



Mindanao

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Best Places to Eat

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- Guerrera (p361)
- Kawayan (p370)
- Panagatan (p354)

Best Places to Stay

- Harana (p369)
- Balai sa Baibai (p360)
- Siargao Island Emerald House (p369)
- Ponce Suites Art Hotel (p374)
- Kalinaw Resort (p369)

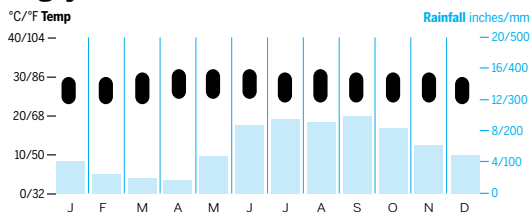
Why Go?

Despite jaw-dropping beaches, surf, rugged mountains and indigenous cultures living much as they have for centuries, Mindanao, with the exception of Siargao and to an extent Camiguin, remains off the tourism industry's radar. Of course, the conflict that has simmered for several generations (and the 2017 declaration of martial law in the region) is largely responsible for this. That's not to say, however, that there isn't development and the woes that go with it – the southern city of Davao is, for example, fairly cosmopolitan.

Though big and bulky, Mindanao's varied ethnographic make-up, competing land claims and highly prized natural resources can make it seem undersized. Since the 1950s Muslims have been outnumbered and currently muster a majority in only five of Mindanao's 21 provinces. Of these five, 14,000 sq km are given over to the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), an area that includes islands stretching towards Malaysia and Indonesia.

When to Go

Cagayan De Oro



Jun–Sep

Driest season on the northern and eastern seaboard, but Davao can see heavy rain.

Sep–Dec

Prime waves at Cloud 9.

Nov–Apr

Dry season, aside from the northern and eastern seaboard, where it's wet to March.

History & Security

Mindanao's history diverged early on from that of the rest of the Philippines because of geography, and more specifically its proximity to centres of Arab influence. Islam was introduced in the Sulu archipelago in the early 1300s, and was soon after brought to Cotabato and the Lanao area. Afterwards, the region was united by the sultanate and most of the population converted to Islam. When the Spaniards arrived in 1527, they were only able to establish outposts in northern Mindanao and Zamboanga.

It was only in the middle of the 19th century that the Spaniards were able to make substantial inroads in Mindanao and assert their sovereignty. The US became the next colonial power in 1898, but its presence in Mindanao wasn't felt for years, and it wasn't until a decade or so later that the province was formally incorporated as an administrative region under the rule of in Manila.

From the beginning, the rights of tribal minority groups and traditional property rights were violated. The peoples of Mindanao were economically and demographically threatened by the influx of Christian Filipinos from the north, who were encouraged by the government to settle in less populated Mindanao. Some argue that the policy simply opened up a sparsely populated region to immigration and created a more diverse ethnic mix. Others claimed it was the occupation and annexation of their homeland, and armed resistance developed in the late 1960s.

Soon after, large multinational agricultural companies entered the region en masse, impacting small-scale farming and traditional ways of life regardless of ethnicity or religion. Less militant groups, as well as the communist New People's Army (NPA), active in Mindanao, argue that the crux of the conflict is not simply the result of Muslim and Christian populations living together, but the consequence of the exploitation of the island's resources without ensuring that the people see the benefits of development.

In 1976 an agreement was struck with one of the rebel groups, the Moro Islamic National Liberation Front (MNLF), establishing the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM); in 1996 the MNLF was legitimised as a political group by Manila. Other groups didn't agree that limited autonomy within a federalised system was adequate (of course, some objected because they weren't considered when divvying up the spoils); as a result a breakaway group, the Moro Islamic

Liberation Front (MILF), was established in 1978. The most radical of the groups was Abu Sayyaf, a small group of former MILF members affiliated with Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, an Indonesia-based organisation.

Successive government regimes have tried to assert their control through different means; Marcos tried through a combination of military action and amnesty offers, but it was talks between Cory Aquino and Nur Misuari, the founder of the MNLF, that finally led to a reduction in violence in the late 1980s. Unfortunately, most of the outstanding issues were never resolved, and in the late 1990s and early 2000s the violence resumed.

When Benigno Aquino III came to power in 2010, his government immediately began to engage in peace talks in Malaysia with the leader of the MILF. However, once again, breakaway groups dissatisfied with negotiations brought more violence from both sides. Aquino resisted calls for war, but thousands of civilians were again displaced as a result of air and ground assaults.

In the summer of 2014 a transitional commission of MILF and Aquino administration members finished drafting the Basic Bangsamoro Law (BBL), which granted some of the autonomy sought for decades by Muslim leaders. Observers responded with cautious optimism; however, Congress failed to ratify it. The Mamasapano Massacre in January 2015, in which 44 Philippine special forces soldiers were killed in a raid to capture a Malaysian bomb maker from a MILF stronghold, buried hopes for a peaceful resolution.

When Rodrigo Duterte, the former mayor of Davao, became president in 2016, he vowed to transform the Philippines into a federalised system. When ISIS-affiliated groups including the Maute, as well as foreign fighters, began operating, a negotiated solution seemed even more distant. In late May 2017 Philippine security forces went to Marawi City to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, the ISIS-designated emir of Southeast Asia. Two months later, much of the city was destroyed, with hundreds killed and thousands evacuated, and parts of the city remained in the control of the militants. Hapilon was not captured. The strength and sophistication of the resistance, including an enormous cache of weapons and money, surprised the Philippine security forces. Duterte declared martial law throughout Mindanao, the first time since the rule of Marcos. It has been extended, with the approval of Congress, until December 2018. **For more on the security situation in the region, see p361.**



Mindoro

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Best Places to Stay

- ▶ Pandan Island Resort (p215)
- ▶ El Galleon Beach Resort (p204)
- ▶ Verde View Villas (p204)
- ▶ Apo Reef Club (p216)
- ▶ Sunset at Aninuan (p206)

Best Hikes

- ▶ Mt Halcon (p210)
- ▶ Mt Iglit-Baco National Park (p214)
- ▶ Sablayan Prison Farm & Rainforest (p215)
- ▶ Talipanan Falls (p200)

Why Go?

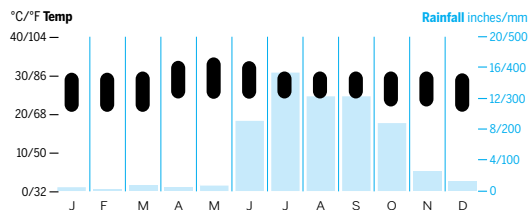
Bisected by a virtually impassable mountain range – aptly named the High Rolling Mountains – rugged Mindoro is part tropical paradise, part provincial backwater. Forming a dramatic backdrop almost everywhere, the mountains separate the island's two provinces: rough and rugged Mindoro Occidental to the west, and more prosperous Mindoro Oriental to the east.

Most visitors head to the dive resorts around Puerto Galera on the north coast, but there is much more to Mindoro. If you prefer remote to resort, venture into Mindoro Occidental, where virtually tourist-free Sablayan, jumping-off point for the pristine dive mecca of Apo Reef, awaits. Improvements to roads are making this once hard-to-reach province more accessible than ever.

Mindoro's south coast has excellent island-hopping, while in the mountainous interior you can hike to remote villages populated by the indigenous Mangyan tribespeople.

When to Go

San José



Apr & May

Rainy season has yet to begin and winds are at their calmest at Apo Reef.

Feb–Apr

The driest months and the best season for climbing Mt Halcon.

Oct & Nov

Another transitional period wind-wise, meaning flat seas for divers.



Mindoro Highlights

1 Apo Reef (p216)

Swimming with turtles, sharks, wrasses and other sea critters at this incredible protected marine park off Sablayan.

2 Puerto Galera (p200)

Exploring the pretty coves, waterfalls and beaches of this resort town, and diving into its underwater wonders.

3 Mt Iglit-Baco National Park (p214)

Observing the headcount of critically endangered *tamaraw* (native buffalo) and visiting Mangyan villages.

4 Sablayan Prison Farm & Rainforest (p215)

Visiting bird-laden rainforests and lakes, led by prisoner-guides.

5 Mt Halcon (p210)

Launching an assault on Mindoro's highest peak – the country's ultimate climb.

6 Malasimbo Music & Arts Festival (p204)

Taking in the Philippines' premier open-air music event in Puerto Galera.



North Luzon

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- Lake Mapanuepe (p123)

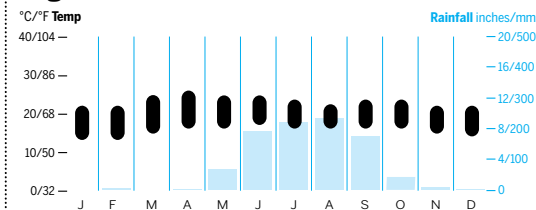
Why Go?

A region that invites intrepid exploration, North Luzon encapsulates a nation in miniature. Surfers race waves onto sunny beaches, where white sands are lapped by teal waters. Machete-carrying mountain tribespeople are quick to smile and quicker to share their rice wine. Impenetrable jungle hides endemic critters. In Spanish colonial cities, sunlight breaks through seashell windows. Far-flung islands with pristine landscapes greet few visitors.

For many travellers, the lure is the emerald rice terraces of the Cordillera, a mountain range that hides hanging coffins and mummies. Trekking is a prime activity, but caving, mountain biking and rafting are other adrenalin-fuelled activities that shape the North Luzon experience. Culturally, this is the Philippines at its most diverse; the peoples of the mountains, Zambales, Ilocos and Batanes, are notable for a melange of language and ritual, and share a genuine and consistent friendliness to visitors.

When to Go

Sagada



Nov–May

The best weather the Philippines has to offer – you'll have lots of company!

Apr–Jul

The heat is on but the crowds are down.

Jul–Oct

Rice terraces are green, but typhoons can be a problem.

North Luzon Highlights

1 Batad (p158)

Being awestruck by this rice-terrace amphitheatre then trekking to others that rival it.

2 Kalinga Province (p153)

Hobnobbing with former headhunters and meeting a famous tattoo artist.

3 Sagada (p146)

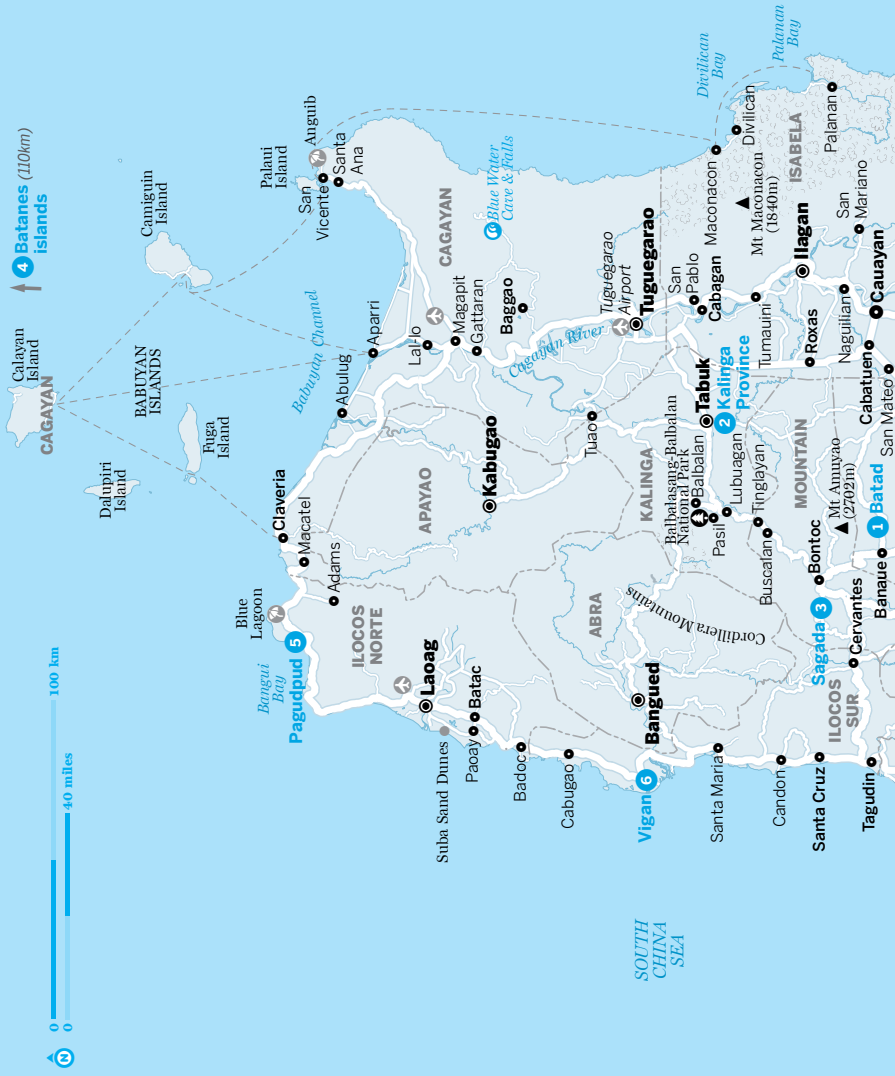
Shimmying, climbing and swimming into deep caves before hiking to hanging coffins.

4 Batanes Islands

(p166) Exploring the end of the world to experience Ibatan culture.

5 Pagudpud

(p134) Kitesurfing windy waves or chilling on the sublime white-sand beaches.





Palawan

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Southern Palawan	394
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Busuanga & the Calamian Islands	411

Best Places to Eat

- Kalui (p390)
- La Plage (p407)
- Trattoria Altrove (p417)
- Gorgonzola (p398)
- Bulalo Plaza (p407)

Best Places to Stay

- Sangat Island Reserve (p417)
- Flower Island Beach Resort (p401)
- Daluyon Resort (p393)
- Pangalusian Island Resort (p411)
- Coconut Garden Island Resort (p397)

Why Go?

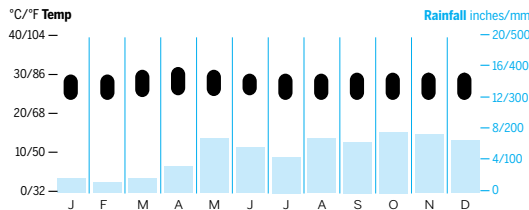
Nothing defines Palawan more than the water around it. With seascapes the equal of any in Southeast Asia, and terrestrial and aquatic wildlife, the Philippines' most sparsely populated region is also the most beguiling. Because of the silhouette of its main island – a long sliver stretching 650km all the way to Borneo – there's a certain liberating logic to travel here.

Despite becoming something of a travel-media darling in recent years, Thailand-style tourists hordes have yet to arrive and the main island's Amazonian interior remains relatively pristine. That said, the northern towns of El Nido and Coron – base camps for adventures in the Bacuit Archipelago and Calamian Islands, respectively – are starting to attract big crowds in the high season.

Not to fear: plucky travellers who venture outside those two hubs have countless places to choose from in their quest for that perfect paradise.

When to Go

Puerto Princesa



Apr–early Jun

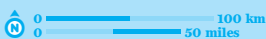
The best time for sea travel.

Jul–Sep

The southwest monsoon peaks, bringing heavy rains (but cheap prices).

Dec–Feb

Cooler and drier, but high winds can foul up boat schedules.



Palawan Highlights

- 1 Bacuit Archipelago** (p409) Snorkelling your way in and out of lagoons.
- 2 Calamian Islands** (p411) Island-hopping till you drop in these paradisiacal islands: hidden lakes and empty white-sand beaches.
- 3 El Nido** (p401) Exploring the stunning beaches,

waterfalls, cliffs and islands around north Palawan's main tourist town.

- 4 Port Barton** (p395) Moving in the slow village pace, from hammock to beach and back again.
- 5 Coron Bay Wrecks** (p412) Wriggling through the portholes of WWII-era wrecks

is the experience of a lifetime for scuba divers.

- 6 Sabang** (p392) Staying at the home of the Underground River to enjoy its lush beach and raw jungle scenery.
- 7 Puerto Princesa** (p385) Breezing through the countryside outside Palawan's capital on a motorcycle.



Southeast Luzon

Includes →

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Best Places to Eat

- Smalltalk Cafe (p183)
- Waway Albay (p183)
- Kusina sa Plaza (p196)
- Bob Marlin (p177)
- Blossoms (p190)

Best Places to Stay

- Balai Tinay Guesthouse (p181)
- Carmen (p176)
- Bagasbas Lighthouse (p174)
- Mayon Backpackers Hostel (p181)
- Ticao Island Resort (p194)

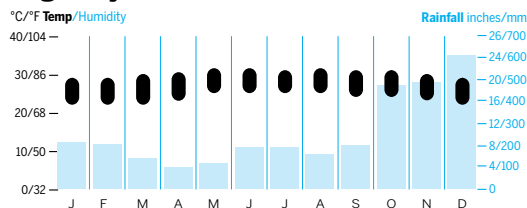
Why Go?

Southeast Luzon is one of the more overlooked parts of the Philippines, but those travellers who do make it here will find a wildly varied and unusual part of the country, where you're likely to encounter anything from creatures of the deep (in Donsol and Ticao) to Easter-time Romans and self-flagellation (Marinduque), cowboys rounding up both steers and crabs (Masbate), and *Survivor* locations (Caramoan peninsula).

Surfers make the trek down here, drawn to the waves whipped up by the fierce winds in Southeast Luzon's outer reaches, while adventurous travellers look to the active volcanoes of Mayon, Isarog and Bulusan. Departing the tourist trail to island-hop *Survivor* film locations and making the well-worn journey to snorkel with whale sharks in Donsol are highlights. Dive in!

When to Go

Naga City



Apr & May
Festival time in Legazpi and Masbate.

May–Jul
Sunny (and hot!) time of year, ideal for island-hopping and diving.

Aug–Nov
Surf's up in Catanduanes and Bagasbas; kitesurfing also takes off.

Southeast Luzon Highlights

- 1 Donsol** (p186)
Snorkelling alongside Bicol's gentle whale sharks.
- 2 Mt Mayon** (p185)
Riding an ATV near the base of Mt Mayon, Bicol's prettiest volcano.
- 3 Legazpi** (p180)
Sampling the best of Bicol's spicy cuisine.
- 4 Masbate** (p191)
Getting off the beaten track at this 'Wild East' island, with its cowboys and crab races.
- 5 Catanduanes** (p188)
Riding the legendary Majestic surf break on this remote island.
- 6 Caramoan Peninsula** (p177)
Exploring the uninhabited islands, beaches and *Survivor* locations of this pristine peninsula.
- 7 Ticao Island** (p194)
Diving with manta rays at the Manta Bowl.
- 8 Naga** (p175)
Wakeboarding, wakeskating and waterskiing at CamSur Watersports Complex (CWC) near Naga.
- 9 Marinduque** (p196)
Making like a Roman legionary at this island's wild Moriones Festival.



Understand the Philippines

THE PHILIPPINES TODAY.....422

Duterte's war on drugs, martial law in Mindanao and geopolitics: the issues of the day dissected.

HISTORY424

From early colonisers to Christianity, and American occupation to the Marcos regime, the history of the Philippines has always been intriguing.

PEOPLE & CULTURE432

Arts, architecture, karaoke and outdoor chess – the Filipinos display a rich culture.

ENVIRONMENT.....438

Incredible biodiversity above and below the water, along with immense environmental pressures: a look at the natural highlights and challenges.

The Philippines Today

Epic city traffic jams, a 'war on drugs' and martial law. Upheavals – natural and political – are par for the course for this country situated in the typhoon belt and the Pacific Ring of Fire. As a result, Filipinos are resolute and adept survivors. Political intrigue, corruption scandals and shifting foreign alliances are splashed across newspaper headlines. However, for many, it's mostly white noise. Scratch the surface, and Filipinos' thoughts are elsewhere: on migration, traditions, superstitions, and the next generation.

Best on Film

Norte, the End of History (2014)

A character's struggle against inexorable tide of forces is an epic masterpiece.

Heneral Luna (2015) Epic film lambastes Filipinos for assassinating their greatest general during the Philippine–American War.

Kid Kulafu (2015) Biopic about the early years of boxer and national icon Manny Pacquiao.

Woman Who Left (2016) A wrongly convicted woman seeks revenge against the ex-lover who framed her.

Best in Print

Ilustrado (Miguel Syjuco; 2010) A postmodern mystery that traces Philippine history and the fictional narrator's search for identity.

Soledad's Sister (José Dalisay; 2008) The body and identity of a corpse are claimed by her sister.

In the Country (Mia Alvar; 2015) Short stories exploring the lives of Filipinos during Marcos' rule.

Playing with Water – Passion and Solitude on a Philippine Island (James Hamilton-Paterson; 1987) This timeless account of life on a remote islet sheds much light on Philippine culture.

Duterte's Drug War

Rodrigo Duterte (aka 'Digong'), who was often referred to as the 'Death Squad Mayor' when he was mayor of the city of Davao for more than two decades, ran a populist campaign for the presidency in 2016, promising to fight crime, drugs and corruption. He made no apologies. He spoke impolitically. He vowed to destroy enemies. And he bested his closest rival by more than six million votes.

According to Human Rights Watch, quoting official police statistics, more than 7000 people were killed in the so-called war on drugs in the first six months after Duterte took office, many of them suspected dealers and users of *shabu* (methamphetamine). Police are reported to be responsible for up to half of this figure (2500 by their own admission); the remaining deaths are largely attributed to 'unidentified gunmen'.

In a televised speech in August 2016, Duterte accused 150 officials, from mayors to police officers, of being part of the illegal drug trade, and at other times has encouraged the public to kill addicts. Despite this, Duterte remains popular. His claim that drugs fuel corruption, militant groups in Mindanao and crime overall resonates with some Filipinos. Journalists and human rights groups have worked to document extrajudicial killings, though they often take place in communities that fear reprisals, and circumstances are hazy.

Geopolitics & Natural Resources

The Philippines' location, with its maritime boundaries in the South China Sea, leaves its economic momentum vulnerable to regional and superpower jockeying. In 2013, the former Aquino administration, aligned with the US, brought a case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration, alleging violation