

Philippines

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Cordillera region** – trekking through immense rice terraces around Banaue (p609) and Bontoc (p609) in Luzon’s rugged north
- **Isolated beaches** – doing the Robinson Crusoe thing in remote Siquijor (p623), Sipalay (p621), Port Barton (p638) and Camiguin (p635)
- **Party beaches** – diving in Puerto Galera (p614), kite-surfing in Boracay (p618) and drinking all night in both places
- **Biggest fish** – snorkelling with the whale sharks of Donsol (p613) and Southern Leyte (p632)
- **Ride the wave** – surfing the Philippines’ gnarliest break – classic Cloud Nine – and imbibing surfer-dude culture on laid-back Siargao Island (p634)
- **Off the beaten track** – exploring sunken WWII wrecks and hidden lagoons in the bays and islands around Coron (p639)

FAST FACTS

- **Budget** US\$20 to US\$25 a day
- **Capital** Manila
- **Costs** island cottage US\$5 to US\$15, four-hour bus ride US\$2 to US\$3, beer US\$0.40
- **Country code** ☎ 63
- **Languages** Filipino (Tagalog), English, 11 regional languages and 87 dialects
- **Money** US\$1 = P46.28 (peso)
- **Phrases** *paalam* (goodbye), *salámat* (thanks), *iskyus* (sorry); raise eyebrows while tilting head upwards (nonverbal hello)
- **Population** 89 million, including up to 10 million Filipinos working overseas
- **Time** GMT + eight hours
- **Visas** free 21-day visa given on arrival; extensions for up to 59 days are US\$42, and are available in major cities



TRAVEL HINTS

Try to fly into Manila and out of Cebu, or vice versa, to save yourself lots of backtracking. Bring earplugs for those long, loud *bangka* (pumpboat) rides, and to muffle ubiquitous early morning distractions such as roosters, tricycles and over-caffeinated courtyard sweepers.

WARNING

The situation in some parts of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago is volatile. Travel in these regions should be considered dangerous and only undertaken with careful, independent research on the ground.

Just when you thought you had Asia figured out, you get to the Philippines. Instead of monks you have priests; instead of *túk-túks* you have tricycles; instead of *pho* you have *adobo*. At first glance the Philippines will disarm you more than charm you, but peel under the country's skin and there are treasures to be found – aplenty. For starters, you can swim with whale sharks, scale volcanoes, explore desert islands, gawk at ancient rice terraces, submerge at world-class dive sites and venture into rainforests to visit remote hill tribes.

Beyond its obvious physical assets, the Philippines possesses a quirky streak that takes a bit longer to appreciate. There are secret potions and healing lotions, guys named Bong and girls named Bing, grinning hustlers, deafening cock farms, wheezing *bangkas* (pumpboats), crooked politicians, fuzzy *caribao* (water buffalo), graffiti-splashed jeepneys and – best of all – cheap beer to enjoy as you take it all in.

Transport connections are extensive, but in remote areas may require intestinal fortitude and an affinity for the Filipino maxim *bahala na*: go with the flow. Gregarious locals everywhere dispense smiles like they're going out of style. Be sure not to leave before seeing one of the country's spirited festivals and sampling the Filipino zeal for living *la vida loca*.

CURRENT EVENTS

In some ways not much has changed in the political and economic structure of the Philippines in decades – the same clannish circle of politicians runs the show, the population boom continues and corruption cuts the potential for growth. Despite this, the economy has been growing by around 5% since President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo replaced disgraced Joseph Estrada in 2001. Arroyo is far from popular: her allies won only three of the 12 influential Senate seats up for grabs in the 2007 elections, and she barely survived coup attempts and street protests in 2005 and 2006. But 'GMA', as the president is known, has at least given the country a semblance of stability, something it has lacked since the 'People Power' revolution deposed President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

Meanwhile, a Muslim insurgency in this predominantly Christian country continues to affect the Philippines' south. The country's largest Muslim rebel group is the 12,000-strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), but the group that grabs all the headlines is Abu Sayyaf, which was responsible for a highly publicised kidnapping in 2001 and is accused of a 2004 ferry bombing that killed more than 100 people near Manila. In recent years the killing of several top leaders has weakened Abu Sayyaf substantially, while the government has been extending the olive branch to the MILF. Despite that, fighting in parts of Mindanao remains common, and few are predicting that peace will break out in the south any time soon.

The government's other bugbear is the communist New People's Army (NPA), which has been fighting the government for

years from remote bases in Luzon, Mindanao, Samar and elsewhere. In 2006 there were dozens of unsolved 'extrajudicial' killings of left-leaning activists, journalists and priests with alleged links to the NPA; human rights groups have assailed the Arroyo administration for the killings, but little had been done to address the problem as of this writing. It's worth noting that the NPA is not considered a threat to tourists.

HISTORY

First Filipinos

Negrito tribes may have started migrating here over land bridges up to 30,000 years ago. Later migrants arrived by outrigger canoes. The Philippines was one of the earliest centres of the Austronesian migration wave, which started in China, skipped to Taiwan and the Philippines and swept out as far as New Zealand, Hawaii and Madagascar. Outrigger canoes safely carried new crops and animals such as pigs, and you can bet that a proto-cockfighting fanatic on board was tenderly holding his prize rooster.

Spanish Colonialists

In 1519 Ferdinand Magellan set off from Europe with instructions to sail around the world, claim anything worth claiming and extend Spain's spice empire into the Pacific region. Reaching the Islamic Sultanate of Cebu in 1521, Magellan managed to convert a number of people to Christianity before he was killed by Chief Lapu-Lapu on Mactan Island.

In 1565 the Spanish returned. Miguel de Legazpi stormed the island of Cebu and established the first permanent Spanish settlement.



Then, in 1571, the headquarters were relocated to Manila and from there the Spanish gradually took control of the entire region. The colony, however, never became very profitable for Spain.

The Spanish aimed to convert the *Indios* (Filipinos) to Catholicism; their fortified churches defended priests and converts from Chinese and Moro piracy. The *frialocracia* (friar-ocracy) came to run local administration such as the police, hospitals and schools, while the Filipinos were left with little except toil and the Virgin Mary.

Decline of Spanish Rule

A combination of bad weather and English forces defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, and the Spanish empire began a long, slow decline. There were over 100 revolts and peasant uprisings against the Spanish before they finally sealed their fate in 1896 by executing the writer José Rizal for inciting revolution. A brilliant scholar and poet, Rizal had worked for independence by peaceful means. His death galvanised the revolutionary movement.

With aid from the USA, already at war with Spain over Cuba, General Aguinaldo's revolutionary army drove the Spanish back to Manila. American warships defeated the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay in May 1898, and independence was declared on 12 June 1898.

American Rule

Unfortunately for the revolutionaries, the American intervention was just a stepping stone towards a new colonial regime. Today, American English, American food and an American form of government (presidency, congress and senate) still exist, but the American presence, or 'tutelage', in the Philippines was always intended to be temporary. The first

RIZAL'S TOWER OF BABEL

The Philippines' answer to Gandhi, writer and gentle revolutionary Dr José Rizal could read and write at the age of two. He grew up to speak more than 20 languages, 18 of them fluently, including English, Sanskrit, Latin, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Russian, Japanese, Chinese and Arabic. His last words were *consummatum est!* (it is done!).

MUST SEE

The documentary *Imelda* (2004) is a telling look into the psyche of Imelda Marcos, directed by Filipina American Ramona Diaz.

Philippine national government was formed in 1935 with full independence pencilled in for 10 years later.

This schedule was set aside when Japan invaded the islands in WWII. The Americans sustained heavy casualties before finally overcoming the Japanese during the bloody Battle for Manila in 1944. The devastation of the Philippines during the war was profound.

Independence

Independence was granted in 1946, though America continued to exert influence and maintained a vast military presence at Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Field Airbase, which remained until 1991.

During the early years of independence the Philippines bounced from one ineffectual leader to another until Ferdinand Marcos was elected in 1965. With a nod and wink from the US he took a *datu*-style (local chief) approach to government and marched the Philippines towards dictatorship, declaring martial law in 1972. Violence, previously widespread, was curtailed, but the Philippines suffered from stifling corruption and the economy became one of the weakest in an otherwise booming region.

The 1983 assassination of Marcos' opponent Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino pushed opposition to Marcos to new heights. Marcos called elections for early 1986 and the opposition united to support Aquino's widow, Corazon 'Cory' Aquino. Both Marcos and Aquino claimed to have won the election, but 'people power' rallied behind Cory Aquino, and within days Ferdinand and his profligate wife, Imelda, were packed off by the Americans to Hawaii, where the former dictator later died.

Politics & Unrest

Cory Aquino failed to win the backing of the army but managed to hang on through numerous coup attempts. Fidel Ramos, Imelda's cousin, was elected in 1992 and carried out some much-needed repairs on the economy, encouraged foreign investment and took steps

to end the guerrilla war with the NPA and Muslim rebels in the south. In 1996 the government signed a peace agreement with the main Muslim rebel group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was created. A faction calling itself the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) split from the MNLF and continued the fight.

In 1998 Ramos was replaced by B-grade movie actor Joseph 'Erap' Estrada, who promised to redirect government funding towards rural and poor Filipinos. Unfortunately, Erap spent most of his time redirecting government funding towards his own coffers and was impeached two years later. What followed was a kind of middle-class revolt, which was called EDSA 2 (EDSA was the Manila ring road where the demonstrators gathered and EDSA 1 had been the overthrow of Marcos). Replacing Estrada was his diminutive vice-president, Arroyo. For more information, see Current Events on p584.

GEMS OF THE PHILIPPINES

This is our completely subjective list of the best and strangest in this incredible country.

Favourite Small Mercies

- The widespread distribution of what is probably the cheapest beer in the world
- The availability of tricycles to take you anywhere, any time, for less than US\$5
- All-you-can-eat buffets after 18-hour boat trips

Most Tragically Popular Karaoke Songs

- *Glory of Love*, Peter Cetera
- *Even the Nights Are Better*, Air Supply
- *My Heart Will Go On*, Celine Dion

Most Challenging Moments

- Roosters with dysfunctional circadian rhythms crowing at 3am
- When your bus loses its breaks on a single-lane road with a truck coming the other way – and you're riding shotgun
- Being stuck on the tarmac with a Tanduvay hangover in a sweltering plane running on 'Filipino time'

Best Perches

- On the deck at Rita's or Simon's, gazing at the rice terrace amphitheatre in Batad (p610)
- On top of Mt Kanlaon, Negros Occidental (p621)
- In an over-water *nipa* hut (traditional hut made of palm leaves) at Guiwanon Spring Park Resort (p623), Siquijor, watching a seaside sunset

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

Probably the first thing you'll notice about the people of the Philippines is their calm demeanour. Filipinos greet adversity with all the fuss that a *caribao* greets a fly on its back – they shrug their shoulders, smile and move on. This whatever-will-be-will-be attitude has a name: *bahala na*. It expresses the idea that all things shall pass and that in the meantime life is to be lived. *Bahala na* also helps explain one of the Filipinos' more appealing traits: they tolerate just about everybody, regardless of nationality, skin colour or sexual orientation.

Another force that shapes the Filipino psyche is *hiya*, which means, roughly, 'sense of shame'. Showing a lack of *hiya* in front of others is similar to 'losing face' and for the Filipino there are few worse fates. Expressing strong or negative emotions in public are sure ways to show you are *walang-hiya* – without shame. Most problems that travellers run into result from a lack of respect for the Filipino

MUST READ

Ghosts of Manila (1994) by James Hamilton-Paterson is a chilling 'docu-fiction' of life, death and the corrupt chains binding Filipinos in the city's slums.

codes of *hiya* and *amor propio*, or self-esteem. The golden rule when travelling in the Philippines is to treat problems with the same graciousness as the average Filipino. A smile and a joke go a long way, while anger just makes things worse.

Filipinos are a superstitious lot. In the hinterland, a villager might be possessed by a wandering spirit, causing them to commit strange acts. In urban areas, faith healers, psychics, fortune-tellers, tribal shamans, self-help books and evangelical crusaders can all help cast away ill-fortune.

Lifestyle

First-time visitors to Manila are often lulled into thinking the Philippines is Westernised. They soon realise that the chain restaurants, malls and American R&B music disguise a unique Asian culture still very much rooted in an ancient values system.

For centuries the two most important influences on the lives of Filipinos have been family and religion. The Filipino family unit, or 'kinship group', extends to distant cousins, multiple godparents and one's *barkada* (gang of friends). With few exceptions, all members of one's kinship group are afforded loyalty and respect. Filipino families, especially poor ones, tend to be large. It's not uncommon for a dozen family members to live together in a tiny apartment, shanty or *nipa* hut (traditional hut made of palm leaves).

Another vital thread in the fabric of Filipino society is the overseas worker. Nearly one in 10 Filipinos works abroad. Combined they sent a record US\$12 billion back home in 2006, or about 10% of the GDP. The true figure is probably much higher than that. The Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) – the nurse in Canada, the construction worker in Qatar, the entertainer in Japan, the cleaner in Singapore – has become a national hero. When OFWs retire, they return to their home provinces as *balikbayan* (literally 'returnees to the home country') and build gaudy concrete homes.

Population

A journey from the northern tip of Luzon to the southern tip of the Sulu islands reveals a range of ethnic groups speaking almost 100 different dialects. Filipinos are mainly of the Malay race, although there's a sizable and economically dominant Chinese minority and a fair number of *mestizos* (Filipinos of mixed descent).

The country's population is thought to be between 80 million and 90 million (the 2005 census was cancelled for budgetary reasons). Partially because of the Catholic church's hard line on 'artificial' birth control, the population is growing at one of the fastest rates in Asia. It's also becoming younger and more urban: the median age is only 22.5 and almost a quarter of the population lives in or around metro Manila.

RELIGION

The Philippines is one of the only predominantly Christian country in Asia – almost 90% of the population claims to be Christian and over 80% are Roman Catholic. The largest religious minority is Muslim (5%), although Islam is actually an older presence than Christianity. Filipino Muslims live chiefly in the ARMM and belong to the mainstream Sunni sect. Popular Christian sects include the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) and various brands of southern Baptists.

While the separation of church and state is formalised in the Filipino constitution, a subtle hint from the church can swing a mayoral race and mean millions of votes for presidential or senatorial candidates.

**ARTS
Cinema**

The Philippines has historically been Southeast Asia's most prolific film-making nation.

THE SEARCH FOR SPOILS

Legends of buried treasure flourish in the Philippines. The most famous urban myth talks of Yamashita's Horde, a cache of bullion sunk on a WWII Japanese ship, which Ferdinand Marcos claimed to have found. Modern-day Indiana Jones types, including ex-Japanese soldiers and CIA operatives, supposedly still scour the country's remote regions in search of plunder.

MUST SEE

Kubrador, about the life of a *juetang* bet collector, won awards in several international film festivals in 2006. *Juetang* is an illegal lottery-style numbers game popular throughout the country.

The movie industry's 'golden age' was the 1950s, when Filipino films won countless awards. In the 1980s and 1990s the industry surged again thanks to a genre called 'bold' – think sex, violence and dudes with great hair in romantic roles. Today the mainstream studios are in decline, but the flip side is that the quality of films is getting better with the proliferation of independent films such as *Kubrador* (see boxed text, p586). Over the years, the Philippines has also served as a backdrop for many big foreign films, most notably *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*.

Dance

Among the most beautiful traditional dances in the Philippines are *tinikling* (bamboo or heron dance) and *pandanggo sa ilaw* (dance of lights); the best-known Filipino-Muslim dance is *singkil* (court dance). You will also often see performances of the Filipino variations of the Hispanic dances *habanera*, *jota* and *paypay* (the fan dance).

Music

Filipino rock music is known as 'OPM' (Original Pinoy Music – 'Pinoy' is what Filipinos call themselves). It actually encompasses a wide spectrum of rock, folk and new age genres – plus a subset that includes all three. Embodying the latter subset is the band Pinikpikan, which performs a sometimes frantic fusion of tribal styles and modern jam-band rock. The 11-piece band uses bamboo reed pipes, flutes and percussion instruments and sings in languages as diverse as Visayan, French and Bicol.

The Philippines' best-loved form of traditional music is the *kundiman*, a bittersweet

DID YOU KNOW?

The traditional welcome dance, the *ku-ratsa*, is based on the courtship dances of chickens!

combination of words and music. Traditional instruments include the *kulintang gong*, or chime, found in North Luzon, and the *ku-tyapi*, an extremely demanding, but hauntingly melodic, two-stringed lute, commonly found in Mindanao.

ENVIRONMENT**The Land**

An assemblage of 7107 tropical isles scattered about like pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle, the Philippines stubbornly defies geographic generalisation. The typical island boasts a jungle-clad, critter-infested interior and a sandy coastline flanked by aquamarine waters and the requisite coral reef. More populated islands have less jungle and more farmland.

Wildlife

The country's flora includes well over 10,000 species of trees, bushes and ferns, including 900 types of orchid. About 10% of the Philippines is still covered by tropical rainforest.

Endangered animal species include the mouse deer (see boxed text, p631), the *tamaraw* (a species of dwarf buffalo) of Mindoro, the Philippine crocodile of Northeast Luzon, the Palawan bearcat and the flying lemur. As for the national bird, there are thought to be about 500 pairs of haribons, or Philippine eagles, remaining in the rainforests of Mindanao, Luzon, Samar and Leyte.

There's an unbelievable array of fish, seashells and corals, as well as dwindling numbers of the *duyong* (dugong, or sea cow). If your timing's just right you can spot *butanding* (whale sharks) in Donsol and Southern Leyte.

National Parks

The Philippines' numerous national parks, natural parks and other protected areas comprise about 10% of the country's total area, but most lack services such as park offices, huts, trail maps and sometimes even trails. The most popular national park, at least amongst foreigners, is surely Palawan's Subterranean River National Park (p638).

Environmental Issues

As with many of the government departments, the budget of the Department of Environment & Natural Resources (DENR) is never quite what it seems. The Philippines has strict environmental laws on its books,

DID YOU KNOW?

The Philippine eagle was known as the 'monkey eating eagle' until the government officially changed the name in 1978.

but they just aren't enforced. Only 3% of the reefs are in a pristine state, and 60% have been severely damaged.

The biggest culprit of reef damage is silt, washed down from hills and valleys indiscriminately – and often illegally – cleared of their original forest cover. Illegal logging also exacerbates floods and causes landslides, such as the one in February 2006 that killed more than 1000 people in St Bernard, Southern Leyte. Lip service is given to the issue by the government, but little is done.

Incredibly short-sighted techniques for making a few extra bucks include dynamite and cyanide fishing. The uncontrolled harvesting of seashells for export, particularly in the Visayas, is another problem. Don't go buying souvenirs made from shell or coral (souvenirs made from farmed oyster shells are an exception).

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The three main points of entry are Manila, Cebu and Clark Special Economic Zone. In addition, domestic carrier Asian Spirit runs a thrice-weekly flight between Zamboanga (Mindanao) and Sandakan, Malaysia. Indonesian carrier Sriwijaya Airlines has two weekly flights from Manado, Indonesia, to Davao (Mindanao).

MANILA

Unless you fly in with Philippine Airlines (PAL), which uses the tidy new Centennial Terminal II, you'll have to fight your way through Terminal I of Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA). Expect disorganisation, long queues at immigration and diabolical transport connections to the city.

A brand new international terminal was completed in 2002, but as of this writing its opening remained on hold.

The two budget airlines flying to/from NAIA are domestic carrier Cebu Pacific and Singapore's Jetstar. Tickets for both airlines can be bought online.

Manila is well connected to Europe, the US, Australia and Asia. The following are the main airlines serving Manila nonstop from South-east Asia, China and the South Pacific.

Asian Spirit (code 6K; ☎ 02-855 3333; www.asianspirit.com) From Palau.

Cathay Pacific (code CX; ☎ 02-757 0888; www.cathaypacific.com) From Hong Kong.

Cebu Pacific (code 5J; ☎ 02-702 0888; www.cebpacificair.com) From Bangkok, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Singapore and Taipei.

China Southern Airlines (code CZ; www.cs-air.com) From Beijing and Guangzhou.

Continental Airlines (code CO; ☎ 02-818 8701, 02-817 9666; www.continental.com) From Palau.

Jetstar Asia (code 3K; www.jetstar.com) From Singapore.

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; www.malaysiaairlines.com) From Kuala Lumpur.

Philippine Airlines (code PR; ☎ 02-855 8888; www.philippineairlines.com) From Bangkok, Beijing, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai and Singapore.

Thai Airways International (THAI, code TG; ☎ 02-834 0366; www.thaiairways.com) From Bangkok.

CEBU

If you're heading to the Visayas, a much better option is to fly into Cebu City's **Mactan International Airport** (☎ 032-340 2486; www.mactan-cebuairport.com.ph). The Philippines' budget airline, Cebu Pacific, flies direct to Cebu from Hong Kong and Singapore. Cathay Pacific has direct flights to/from Hong Kong, Malaysia Airlines has twice weekly flights to Kuala Lumpur, and Asian Spirit flies direct to Palau.

CLARK SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE

Macapagal International Airport (DMIA, Clark Airport; www.clarkairport.com) in the Clark Special Economic Zone (near Angeles, about a two-hour bus ride north of Manila) is becoming a hot destination for Asian low-cost airlines. **Tiger Airways** (code TGW; ☎ 02-884 1524; www.tigerairways.com) now flies to Clark from Singapore and Macau, and **Air Asia** (code AXM; www.airasia

DEPARTURE TAX

International departure tax is P700 at NAIA, P550 at Cebu and P500 at Clark.

ONWARD TICKETS

The Philippines requires all tourists to show an onward ticket before entering the country. While this rule is rarely enforced at Philippine immigration, most airlines adamantly refuse to let passengers board Philippine-bound planes without an original onward ticket (photocopies will not work, although e-tickets will).

.com) flies to Clark from Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, all for well under US\$100 return. The airport's website has instructions on transport from the airport to Manila or Angeles. Also see p603 for information on catching a bus from Manila to the airport.

Sea

Although there are plenty of shipping routes within the Philippines, international services are scarce. The only route open to foreigners, as of this writing, was Zamboanga to Sandakan in the Malaysian state of Sabah. See p635 for further details.

GETTING AROUND

Air

The Philippines now has two budget domestic carriers – Cebu Pacific and Air Philippines (a subsidiary of PAL). Domestic flights on either of these airlines do not usually exceed P1800 one-way (including all surcharges) provided you book in advance.

Cebu Pacific and PAL have the most modern fleets and serve the most cities, although almost all flights originate in Manila or Cebu. PAL tends to be much pricier than Cebu Pacific, although it's worth checking out its 'promo' fares. Air Philippines serves only a handful of cities from Cebu and Manila.

Two smaller carriers, Asian Spirit and Southeast Asian Airlines (Seair), have fleets of small planes serving minor towns such as El Nido, Palawan and Caticlan (the jump-off point for Boracay) from Manila. These airlines are more expensive than their larger rivals. One-way prices (including all surcharges) range from P3200 for Caticlan to P6200 for El Nido.

In Manila, all PAL flights leave from Terminal II of NAIA, while all other domestic services leave from the domestic airport, about a five-minute taxi ride from NAIA.

Flight times range from 45 minutes for short hops such as Manila–Caticlan to 1½ hours for flights from Manila to southern Mindanao.

Airline details:

Air Philippines (code 2P; ☎ 02-855 9000; www.airphils.com)

Asian Spirit (code 6K; ☎ 02-855 3333; www.asianspirit.com)

Cebu Pacific (code 5J; ☎ 02-702 0888; www.cebpacificair.com)

Philippine Airlines (code PR; ☎ 02-855 8888; www.philippineairlines.com)

Seair (code DG; ☎ 02-849 0100; www.flyseair.com)

Boat

If boats are your thing, this is the place for you. The islands of the Philippines are linked by an incredible network of ferry routes and services are extremely cheap. The vessels used range from tiny, narrow outrigger canoes (known locally as *bangka*, or pumpboats) to luxury 'fastcraft' vessels and, for long-haul journeys, vast multidecked ships such as the SuperFerry.

The jeepney of the sea, the *bangka*, comes sometimes with a roof, sometimes without. *Bangkas* ply regular routes between islands and are also available for hire for diving, sight-seeing or just getting around. The engines on these boats can be deafeningly loud, and they aren't the most stable in rough seas, but on islands such as Palawan the *bangka* can be preferable to travelling overland.

For the most part, ferries are an easy, enjoyable way to hop between islands, but accidents are not unknown. Follow your instincts – if the boat looks crowded, it is, and if sailing conditions seem wrong, they are. Pumpboats during stormy weather are especially scary.

'Fastcraft' services are becoming increasingly popular on shorter routes. They can cut travel times by half but usually cost twice as much as slower 'roll-on, roll-off' (RORO) car ferries. Some shipping lines give 20% to 30% off for students.

Booking ahead is essential for long-haul liners and can be done at ticket offices or travel agents in most cities. For fastcraft and *bangka* ferries, tickets can usually be bought at the pier before departure.

Buses & Vans

Philippine buses come in all shapes and sizes, from rusty boxes on wheels to luxury air-con coaches. Bus depots are dotted throughout

towns and the countryside, and most buses will stop if you wave them down. Terminals are usually on the outskirts of town, but tricycle drivers should know where they are.

Generally, more services run in the morning – buses on unsealed roads may run only in the morning, especially in remote areas. Most buses follow a fixed schedule but may leave early if they're full. Night services – including deluxe 27-seaters – are common between Manila and major provincial hubs in Luzon but should be booked a few days in advance.

Air-con minivans shadow bus routes in many parts of the Philippines (especially Bicol, Leyte and Cebu) and in some cases have replaced buses altogether (such as on the Legazpi–Donsol route). However, you may have to play a waiting game until the vehicles are full. Minivans are quicker than buses, but they are also more expensive and more cramped.

Local Transport

HABAL-HABAL

Common in many Visayan islands and northern Mindanao, these are simply motorcycle taxis with extended seats (literally translated as 'pigs copulating', after the level of intimacy attained when sharing a seat with four people). *Habal-habal* function like tricycles, only they are a little bit cheaper. Outside of the Visayas they're known as 'motorcycle taxis'.

JEEPNEY

The first jeepneys were modified army jeeps left behind by the Americans after WWII. They have been customised with Filipino touches such as chrome horses, banks of coloured headlights, radio antennae, paintings of the Virgin Mary and neon-coloured scenes from action comic books. Modern jeepneys are built locally from durable aluminium and stainless steel but are faithful to the original design.

Jeepneys form the main urban transport in most cities and complement the bus services between regional centres. Within towns, the starting fare is usually P6 to P7.50, rising modestly for trips outside of town. Routes are usually clearly written on the side of the jeepney.

KALESA

Kalesa are two-wheeled horse carriages found in Manila's Chinatown, Vigan (North Luzon)

and Cebu City (where they're known as *tartanillas*). In Manila they seem to exist solely to help tourists part with large sums of money, so be careful to agree on a fare before clambering aboard. You shouldn't pay more than P200 for a 20-minute ride.

TAXI

Taxis exist only in Manila and major provincial hubs. Most taxi drivers will turn on the meter; if they don't, politely request that they do. If the meter is 'broken' or your taxi driver says the fare is 'up to you', the best strategy is to get out and find another cab.

Taxi drivers at many regional airports charge a fixed price – usually P150 to P250 – to get into the town centre. An exception is Manila domestic airport, where metered cabs are readily available.

The taxi flag fall is P35 in Manila, P30 in Cebu and Bacolod, and P25 in Baguio. After that it's about P0.60 per 300m.

TRICYCLE

Found in most cities and towns, the tricycle is the Philippine rickshaw – a little, roofed sidecar bolted to a motorcycle. The standard fare for local trips in most provincial towns is P6. Tricycles that wait around in front of malls, restaurants and hotels in tourist centres will attempt to charge five to 10 times that for a 'special trip'. Avoid these by standing roadside and flagging down a passing P6 tricycle. You can also charter tricycles for about P200 per hour or P120 per 10km if you're heading out of town.

Many towns also have nonmotorised push tricycles, alternatively known as *put-put* or *podyak*, for shorter trips.

MANILA

☎ 02 / pop 11.2 million

Manila's moniker, the 'Pearl of the Orient', couldn't be more apt – its cantankerous shell reveals its jewel only to those resolute enough to pry. No stranger to hardship, the city has endured every disaster both man and nature could throw at it, and yet today the chaotic 600-sq-km metropolis thrives as a true Asian megacity. Gleaming skyscrapers pierce the hazy sky, mushrooming from the grinding poverty of expansive shantytowns. The congested roads snarl with traffic, but

like the overworked arteries of a sweating giant, they are what keep this modern metropolis alive. The tourist belt of Ermita and Malate flaunts an uninhibited nightlife that would make Bangkok's go-go bars blush, and the gleaming malls of Makati foreshadow Manila's brave new air-conditioned world. The determined will discover Manila's tender soul, perhaps among the leafy courtyards and cobbled streets of serene Intramuros, where little has changed since the Spanish left. Or it may be in the eddy of repose arising from the generosity of one of the city's 11 million residents.

HISTORY

The Spanish brushed aside a Muslim fort here in 1571 and founded the modern city as the capital of their realm. They named it *Isigny y Siempre Leal Ciudad* (Distinguished and Ever Loyal City), but the name Manila (from *Maynilad*, derived from a local term for a mangrove plant) soon became established. Spanish residents were concentrated around the walled city of Intramuros until 1898, when the Spanish governor surrendered to the Filipinos at San Agustin Church. After being razed to the ground during WWII, the city grew exponentially during the post-war era as migrants left the countryside for new opportunities. Marcos consolidated 17 towns and villages into Metro Manila in 1976.

ORIENTATION

Metro Manila's traditional tourist belt is located in the relatively compact 'downtown' area just south of the mouth of the Pasig River. The old walled city of Intramuros (Map p600) lies just south of the river; south of that are Rizal Park and the districts of Ermita and Malate (Map pp598–9), where most budget accommodation and dining options are located.

On the northern side of the Pasig (Map pp596–7) you'll find Binondo (Manila's old Chinatown), Quiapo and North Harbor, the departure point for many interisland ferries.

In recent years many of Manila's best restaurants and bars have moved uptown (east) to the relatively posh business district of Makati (Map pp596–7). While many tourists have followed, budget accommodation remains practically nonexistent in Makati.

North of Makati is the smaller business and shopping district of Ortigas, followed by

Quezon City, site of the University of the Philippines' flagship Diliman campus.

Epifanio de los Santos Ave (EDSA; Map pp596–7) is the main artery linking downtown Manila with Makati, Ortigas and Quezon City. The MRT conveniently runs right along EDSA, linking with the LRT at Taft Ave.

The main downtown bus depots are along EDSA near the LRT–MRT interchange in Pasay City; the uptown bus hub is at the other end of EDSA in Cubao, a district of Quezon City.

The airport is about 6km south of Malate, in Parañaque (Map pp596–7).

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Most big malls have several good bookshops.

Powerbooks (Map pp598-9; ☎ 523 5167; Robinsons Place) In Ermita.

Solidaridad Book Shop (Map pp598-9; 531 Padre Faura St, Ermita; ☎ 9am-6pm) This famous leftie bookshop is particularly good for titles on local history and politics.

Tradewinds Books (Map p600; 3rd fl, Silahis Arts & Artifacts Centre, 744 General Luna St, Intramuros) Small bookstore with great collection of books on Filipino culture, arts, history and other subjects.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 117)

Fire brigade (☎ 160)

Police (☎ 166)

Tourist Security Division (Map pp598-9; ☎ 524 1728, 524 1660) Based at the Department of Tourism, this unit is available 24 hours and is more reliable than regular police.

Internet Access

There are internet cafés all over the place; malls such as Robinsons Place (Map pp598–9) often have several. Rates vary from P30 to P60 per hour.

Medical Services

Makati Medical Center (Map pp596-7; ☎ 815 9911; 2 Amorsolo St, Makati)

Manila Doctors Hospital (Map pp598-9; ☎ 524 3011; 677 United Nations Ave, Ermita)

Money

Malate, Ermita and Makati are littered with ATM machines. For cash transactions, there are numerous moneychangers along Mabini and Adriatico Sts but, as always, be careful when using these services. Cashing travellers

GETTING INTO TOWN

Domestic and international flights share the same runways, but use three separate terminals: Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA); Centennial Terminal II (for all domestic and international PAL flights); and the domestic terminal (for all other domestic flights).

A line of booths around each departure hall sells taxi coupons; it costs P350 to get to Malate or Makati. At NAIA and Centennial Terminal II you'll save money by walking upstairs to arrivals and flagging down a metered taxi, which only costs about P120 to Malate or Makati. The domestic terminal has a designated queue for metered taxis.

Since there are no direct public transport routes to the tourist belt in Malate, you're better off biting the bullet and taking a taxi. If you arrive in Manila by boat, you're also better off catching a taxi into town, as the harbour is a pretty rough area and public transport routes are complicated.

With the number of different bus stations in Manila, if you arrive by bus you could end up pretty much anywhere. Luckily, most terminals are located on or near Manila's major artery, Epifanio de los Santos Ave (EDSA). To get to Malate, take a bus or the Metro Rail Transit (MRT) west along EDSA to Pasay City, and continue to Malate by Light Rail Transport (LRT; see p604 for tips on using Manila's metro).

If you're flying into Clark, see the bus information on p603.

cheques is difficult (see p645) and is best done through the office of the issuing company.

The following places are particularly useful for travellers:

Amex (Map pp598-9; ☎ 524 8681/2; 513 Remedios St, Malate; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

HSBC (Map pp598-9; 648 Remedios St, Malate) Its ATM agrees with most Western bank cards and allows withdrawals of more than P20,000.

Thomas Cook (Map pp596-7; ☎ 816 3701; cnr Sen Gil Puyat Ave & Tindabo St, Makati; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat)

Post

Ermita Post Office (Map pp598-9; Pilar Hidalgo Lim St) Contrary to what the name implies, it's actually in Malate.

Manila Central Post Office (Map p600; ☎ 527 0085/79; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) This imposing, neoclassical building north of Intramuros handles most postal transactions, including poste restante.

Telephone

Phone calls can be made from the numerous offices of PLDT, BayanTel, Smart Telecom and Globe Telecom (for rates see p646).

Tourist Information

Department of Tourism Information Centre (DOT; Map pp598-9; ☎ 524 2384; www.wowphilippines.ph; TM Kalaw St; ☎ 7am-6pm) This large, friendly office is in a beautiful pre-WWII building at the Taft Ave end of Rizal Park. There are also smaller DOT offices at Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport and the Centennial Terminal II.

Intramuros Visitors Center (Map p600; ☎ 527 2961; Santa Clara St; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Hands out simple maps and information.

Travel Agencies

Malate and Ermita are filled with travel agencies. Shop around for international air tickets, as prices vary. The following cater specifically to foreign tourists:

Filipino Travel Center (Map pp598-9; ☎ 528 4504, 528 4507; www.filipinotravel.com.ph; 1555 Adriatico St, Ermita) No commission on Seair and Asian Spirit flights. Books Autobus tickets to Banaue.

Swagman Travel (Map pp598-9; ☎ 523 8541; www.swaggy.com; 411 A Flores St, Ermita) Books Cebu Pacific and Asian Spirit flights commission free.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Manila can be a pretty dodgy place, particularly after dark. The tourist areas of Ermita, Malate and Makati are considered some of the safer areas, but even here it pays to be careful after dark. See also the Scams boxed text on p642.

SIGHTS Intramuros

A spacious borough of wide streets, leafy plazas and lovely colonial houses, the old walled city of Intramuros (Map p600) was the centre-piece of Spanish Manila. At least it was until WWII, when the Americans and Japanese levelled the whole lot. Only a handful of buildings survived the firestorm; over 100,000 Filipino civilians were not so lucky.

The Spanish replaced the original wooden fort with stone in 1590, and these walls stand much as they were 400 years ago. They're still studded with bastions and pierced with gates (*puertas*). At the mouth of the Pasig River you'll find Manila's premier tourist attraction, **Fort Santiago** (Map p600; admission P40; ☎ 8am-6pm), fronted by a pretty lily pond and the Intramuros Visitors Center. During WWII the fort was used as a prisoner-of-war camp by the Japanese. Within the fort grounds you'll find the **Rizal Shrine** in the building where national hero José Rizal was incarcerated as he awaited execution. It contains Rizal's personal effects and an original copy of his last poem, 'Mi Ultimo Adios' (My Last Farewell).

The most interesting building to survive the Battle of Manila is the church and monastery of **San Agustin** (Map p600; General Luna St). The interior is truly opulent and the ceiling, painted in three-dimensional relief, will make you question your vision. The former Augustinian monastery next door is now an excellent **religious museum** (Map p600; General Luna St; admission P75; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm). **Casa Manila** (Map p600; ☎ 527 4088; cnr Real & General Luna Sts; admission P40; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a beautifully restored, three-storey Spanish colonial mansion filled with priceless antiques. Nearby, the flashy **Bahay Tsinoy Museum** (Map p600; cnr Anda & Cabildo Sts; admission P100; ☎ 1-5pm Tue-Sun) uses vivid dioramas and photographs to tell the story of the Chinese in Manila.

Also of interest is the grand Romanesque **Manila Cathedral** (Map p600; cnr Postigo & General Luna Sts; ☎ 6.30am-5.30pm), which is a Vatican-funded reconstruction of the cathedral destroyed in WWII, and the sixth church on this site. The gilded altar and stained-glass windows are spectacular, and there's an enormous organ.

Rizal Park

One of the precious few bits of green in Manila, the 60-hectare Rizal Park (also known as Luneta; Map pp598-9) offers urbanites a place to decelerate among ornamental gardens and a whole pantheon of Filipino heroes. On Sunday afternoon you can watch martial arts displays here, including the Filipino school of *arnis*, a style of stick-fighting.

Located at the bay end of the park are the **Rizal Memorial** (Map pp598-9) and the moving **site of Rizal's execution** (Map pp598-9; admission P10; ☎ 7am-8.30pm Wed-Sun). The planetarium is flanked by a **Japanese garden** (Map pp598-9; admission

P10) and a **Chinese garden** (Map pp598-9; admission P10), which are favourite meeting spots for young couples. At the Taft Ave end of the park the gigantic three-dimensional **relief map** (Map pp598-9) of the Philippines is worth a look – see if you can spot 'perfect' Mt Mayon.

The splendid **National Museum of the Filipino People** (Map pp598-9; T Valencia Circle, Rizal Park; admission P100, free Sun; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Wed-Sun) has interesting displays on the wreck of the *San Diego*, a Spanish galleon from 1600, plus plenty of artefacts and comprehensive exhibits on the various Filipino ethnic groups.

Museums

As well as the offerings in Intramuros and Rizal Park, Manila has plenty of other interesting museums. The best is probably the **Ayala Museum** (Map pp596-7; Makati Ave, Makati; admission P350; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun), where dioramas tell the story of the Filipino quest for independence. It also houses the Philippines' best contemporary art collection. The **Metropolitan Museum of Manila** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 521 1517; BSP Complex, Roxas Blvd; admission P80; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) is in the Central Bank Complex and features an avarice-inducing collection of pre-Hispanic gold.

Chinese Cemetery

Boldly challenging the idea that you can't take it with you, the mausoleums of wealthy Chinese in the **Chinese Cemetery** (Map pp596-7; Rizal Ave Extension or Aurora Blvd; admission free; ☎ 7.30am-7pm), north of Santa Cruz, are fitted with flushing toilets and crystal chandeliers. Hire a guide (P300 to P400) for access to the best tombs. To get here take a 'Monumento' jeepney to Aurora Blvd (where Rizal Ave becomes Rizal Ave Extension) and walk east to F Heurtes St, which leads to the south gate. Abad Santos is the closest LRT station.

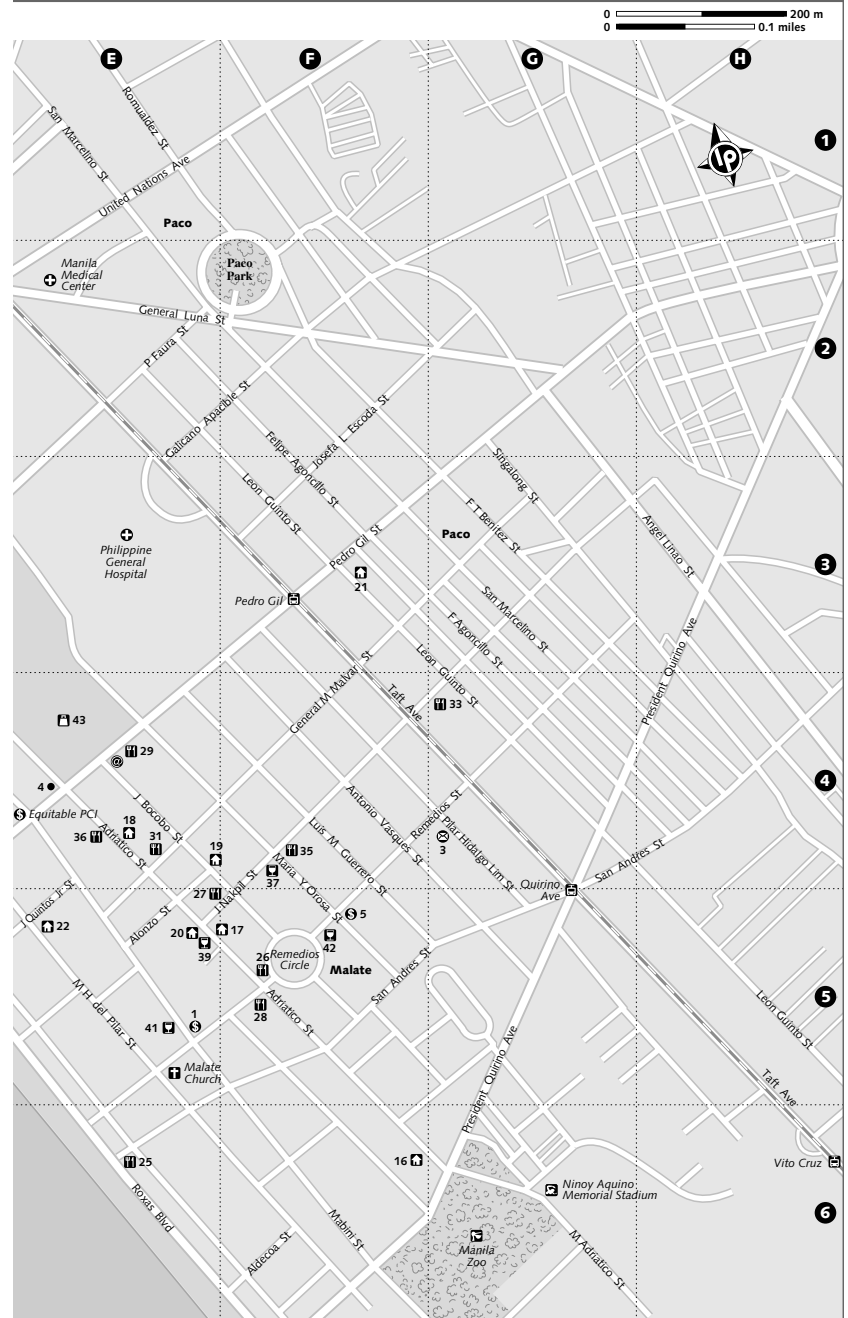
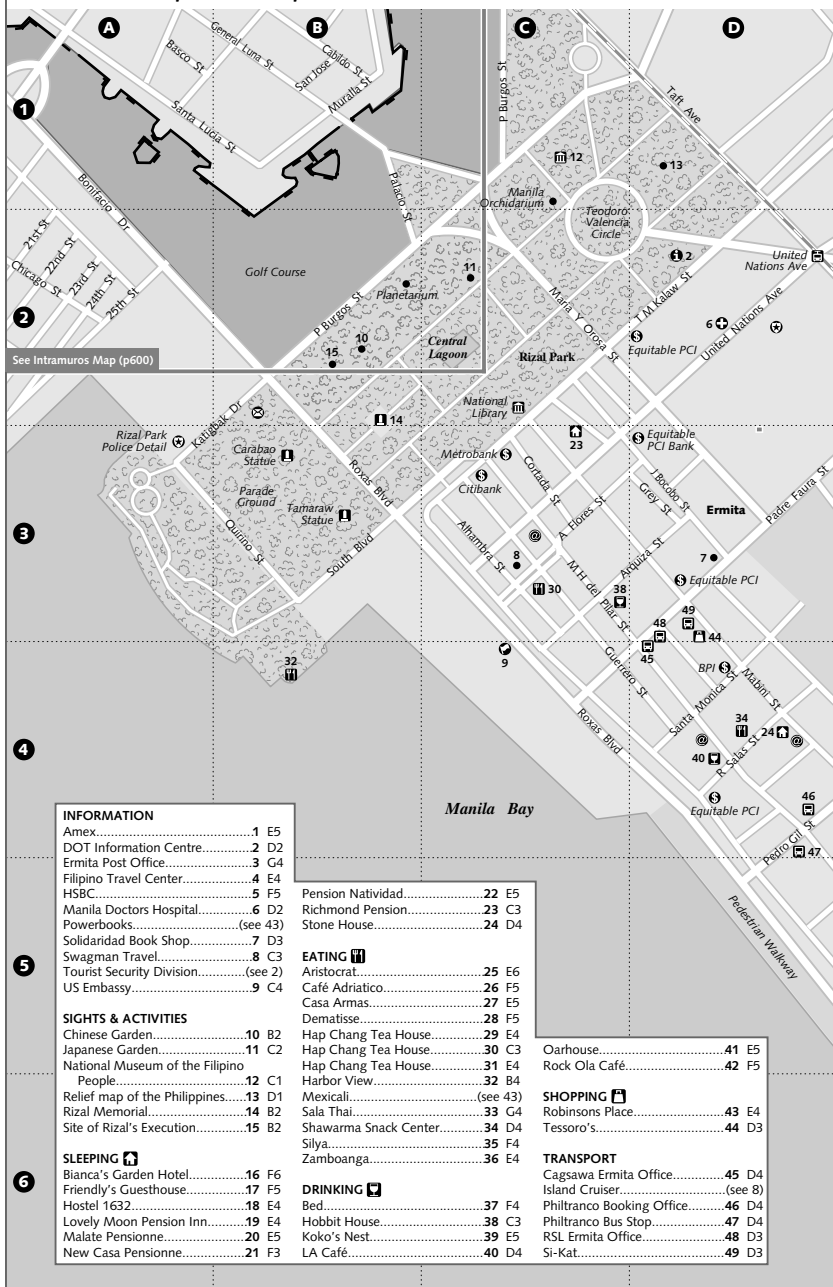
TOURS

If you're in Manila over a weekend don't miss out on the flamboyant tours of Chinatown, Intramuros and other destinations hosted by **Carlos Celdran** (☎ 0906 304 9598; www.celdrantours.blogspot.com; tours per person P500). Carlos' 'Living La Vida Imelda!' tour is fast attaining legend status.

SLEEPING

Manila's budget accommodation centres around Ermita and Malate, with a couple of good deals near the airport as well.

RIZAL PARK, ERMITA, MALATE & PACO



Town House (Map pp596-7; ☎ 854 3826; 31 Bayview Dr, Parañaque; dm P180, r P300-950; 🏠) Conveniently close to the airport, but inconveniently far from central Manila, the Town House has a leafy rooftop patio and a homey annex with dorm beds haphazardly strewn about.

Manila International Youth Hostel (Map pp596-7; ☎ 832 2112; 4227-9 Tomas Claudio St, Parañaque; dm/d P200/700; 🏠) This hostel, just 3km north of the airport, has one gargantuan men's dorm (36 beds) and more manageable women's dorms (12 beds). Discounts are available for members. From the airport take an 'MIA-Baclaran' bus 500m beyond the Coastal Mall on Roxas Blvd.

Richmond Pension (Map pp598-9; ☎ 525 3864; 1165 Grey St; 3-bed dm P240, s/d from P350/500; 🏠) All rooms share bathrooms here and most

lack air-con, but its cosy, friendly feel cannot be denied and it's blissfully distant from Ermita's mayhem.

Friendly's Guesthouse (Map pp598-9; ☎ 0917 333 1418; www.friendlysguesthouse.com; 1750 Adriatico St, Malate; dm/s P250/400, d P450-800; 🏠) Captained by the suitably friendly Benjie, this is backpacker HQ, with an air-con dorm, great balcony/lounge area, and free wi-fi, coffee and, on Saturday nights, wine. Evidently familiar with Keynesian economics, Benjie plans to double capacity to meet the considerable demand for this gem.

Stone House (Map pp598-9; ☎ 524 0302; stone_house_apt@yahoo.com; 1529 Mabini St; s/d from P250/500; 🏠) This chic place is a contemporary habitat for style-savvy backpackers. There is a small,

elegant bar downstairs and, while the budget singles are shoeboxes, the better doubles are great value.

ourpick Malate Pensionne (Map pp598-9; ☎ 523 8304; 1771 Adriatico St, Malate; dm P300, d P600-1300; 🏠) This homey, woodsy old mansion shares a quiet courtyard with Starbucks and has a useful traveller message board. The rooms, while small, are much better appointed than anything else in this price range, with rustic wooden furniture, large wardrobes and above-average bathrooms. The dorms are simple three-bed affairs so you won't have to arm wrestle 10 neighbours for fan rights.

Pension Natividad (Map pp598-9; ☎ 521 0524; 1690 MH del Pilar St, Malate; dm with fan P350, d P800-1200; 🏠) Set around a private courtyard, this popular Peace Corps volunteer roost features low-priced munchies and large single-sex dorms. However, the P800 fan rooms aren't great value.

Bianca's Garden Hotel (Map pp598-9; ☎ 526 0351; 2139 Adriatico St, Malate; r P1000-1800; 🏠) Set back from the street in a quieter part of Malate, this Spanish-style boutique is a real charmer. The 11 rooms feature traditional Filipino furniture, art and numerous antiques.

AIM Conference Center (Map pp596-7; ☎ 867 4033; www.accm.aim.edu.ph; Benavidez St; r from P1800; 🏠) There are no true budget places in central Makati but this is stupendous value. Free broadband internet, squeaky clean bathrooms and a prime location opposite Greenbelt are all part of the equation.

Also recommended:

New Casa Pensionne (Map pp598-9; ☎ 522 1375; cove@skynet.net; Leon Guinto St, Paco; s/d from P380/490; 🏠) Tidy rooms in mercifully quiet neighbourhood north of Taft Ave.

Lovely Moon Pension Inn (Map pp598-9; ☎ 536 2627; 1718 Bococho St, Malate; d P400-850; 🏠) Quirkiness begins and ends with the psychedelic mural in the lobby, but still serviceable.

Hostel 1632 (Map pp598-9; ☎ 526 1000; www.hostel1632.com; 1632 Adriatico St, Malate; s/d P1600/1800; 🏠) New midrange offering has curiously designed rooms and free breakfast.

EATING

Manila should get more kudos as a dining city – every style of Asian food is well represented and there are some solid French, German and Middle Eastern restaurants as well. The city's upscale restaurants have mostly moved uptown to Makati's Greenbelt area and Fort Bonifacio (Map pp596-7), where a large

chunk of Manila's expat community lives. These recommendations cover only the main backpacker haunts of Ermita and Malate.

For vegetarian food try the dozens of Korean and Chinese restaurants in Malate. If you care for street fare, try the boardwalk along Roxas Blvd or Santa Monica St in Ermita (Map pp598-9). Mall food courts are always a good bet for affordable sustenance. **Robinsons Place** (Map pp598-9; Pedro Gil St, Ermita) has dozens of options, including the always reliable **Mexicali** (burritos P125) on the 1st floor near the Padre Faura entrance.

Filipino

Silya (Map pp598-9; 642 J Nakpil St, Malate; breakfast P75, mains P110-160) Besides serving affordable Filipino classics such as *adobo* (chicken, pork or fish in a dark tangy sauce), Silya is also a great place to warm up your karaoke skills before hitting the provinces.

Aristocrat (Map pp598-9; ☎ 524 7671; cnr Roxas Blvd & San Andres St; mains P150-250; 🏠 24hr) This multi-chambered Malate institution has been serving up Filipino classics such as grilled *bangus* (milkfish) and pork knuckles for over 60 years.

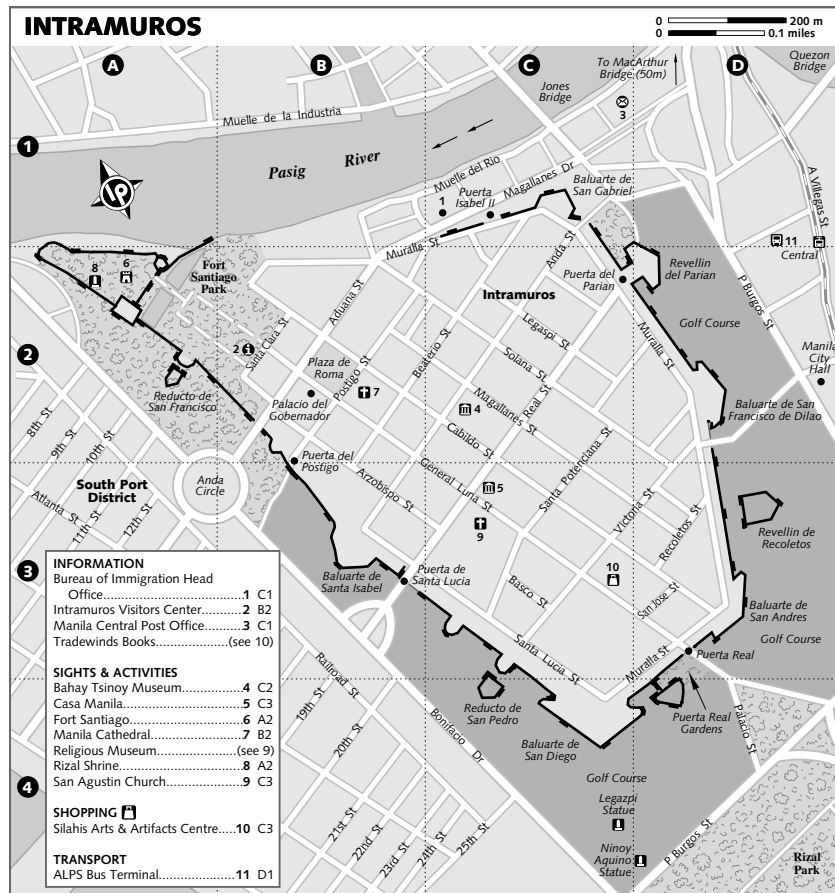
Harbor View (Map pp598-9; ☎ 524 1532; South Blvd, Rizal Park; mains P170-300) This is the best of a clutch of fresh seafood *inahaw* (grill) restaurants jutting into Manila Bay (hope for an offshore breeze). The fish is best enjoyed with the golden sunset and some amber refreshments.

Zamboanga (Map pp598-9; ☎ 521 7345; 1619 Adriatico St; mains P265-500) The prices here aren't bad considering the nightly entertainment consists of a one-hour Filipino cultural program, complete with colourful costumes and indigenous dances such as *tinikling* (see Dance, p589). The food is best described as gourmet Filipino.

Asian

ourpick Shawarma Snack Center (Map pp598-9; ☎ 525 4541; 485 R Salas St; pita sandwiches P45-65, mains P150-250; 🏠 24hr) With freshly grilled kebabs and delectable appetizers such as *falafel*, *muttabal* (purée of aubergine mixed with tahini, yogurt and olive oil) and hummus, this streetside Middle Eastern eatery is a gastronomic delight. Hookah pipes round out the effect. We'd gladly eat here every day.

Hap Chang Tea House (Map pp598-9; cnr General Malvar & Adriatico Sts; mains P120-250; 🏠 24hr) Delicious,



steaming platters of Hong Kong specialties are the name of the game here. It's popular for a reason. Additional branches on Pedro Gil and A Flores Sts.

Sala Thai (Map pp598-9; ☎ 522 4694; 866 J Nakpil St, Paco; mains P120-250; 🍴 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The granddaddy of Manila's Thai restaurants, the dishes here are authentically prepared by a Thai chef, the prices are sensible and the ambience is pure Old Manila.

Western

Dematisse (Map pp598-9; 548 Remedios St, Malate; pasta dishes P120-160; 🍴 5pm-7am) While their pasta's pretty good, the icing on the cake is the P25 San Miguel.

Café Adriatico (Map pp598-9; 1790 Adriatico St, Malate; appetizers P140-200, mains P200-400) Long-time Malate residents call this their 'Cheers'. The menu is Spanish with English, American and Italian effects, but you come here for the people-watching as much as the food.

Casa Armas (Map pp598-9; ☎ 523 0189; 573 J Nakpil St, Malate; mains P250-500; 🍴 lunch & dinner) You'll usually encounter several groups of Manila expats pounding sangria and throwing back tapas here. One of Manila's best restaurants.

DRINKING

Whether you're into Whitney Houston, Pearl Jam or gay bars, there's a good chance you'll find it in Malate. The area also draws its share of party-going university students, driven here by the low beer prices. You'll find many of them chugging cheap suds curbside just west of Remedios Circle on Remedios St – dubbed the 'Monoblock Republic' because of the preponderance of brittle plastic furniture. Male travellers in this area – especially on Mabini St – will get insistent offers to various types of nightclubs to meet girls euphemistically called GROs – 'guest relations officers'.

Oarhouse (Map pp598-9; 1803 Mabini St; beer P30) This snug little haunt, a favourite among Peace Corps volunteers, is one oar house you won't mind getting caught in late at night.

our pick **Rock Ola Café** (Map pp598-9; ☎ 0920 853 2128; 604 Remedios St; 🍴 6pm-2am Tue-Sat) On Wednesday and Saturday this tiny bar-cum-gallery (formerly Penguin Café) squeezes in some of the finest musical talent in town, including, on occasion, Pinikpikan (see p589). Bonus points if you can count the geckos on the wall.

KARAOKE & COVERS

You haven't *really* travelled in the Philippines until you've spent an inebriated evening around a karaoke machine paying homage to Celine Dion and Chicago. Filipinos pursue karaoke without a hint of irony, so whatever you do don't insult the guy who sounds like a chicken getting strangled. Live music is also popular; most towns have live-music bars with local talent belting out flawless cover versions of classic rock and recent hits. Adriatico St in Malate has several such venues.

Koko's Nest (Map pp598-9; Adriatico St) Cheap snacks and P23(!) San Miguel in a small streetside nook sheltered by a bamboo awning. Need we say more?

Bed (Map pp598-9; cnr J Nakpil & Maria Y Orosa St) This place is known for its wild gay and straight crowds, who will dance with abandon till dawn.

LA Café (Map pp598-9; 1429 MH del Pilar St; 🍴 24hr) A notorious dive, this place features live music, billiards, fairly priced food and drinks, a rowdy expat crowd and round-the-clock GROs. If you want to get a glimpse of the raunchy side of Manila, look no further.

Hobbit House (Map pp598-9; ☎ 521 7604; 1212 MH del Pilar St; admission P100-200; 🍴 to 3am) Often forgotten amid the vertically challenged waiters is that Hobbit House consistently draws Manila's best live blues acts. It recently moved after 34 years on Mabini St.

For some uberhip bar and club action, take the MRT or grab a cab (P120) uptown to Makati, where you'll find the likes of **Absinthe** (Map pp596-7; Greenbelt 3; admission Fri & Sat P100-200; 🍴 8pm-late Mon-Sat), **Nuvo** (Map pp596-7; Greenbelt 2; 🍴 11am-3am) and **Embassy** (Map pp596-7; The Fort Entertainment Centre, Fort Bonifacio; admission P100-200; 🍴 10pm-6am Wed-Sat).

ENTERTAINMENT

Check fliers around Malate and weekend entertainment supplements in the newspapers for big club events and concerts. Manila sadly lacks a *Time Out*-style weekly entertainment guide, but the website www.clickthecity.com fills the gap, with entertainment as well as extensive shopping and eating listings. Also try www.mypn.com.ph and, for big club events, www.superfly.com.ph.

For free entertainment, don't miss the boardwalk along Roxas Blvd (Map pp598-9) as it turns into a veritable 'battle of the bands' after sunset. There's an abundance of street-side restaurants, hip live bands and throngs of ambling Filipinos in their element.

Manila's 200 movie screens are dominated by imported blockbusters. All the shopping centres have multiscreen, air-con cinemas – there are seven screens in Robinsons Place Ermita. Check www.clickthecity.com for listings. Admission is P75 to P150.

SHOPPING

With a hulking shopping centre seemingly around every corner, Manila is a mall rat's fantasy. The closest to the tourist belt is Robinsons Place (Map pp598-9), which is currently being expanded to include an outdoor shopping and eating courtyard, à la **Greenbelt Mall** (Map pp596-7; Makati Ave) in Makati. The city's best mall is the newish **Mall of Asia** (Map pp596-7; Pasay City), with an Olympic-sized ice rink and an Imax theatre.

If you're after DVDs and brand-name clothing of questionable legitimacy, the flea market Greenhills (Map pp596-7) in Ortigas and Divisoria Flea Market (Map pp596-7) in Binondo are your best bets.

Popular souvenir items include wood-carved Ifugao *bulul* (rice guards) and textiles from North Luzon and Mindanao. Try the following:

Silahis Arts & Artifacts Centre (Map p600; 744 General Luna St, Intramuros; 🍴 10am-7pm) Has a textile museum on the top floor.

Tessoro's (Map pp598-9; 1325 Mabini St, Ermita; 🍴 9am-7.30pm) Likewise houses a small textile and crafts museum.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Most international airlines have offices at the NAIA terminal, as well as satellite offices in Makati. PAL is based at Centennial Terminal II. Domestic airlines have offices at the domestic terminal and booking agents dotted around town. See p590 for details on airlines and domestic flights.

Boat

Manila's port is divided into two sections: South Harbor and North Harbor. Two of the three main shipping lines serving Manila use the hardscrabble, hard-to-reach North Har-

bor. It's best to take a taxi to North Harbor (about P75 from Malate), as the area is no place to be wandering around.

The following are the main lines operating long-haul ferries out of Manila to most major cities in the Visayas, Mindanao and Palawan. Full schedules are on their websites.

Negros Navigation (Map pp596-7; ☎ 245 5588; www.negrosnavigation.ph; Pier 2, North Harbor)

Sulpicio Lines (Map pp596-7; ☎ 245 0616; www.sulpiciolines.com; Pier 12, North Harbor)

SuperFerry (Map pp596-7; ☎ 528 7000; www.superferry.com.ph; Pier 15, South Harbor) Also has a ticket office on the 3rd floor of Robinsons Place in Ermita.

Bus

Confusingly there's no single long-distance bus station in Manila. The terminals are mainly strung along EDSA, with a cluster near the intersection of Taft Ave in Pasay City to the south, and in Cubao (part of Quezon City) to the north. Another cluster is north of Quiapo in Sampaloc. If you're confused just tell a taxi driver which station you want in which city (eg 'the Victory Liner terminal in Cubao'), and they should know where it is. Heading into Manila, most buses will just have 'Cubao', 'Pasay' or 'Sampaloc' on the signboard.

Philtranco runs a convenient shuttle service to Clark Airport, with three trips daily from its Pasay station (P350, 1¼ hours) and four trips daily from Megamall in Ortigas (Map pp596-7; P300, 1½ hours). Philtranco also makes a masochists-only haul to Davao in southern Mindanao (P2200, two days) via Samar, Leyte and Cagayan de Oro.

RSL, Philtranco and Cagsawa have overnight buses straight from Ermita to Naga and Legazpi.

Several bus lines run 27-seat 'deluxe' overnight express buses to Legazpi via Naga in Southeast Luzon, and to Vigan in North Luzon. It's essential to book these several days ahead. Advance reservations are also highly recommended for the few direct buses to Banaue.

The following is a list of useful bus companies:

Northbound

Autobus (Map pp596-7; ☎ 735 8098; cnr Tolentino St & España St, Sampaloc) Buses to Banaue (P450 to P650, eight hours) and Vigan (P480, nine hours).

Dominion Bus Lines (Map pp596-7; ☎ 741 4146; cnr EDSA & East Ave, Kamuning) Buses to Vigan (P450, nine hours).

DEJA VU

If canoe trips through the jungle-bordered river to Pagsanjan Falls, 100km south of Manila, feel eerily familiar, it may be because this was one of the locations for Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

Try **Green Star Bus Lines** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 831 3178; Taft Ave) for transport to the area from Manila (P150, three hours).

The DOT-operated **Tagaytay Picnic Grove** (☎ 046-483 0346; barangay Sungay; rP1400) has a variety of pretty basic but well-priced rooms. There's a 15-minute nature walk (along an ugly concrete path) with great views of **Lake Taal**; it's usually good for spotting a few colourful birds.

If you wish to get closer to the action, you can charter *bangkas* to 'Volcano Island' from **Talisay**, on the lake's northeast shore, for around P1500 return and do the often sweltering walk up to Taal Volcano's crater (45 minutes). There are longer walks to be done, including a journey into Taal's crater to bathe in the warm, sulphuric waters therein. This requires a guide (P500) – ask your *bangka* driver or one of the dozens of touts hanging around Talisay.

For Tagaytay, take a **Crow Transit** (Map pp596-7; cnr EDSA & Taft Ave, Pasay City) bus from Manila (P80, two hours). Talisay is a 20-minute jeepney ride straight downhill from Tagaytay (P9).

BATANGAS

☎ 043 / pop 248,000

Batangas is an industrial town that is the jumping off point to Puerto Galera on Mindoro (see p614 for information on boats to Puerto Galera). A short jeepney ride west of Batangas are several **diver resorts** at Anilao, while the well-preserved historical town of **Taal**, birthplace of several Filipino heroes and patriots, lies a little further up the coast.

ALPS Transit and JAM Transit have buses every 30 minutes or so to Batangas pier from Manila (see p604).

NORTH LUZON

Luzon's north is a vast expanse of misty mountains, sprawling plains and endless coastline. The region's trophy piece is the central mountainous area known as the Cor-

dillera, where the Ifugao built their world-famous rice terraces in and around Banaue more than 2000 years ago. Elsewhere, historic Vigan boasts a colonial hub that is the country's best-preserved vestige of its Spanish heritage. Self-explorers can continue north of Vigan to Luzon's wild northern tip, where remote white-sand beaches embrace the coastline and rarely visited islands lurk offshore.

THE CORDILLERA

Most venturers into North Luzon set their sights squarely on the Cordillera, a river-sliced hinterland of lush green forests covering hectare after hectare of jagged earth. The amazing rice terraces near Banaue were hewn out of the steep mountains by the Ifugao some 2000 to 3000 years ago. Legend has it that the god Kabunyan used the steps to visit his people on earth. Lesser known but no less spectacular terraces exist throughout the Cordillera, most notably north of Bontoc in Maligcong and Mainit.

The tribespeople of the Cordillera, collectively known as Igorot, are as compelling as the landscape. In remote areas you'll still see elders in traditional garb such as 'g-strings' (loin cloths). Sturdy travellers can embark on one- to several-day treks over ancient walking trails to visit Igorot villages where the locals tend to their terraces, raise pigs and practise animistic rituals as they have done for eons.

Outside of Baguio there are no ATMs that accept Western plastic. Bring cash, but not too much because you'll only need about \$10 (in any currency!) a day. Throw a poncho in your bag too, as the Cordillera can get chilly at night.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Travel in the Cordillera is exhilarating but requires patience, and ideally a pillow to sit on. The twisting roads are rough, dusty affairs that are subject to landslides in the June to September wet season. Baguio is the traditional launching pad for forays north to Sagada and Banaue, although Banaue can be reached via sealed roads from Manila (eight to nine hours). The trip from Baguio to Sagada is six hours in good weather, mostly over the winding, perilous Halsema Hwy. Sagada to Banaue is three hours, with a jeepney change in Bontoc.

The Halsema Hwy – about two-thirds of which is now sealed – has to be one of the world's most scenic drives. A real engineering feat when it was built in the 1920s, the road snakes along a narrow ridge, usually at well above 2000m (the high point is 2255m). It offers up astonishing, often petrifying views of precipitous valleys, bright green rice terraces and the Philippines' second-highest peak, Mt Pulag (2922m).

Baguio

☎ 074 / pop 275,500 / elev 1450m

Vibrant, woodsy and cool by Philippine standards, Baguio (*bah-gee-oh*) is the Cordillera's nerve centre. For Filipinos, it's the escape of choice from the stifling heat of the lowlands. For foreigners, it's the primary gateway to backpacker bliss up north in Sagada and Banaue.

Baguio's character is shaped by the quarter of a million college students who double Baguio's population for much of the year. Acoustic music wafts out of windows on every street; walking around with a guitar strapped to your back is decidedly *de rigueur*.

Unfortunately, even without tricycles (which can't make it up the hills), Baguio has a traffic problem. If you don't stray far from the main drag of Session Rd, you can be forgiven for disliking this city. Baguio's charm lies well outside the centre, in pine-forested parks such as Camp John Hay.

INFORMATION

Session Rd hosts several internet cafés, banks and telephone offices. The **tourist office** (☎ 446 3434; Lake Dr, Burnham Park; ☎ 8am-5pm) sells maps and can arrange private transport to points north of Baguio.

SIGHTS

The **city market** near the west end of Session Rd shouldn't be missed – it's an infinite warren of stalls selling everything from soap to fresh-grilled chicken foetus. You can also pick up all manner of mass-produced handicrafts, including basketwork, textiles, Ifugao woodcarvings and jewellery (silver is a local speciality).

Eight traditional Ifugao homes and two rare Kalinga huts were taken apart and then reassembled on the side of a hill at the artists' colony **Tam-awan Village** (☎ 446

2949; tamawan@skyinet.net; Long-Long Rd, Pinsao; s/d P500/900). Spending the night in one of these huts is a rare treat. You can learn indigenous dance, music and the martial art *arnis* at the colony, and on a clear day there are wonderful views of the South China Sea, hence the name Tam-awan, which literally means 'Vantage Point'. To get here, take a Quezon Hill–Tam-awan or Tam-awan–Long-Long jeepney (P7.50) from the corner of Kayang and Abano Sts.

SLEEPING

The most unique choice is Tam-awan Village, but note it's at least a 15-minute ride from the centre. Beyond that, Baguio's budget options are perfectly grim. Book well ahead on weekends in the Philippine 'summer' months (March to May).

Baguio Harrison Inn (☎ 442 7803; 37 Harrison Rd; d P400-700) In the YWCA building, the cheapest rooms here are tiny and share a common bathroom, but are good value for Baguio.

Mile Hi-Inn (☎ 446 6141; Mile Hi Center; dm P450) Located in a bizarre duty-free shopping centre within Camp John Hay, this place offers a woodsy escape from the mayhem of Session Rd. It has four single-sex dorm rooms with four beds each. It's a 10-minute FX van ride to Session Rd.

ourpick Burnham Hotel (☎ 442 2331; 21 Calderon St; d from P985) Beautifully adorned with local handicrafts and staffed by a lively, informative family, this graceful place is well worth a couple of extra pesos.

Also recommended:

Benguet Pine Tourist Inn (☎ 442 7325; 82 Shanung St; dm/d P300/800) Quiet option near buses to Banaue.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

A beaten 4WD track heading north out of Baguio for 50 bone-rattling kilometres leads to picturesque **Kabayan**, the site of several caves containing eerie mummies entombed centuries ago by the Ibaloi people. Some of these caves can be visited, while others are known only to Ibaloi elders. After exploring Kabayan for a day or two you can walk back to the Halsema Hwy (six hours) via the **Timbac Caves**, the spot where the best-preserved mummies lurk. You'll need to bring along a guide with a key to unlock the gates protecting the caves.

Red Lion Pub/Inn (☎ 304 3078; 92 Upper General Luna Rd; d P800) Has a few basement rooms if you don't mind the noise overhead.

EATING

In the evenings, Perfecto St (near Burnham Park) turns into a freeway of street stalls barbecuing pretty much everything under the sun.

our pick Bliss (www.blissnabaguio.com; 21 Leonard Wood Rd; mains P100-150; ☺ closed Mon) Owner/chef Shanti home-cooks delectable vegetarian pasta and a few Indian dishes. She and husband Jim hold regular art shows and events – Sunday is art-house flick night. It shares space with the Munsayac Inn.

Cafe by the Ruins (25 Chuntug St; mains P100-150) The 'ruins' in this case are merely the former residence of an ex-governor, but the effect is still sublime, and the organic food as original as the ambience.

Don Henrico's (Session Rd btwn Carlo & Assumption Sts) Don Henrico's sturdy pizza wraps (P120) have no rival when it comes to slaying the late-night munchies.

DRINKING

Red Lion Pub/Inn (92 Upper General Luna Rd) Red Lion is Baguio's preferred expat watering hole. It's also renowned for its steaks and ribs (P350 to P450).

Nevada Square (Loakan Rd off Military Circle) This innocuous-looking collection of bars and clubs turns into one giant fraternity party on weekends, complete with shooters, bar sports and inebriated Filipino students dancing on tabletops.

Rumours (56 Session Rd) For something a little more sophisticated try this long-time traveler fave.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Victory Liner, which has its own flashy terminal off Upper Session Rd, has buses to/from Manila every 30 minutes (P380, six hours). Several other bus companies serve Manila from Governor Pack Rd, just south of the intersection with Session Rd; for details, see p603.

GL Lizardo has hourly buses until 1pm to Sagada (P220, 6½ hours) from the **Dangwa Terminal** (Magsaysay Ave), a five-minute walk north of Session Rd. D'Rising Sun buses to Bontoc (P212, six hours) leave hourly from the **Slaughterhouse Terminal** (Magsaysay Ave), five minutes by

jeepney beyond the Dangwa Terminal. Both routes follow the Halsema Hwy.

KMS and Ohayami have several buses to Banaue (P400, nine hours) each day along the sealed, southern route via Solano. The terminal is on Shanum St, west of Burnham Park.

Sagada pop 3000

Sagada (1477m) is a delightfully laid-back village where you can fall asleep to the sound of chickens and cicadas rather than cars and karaoke. It's home to hearty Kankanay mountain folk and is set amid jagged limestone rock formations that slice through Sagada's rich fir forests. Adventurers will find loads to explore in the area, including spooky **burial caves** and **hanging coffins**, an underground river system and several waterfalls. Most hotels sell maps (P10) that list the main attractions.

Take a guide for pretty much any trekking or caving you do around here or you'll almost surely get lost; grab one (per day P800 to P1200) at the tourist information centre, where you can also hire a private jeepney if need be. If you only have time for one excursion, our pick would be the half-day **cape connection** (per person with guide P400).

SLEEPING

Sagada's basic but charming guesthouses, featuring cosy linen and buckets of hot water (P25), are a delight. Prices listed are for rooms with common bathrooms; most places also have rooms with private bathrooms in the P800 to P1200 range.

Sagada Guesthouse (☎ 0919 300 2763; eda0as@yahoo.com; d per person P200) The rustic, cheerful doubles here, overlooking the central square, are perhaps the town's best value.

St Joseph's Resthouse (☎ 0918 559 5934; s/d/tr per person P200; ☒) Set on a hill overlooking town, this is probably the best all-around choice, with a wide variety of rooms to choose from, good food and excellent views. The cheaper rooms are shoeboxes.

Olahbinan Resthouse (☎ 0928 406 7646; d per person P250) It's wood from floor to ceiling inside this immaculately kept, rambling house, located behind the Sagada Igorot Inn.

EATING

Sagada has a few surprisingly good eating options.

Masferré (sandwiches P60, mains P90-600) Sagada's most popular restaurant is run by the family of the late Sagada-born photographer Eduardo Masferré. Ask the proprietor for a tour of the Masferré Gallery, in a private house just outside of town.

Yoghurt House (pastas P110-130) A local gallery and craft museum as much as a restaurant, Yoghurt House has a lip-smacking menu offering spicy Indian curries, filling pastas and its trademark yoghurt muesli breakfasts (P60 to P80).

our pick Log Cabin (☎ 0920 520 0463; meals from P300; ☺ dinner) The fireplace dining here hits the spot on those chilly evenings. On Saturday there's a buffet (P250; prepaid reservations only) prepared by a French chef.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are jeepneys to Bontoc every hour until noon (P35, one hour). The last bus to Baguio leaves at 1pm (see opposite for details).

Bontoc

☎ 074 / pop 3600

This Wild West frontier town is the central Cordillera's transport and market hub. You can still see tribal elders with full body tattoos and g-strings strolling the streets, especially on Sunday when people descend from the surrounding villages to sell their wares at Bontoc's bustling market. Don't even think about leaving Bontoc without visiting the **Bontoc Museum** (admission P50; ☺ 8am-noon & 1-5pm), which has fascinating exhibits on each of the region's main tribes. Check out the grisly photos of head-hunters and their booty.

There's some mint trekking to be done around Bontoc, most notably to the stone-walled **rice terraces of Maligcong**, which rival those in Batad. To really get off the beaten track, head even further north into Kalinga Province, where you can hike to remote villages and meet aged former head-hunters. Ask around the hotels for Kinad (for treks around Bontoc) or Francis Pa-In (for Kalinga treks).

If you are staying a night, **Churya-a Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 0906 430 0853; darwin_churyaa@yahoo.com; dm/d/tr P100/350/600) has clean if unspectacular rooms, and a pleasant balcony overlooking Bontoc's main street.

Cable Tours has the only direct bus to/from Manila, leaving Bontoc daily at 3pm (P600, 12 hours) and leaving Manila nightly at 8.30pm. It goes via Banaue (P150, two hours). To Banaue, there are also two jeepneys around noon

(P130, two hours) and four morning buses. Jeepneys to Sagada (P35, one hour) leave hourly until 5pm from near the Eastern Star Hotel. For buses to Baguio, see opposite.

Banaue & the Rice Terraces

☎ 074 / pop 2700

Banaue is synonymous with Luzon's most famous icon, the Unesco World Heritage-listed Ifugao rice terraces, etched out of the hillsides using primitive tools and an ingenious irrigation system over 2000 years ago. The Ifugao by no means had a monopoly on rice terraces in the Cordillera, but they were arguably the best sculptors, as the mesmerizing display overlooking Banaue suggests.

Banaue itself – a ragged collection of tin-roofed edifices along a ridge – often spoils things for those looking for a perfect first ooh-and-ahh moment. But you can't argue with Banaue's setting, and accommodation remains of stellar value compared with most tourist hot spots in the Philippines. Meanwhile, that perfect ooh-and-ahh is not far away, in Batad.

The Ifugao are almost as famous for carving wood as they are for carving earth into green, fuzzy, rice-bearing steps. You'll find myriad locally made carvings and other crafts in the shops surrounding the main plaza. Two kilometres north of town you can ogle rice terraces to your heart's content at the **viewpoint**; a tricycle there and back costs P200. If your heart's still not content, there are similarly impressive specimens lurking in nearby Hapao and Kiangnan, as well as around Bontoc and in Kalinga Province to the north.

INFORMATION

The **tourist office** (☎ 386 4010; ☺ 7am-6pm) adjacent to the plaza arranges accredited guides (P1000 to P1500) and private transport according to a remarkably transparent list of set prices. Good little maps of the main hiking routes are widely available for P10. You can change money and access the internet at the upscale Banaue Hotel or in the plaza area.

SLEEPING & EATING

People's Lodge (☎ 386 4014; s/d from P150/300) Service couldn't be friendlier at this sweet value spot, which has one of the more popular restaurants in town.

Sanafe Lodge & Restaurant (☎ 386 4085; dm/s/d P150/600/750) Wood panelling is the theme

in the small rooms here. The rice terrace-facing barstools precariously perched over the Banaue valley are perfect for a posthike frosty one.

Banaue View Inn (☎ 386 4078; 3-bed dm P200, d/tr P700/900) This inn off the main road above town boasts a bird's-eye view of the rice terraces and has shipshape rooms. Karen, the owners' daughter, is a great source of information.

Restaurants in Banaue close annoyingly early, except for **Las Vegas** (☎ 0918 440 9932), which also has cheap rooms.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are now three bus companies making the direct trip nightly to Manila (see p603). If you miss those take a jeepney to Solano (P100, two hours) and pick up a Manila-bound bus there.

For bus companies serving Baguio, see p608. Most buses to Baguio ply the lowland route via Solano. To take the scenic but perilous highland route (ie via Bontoc and the Halsema Hwy), you must transfer in Bontoc. There are two early morning jeepneys to Bontoc, and a handful of Bontoc-bound buses pass through Banaue throughout the day (about P150, two hours).

Batad

pop 1150

To really see the **Ifugao rice terraces** in all their glory, you'll need to trek to Batad (900m), nestled halfway up an imposing amphitheatre of rice fields. Most of the inhabitants still practise traditional tribal customs in what must be one of the most serene, picture-perfect villages to grace the earth. A slippery 45-minute walk beyond the village itself is the gorgeous 25m-high **Tappiya Waterfall** and swimming hole.

SLEEPING

Although electricity is now common in Batad, accommodation remains decidedly rustic. Rather than being a disadvantage, this, and the distinct absence of any kind of engine, is a big part of the town's appeal. Most guesthouses overlook the amphitheatre from a ridge above Batad, and provide blankets to take the edge off the chilly nights.

Hillside Inn, Rita's Mount View Inn and Simon's Inn all have restaurants and rooms for P150 per head. They're all simple, clean and homey, but Rita's wins our hearts with its all-round charm.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Banaue, it's 12km over a rocky road to Batad Junction, where a 4WD track leads three bone-jarring kilometres up to the 'saddle' high above Batad. From the saddle it's a 45-minute hike to Batad.

A few morning jeepneys go from Banaue to Batad Junction (P60); one afternoon jeepney goes to the saddle (P100). You can also take a tricycle to the junction (one-way P350, return P700 including waiting time). Sturdier tricycles can make it to the saddle. You can also team up with other travellers in Banaue and hire a private jeepney to the saddle (one-way/return P1500/2000).

If you are overnighting in Batad, get out to the saddle by 9am (or to the junction by 10am) the next morning to catch the last jeepney back to Banaue.

VIGAN

☎ 077 / pop 46,500

Spanish-era mansions, cobblestone streets and *kalesa* (horse-drawn carriages) are the hallmarks of Unesco World Heritage site Vigan. Miraculously spared bombing in WWII, the city is considered the finest surviving example of a Spanish colonial town. One of Vigan's finer mansions is now the **Crisologo Museum** (Liberation Blvd; admission free; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sat).

After being razed several times by earthquakes, **St Paul Cathedral** (Plaza Salcedo) was rebuilt in 1641, bigger and better, in a style known as 'earthquake baroque'. It was a successful technique, and the church is now one of the oldest and biggest in the Philippines.

The **Vigan Town Fiesta** is in the third week of January, while the **Viva Vigan Festival of the Arts** takes place in early May.

Sleeping

It's worth paying a little extra to stay in one of Vigan's charismatic colonial homes. Prices go way down from June to October.

Vigan Hotel (☎ 722 1906; Burgos St; s/d from P395/495; 🏠) The once popular Vigan Hotel today suffers from a decided lack of TLC. It's still cheap though.

Gordian Inn (☎ 722 2562; www.gordianinn.netfirms.com; cnr V de los Reyes & Salcedo Sts; d P600-1500; 🏠) This old mansion has a new wing with some budget-friendly rooms.

Villa Angela (☎ 722 2914; 26 Quirino Blvd; d from P1200; 🏠) This magnificent place has a giant

JULIA CAMPBELL (1967-2007)

The murder of Peace Corps volunteer Julia Campbell at the hands of a local man on the main trail to Batad in April 2007 shocked the country. Her blog – www.julianthephilippines.blogspot.com – quickly turned into a poignant shrine where Filipinos issued their condolences and expressed their shame. While the country's justice minister despicably blamed Campbell for hiking alone, the truth is that the incident was extremely uncharacteristic of the hospitable Ifugao people, who were so upset by the murder that they donated a 40-hectare forest plot as a memorial. The murder was a random act of violence, not a terrorist act or hate crime, and the killer was swiftly caught and brought to justice. Nonetheless, in the wake of the murder local authorities strongly advise all tourists to hire a guide for any hikes around Banaue, Bontoc and Sagada, and to register with the local tourist office upon arrival.

sala (living room) festooned with antiques and four bedrooms looking much as they would have in the 18th century.

Eating

Café Leona (Mena Crisologo St; snacks P50-75, mains P200-300) Just off Plaza Burgos, popular Café Leona serves terrific Ilocano food and passable Japanese specials on the cobbled street. Around the corner is the more economical Plaza Sanitary (Florentino St; mains P60 to P100).

Evening **street stalls** (Plaza Burgos) serve snacks such as *empanadas* (deep-fried tortillas with shrimp, cabbage and egg) and *okoy* (shrimp omelettes).

Getting There & Away

There are plenty of companies serving Manila (see p603), but the trip is most comfortable on the 'deluxe' 27-seater overnight buses run by Partas (☎ 722 3369; Alcantara St). Partas also has 10 daily trips to Baguio (P300, five hours).

SOUTHEAST LUZON

Fiery food, fierce typhoons and furious volcanoes characterise the adventure wonderland known as Bicol. The region's most famous peak, Mt Mayon, may just be the world's most perfect volcano. And it's no sleeping beauty, either. A steady stream of noxious fumes leaks out of its maw, and minor eruptions are frequent. You can climb most of the way up Mayon, but there is better hiking to be had in Mt Isarog National Park and on the remote Caramoan Peninsula. Below water, Bicol is famous for one of the Philippines' most famous attractions: the gentle, graceful *butanding* (whale sharks) of Donsol.

You'll want to pay extra attention to the news before heading to Bicol, lest you waltz into one of the region's patented typhoons. The Pan-Philippine or Maharlika Hwy runs right through Bicol down to Matnog, where ferries cross to Samar (P100, one hour).

NAGA

☎ 062 / pop 161,000

Naga is relatively cosmopolitan by Philippine standards, with a young, vibrant student population. The city centres on a pleasant double plaza that often hosts large concerts or festivals after sundown. In September don't miss the famous **Peñafrancia Festival**, held in honour of Naga's patron, the Virgin of Peñafrancia. Be sure to sample the spicy local Bicol cuisine, as well as pili nuts (a local favourite).

Activities

Hiking is the big activity around here, especially in two areas: the **Caramoan Peninsula** and **Mt Isarog National Park**. The former is actually more renowned for its coastal jewels – untouched beaches and jagged limestone cliffs similar to those found in Palawan. But you can explore the area on foot, stopping along the way to go island hopping in boats hired from local fishermen. There are several places to stay in Caramoan town or you can camp on white-sand **Gota Beach**. Talk to the helpful caretaker there, Tiyo, for advice. The town tourist office rents out tents. To get there go to Sabang (see p612), then take a scenic *bangka* ride to Guijalo (P130, two hours, last trip 1pm), which is 10 minutes by tricycle from Caramoan town.

Looming over Naga, craggy **Mt Isarog** (1966m) is easier to get to. You can launch an assault on its summit or there are several shorter hikes through the jungle lower down.

Access to the national park is from the town of Panicuason, where you can find guides.

The **Kadlagan Outdoor Shop & Climbing Wall** (☎ 472 3305; kadlagan@yahoo.com; 16 Dimasalang St, Naga) hires out tents and other camping gear, and guides excursions to Mt Isarog and the Caramoan Peninsula. Jojo Villareal knows all the local rocks and routes and is usually here in the evenings. Guides cost roughly P1000 per day, not including meals, equipment, island-hopping boats, porters etc.

Sleeping

Sampaguita Tourist Inn (☎ 473 8896; Panganiban Dr, s/d from P150/350) The cookie-cutter rooms here won't excite you, but they won't give you any major problems either. Choose between windowless or loud.

Golden Leaf Hotel (☎ 471 6507; Misericordia St; s/d from P300/400; ☼) Positively gleaming new rooms are a welcome change to Naga's usual musty offerings. Cross the Panganiban Dr bridge, then take the second left.

Eating & Drinking

San Francisco food court (Peñafrancia Ave; portions P10-20) This lane of food stalls next to San Francisco Church is a great place to get down with the locals and sample fiery Bicol dishes, such as *pinangat* (taro leaves wrapped around minced fish or pork) and *ginataang pusit* (squid cooked in coconut milk).

'Magsaysay' jeepneys along Peñafrancia Ave lead to a new food mall, **Avenue Square** (Magsaysay Ave). Beyond this mall is a huddle of popular bars and restaurants, the best of which is **Coco Leaf** (Magsaysay Ave; mains P75-50), with Filipino and Asian-fusion dishes. **Molino Bar & Grill** (Magsaysay Ave; 6-beer bucket P150) was the party nexus for the cool university crowd when we visited.

Getting There & Away

Air Philippines has a daily flight to Manila.

The bus station is just over Panganiban Bridge. Cagsawa and RSL bus lines go directly to Ermita in Manila, while several others go to Cubao (see p603). The night buses to Manila fill up fast so book a few days ahead.

Minivans are the preferred method of local travel. They go to Panicuason (P30, 30 minutes), Sabang (P75, one hour) and Legazpi (P120, two hours). Air-con buses to Legazpi take longer and cost the same, while ordinary (non-air-con) buses sometimes take six hours!

LEGAZPI

☎ 052 / pop 184,000

Charm is in short supply in the city of Legazpi, but with the towering cone of Mt Mayon hogging the horizon no-one seems to really notice. The city is divided into Albay District, where the provincial government offices and airport are located, and commercial Legazpi City. A steady stream of jeepneys connects the two districts (P7.50) along the national highway. You can pick up a great map of the city at the **Provincial Tourism Office** (☎ 820 6315; http://tourism.albay.gov.ph; Astrodome Complex, Aquende Dr, Albay District).

Sleeping

Dreams Inn & Cafe (☎ 480 0885; F Imperial St, Legazpi City; s/d from P150/575; ☼) This extra-value special across from Pacific Mall has well-maintained cookie-cutter rooms. Don't plan on throwing a party in the singles.

Catalina's Lodging House (☎ 481 1634; 96 Peñafrancia St, Legazpi City; s P180-240, d P240-550; ☼) The small rooms here have fragrant old wooden floors and range from very cheap and basic to less cheap and basic.

Legazpi Tourist Inn (☎ 480 6147; V&O Bldg, Quezon Ave, Legazpi City; s/d from P500/560; ☼) The best midrange option is this modern place, with clean and well-kept rooms, quality TVs and lots of mirrors.

Eating & Drinking

The nightly street stalls along Quezon Ave near the Trylon Monument in Legazpi City dish out fried chicken, noodles and fiery, coconut milk-cooked Bicol specialties for P10 to P30 per portion.

Waway's Restaurant (Peñafrancia St, Legazpi City; dishes P60-100) On the northern side of town, this is the best place in the country to try Bicol food. A surprisingly palatable choice for the adventurous eater is *candingga* (diced pig liver and carrots sweetened and cooked in vinegar).

our pick Small Talk (Doña Aurora St & National Hwy, Albay District; mains P75-125) This delightful little eatery adds Bicol touches to its Italian fare. Try the pasta *pinangat* or 'Bicol express' pasta.

Buckets of beer (P150) and live music are the themes at the bars on the 3rd floor of the **Silver Screens Entertainment Centre** (cnr Magallanes & Ramon Santos Sts, Legazpi City). This is also the place to catch big-budget Hollywood movies.

Getting There & Away

Cebu Pacific flies twice daily and PAL once daily to/from Legazpi. Sit on the left side flying out of Legazpi for prime views of Mt Mayon.

The main bus terminal is at the Satellite Market, just west of Pacific Mall in Legazpi City. Cagsawa and RSL bus lines have popular deluxe night buses that go directly to Ermita in Manila, while several others go to Cubao (see p603).

For options to Naga, see opposite. The only direct trip to Donsol is by air-con minivan (P60, 1¼ hours).

AROUND LEGAZPI

Mt Mayon

Bicolanos hit the nail on the head when they named this monolith – *magayon* is the local word for 'beautiful'. The impossibly perfect slopes of the volcano's cone rise to 2462m above sea level, emitting a constant plume of smoke over the flat plains and surrounding coconut plantations.

The spirit of the mountain is an old king whose beloved niece ran away with a young buck. The grumpy old man's pride still erupts frequently. In February 1993, 77 people died and a further 50,000 were evacuated. This was followed by an ash eruption in 1999, streaming lava in 2000, and more lava in 2001, 2004 and 2006. Shortly after the lava flows of 2006 subsided, a biblical typhoon triggered mudslides on Mt Mayon that killed more than 1000 people.

Despite that, the mountain's 'knife edge' – the highest point to which you can climb, at about 2200m – was reopened in 2007 after being off-limits for three years. For most people it's a 1½-day climb, but extremely fit climbers may be able to do it in a day with an early start. The best time to climb is February to April. From May to August it's unbearably hot; from September to January it's unbearably wet.

Guides are mandatory and can be secured through the **Region V Department of Tourism** (DOT; ☎ 482 0712; National Hwy, Rawis), 2.5km north of Legazpi City, or through **Bicol Adventure & Tours** (☎ 480 2266; bicoladventure@digitelone.com; V&O Bldg, Quezon Ave, Legazpi City). Organised treks cost about US\$100/110/145 for one/two/three persons and include transport from Legazpi, camping equipment, porters, food etc. Figure on P2000 per day for just a guide.

Donsol

pop 4200

Every year, between December and early June, a large number of whale sharks, or *butanding*, frolic in the waters off this sleepy fishing village about 50km from Legazpi. It's truly an exhilarating experience swimming along with these silver-spotted marine leviathans, which can reach 18m in length. In the peak months of February to May, the question isn't whether you will see a shark, but how many you will see. Call Salvador Adrao at the **Donsol Visitors Center** (☎ 0927 233 0364; ☼ 7.30am-5pm) to make sure they're around before you visit.

When you arrive in town head to the visitors centre to pay your registration fee (P300) and arrange a boat and spotter (P3500, good for seven people), plus a *Butanding* Interaction Officer (BIO; P700). There is a limited supply of snorkelling equipment available for hire, so bring your own just in case. Scuba diving is prohibited.

SLEEPING & EATING

Santiago Lodging House (tr P300) Located across from the town hall, this is basically a home-stay with three good, clean rooms in a beat-up wooden house.

Amor Farm Beach Resort (d from P500; ☼) Right next to the visitors centre, Amor Farm is a peaceful place, albeit not quite as well kept as Woodland.

Woodland Farm Beach Resort (cottages from P800; ☼) This is a stylish place with tidy, comfortable duplex cottages, a restaurant and a narrow brown-sand beach. It's just north of the visitors centre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air-con minivans leave to/from Legazpi every hour until about 4pm (P60, 1¼ hours).

MINDORO

This large and attractive island just south of Luzon has something of a split personality. The beach centre of Puerto Galera in the north is all dive schools and skin tone culture. Further south, sons of peasants are fighting for the communist NPA (see p584), and in the forested mountains in the middle the Mangyan tribal people live as slash-and-burn farmers.

Puerto Galera's first-rate scuba-diving opportunities in the surrounding Unesco-protected marine reserve are the big tourist draw. Sabang is diving HQ. For something off this well-beaten path, make a beeline for the west coast's Apo Reef, where the world-class underwater action involves plenty of sharks and stingrays.

Getting There & Away

Asian Spirit flies to San José in southern Mindoro daily, but the way to Puerto Galera is by boat from Batangas (see Getting There & Around, below).

There are also hourly SuperCat fastcraft ferries from Batangas to Calapan in northern Mindoro (P230, one hour) as well as slower car ferries (P160, 2½ hours). Montenegro Shipping has three ferries per week from Batangas to San José (P582, 12 hours). Regular ferries to Boracay depart from Roxas (see p616).

PUERTO GALERA

☎ 043 / pop 25,700

It lacks the beautiful beach, classy resorts and edgy nightlife of Boracay, but this diving hot spot on the northern tip of Mindoro is conveniently located just a hop, skip and a *bangka* ride from Manila. That alone easily qualifies it as the country's second most popular tourist destination after Boracay.

The name Puerto Galera typically refers to the town of Puerto Galera and the resort areas surrounding it – namely Sabang, 7km to the east, and White Beach, 7km to the west. The town proper has a breathtakingly beautiful harbour, but otherwise is of little interest. Indeed, most travellers take ferries directly to Sabang or White Beach and never step foot in Puerto Galera town.

Many internet cafés dot Sabang and White Beach, but there are no ATMs in the area so bring cash. The privately owned **Tourist Center** (☎ 287 3108; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat), on the main road in Sabang, has information on transport and hotels and also exchanges currency.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Speedy *bangka* ferries to Puerto Galera, Sabang Beach and White Beach leave regularly throughout the day from Batangas pier until about 4.30pm (P180, one hour). The last trip back to Batangas from Sabang leaves

DID YOU KNOW?

Whale shark-watching in Donsol is the Philippines' highest profile – and probably most successful – community-based ecotourism project. Many *Butanding* Interaction Officers (BIOs) and spotters are former fishermen who once hunted whale sharks and dynamite-fished on the local reefs.

at 1.45pm, from White Beach at 3.30pm, and from Puerto Galera it's the 5.30pm car ferry (P190, 2½ hours). This crossing can be rough, but the boats usually sail unless there's a tropical storm brewing.

To Calapan, frequent jeepneys leave from the petrol station 500m south of Puerto Galera proper (P60, two hours). Transfer in Calapan for Roxas, where ferries depart to Boracay.

Jeepneys ply the routes between Sabang and Puerto Galera town, and White Beach and Puerto Galera town, leaving every 30 minutes or so until 6pm; both rides cost P15 and take 20 minutes. A tricycle from Sabang to Puerto Galera costs a steep P150; from Puerto Galera to White Beach it is P100. You'll save some money by taking a motorcycle taxi.

Off-road motorcycles can be rented for around P800 a day.

Sabang Beach

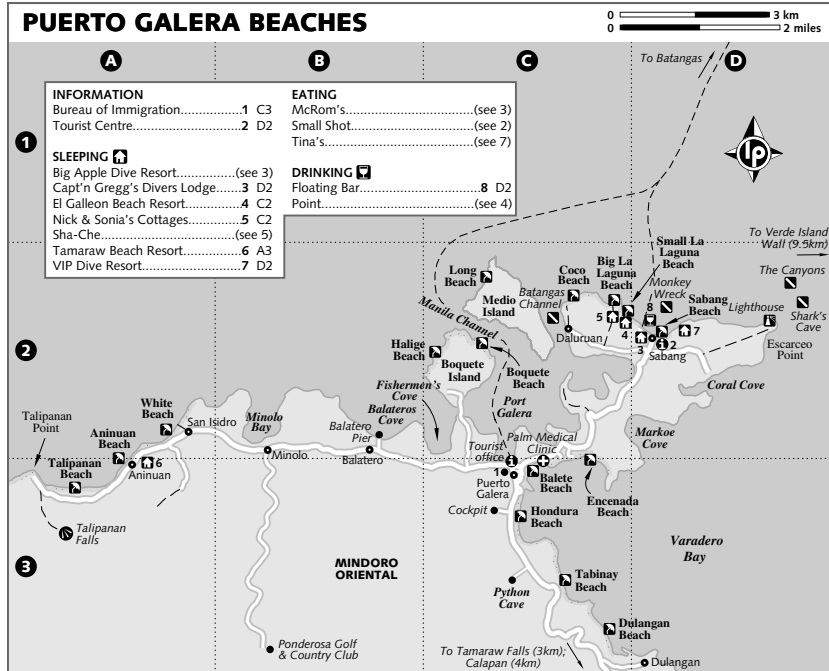
Drinking and underwater pursuits are the activities of choice in Sabang, with plenty of establishments offering variations on this theme. The local divers' association keeps dive prices uniform at about US\$30 for a one-tank dive if you lack your own equipment. An open-water course will set you back US\$350 to US\$400. Snorkel and fin hire is P3 to P5 per day. By night Sabang serves up plenty of action, much of it less than wholesome.

Just around the headland and a stone's throw from Sabang, the cleaner and more laid-back **Small La Laguna Beach** has several resorts fronting a brown strip of sand. Beyond that is **Big La Laguna Beach**.

SLEEPING

Expect big discounts off these prices in the June to October low season.

VIP Dive Resort (☎ 0917 795 9062; d P400-1000) Sabang's cheapest rooms are a bit worn but



still have verandas, hot water and small kitchens. It's at the quieter east side of the beach.

Big Apple Dive Resort (☎ 0919 852 3442; www.dive-bigapple.com; s/d P750/850; 🏠) Professionally run Big Apple has a popular beachfront bar and reasonably large rooms set around a garden out the back. There's free wi-fi.

Capt'n Gregg's Divers Lodge (☎ 287 3070; www.captngreggs.com; d P800-1400; 🏠) This Sabang institution is great value. The wood-lined rooms, right over the water, earn the best-view plaudit. All rooms have TV, minibar and free wi-fi.

El Galleon Beach Resort (☎ 0917 814 5170; www.elgalleon.com; Small La Laguna Beach; d from US\$40; 🏠 📺 📶) Elegant hut-style rooms with wicker furniture and verandas creep up a beachfront cliff and slink around the pool. Yes it's a splurge, but completely worth it.

Right next to each other on Small La Laguna Beach are two similarly good-value places: **Nick & Sonia's Cottages** (☎ 0917 803 8156; r P800-1500) and **Sha-Che** (☎ 0917 641 0112; r P1000-2500). Both offer what are essentially small studio apartments, complete with kitchens and TVs, in concrete rows just off the beach.

EATING

The restaurants in Sabang are, in a word, expensive.

Tina's (mains P75-200) Way down at the east end of Sabang Beach, Tina's has the best-price food on the beachfront. Do try Tina's schnitzel.

McRom's (Sabang Beach; mains P120-350) Popular with expats in the know, McRom's serves up sizzling local and Western dishes.

There are several simple Filipino eateries down the main road leading away from the beachfront. **Small Shot** (noodle dishes from P50) is the pick of the lot.

DRINKING

Floating Bar (☎ 9am-7pm) This popular bar, moored off Sabang, is the place to go if you really want to drink like a fish. Remember to apply plenty of sun protection while you're still sober. Free shuttle boats leave from in front of Capt'n Gregg's Divers Lodge.

Point (☎ 10am-midnight) El Galleon's enviably placed bar is the best spot for a sundowner

cocktail, with ocean views and a CD collection as colourful as the cocktails.

White Beach & Aninuan Beach

Known as Sabang's quieter and less seedy cousin, White Beach has in recent years become a little too popular among the Manila weekend warrior set. While the beach here trumps Sabang's pebbly sliver, don't expect it to rival its namesake in Boracay.

Worse, White Beach's gaudy, concrete cinder blocks and bare-bones *nipa* huts – none available for less than P1500 a room for most of the year – may just be the worst-value accommodation in the Philippines. Outside low-season weekdays, White Beach is to be avoided, and even then you may not find much of interest here if you aren't an aficionado of banana boats or karaoke.

If you want to escape the girlie bars of Sabang, a much better option is the mellower, cleaner Aninuan Beach. **Tamaraw Beach Resort** (☎ 0916 613 2845; Aninuan Beach; d P800-1500; 🏠) is a sprawling, full-service hotel with a few cosy, budget-friendly beachfront cottages and hotel-style rooms in a concrete edifice. It has a fleet of sailboards for windsurfing and a dive centre.

ROXAS

☎ 043 / pop 10,000

Roxas is a dusty little spot with ferry connections to Caticlan (the jumping-off point for Boracay). The anthropologically inclined can take a day trip and walk to the villages of nearby Mangyan. Talk to Boy Villaluna, owner of the Roxas Villa Hotel & Restaurant.

If you need to stay the night, the **Roxas Villa Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 289 2026; Administration St; s/d P350/450; 🏠 🏠) is in the town centre.

There are about six daily ferries to Caticlan (P330, four hours) from Dangay, a P6 jeepney ride from town. Vans to the pier in Calapan (P180, 2½ hours) leave from Dangay pier and from Morente St near the town plaza. From Calapan there are jeepneys to Puerto Galera and ferries to Batangas see p614.

THE VISAYAS

If it's white sand, rum and coconuts you're after, look no further than the jigsaw puzzle of central islands known as the Visayas. From party-mad Boracay and Cebu, to

mountainous Leyte and Negros, to dreamy Siquijor and Malapascua, the Visayas has about everything an island nut could ask for. Hopping among paradisiacal, palm-fringed isles, you'll inevitably wonder why you can't go on doing this forever. Indeed, many foreigners *do* give it all up, take a local partner and live out their years managing this resort or that dive centre on some exquisite patch of white sand. Others end up simply extending their trip for months – or years. This is one area of the country where you can dispense with advance planning. Just board that first ferry and follow your nose.

Getting There & Around

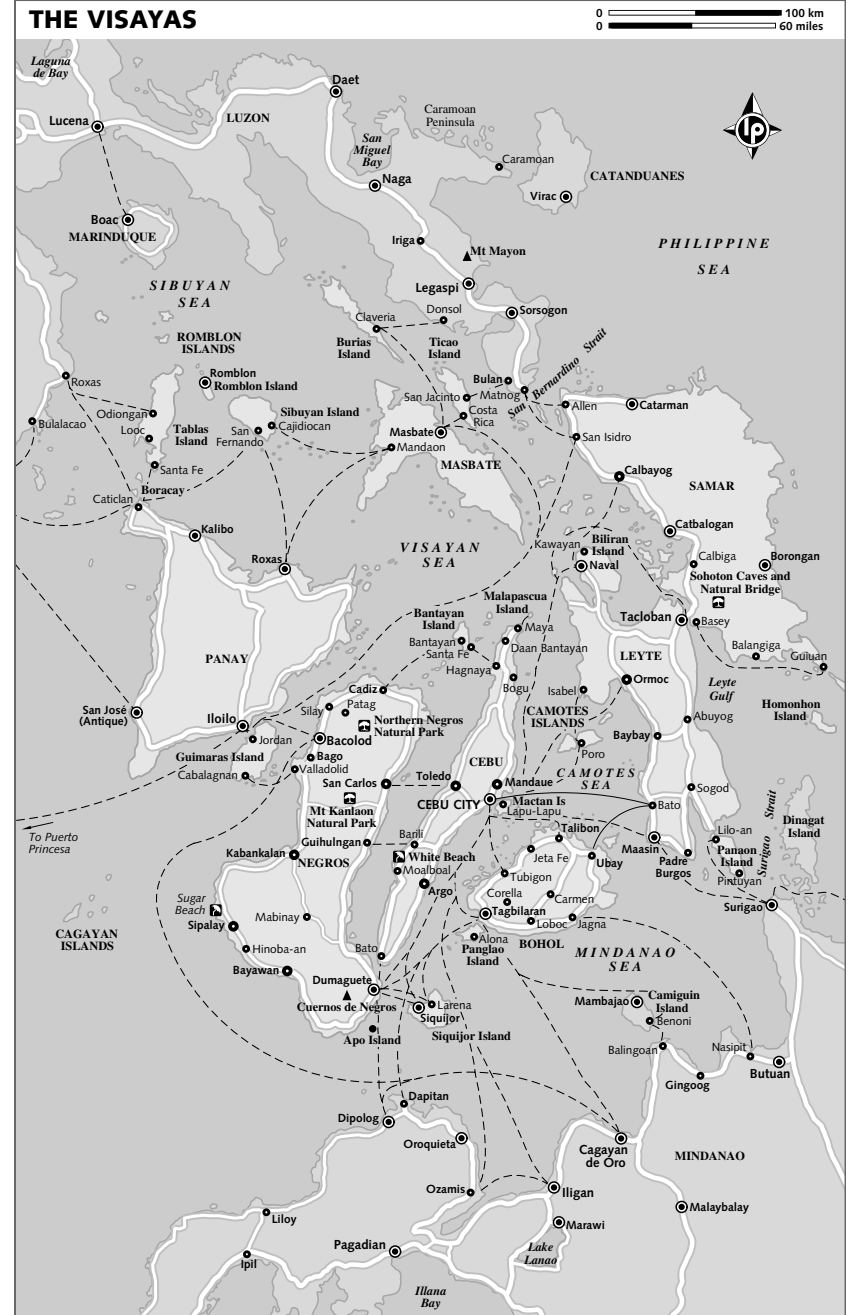
All the major cities in the Visayas are well connected to Manila by both air and sea. Cebu City and ports in the southern Visayas have good ferry connections to Mindanao, including Surigao and Cagayan de Oro.

If you prefer to get to the Visayas overland from Luzon, head to Matnog on the southern tip of southeast Luzon, just a short ferry hop to Allen in northern Samar. From Allen, buses head south into Leyte, which is well connected by boat to Cebu and the rest of the central Visayas. Or you could enter the region via Roxas on Mindoro, which is connected by boat to Caticlan (see left).

The six main islands of the Visayas – Panay, Negros, Cebu, Bohol, Leyte and Samar – are linked to each other by a veritable armada of so-called 'fastcraft' ferries, with plenty of 'roll-on, roll-off' car ferries (ROROs) following in their wake. Cebu City is the Visayas' main hub, with frequent ferry connections to all major and minor Visayan ports.

PANAY

The large, triangular island of Panay is where you'll enter the Visayas if taking the ferry from Mindoro. To most travellers, mainland Panay is just a giant, clumsy planet around which orbits diminutive party satellite Boracay island. Yet Panay has plenty to offer plucky independent travellers willing to part with their guidebooks for a few days, including decaying forts, Spanish churches, remote thatch-hut fishing villages and the mother of all Philippine fiestas, Kalibo's Mardi Gras-like **Ati-Atihan**, which peaks in the third week of January. Panay's capital and gateway to the rest of the Visayas is Iloilo, a five-hour bus ride south of Boracay.



Boracay

☎ 036 / pop 13,900

With a postcard-perfect, 3km-long white beach on its résumé and the country's best island nightlife, it's not hard to figure out why Boracay is the country's top tourist draw. Overdevelopment has made some old-timers long for the halcyon days of no electricity, but the debate about whether it's better now or was better then won't worry you too much when you're digging your feet into the sand on White Beach and taking in the Philippines' most famous sunset. Parasails, seabirds, Frisbees and *paraw* (small *bangka* sailboats) cut across the Technicolor horizon, while palm trees whisper in the breeze and reggae wafts through the air. Oh yeah, and you're in a beachfront bar that's generously serving you two-for-one cocktails. Yes, even 'developed' Boracay remains a master creator of the mellow island vibe.

INFORMATION

Boracay Island Municipal Hospital (☎ 288 3041;

☎ 24hr) Off the main road, behind Boat Station 2.

BPI Has an ATM at D'Mall accepting many foreign cards.

Metrobank (Boracay Main Rd) ATM machine accepts most foreign cards.

Tourist Center (☎ 288 3705; ☎ 9am-11pm) Private company offering a range of services, such as internet access, postal services and money-changing facilities (including American Express travellers cheques). Also sells plane tickets and posts ferry schedules.

ACTIVITIES

On Boracay you can try your hand at a stupendous array of sporting pursuits, including **paraw rides** (per hr P500), **diving**, **windsurfing** and **parasailing**. From December to March, consistent winds, shallow water and good prices (about US\$350 for a 14-hour certification course) make the east side of the island the perfect place to learn **kite-boarding**. Of the several kite-surfing centres, **Hangin** (☎ 288 3663; www.kiteboardingboracay.com) is the only one that stays open year-round.

Back on White Beach, daily games of **football**, **volleyball** and **ultimate Frisbee** kick off in the late afternoon.

SLEEPING

Budget accommodation on Boracay grows ever scarcer, but a few backpacker-friendly options remain around Boat Station 3 on the

south side of White Beach. Bargaining might bear fruit, especially in the low season. The two clusters of budget accommodation are around Melinda's Garden and Julius Bamboo Beach House. Steer clear of the beachfront, where huts cost 50% to 100% more.

Tree House Da Mario (☎ 288 4386; treehouse_damario@yahoo.com.ph; dm/d P180/1500; 🏠) Proprietor Mario, a 30-year veteran of Boracay, offers a wide variety of rooms spread across two complexes. The four-bed dorm rooms, behind Da Mario's tasty Italian restaurant, are the island's best value.

Casa Camilla (☎ 288 5209; http://asiabill.pages.web.com/id1.html; dm P250, d P600-1800; 🏠) The cheapest rooms here are dark, dank concrete numbers, but an extra P200 nets you a two-room cottage with a stove. The dilapidated dorms are for the desperate only.

Boracay Dive Hostel (☎ 288 6954; www.boracaydivehostel.com; d from P500; 🏠) Dive/room packages make this place perfect for divers on a budget, but the cheap fan rooms, brewed coffee and free wi-fi will thrill penny pinchers of all stripes.

Giulius Bamboo Beach House (☎ 288 5840; d P800-1000; 🏠) The basic cottages here have enough bamboo to make a panda bear feel at home. Contrary to what the name suggests, it's a short walk from the beach.

Melinda's Garden (☎ 288 3021; www.melindasgarden.com; d P800-1500; 🏠) This leafy, long-standing jewel has been inching upscale over the years, but retains a pair of P800 cottages along with a friendly atmosphere and quality food.

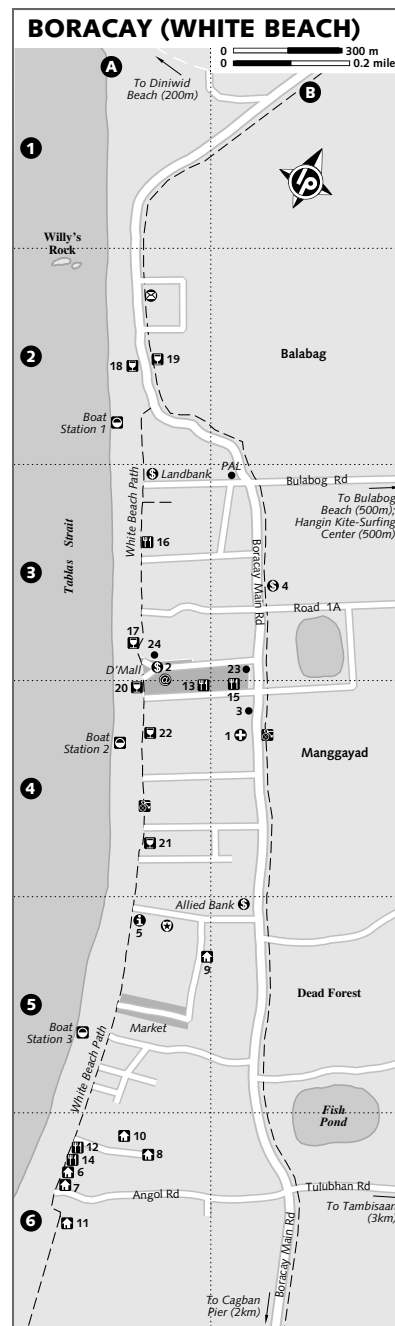
Dave's Straw Hat Inn (☎ 288 5465; www.davesstrawhatinn.com; d P1100-1650; 🏠) Dave gives travellers what they want – including free wi-fi, free book exchange and small but tasteful rooms with verandas.

EATING

You'll find the best deals on Filipino food near the wet market (known as D'Palengke) in the southeast corner of D'Mall. Of course, it's worth paying a bit more for the ambience of White Beach – just stroll along until you see something that takes your fancy.

RNRC (meals P75-100) Also known as Cindy's, this fast-food and BBQ shack serves both the cheapest food and the cheapest San Miguel (P25) on the beach.

our pick **Smoke** (d'palengke; mains P75-120) This is hands down Boracay's best-value restaurant, with freshly cooked Filipino food,



appetizing coconut-milk curries and a P60 Filipino breakfast.

bei Kurt und Madz (mains P115-250) Has a blissfully long happy hour (2pm to 8pm) featuring P25 San Miguel and a diverse, affordable menu to satisfy both noodle lovers and meat-and-potatoes types.

Cyma (☎ 288 4283; D'Mall; mains P140-300) This Greek restaurant is a little more upscale but has affordable gyros, appetizers such as flaming *saganaki* (fried salty cheese) and outstanding salads.

Steak House (steaks P350) A bit of a splurge but its juicy steaks are actually a bargain in the grand scheme of things.

DRINKING

Boracay has no shortage of bars, from peaceful, beachfront cocktail affairs, where you can sip a mai tai while you watch the sunset, to throbbing discos that run late into the night.

our pick **Nigi Nigi Nu Noos** (☎ happy hour 5-7pm) Its legendary, quart-sized Long Island iced teas – like all drinks here, they're two-for-one during happy hour – more than capably kick-start any evening.

Bom Bom (☎ 5pm-2am) With nightly bongo-infused live music, Bom Bom practically

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defines cool and is the best spot to kill time between dinner and late-night dancing.

The same three open-air bars have been dominating the late-night scene for years: **Hey Jude** (☎ 9am-late) is the swankiest of the lot and has the best DJs; **Summer Place** (☎ 11am-late) begins the evening as a Mongolian BBQ and ends it as White Beach's rowdiest disco; and **Cocamangas** (☎ 11am-late) has a shooters-crazy beach bar and a notoriously sleazy dance club across the main road.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Boracay you must first travel to Caticlan. From Caticlan small *bangka* ferries leave every 10 minutes or so throughout the day to Boracay's Cagban pier (P90 including terminal and environmental fee, 10 minutes). Tricycles from Cagban pier cost an extortionate P100 regardless of your destination.

Air

Asian Spirit (D'Mall) and **Seair** (D'Mall) each have flights roughly every half-hour throughout the day from Manila to Caticlan for about P3500. Asian Spirit has one daily flight between Cebu and Caticlan. From the airport to the pier in Caticlan it's a five-minute walk or a one-minute tricycle ride (P40).

Cebu Pacific has much cheaper flights from both Manila and Cebu to Kalibo in northern Panay, where air-con vans meet the flights and run to Caticlan pier (P100, 1½ hours). PAL also flies the Manila–Kalibo route.

Boat

MBRS Lines (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-241 8497; Pier 8, North Harbor, Manila) has twice-weekly ferries between Manila and Caticlan (from P840, 12 hours).

From Caticlan there are six RORO ferries per day to Roxas, Mindoro (P330, four hours). From March to May, Negros Navigation runs a ferry along the Manila–Caticlan–Puerto Princesa route.

Bus

Ceres Lines has five daily buses to Iloilo from Caticlan, the last one departing at 2pm (ordinary/air-con P190/240, five hours), or take a van to Kalibo and grab a bus from there to Iloilo.

GETTING AROUND

To get from one end of White Beach to the other, either walk or flag down a tricycle along

the main road. These cost only P7 provided you steer clear of the disingenuously named 'special' trips offered by stationary tricycles, which cost a not-so-special P40 to P60.

Iloilo

☎ 033 / pop 429,000

The highlight of Iloilo (*ill-o-ill-o*) is its Spanish colonial architecture, much of which is located in the Jaro district north of the city centre. Get a map from the **tourist office** (☎ 335 0245; Bonifacio Dr), next to Museo Iloilo.

With some interesting displays of furniture, memorabilia and treasure plucked from sunken ships, **Museo Iloilo** is worth a look. Adventure lovers should talk to anthropologist Daisy at **Panay Adventures** (☎ 0918 778 4364; panay_adventures@yahoo.com.ph), which organises mountain bike and trekking trips and eco-cultural tours to various tribal groups in Panay.

SLEEPING & EATING

Family Pension House (☎ 335 0070; General Luna St; s P275, d P350-575; ☎ ☑) Backpackers love this homey neoclassical building with polished floorboards and clean, bargain-basement rooms. There's an internet café and an airy restaurant upstairs.

Highway 21 (☎ 335 1839; General Luna St; s/d from P600/750; ☎ ☑) The rooms here are somewhat small but modern, with Buddhist art on the walls and elegant furnishings.

On General Luna St, east of the two hotels mentioned, you'll find the **Atrium Shopping Mall** (mains P50-75), with a good food court and a huge, modern supermarket. In the other direction, at the corner of General Luna and Jalandoni Sts, you'll find the **Times Square** (mains P50-75) open-air food court and **Bluejay Coffee & Delicatessen** (sandwiches P75-100, pastas P130), a superb deli with free wi-fi and imported-meat sandwiches.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are many daily flights to/from Manila with PAL, Cebu Pacific and Air Philippines. The latter two also have daily flights to/from Cebu. The **airport** (Diversion Rd) is in Mandurriao district, about 3km north of General Luna St.

Fastcraft operators Sea Jet, Oceanjet and Weesam Express take on the rough crossing between Iloilo and Bacolod (P230, one hour, 24 daily). Peso pinchers can opt for the twice-daily Montenegro RORO (P140, 2½ hours). **Milagrosa J Shipping Lines** (☎ 335 0955; Jarfel

Bldg, La Puz Norte) offers a twice-weekly service between Iloilo and Puerto Princesa (P1150, 30 hours). Negros Navigation sails weekly to/from Cagayan de Oro (P2000, 21 hours) via Bacolod. There are also many ferries to both Manila and Cebu. Iloilo has several piers – your tricycle driver should know which one you need.

Ceres buses to Caticlan (P233, five hours) leave every hour until 3pm from the brand-new **Tagbac Bus Terminal** (☎ 3203163), about 7km north of the centre. Alternatively, you can take a bus to Kalibo and grab an air-con van there.

NEGROS

Negros is the sweet tooth of the Philippines, heart of the country's sugar production. Split in two by intimidating mountains, its unspoilt coastline and natural finery earn it plenty of traveller kudos. The Kanlaon volcano is being touted as the next big thing in volcano scrambling, while lovely, laid-back Dumaguete is a fine base for exploring the central Visayas – better than Cebu, in many ways. If you like to get away from it all, look no further than Sipalay.

Bacolod

☎ 034 / pop 500,000

Bacolod is a little too large and intractable to be of much appeal to travellers. The city boomed in the 19th century when Iloilo's clothing industry collapsed and the textile barons migrated across the Panay Gulf to try their luck at sugar. Most people in Bacolod still speak Ilongo, the language of Iloilo. Locals masquerade in grinning masks for October's **MassKara Festival**.

ACTIVITIES

The main reason to stay in Bacolod is to get permits for climbing in **Mt Kanlaon Natural Park** (admission P300), site of the highest peak in the Visayas (2645m). These can be obtained through Angelo Bivar at the **Park Superintendent Office** (☎ weekdays 433 3813, weekends 0917 301 1410 or 0919 836 1905; Penro compound, South Capitol Rd). In an effort to preserve the park's fragile ecosystem, access is tightly controlled and guides are mandatory, so call ahead to reserve a spot. There are three routes to the top, one of which can be done by fit climbers in a day. The climbing season is March to May and October to November.

The trekking is at least as good in bird-infested **Northern Negros Natural Park**, accessible from Patag, a small town due east of Silay. The park office in Silay can help you get a guide, or just ask around in Patag. The **Biodiversity Conservation Center** (☎ 433 9234; South Capitol Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) has information on the natural park and also runs a small zoo.

SLEEPING & EATING

Pension Bacolod (☎ 433 3377; 27 11th St; s P100-370, d P165-460; ☎ ☑) Look no further than this professionally run bargain, with a diverse array of rooms on a quiet side street near the Ceres north bus terminal. Mice reportedly like this place too.

Around 21st St and Lacson you'll find a bunch of restaurants and bars popular with students, including **Bob's** (sandwiches P70-125), a clean, bright, coffee shop/deli/pizzeria/ice cream parlour with free wi-fi. There's another cluster of restaurants around Mayfair Plaza at 13th St and Lacson, or try the new SM Mall near the pier.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air Philippines and Cebu Pacific each fly at least daily to/from Manila and Cebu.

Fastcraft operators Sea Jet, Oceanjet and Weesam Express each run eight trips per day to Iloilo (P230, one hour). SuperFerry and Negros Navigation have several trips weekly to/from Manila (P1850, 23 hours), and also service Cagayan de Oro (P1650, 21 hours, weekly).

From the **Ceres north bus terminal** (cnr Lopez Jaena St & IV Ferrer Ave) there are several buses every morning to Cebu City (P550, including San Carlos–Toledo ferry; seven hours). Any bus heading north passes through Silay.

From the **Ceres south bus terminal** (cnr Lopez Jaena & San Sebastian Sts), buses run regularly until mid-afternoon to Dumaguete via Kabankalan (P230, 5½ hours), and until mid-evening to Sipalay (P180, 4½ hours).

To get to the Ceres terminals, take a 'Shopping' jeepney from city plaza for P7; after hours take a taxi (P60).

Sipalay

☎ 034 / pop 11,400

You could get stuck for days – make that months – in this remote fishing town on Negros' southwest edge. At delicious Sugar Beach a small outpost of resorts caters to

those looking to achieve the full Robinson Crusoe effect. The town proper has an endless beach where every morning fishermen unload their catches, which can include several-hundred-pound tuna. Divers should head 6km south of Sipalay to the pricier resorts of *barangay* (village) Punto Ballo.

SLEEPING

The following are two of the five resorts on Sugar Beach.

Our pick **Driftwood Village** (☎ 0920 252 9472; www.driftwood-village.com; cottages P400-1100; 🏠) Hosts Daisy and Peter (he's Swiss) are a lot of fun, and so is their resort, which features 11 cosy *nipa* huts, good Thai food and a range of bar sports, including table football.

Takatuka Lodge & Dive Resort (☎ 0920 230 9174; www.takatuka-lodge.com; cottages P650-1450; 🏠) Wash in funky furniture, psychedelic colours and kitsch, this eclectic boutique place offers five rooms done up in different themes. The owner has an extensive collection of heavy metal music and makes a mean mango milk shake (P85).

If you're really on a tight budget and/or prefer to live among locals, stay opposite the City Park in Sipalay proper at the quaint **Langub Pension House** (☎ 0910 289 4393; cnr Lacson & Alvarez Sts; r P200-650; 🏠).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ceres buses to/from Bacolod leave every half-hour until evening (P180, 4½ hours). For Dumaguete, see opposite.

Sugar Beach is about 5km north of Sipalay proper, across two rivers. To get there arrange a boat transfer from your resort (per boat P250 to P400, 15 minutes), or take a tricycle via Montilla to *barangay* Nauhung (P150, 20 minutes), where small paddle boats will bring you across the river to Sugar Beach for P5.

Dumaguete

☎ 035 / pop 119,000

There are only a few Philippine provincial cities worth more than a day of your time, and Dumaguete (doo-ma-get-ay) is one of them. A huge college campus engulfs much of its centre, saturating the city with youthful energy and attitude. The location – in the shadow of twin-peaked Cuernos de Negros (1903m) and just a few clicks from some marvellous hiking, beaches and diving – takes care of the rest.

The city's main commercial drag is Perdices St, which runs from central Rizal Park up to Silliman University. However, most dining, drinking and strolling happens on and around the waterfront promenade flanking Rizal Blvd. The **city tourist office** (☎ 225 0549; City Hall, Santa Catalina St), east of Rizal Park, has maps.

ACTIVITIES

Budget-conscious divers looking to dive **Apo Island** – one of the top dive sites in the Philippines – can base themselves in Dumaguete, where accommodation costs much less than in Dauin, the principal jumping-off point for Apo Island. Snoopy Montenegro, owner of **Scuba Ventures** (☎ 0917 304 3033; Hibbard Ave), is the authority on Apo Island.

Back on terra firma there's **caving, rock climbing** and **trekking** around Cuernos de Negros and Mt Kanlaon in northern Negros. Michelle at **Dumaguete Outdoors** (☎ 226 2110; www.dumagueteoutdoors.com; 3 Noblefranca St) arranges tours and dispenses advice.

SLEEPING

Vintage Inn (☎ 225 1076; Legazpi St; s/d from P242/352; 🏠) Centrally located opposite the market, this place has some of the cheapest rooms in the Philippines. Rooms are hardly luxurious, but are bigger than expected, with wardrobes.

Harold's Mansion Tourist Inn (☎ 225 8000/1; www.haroldsmansion.com; 205 Hibbard Ave; dm/s/d from P275/330/415; 🏠 📺) Besides offering free wi-fi and a roomy six-bed dorm room complete with balcony, Harold is a goldmine of information on the region.

Bethel Guest House (☎ 225 2000; www.bethelguesthouse.com; Rizal Blvd; s/d from P850/1000; 🏠 📺) This big, bright, sea-facing property with spacious rooms, giant TVs and all the mod-cons is a worthwhile splurge.

EATING & DRINKING

Oyosko (cnr Santa Rosa & Perdices Sts; mains P50-75; 🍷 24hr) A budget traveller's dream, this spot serves up hot Filipino dishes, sandwiches and breakfast for under P50.

Persian Palate (San Juan St; dishes P50-100) Vegetarians will find much to praise on the menu here, including hummus and *baba ganoush* (eggplant purée). Outside they sell gyro-like pitta sandwiches for P25.

Why Not (☎ 225 4488; Rizal Blvd; mains P150-200; 🍷 to 2am) The continental and Thai food here is wildly popular among foreigners, but Why

Not is most famous for its always-happening nightclub.

For live music there is a cluster of lively student bars on the waterfront about 2km north of Why Not. The best is **Hayahay** (Flores St), known for its reggae Wednesdays.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Cebu Pacific, Air Philippines and PAL all fly daily to/from Manila.

OceanJet fastcraft go to/from Cebu (P800, four hours, daily) via Tagbilaran (P520, two hours) on Bohol. There are also RORO ferries to Cebu (see p627). For Siquijor, see right. SuperFerry and Sulpicio Lines have weekly trips to Manila (P2000, 25 hours).

From the nearby port of Tampi there are frequent fastcraft to Bato on Cebu island (P50, 20 minutes), from where there are buses to Cebu City and Moalboal.

Ceres Bus Lines (Perdices St) connects Dumaguete and Bacolod (P230, 5½ hours). Buses depart hourly until about 2.30pm, or you can get a bus to Kabankalan and transfer to Bacolod.

Getting to Sipalay requires three separate Ceres buses: Dumaguete–Bayawan (two hours), Bayawan–Hinoba-an (1½ hours) and Hinoba-an–Sipalay (45 minutes). The entire trip costs P150 and takes 4½ to 5½ hours, depending on waiting time in Bayawan.

SIQUEJOR

☎ 035 / pop 96,000

Spooky little Siquijor is renowned for its witches and healers, but don't be scared away. This is backpacker paradise, with breathtaking scenery and some of the best-value accommodation in the Philippines. With your own

COCKSURE GAMBLERS

Heavy male drinking and bonding occur over gambling – on anything from *sabong* (cockfighting) to horse racing. But *sabong* are what Filipino men get most excited about. All over the country, every Sunday and public holiday, irritable and expensive fighting birds are let loose on one another. The cockpits are full to bursting and the audience is high with excitement – as much as P100,000 may be wagered on a big fight. All this plus cheap booze, lots of guns, pimps, players and prostitutes make for an interesting life for police.

transport you can travel around the island in a day and explore beaches, colonial relics, waterfalls, caves and charming villages.

A good strategy is to arrange for motorbike hire (per day P500) at the pier in Siquijor town when you arrive and investigate accommodation options on your own. The best budget places are in **Sandugan**, 15km northeast of Siquijor town. The best beaches and a few good midrange lodging options are along the west coast at **Solangan**, 9km southwest of Siquijor town. The marine reserve near Sandugan gets many divers' tails wagging.

Sleeping

Guiwanon Spring Park Resort (☎ 0926 978 6012; cottages P250-300) The three cottages here are essentially stilted, over-water tree houses in the middle of a mangrove forest. They are very basic, but two of them directly face the ocean. It's certainly one of the quirkiest lodging experiences you'll ever have, but check it out first to see if it's for you. It's about 5km east of Siquijor town.

Coral Cay Resort (☎ 0919 269 1269; www.coralcayresort.com; d P750-2500; 🏠 📺) This resort has lavish rooms on a perfect stretch of white-sand beach at Solangan. There's an infinity pool, mountain-bike rental, sea kayaks, windsurfing, plenty of palm trees and the only thatch-hut gym we've ever seen.

In Sandugan the two best options are neighbouring **Kiwi Dive Resort** (☎ 424 0534; www.kiwidiveresort.com; dm P200, d P450-790; 🏠 📺) and **Islander's Paradise** (☎ 0918 332 0906; www.islandersparadisebeach.com; d P300-850). The latter's cottages are all beachfront.

Getting There & Around

The vast majority of visitors arrive at the pier in Siquijor town via diminutive fastcraft from Dumaguete. There are at least four trips per day each way (P190, one hour). Montenegro Lines has two daily RORO ferries from Dumaguete to Larena, 9km northeast of Siquijor town (P180, two hours). Palacio Shipping has five weekly boats from Larena to Cebu (P360, eight hours) via Tagbilaran (P274, two hours).

Jeepneys meet ferries at the pier and run to all points on the perimeter of the island.

CEBU

Surrounded on all sides by the Philippine isles and dotted with tranquil fishing villages, Cebu

is the island heart of the Visayas. Cebuanos are proud of their heritage – it is here that Magellan sowed the seed of Christianity and was pruned for his efforts at the hands of the mighty chief Lapu-Lapu. The island's booming metropolis, Cebu City, is a transport hub to pretty much anywhere you may wish to go. Pescador Island, near the laid-back town of Moalboal, placed Philippine diving on the world map, while the Malapascua marine scene boasts close encounters of the thresher-shark kind.

Cebu City

☎ 032 / pop 843,000

The island capital is much more laid-back than Manila as a place to arrive in or leave the Philippines. One of the first stops on Spain's conquest agenda, Cebu lays claim to everything old – including the oldest street (Colon St), the oldest university and the oldest fort. By night Cebu turns decidedly hedonistic. However, the excellent transport links to the rest of the Philippines are the city's biggest attraction.

Cebu's downtown district (Map p625) is its mercantile nucleus. Most of the sights are here, but you must wade through exhaust fumes, beggars, prostitutes and block after block of downmarket retail madness to get to them. Uptown (Map p626) is much more pleasant and has better accommodation.

INFORMATION

There are plenty of internet cafés and ATMs around.

Cebu Doctors Hospital (Map p626; ☎ 253 7511; Pres Osmeña Blvd) Near the Capitol Building.

Central post office (Map p625; Quezon Blvd)

Department of Tourism Downtown (Map p625;

☎ 254 2811; LDM Bldg, Legazpi St; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri); Mactan International Airport (off Map p625;

☎ 340 8229; ☎ 6am-8pm) The downtown office is near Fort San Pedro.

HSBC Bank (off Map p626; Ayala Center, Lahug district) Allows P20,000 withdrawals.

National Bookstore (Map p626; General Maxilom Ave) Good range of maps but threadbare book collection.

Visayas Community Hospital (off Map p626; ☎ 253 3025; Osmeña Blvd)

SIGHTS

Fort San Pedro (Map p625; Legazpi St; admission P20; ☎ 8am-6pm) was built by Miguel Legazpi in 1565 as a defence against marauding pirates. This gently crumbling ruin with gardens is

the oldest Spanish fort in the country. The Santo Niño statuette is the main attraction in the **Basilica Menor del Santo Niño** (Map p625; Juan Luna St), built in 1740. This image of Jesus as a child is said to have been given to Queen Juana of Cebu by Magellan on the queen's baptism in 1521. It's the oldest religious relic in the country.

In the central Parian district, the **Casa Gorordo Museum** (Map p625; ☎ 255 5630; 35 L Jaena St; admission P70; ☎ 10am-6pm) is in an astonishingly beautiful mid-19th-century house that was restored in 2006.

Mactan Island, where Magellan came a distant second in a fight with Chief Lapu-Lapu, is now the site of Cebu's airport and is joined to the city by a bridge. There are several **guitar factories** on Pajac-Maribago Rd, southwest of the airport. The most tourist friendly is **Alegre** (☎ 340 4492; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat), with hundreds of beautiful guitars (P2000 to P60,000) on display.

SLEEPING

While good super-budget rooms are hard to find in Cebu, there are some terrific deals in the P800 to P1000 range. If the following are full, there's a cluster of cheap pension houses in the vicinity of Jasmine Pension on DG Garcia St.

our pick **Kukuk's Nest Pension House** (Map p626; ☎ 231 5180; www.geocities.com/kukuksnestcebu; 157 Gorordo Ave; sP315, dP450-700; ☎) This colourful old house defines 'quirky', with contemporary art hanging about, a resident armless charcoal sketcher and a 24-hour resto-bar that draws all types. Booking ahead is essential.

Jasmine Pension (Map p626; ☎ 254 2686; on Jasmine & DG Garcia Sts; s/d from P480/580; ☎) Located in a pretty yellow building with a North Asian feel, Jasmine has a few spacious, wood-lined rooms – some with fab retro black-tile bathrooms.

GETTING INTO TOWN

Metered taxis between Cebu City and Mactan International Airport cost around P150. A cheaper option is to take a tricycle (if you can find one) to Lapu-Lapu city and then take a 'Lahug' jeepney into town from there (P6).

To get uptown from the ports, catch one of the jeepneys that pass by the piers to Pres Osmeña Blvd, then transfer to a jeepney going uptown.

Mayflower Pension House (Map p626; ☎ 255 2800; www.mayflowerpensionhouse.com; Villalon Dr; s/d P650/900; ☎) The rooms are spacious, the soundproofing is tight and the earthy-toned paint is meticulously applied at this clean and modern gem.

Casa Rosario (Map p626; ☎ 255 0535; R Abott St; s/d P900/1000; ☎) Cebu's best midrange option, this is a warm, welcoming place in an ideal location. The rooms are airy and some have balconies facing the northern hills.

Also recommended:

Hotel de Mercedes (Map p625; ☎ 253 1105; 7 Pelaez St; s/d from 600/820; ☎) Good option if you need to stay downtown.

C'est La Vie Pension (Map p626; ☎ 253 5266; 13 J Osmeña St; d from P650; ☎) Fantastic value near Casa Rosario.

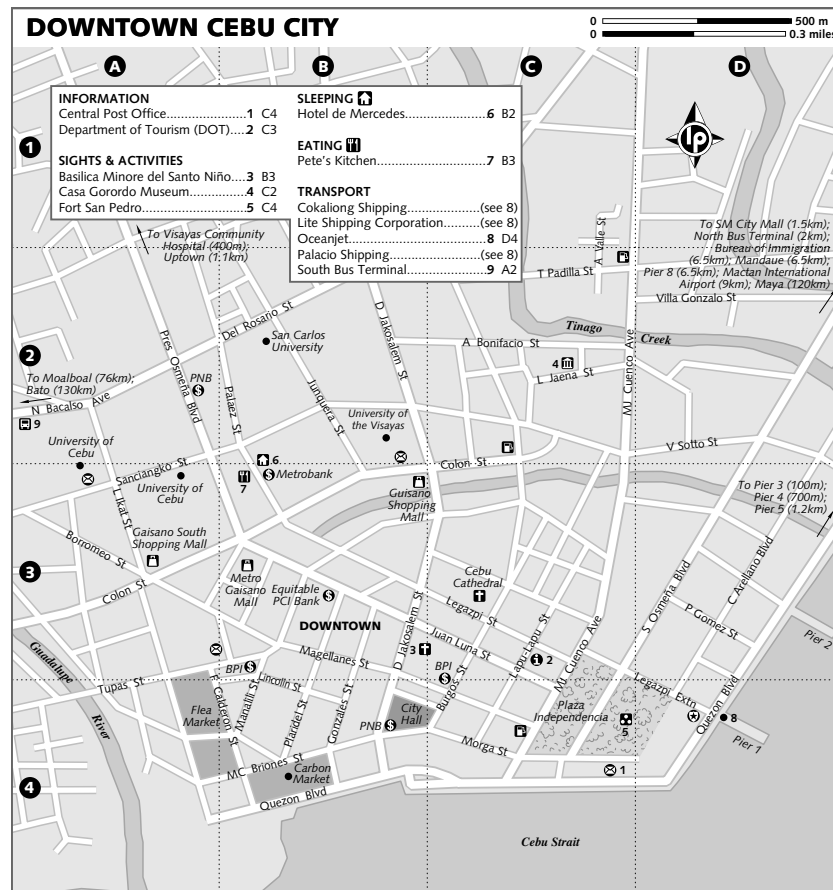
Pensionne La Florentina (Map p626; ☎ 231 3318; 18 Acacia St; s/d P650/750; ☎) Quiet digs in a stately wooden house.

EATING

Pete's Kitchen (Map p625; Pelaez St; mains P75-100) A local favourite, this Filipino-style eatery is actually two restaurants – walk south to the more ambient outdoor version across from Metrobank.

Sideline Garden Restaurant (Map p626; J Osmeña St; mains P75-150) The smell of fresh seafood being grilled under a large pagoda heralds the presence of this charming streetside eatery. Equally pleasant for eating or drinking.

Indian Ocean (Map p626; N Escario St; mains P100-150; ☎ 4pm-4am) This late-night hangout near



Kukuk's Nest has great curries and other specialties of the subcontinent. It also serves mediocre Middle Eastern food.

Joven's Grill (Map p626; cnr Pres Osmeña Blvd & Jasmine St; all-you-can-eat buffet P145; ☎ lunch & dinner) The best place to gorge after an extended boat journey.

As in Manila, many of the best restaurants are in the malls, particularly the **Ayala Center** (off Map p626; Lahug district). On the ground floor you'll find good Thai cuisine at **Lemongrass** (Pad Thai P155), while Mexican food and Margarita lovers should head to **Tequila Joe's** (mains P150-250). There's a food court on the 3rd floor for budget meals.

St Patrick's Sq (Map p626) near Casa Rosario has a great little coffee shop, **Brown Cup**

(breakfast P100), and a few cheap restaurants, including affordable Japanese eatery **Bento** (sushi platters P100).

DRINKING

Brew's Place (Map p626; J Osmeña St) Near Sideline Garden Restaurant, this is another fantastic place to perch for a few hours while hoisting cold ones. Inoffensive live acoustic music plays until at least 2am nightly.

Ratsky (off Map p626; Ayala Center; ☎ 11am-3am) This live-music club has all-you-can-consume pizza and beer for just P150 from 2pm to 6pm daily. After that you'll be so oiled that it won't matter whether the music is any good.

Mango Square (Map p626; cnr Gen Maxilom Ave & J Osmeña St) There are a couple of rowdy bars

upstairs at this complex, as well as the more upscale club Pump (admission P100).

Serious clubbers will want to head north to the Crossroads strip mall in Lahug and try to breach the velvet rope at swanky **Voodoo Club** (off Map p626; admission P150). It's a five-minute cab ride (P50) northeast of the Ayala Center.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For international flights into Cebu's Mactan International Airport, see p590. Cebu Pacific, Air Philippines and PAL all have regular connections to Manila. Cebu Pacific also has non-stop flights from Cebu to a number of regional centres, including Puerto Princesa, Kalibo, Bacolod and Iloilo.

Boat

Many of the long-haul ferries from Manila to ports in the southern islands stop in Cebu City, including SuperFerry and Sulpicio Lines. Fastcraft such as SuperCat, Oceanjet and Weesam Express have speedy connections to Bohol, Leyte and Negros. Check the weekly schedules in the *Sun Star* and *Cebu Daily News* for updates.

Useful shipping companies in Cebu City include the following:

Cokaliong Shipping (Map p625; ☎ 232 7211-18; www.cokaliongshipping.com; Pier 1) Boats to Surigao (P850, 13½ hours, daily except Monday); Maasin, Leyte (P390, five hours, five weekly); Dumaguete (P393, six hours, daily); Tagbilaran (P150, four hours, six weekly); and Iloilo (P778, 12 hours, three weekly).

Kinswell (off Map p625; ☎ 416 6516; Pier 3) Boats to Bato, Leyte (P350, three hours, daily); and Tubigon, Bohol (P168, 1½ hours, two daily).

Lite Shipping Corporation (Map p625; ☎ 255 1721; Pier 1) Ferries to Tagbilaran (P300, four hours, two daily); and Ormoc, Leyte (P450, 4½ hours, six weekly).

Oceanjet (Map p625; ☎ 255 7560; www.oceanjet.net; Pier 1) Oceanjet has boats to Tagbilaran (P300, two hours, four daily) and Dumaguete (P800, four hours, daily).

Palacio Shipping (Map p625; ☎ 255 4538; Pier 1) Has ferries to Larena, Siquijor (P360, eight hours, five weekly) via Tagbilaran (P95, four hours).

Roly Shipping Lines (off Map p625; ☎ 234 0827; Pier 3) Boats to Tubigon, Bohol (P158, two hours, two daily).

Sulpicio Lines (off Map p625; ☎ 232 5361; www.sulpiciolines.com; Pier 5) Ferries to Manila (P1800, 22 hours, five weekly), Cagayan de Oro (P728, 11 hours, four weekly) and Surigao (P504, eight hours, weekly).

SuperCat (off Map p625; ☎ 234 9630-34; www.supercat.com.ph; Pier 4) Supercat has boats to Ormoc

(P672, 2¾ hours, four daily) and Tagbilaran (P350, two hours, three daily).

SuperFerry (off Map p625; ☎ 233 7000; www.superferry.com.ph; Pier 4) Four boats weekly to Manila (P1900, 23 hours) and two boats weekly to Cagayan de Oro (P800, eight hours).

Super Shuttle Ferry (off Map p625; ☎ 233 5733; Pier 8) Ferries to Ormoc (P336, seven hours, six weekly) and Camiguin (P616, eight hours, weekly).

Trans-Asia Shipping Lines (off Map p625; ☎ 254 6491; www.transasiashipping.com; Pier 5) Ferries to Cagayan de Oro (P950, 12½ hours, daily) and Iloilo (P1150, 14 hours, daily).

Weesam Express (off Map p625; ☎ 412 9562; www.weesamexpress.com; Pier 4) Boats to Tagbilaran (P300, two hours, four daily) and Ormoc (P550, 2½ hours, two daily).

You can buy tickets for all ferries at the handy **Travellers Lounge** (☎ 232 0291; ☎ 8am-8pm) just outside SM City Mall. You can also buy tickets at the piers.

Bus

There are two bus stations in Cebu. **Ceres Bus Lines** (☎ 345 8650) services southern and central destinations, such as Bato (P150, 3¼ hours) via Moalboal (P90, 2½ hours), from the **South bus terminal** (Map p625; Bacalso Ave). Air-con vans ("V-hires") leave for Moalboal from the Citilink station near the South bus terminal (P80, two hours).

The **North bus terminal** (Wireless St) is beyond SM City Mall. From here Ceres has frequent buses to Hagnaya (P70, three hours) for Bantayan Island, and Maya (P90, four to five hours) for Malapascua Island.

Moalboal

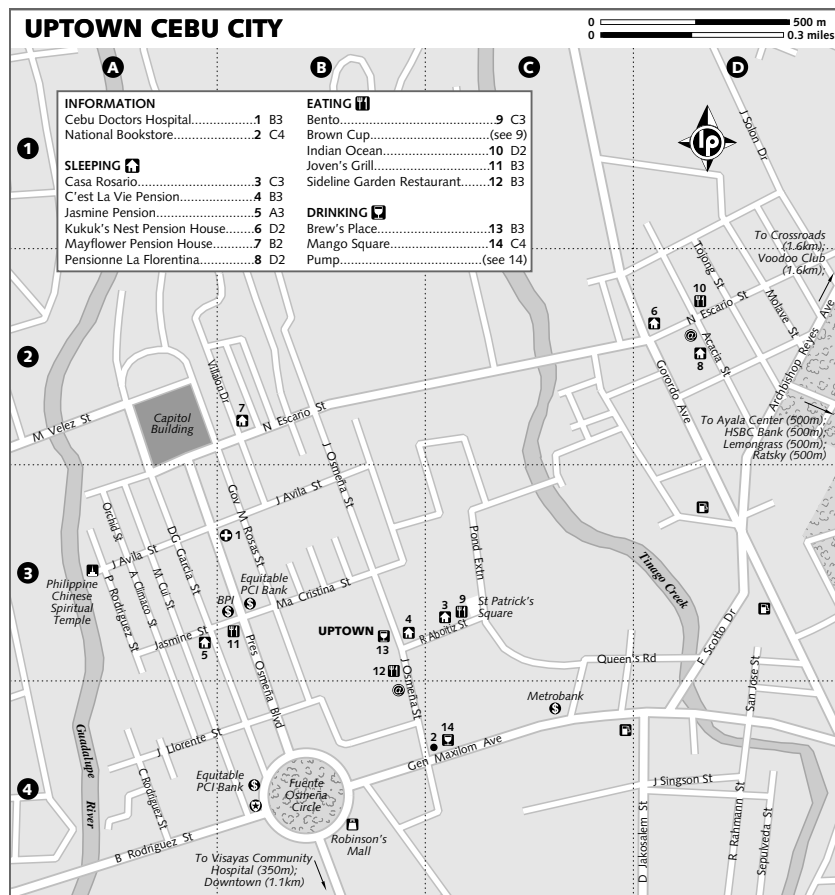
☎ 032 / pop 26,400

The Philippines' original dive hotbed, Moalboal remains a throwback to the days when diving came cheap and minus the attitude.

Panagsama Beach, where the resorts are, meanders lazily along a sea wall within rock-skip distance of a stunning diving wall (also snorkellable). While the beach itself is hardly worthy of the name, Moalboal's mellow vibe and quirky, mischievous nightlife attract divers and nondivers alike.

ACTIVITIES

Divers can paddle out to the coral-studded wall or take a 10-minute *bangka* ride to **Pescador Island**, which swarms with marine life. A single-tank dive shouldn't exceed US\$25.



Beach lovers can take a *habal-habal* (P20) 3km north to lovely **White Beach**. For adrenalin junkies, **Planet Action** (☎ 0916 624 8253; www.action-philippines.com), run by the wry and affable Jochen, runs mountain biking, canyoning and other mountain tours, including a trip across the Tañon Strait to climb Mt Kanlaon on Negros (see p621).

SLEEPING

Mollie's Place (☎ 0917 254 7060; d P500-1500) Mollie's has a few cute concrete cottages with a shared bathroom, along with much roomier but TV-less air-con abodes.

Sunshine Pension House (☎ 474 0049; sunshine.pension@yahoo.com; d from P600; 🏠 🚿) It's on the wrong side of the beach path but this place is great value, with a clear pool, a Swiss restaurant and sizeable fan rooms.

Coral's Palm Court (☎ 0906 210 3876; r P700-1200; 🏠 🚿) Earthy owner Philip has been running this character-laden backpacker haunt near the bar strip on Panagsama Beach since 1984. He offers discounts to like-minded souls.

Quo Vadis (☎ 474 0018; www.visayadivers.info; d P750-2000; 🏠 🚿) This place is pure money, with spectacular views and gigantic rooms littered with bamboo furniture. Its nearby sister resort, Nido's Garden, has rooms for P500 to P750.

EATING & DRINKING

Drinking is the national sport of the Moalboal Republic, and there are dozens of eateries where you can secure food to soak up the deluge of beer.

Chilli Bar (mains P150-200) A tried-and-true recipe of bar sports, shooters and comely waiters ensures a solid crowd every night at this place.

Last Filling Station (Thai dishes P165) On an isolated perch south of the bar strip, this is an ideal spot to watch the sunset.

Sunset View & Restaurant (mains P175) More great views and P25 San Miguel.

Lloyd's Music Lounge takes over when others shut down, while the Saturday-night discos at Pacita's Resort are famous – or infamous, depending on your point of view.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Ceres buses pass through town heading south to Bato (P60, two hours) and north to Cebu's South bus terminal (P89, 2½ hours) regularly until about 5.30pm. To Cebu, there are also

air-con vans driven by notoriously sadistic drivers (P80, two hours).

Tricycles to Panagsama Beach from Moalboal cost P35.

Malapascua Island

Blessed with a long ribbon of pearly white sand, this little island off the northern tip of Cebu has long been touted as 'the next Boracay'. Truth be told, this sleepy little dive mecca remains light years away from that goal, although gradually rising prices are starting to turn backpackers away.

ACTIVITIES

Thresher sharks are the big attraction here. Divers head out at 5.30am to **Monad Shoal**, where they park on the seabed at 35m hoping to catch a glimpse of these critters. The chances are pretty good – about 75%. By day Monad Shoal attracts manta rays. More terrestrial sorts can lounge on Malapascua's signature **Bounty Beach**, or hike the walking path leading up to the **lighthouse** on the northern tip.

SLEEPING

Malapascua's electricity grid functions only from 6pm to midnight, so make sure your resort has a generator to avoid sweltering to death.

BB's (☎ 0916 756 6018; r from P300) The fan rooms here are serviceable and friendly on the wallet but get hot when the power cuts out at midnight. It's off the beach, next to Ging-Ging's restaurant.

White Sands Bungalows (☎ 0927 318 7471; s/d P600/700) These simple raised, thatched, beachfront cottages facing less touristy Poblacion Beach are the best value in Malapascua. Danish owner Kurt is useful for tips and sets a perfect vibe.

Cocobana Beach Resort (☎ 437 1001; www.cocobana.ch; s/d from P800/1100; 🏠 🚿) This is Malapascua's first resort; the 24-hour generator, speedy internet connection and good restaurant here make it worth the splurge.

EATING & DRINKING

Expect anything on Bounty Beach to cost more than you want to pay.

Ging-Ging's Flower Garden (mains P35-77) Inland from the beach, Ging-Ging's serves tasty, cheap, filling vegetarian food and curries and P30 San Miguel.

La Isla Bonita Restaurant (pizzas from P120, mains about P180) Next to Ging-Ging's, this is still the best restaurant on the island even after the recent passing of its founder, Uwe. It concocts an array of Greek, Thai and Indian dishes.

Sunsplash (🕒 7am-late) Despite the floating bar, pool tables and 'drink for your country' shooter-drinking competitions, this open-air resto-bar stays mellow *most* of the time.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The scheduled boat from Maya (P50, 20 to 40 minutes) to Malapascua leaves when full. Get to Maya before 5pm or you may miss the last trip and have to charter a boat for P800.

For information on getting to Maya from Cebu City see p627. The last bus heading back to Cebu City leaves around 6pm.

BOHOL

Bohol is a short hop from Cebu. It's difficult to reconcile its bloody history with the relaxed isle of today. It's here that Francisco Dagohoy led the longest revolt in the country against the Spaniards, from 1744 to 1829. The Chocolate Hills, rounded mounds resembling chocolate drops, are the big tourist magnet. Bohol also has endearing little primates, coral cathedrals off Panglao Island and lush jungle, ripe for exploration, around the town of Loboc.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Tagbilaran is the main gateway, but there are also many ferries between Cebu and Tubigon in northwest Bohol (see the shipping companies under Boat, p627), and twice-daily RORO ferries between Bato, Leyte, and Ubay in northeast Bohol (P180, 2½ hours).

Tagbilaran

☎ 038 / pop 91,000

There's no reason to waste much time in traffic-snarled Tagbilaran. Your first port of call should be the newly opened **tourist office** (🕒 8am-6pm) at the ferry dock, which can help with transport arrangements.

If you do need to stay the night, your best bet is **Nisa Travelers Inn** (☎ 411 3731; CP Garcia Ave; s/d from P250/750; 🏠 🚿), with a nice range of rooms in an attractive wooden townhouse. Eat, cool off and escape the tricycle madness across the street in the food court in BQ Mall.

Cebu Pacific and PAL each fly from Tagbilaran to Manila twice daily.

There are various fastcraft and slow craft heading to Cebu every day (see the shipping companies under Boat, p627). OceanJet operates a daily fastcraft to/from Dumaguete (P520, two hours). SuperFerry has two weekly trips to/from Manila (P2100, 26 hours). Trans Asia has three trips weekly and SuperFerry one trip weekly to/from Cagayan de Oro.

The main bus terminal is in Dao, a few kilometres north of the centre; 'multicabs' (small jeepneys) run here from the city market on Carlos P Garcia St (P6).

To avoid expensive van rides and tricky public transport connections on Bohol, consider hiring your own motorbike at Tagbilaran pier for about P350 per day.

Around Tagbilaran

It's just a short drive north of Tagbilaran to two of the Philippines' signature attractions – the **Chocolate Hills** and that lovable palm-sized primate, the **tarsier**.

You can visit both in a single day on an excursion from Tagbilaran, but you're much better off basing yourself in Loboc at **Nuts Huts** (☎ 0920 846 1559; www.nutshuts.com; dm P200-250, d P450-650), a backpacker Shangri-la in the middle of the jungle. With a sublime location overlooking the emerald-tinged Loboc River, Nuts Huts provides at least as much reason to visit inland Bohol as brown loam lumps or miniature monkeys. The Belgian hosts can tell you everything you need to know about exploring the area, and you can hike and mountain bike on a network of trails in the immediate vicinity.

To get to Nuts Huts from Tagbilaran, catch a Carmen-bound bus and get off at the Nuts Huts sign (P25, one hour). It's a 15-minute walk from the road. Alternatively, take a bus to Loboc and then a *habal-habal* (P50) or shuttle boat up the river from the Sarimanok landing (P130/160/240 for one/two/three passengers).

You are unlikely to spot the nocturnal tarsier in the wild, so head to the **Tarsier Visitors Center** (requested donation P20; 🕒 9am-4pm) in *barangay* Cananapan, between the towns of Corella and Sikatuna. About 10 saucer-eyed tarsiers hang out in the immediate vicinity of the centre – the guides will bring you right to them. This is a much more humane and eco-friendly way to appreciate the tarsier, better than visiting the animals kept in cages by tourist operators in Loboc.

From Nuts Huts the Tarsier Center is a 30- to 45-minute motorbike ride, or take a jeepney from Loboc (P15, 45 minutes). From Tagbilaran catch a bus or jeepney to Sikatuna (P25, one hour) from the Dao terminal and ask to be dropped off at the centre.

An interesting quirk of nature, the **Chocolate Hills** consist of over 1200 conical hills, up to 120m high. They were supposedly formed over time by the uplift of coral deposits and the effects of rainwater and erosion. Since this explanation cannot be confirmed, the local belief that they are the remnants of a battle between two giants may one day prove to be correct. In the dry season, when the vegetation turns brown, the hills are at their most chocolate-y.

From Nuts Huts, the Chocolate Hills are a 45-minute motorbike ride; alternatively, flag down a bus bound for Carmen (4km north of the Chocolate Hills). From Tagbilaran there are regular buses from the Dao terminal to Carmen (P60, two hours). From Carmen, *habal-habal* whisk tourists up to the main Chocolate Hills viewing point (P30). A more fun method is to take a *habal-habal* in and around the hills; a 1½-hour ride costs P250.

Panglao Island

☎ 038

Linked by two bridges to Bohol, Panglao is where divers head to take advantage of the spectacular coral formations and teeming marine life on the nearby islands of Balicasag, Cabilao and Pamilacan. Ground zero for divers is **Alona Beach**, which is sort of like a mini Boracay minus the stunning beach and nightlife. As Alona Beach has gone upscale in recent years, its appeal to budget travellers has waned. Even the diving is more expensive than elsewhere – at least US\$30 per dive with equipment.

ACTIVITIES

Most resorts offer early morning dolphin watching tours near Pamilacan Island, but the best group to go with is the community-based **Pamilacan Island Dolphin & Whale Watching Tours** (☎ 540 9279; per person P850-1900 depending on group size), which uses old converted whaling boats and local crews. Spotting whales is rare, but you almost always see dolphins. It's based in Baclayan, 6km east of Tagbilaran, but they do pick-ups on Alona Beach. Smaller groups are better off with Alona Beach dive outfit **Baywatch** (☎ 502 9028; 4-person boat P1500).

SLEEPING & EATING

Citadel Alona Inn (☎ 502 9424; www.citadelalona.com; d P500-700; ♿) Inland from the beach is this appealing, artsy house where all rooms share squeaky-clean bathrooms. There's a big kitchen for self-caterers.

Bohol Divers Resort (☎ 502 9047; s P500, d P800-6000; ♿) This sprawling complex is one of the few places on the beach still offering budget rooms. Accommodation runs the gamut from basic fan rooms to upscale villas.

Beachfront dining opportunities on Alona Beach are ample but come at a price. The one notable exception is **Trudi's Place** (mains P65-95, beer P30). Other affordable eateries and bars are located north of the beach, on the way to Citadel Alona. The **Powder Keg** (mains P100-150) has meaty mains, P30 San Miguel, darts and a crusty expat clientele.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

From Tagbilaran, minibuses to Panglao town leave when full from the corner of Dagahoy and F Rocha Sts (P18, 50 minutes). Get off in Tawala and walk 15 minutes or take a tricycle (P40) to Alona Beach. An easier option is to hire a *habal-habal* (P150) or tricycle (P200, 25 to 45 minutes).

SAMAR & LEYTE

'Rugged' is usually the word you hear associated with these two eastern Visayan provinces, separated from each other by the narrowest of straits near Leyte's capital, Tacloban. It's an apt tag. The interior of both islands is consumed by virtually impenetrable forest. This naturally creates opportunities for adventure, although you either have to learn advanced backcountry navigation or scrounge up one of the region's few qualified guides to take advantage of it.

The coastlines of both islands serve up a few gems of their own, most notably tourist-free whale shark viewing in southern Leyte. For fanatical surfers, the eastern seashore of Samar offers a coastline of unexplored breaks facing the onslaught of Pacific currents – getting there is the only problem. There's history here too – in 1521 Magellan first stepped ashore on what would become Philippine soil on the island of Homonhon, off Samar. In October 1944, General MacArthur fulfilled his pledge to return to the Philippines on Red Beach south of Tacloban. And who can forget the notorious Balangiga Massacre (see boxed text, p632)?

ALL CREATURES SMALL & GREAT

Contrary to popular belief, the loveable tarsier is *not* the world's smallest primate. That distinction belongs to the pygmy mouse lemur of Madagascar. However, the Philippines can still proudly lay claim to the world's smallest hoofed mammal – the rare Philippine mouse deer of Palawan. Meanwhile, the Philippines' 24mm *Hippocampus bargibanti* recently lost the title of world's smallest seahorse to a newly discovered rival in Indonesia: the 16mm *Hippocampus denise*.

Catbalogan

☎ 055 / pop 98,000

Catbalogan is the preferred base for exploring the interior of Samar. A ban on motorized tricycles in the city centre also makes it a pleasant stopover on the road from Allen to Tacloban. From the pier you can spot about 30 different islands offshore, plus some giant peaks in northern Leyte.

Spelunking, climbing, scrambling, bird-watching, mountain biking – you name it, Samar's got it. **Trexplora** (☎ 251 2301; www.bonifacio.joni.blogspot.com; Allen Ave), run by North Face-clad Joni Bonifacio, is the only one doing tours around here, and yes, you will need a guide. Check out his website for some ecotourism ideas. Joni specialises in tours of the **Langub-Gobingob Cave** near Calbiga, 50km south of Catbalogan. It is one of the longest caves in the world and hosts rare blind crabs.

SLEEPING & EATING

Casa Cristina (☎ 543 9237; r from P200; ♿) This budget option has decent fan-cooled rooms decorated with brightly coloured walls. The shared bathrooms are clean.

Rolet Hotel (☎ 251 5512; s/d P750/950; ♿) The well-kept rooms here (some windowless) are somewhat small, but you could budget a 25 centavo coin on the expertly made beds. Unbelievable value.

For American-style snacks and pizza try **Ernie's Pizza** (pizzas P65-135) by the town square. **Fortune Restaurant** (555 Del Rosario St; mains P75-225) has yummy Chinese food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Asian Spirit flies thrice weekly from Manila to Calbayog, a two-hour bus ride north of Catbalogan. Palacio Shipping has three weekly

ferries between Catbalogan and Cebu (P531, eight hours).

Eagle Star buses plod north to Allen (P122, five hours), where you catch the ferry to Matnog in southeast Luzon (P74, one hour). Heading south to Tacloban there are buses (P100, three hours) and air-con vans. The brutal road to Tacloban is gradually being repaired, which should trim travel times.

Sohoton Caves & Natural Bridge

Named for a magnificent stone bridge connecting two mountain ridges, this **national park** (admission P150) has an expansive cave system, subterranean rivers, waterfalls and limestone formations. Day trips include a one- to two-hour cave tour (per group without/with guide P300/500; fees include kerosene lanterns), or you can just walk to the natural bridge. You can sleep inside the park at the simple **DENR Guest House** (☎ 053-327 9528; per person P150).

To get to the park you need to take a *bangka* (per boat P700, two hours) from the pier in Basey, which is in southwest Samar just over the San Juanico bridge from Tacloban, Leyte. In Basey go to the **Municipal Tourism Office** (☎ 055-276 1471) near the pier to pay the park entry and boat fees. Regular jeepneys (P20, 45 minutes) and swifter vans head to Basey from the bus terminal in Tacloban. The last trip back from Basey is around 5pm. Trina at the regional tourism office in Tacloban (see below) is an excellent source of information on the park.

Tacloban

☎ 053 / pop 209,000

The birthplace of Imelda Marcos – the 'Rose of Tacloban' – is a busy commercial centre and transport hub. It's hardly chic, but it does have a strip of decent restaurants where you can escape the rat race and cool off with an iced latte and air-con. Travellers between Cebu and southern Leyte won't pass through here, as most ships from Cebu pull into Ormoc.

The **regional tourism office** (☎ 321 2048; F Mendoza Commercial Complex, 141 Santo Niño St) has maps, brochures and information about both Leyte and Samar.

There's a unique **memorial** of MacArthur's Red Beach landing in Palo, 6km south of Tacloban. Grab a 'Palo' jeepney to get there. Northwest of Tacloban, volcanic **Biliran Island** has some splendid beaches and waterfalls. For how to get there, see Getting There & Away, p632.

SLEEPING & EATING

Steer clear of the noisy, congested city centre and stay closer to the internet cafés, restaurants and bars around Burgos St.

Welcome House Pension (☎ 321 2739; 161 Santo Niño St; s/d from P350/500; 🏠) This quiet place set off the street has an assortment of bright, immaculate rooms. It's especially good value for groups of three or four. TVs cost extra.

Rosvenil Pensione (☎ 321 2676; Burgos St; s/d from P410/500; 🏠) Located in a great rambling house with a pleasant garden out the front, Rosvenil offers an enticing mix of rooms, including some truly swanky digs in its new wing.

Restaurant row is Veteranos Ave near the corner of MH del Pilar St. Near there you can scratch your Mexican food itch at **Hugo's American & Mexican Cuisine** (cnr Burgos & MH del Pilar Sts; burritos from P120).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Cebu Pacific and PAL each have three daily flights to Tacloban from Manila. Long-haul ferries run to Manila from the pier (Bonifacio St).

Most land transport now uses the new bus terminal, about 3km west of the old waterfront bus terminal. You'll find plenty of transport to Catbalogan (bus/van P100/120, three/2½ hours) and other points on Samar; Ormoc (bus/van P100/120, three/two hours); Naval on Biliran Island (bus/van P120/150, three/two hours); and Sogod (bus P100, 2½ hours), where there are connections to Padre Burgos and Pintuyan.

Ormoc

☎ 053 / pop 181,000

Ormoc is mainly a springboard for boats to Cebu. If you arrive late, stay in the hulking **Don Felipe Hotel** (☎ 255 2460; cnr Bonifacio St & Imelda Blvd; s/d from P360/580; 🏠) on the waterfront opposite the pier. Pricier rooms have wonderful views.

SuperCat runs four efficient but pricey fastcraft per day to Cebu (P672, 2¾ hours). For slower, cheaper options see Boat on p627. Conveniently, the bus terminal is just over the road from the port, with connections to Tacloban and all points south.

Southern Leyte

☎ 053

Leyte's bowlegged rump straddles Sogod Bay, where **whale sharks** frolic from about mid-October to late April. The sharks here are

THE BALANGIGA MASSACRE

On 28 September 1901, Filipino guerrillas masquerading as women massacred 59 members of the US garrison stationed at Balangiga in Eastern Samar. For the Americans it was the bloodiest day of the Filipino-American War, and it triggered a massive retribution campaign led by General Jacob 'Howling Mad' Smith, who killed scores of innocent civilians while fulfilling his vow to turn Samar into a 'howling wilderness'. There is an annual re-enactment and commemoration on that date.

fewer and more elusive than their more famous cousins in Donsol (see p613), but for many this just makes the thrill of spotting one that much greater. For now the village of Pintuyan, where the whale sharks congregate, is a far cry from the *butanding*-chasing frenzy of Donsol. That's largely because whale sharks only recently started coming to Pintuyan. They were once further north, near Lilo-an, but have gradually moved south – some say because of increased boat traffic around Lilo-an. The hope is that Pintuyan is too remote to draw Donsol's hordes. If you go, tread softly around these beasts and go only with sanctioned operators, who are collectively working to control the number of visitors.

PADRE BURGOS

If you have the money, an organised boat trip from this friendly little dive colony (simply called 'Burgos') is the easiest way to see the whale sharks. The dive resorts listed here run one or two excursions per week across Sogod Bay to snorkel with the sharks. Unlike in Donsol, they'll even let you scuba dive with the sharks here, although that may change. An excursion takes most of the day and costs roughly US\$80 for scuba divers and US\$24 for snorkellers. Whale sharks aside, the reef diving on both sides of Sogod Bay is first-rate all year.

Sleeping

Peter's Dive Resort (☎ 573 0015; www.whaleofadive.com; s P336, d P480-1200; 🏠 📺) Peter's has a colourful, turtle-laden house reef and rooms that cater to all budgets. The rooms have verandas with superb sea views. A few cottages are practically lapped by waves.

Southern Leyte Dive Resort (☎ 572 4011; www.leyte-divers.com; r P600-1300; 🏠) This charming resort sports imaginative circular duplex cottages. It's 1km northeast of Burgos, which makes whale shark excursions a bit longer. On the other hand, there's an actual beach and sunset views here.

Getting There & Away

From Cebu you can take a Kinswell or Cokaliong ferry to Bato (see Boat, p627), which is a two-hour bus ride to Burgos; or take a ferry to Ormoc (opposite), which is a four-hour bus ride to Burgos. There are also RORO ferries between Ubay, on Bohol, and Bato (P180, 2½ hours, two daily).

From Tacloban, take a bus to Sogod (P100, 2½ hours) and transfer to Burgos (P40, one hour). From Lilo-an, bus it to Sogod (P50, one hour) and transfer.

LILO-AN

This scenic town is where the ferries from Surigao disembark. Sightings of whale sharks feeding in the raging current under the bridge, once common, are now rare. The only place to stay in town is the eminently affordable and better-than-passable **Ofelia's Lodge** (r P150-300) near the pier.

There are four ferries per day plying the route between Surigao and Lilo-an (from P165, three to 4½ hours). Vans make the trip to/from Tacloban (P250, three hours) via Sogod.

PINTUYAN

Few people make the overland journey down to Pintuyan, so here's your chance to be ahead of the pack. A small tourism office near the pier organises community-based snorkelling trips to see the whale sharks in three-passenger *bangka* owned by the local fishermen's association. Tours cost P1300/2100/2900 for one/two/three people, including boat, guide and spotters. **Moncher Bardos** (☎ 0916 952 3354) in Pintuyan has the details and can arrange home-stays with local families for P500, including three square meals a day. You may even spot a few whale sharks from land around here, as these sharks swim closer to the shoreline than their friends in Donsol.

Buses to Pintuyan from Sogod (P80, six daily) take 2½ hours over a smooth sealed road and go via Lilo-an. From Tacloban take a bus to Sogod or Lilo-an and transfer. A *habal-habal* to/from Lilo-an costs P250.

MINDANAO

Sprawling Mindanao, the world's 19th-largest island, is known for dazzling scenery, primitive hill tribes and an almost complete lack of tourists because of political unrest and occasional fighting between the government and Muslim separatists. What most tourists don't realise is that the lovely coastal stretch of northern Mindanao between Cagayan de Oro and Siargao Island is Catholic, Cebuano (Visayan) speaking – and quite safe. The area is known for first-rate surfing on Siargao and a peaceful island-life existence on Camiguin. Elsewhere, Mindanao offers up plenty of cherries for the intrepid traveller, including the Philippines' highest mountain, Mt Apo (2954m), accessible from Davao in southern Mindanao. Exercise caution if you are heading south or west of Cagayan de Oro (see boxed text, p634).

Getting There & Away

The four Philippine domestic airlines together service most major cities in Mindanao, including Cagayan de Oro and Surigao. There are also plenty of ferries from Manila and from all the major Visayan cities, including Cebu, Dumaguete and Tagbilaran.

SURIGAO

☎ 086

Unless you fly directly from Cebu to Siargao, you'll need to travel through Surigao, the capital of Surigao del Norte province.

If you need to stay the night in Surigao, **Dexter Pension House** (☎ 232 7526; cnr San Nicolas & Magallanes Sts; s P150, d P300-600; 🏠) has a central location and small but passable rooms – many windowless.

From Surigao, ferries head to the town of Dapa on Siargao. The schedule changes frequently, but you can bank on at least one fastcraft (P380, two hours) and one or two RORO car ferries (from P120, 3¼ hours) per day.

There are various ways to get to Surigao. Asian Spirit has five weekly flights to/from Manila, or you can fly Cebu Pacific or Philippine Airlines to Butuan and take a bus from there. Several ferries sail to Lilo-an in Leyte every day from the port of Lipata, 10km northwest of Surigao (P175 to P300, 2½ to four hours). Take a tricycle (P150) to Lipata. For services to Cebu, see p627. SuperFerry

has a weekly trip to Manila (from P2000, 32 hours) via Bacolod, and Sulpicio Lines has twice-weekly ferries to Manila.

Bachelor buses run regularly from Surigao to Butuan (ordinary/air-con P130/160, two hours) and Davao (air-con P650, 10 hours) from the Integrated Bus & Jeepney Terminal near the airport, 5km west of the city centre. You must transfer in Butuan for Cagayan de Oro.

SIARGAO

☎ 086

It's best known for having one of the world's great surf breaks, but Siargao (75km east of Surigao in northeast Mindanao) is no one-trick pony. Surrounded by idyllic islands and sprinkled with coves and quaint fishing villages, it's an island hopper's dream. The legendary **Cloud Nine break** off Tuazon Point is what put Siargao on the map. After years of being an inside secret for the mostly Australian veterans of the area, the break is now jokingly referred to by some locals as Crowd Nine. That's probably an exaggeration, although the sleepy village of Cloud Nine does get overrun for the **Siargao International Surfing Cup**, held every October. The breaks around here are reef breaks, but it's a soft, spongy reef and there are some moderate swells around for beginners. Lessons cost about P500 per hour including board rental – ask one of the surf bums hanging out around Laida's Restaurant in Cloud Nine.

Most of the resorts are in the village of Cloud Nine, which is a bumpy 15-minute *habal-habal* ride north of the town of General Luna ('GL'). All resorts can organise island-hopping trips. GL is a sleepy village where you'll find cheap eateries and a couple of bars frequented by local surfer dudes and chicks. From GL or the port town of Dapa you can take a boat (30 minutes) or rent a motorbike (P500, 1½ hours) and ride up to stilt house-studded Pilar, where the surf-sprayed **Magpoponco Beach** turns into a moonscape of natural pools at low tide. Continuing around the island you'll discover waterfalls and isolated beaches.

Sleeping & Eating

Prices mushroom and rooms fill up fast in the high surfing season (July to November). Some resorts shut down during the low, rainy season (December to March).

WARNING

Most embassies strongly warn tourists against travelling to potential conflict zones such as Maguindanao province (and its notoriously violent capital, Cotabato), Zamboanga and the entire Sulu Archipelago. While embassies tend to be a bit alarmist, it pays to exercise considerable caution when travelling to these areas. Check local news sources to make sure your destination and travel route are safe. See p584 for more on the Muslim separatist movement in Mindanao.

Cloud Nine (☎ 0918 564 5981; Cloud Nine; cottages P500-3500; ☺) Its location right by the surfers' boardwalk is ideal, although management was in flux when we visited. Pricier *nipa* huts have kitchens, DVD players and bathrooms.

Ocean 101 Beach Resort (☎ 0919 826 8837; Cloud Nine; r from P660; ☺ ☑) This is the most popular hangout among foreign surfers, featuring big beachfront rooms in two ugly blue concrete edifices. It has a great common area with a restaurant, pool table and satellite TV.

Also recommended:

Drop In (☎ 0919 652 0961; Cloud Nine; d P400) Across the road from Ocean 101.

Jadestar Lodge (☎ 0919 234 4367; General Luna; cottages from P400) Basic option just south of GL centre.

Getting There & Away

Sear's on-again, off-again direct flights from Cebu to Siargao's small airport were on again at the time of writing; flights are on Monday and Friday. Otherwise you'll need to catch a ferry from Surigao to get to the island; see p633 for more information.

Getting Around

On Siargao, jeepneys meet the ferries and run from Dapa to GL (P20) and Pilar (P30), or you can take a *habal-habal* to GL (P100) or Cloud Nine (P150).

CAGAYAN DE ORO

☎ 088 / pop 542,000

It may not be the most cosmopolitan city in the world, but every Friday and Saturday of the year the good people of this city descend on the central boulevard and engage in a giant, boozy street party. Take that, Rio! If you're too cool for the masses, 'CDO' also has some great

clubs. This pleasant city, enviably placed on the banks of the swimmable Cagayan River, is the one place in the Philippines that does organised rafting trips year-round. Contact **Cagayan de Oro Whitewater Rafting Adventure** (☎ 857 1270; per person from P900). The **tourist office** (☎ 856 4048; Velez St) is south of the city centre.

Sleeping

Park View Hotel (☎ 857 1197; cnr T Neri & General Capistrano Sts; r from P285) An organised place that has economical rooms – check out a few, as many are windowless.

Ramon's Hotel (☎ 857 4804; cnr Burgos & Tirso Neri Sts; r from P550; ☺) Rooms here are nothing special, but the quiet, riverside location is. Alas, river-view rooms lack balconies, although the restaurant has one.

Nature's Pensionne (☎ 857 2274; T Chavez St; d from P635; ☺) This hotel located in the concrete jungle of downtown CDO is the best mid-range option. Its clean, tastefully decorated rooms have cable TV and hot water.

Eating & Drinking

Gazebo Home Store Café (cnr Apolinar Velez & Gaerlan Sts; sandwiches P90) This clean, cool deli doubles as a souvenir store and has real coffee and free wi-fi.

Reina del Rey (cnr Burgos & Chavez Sts; mains P120-200) This floating restaurant in the Cagayan River is a great place to enjoy a beer and cheap snacks and sandwiches.

Karachi (Hayes St; mains P150-200) Feels like a hole in the wall, but has scrumptious Pakistani food, hookah pipes and a smattering of halal Middle Eastern dishes.

The bar and club action is centred on Tiano Brothers St between Hayes and Gaerlan. **Pulse** (Tiano Brothers St), **Ralf's** (Tiano Brothers St) and swanky Manila-style club **Eleven Fifty** (Gaerlan St; admission P100) were hot when we were there.

Getting There & Around

Between Cebu Pacific, Air Philippines and PAL, there are several flights per day to both Manila and Cebu. The airport is about 10km west of town (P120 by taxi).

At Macabalan Pier, 5km north of the city centre, various ferry companies serve Cebu (see Boat, p627) and Tagbilaran (P560, 12 hours). SuperFerry, Negros Navigation and Sulpicio Lines have a few trips per week to/from Manila (from P2500, 32 hours); many of these go via Bacolod and Iloilo.

GETTING TO MALAYSIA

At the time of writing, the only route open to foreigners was Zamboanga to Sandakan, Sabah. **Weesam Express** (www.weesamexpress.com) has a fast ferry that covers this route twice a week (P2800, 13 hours) and there are slower ferries that make this trip too. However, travel in the Zamboanga region is considered risky (see opposite). The boats to Sabah from Palawan are off limits to foreigners.

See p488 for information on the crossing from Malaysia.

Bachelor Tours buses head up the coast to Butuan (air-con P280, four hours) via Balingoan (P120, 1½ hours). Change in Butuan for Surigao.

The main bus terminal is on the edge of town, beside the Agora Market (take a 'Gusa' or 'Cugman' jeepney from town).

CAMIGUIN

☎ 088 / pop 87,000

With seven volcanoes, various waterfalls, hot springs, cold springs and underwater diversions aplenty, Camiguin is developing a reputation as a top adventure-tourism destination. Its undulating landscape, with cloud-tipped volcanoes as a continuous backdrop, makes it a great place to strike out on your own and explore, preferably by motorbike (per day P500) and on foot.

Adventure lovers should seek out Barbie at Camiguin Action Geckos (see p636) or Johnny at **Johnny's Fun N' Dive** (☎ 0920 953 6680; www.johnnysdive.com; Secret Cove Beach Resort). Not only do they both offer a range of trekking, rappelling, mountain biking and diving tours, but they are also happy to dispense advice to do-it-yourselfers.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Sear flies to Camiguin airport, located in Mambajao, three times a week from Cebu. Alternatively, you can catch regular boats from Balingoan on mainland Mindanao to Benoni or Guinsiliban (P100, about one hour) on Camiguin. Frequent buses and vans run to Balingoan from Cagayan de Oro (see Getting There & Around, left).

Jeepneys circle the island in both directions, passing any given point roughly every

half-hour until about 5pm. The jeepney fare from Benoni pier to Mambajao is P30 (35 minutes).

Mambajao

In this shady capital of Camiguin, life rarely gets out of first gear. The Camiguin **tourist office** (☎ 387 1097; Provincial Capitol Bldg) has free maps of the island. Mambajao is a good place to observe ornate *okkil* architecture. The best example is the Landbank building along the National Hwy in the city centre. Notice the intricate patterns cut into the wooden awning.

Penny-pinchers can bunk in the town centre at tidy **GV Tower Hotel** (☎ 387 1041; Burgos St; d P300-500) or the bare-bones **Travel Lodge** (☎ 0928 214 7729; Reyes St; s/d P100/200) opposite the market.

our pick **Enigmata** (☎ 387 0273; r from P500; ☎) is a memorable, hippy-sque artist hangout that's more a way of life than a resort. Most rooms are in a fantastic tree house built around a towering hardwood tree and swathed in wooden furniture, murals and artwork. Head honcho Ros does much to promote Camiguin arts and is a fine artist in her own right. The dirt road here turns off the highway at the Tarzan statue about 2km east of Mambajao.

There are a couple of Filipino eateries on the waterfront, or try **Green Tropical Pub** (mains P100-150; ☎ Tue-Sun), an open-air restaurant with pizzas and Thai and Filipino dishes just west of Mambajao.

Around Mambajao

Most of Camiguin's resorts are on the black-sand beaches in *barangay* Bug-Ong, about 4km west of Mambajao. You can take a jeepney or hire a tricycle for a negotiable P75 to P100 to get to any of the resorts.

Everything is cut-rate at **Jasmine by the Sea** (☎ 387 9015; Bug-Ong; d P500), including food, island hopping, motorbike rental and – perhaps worryingly? – diving. Run by an eccentric German, it has cosy garden cottages with seaweed balconies.

Camiguin Action Geckos (☎ 387 1266; www.camiguinaction.com; Bug-Ong; r/cottages P600/1500) has some cosy budget rooms above the restaurant, as well as some truly exceptional beachfront fan cottages.

Right next to Jasmine, **Seascape** (☎ 0906 256 4384; Bug-Ong; d without/with air-con from P700/1200) has

big, austere bungalows on a quiet stretch of beach.

PALAWAN

Palawan is fast becoming a haven for nature buffs and intrepid adventurers. Drifting on the Philippines' western edge, this long sliver of jungle is one of the country's last ecological frontiers. The Amazonian interior is barely connected by a few snaking roads that will make your fillings jingle, and the convoluted coast is comprised of one breathtaking bay after another. Puerto Princesa is the energetic capital from where you can explore nearby Sabang, with its famous underground river, and laid-back Port Barton. Towering limestone cliffs shelter the northern community of El Nido, while the Calamian group of islands offers beaches, unbeatable wreck diving and a few El Nido-esque cliffs of their own.

Only the road between Puerto Princesa and Roxas is sealed, and the infrequency of transport can test a Zen master's patience – seafaring *bangkas* are a popular way of avoiding dusty inland routes.

Getting There & Around

Cebu Pacific has daily flights to Puerto Princesa from both Manila and Cebu, while PAL and Air Philippines fly from Manila only. Seair and Asian Spirit both service Coron from Manila. Seair has a very useful 'hopping' route between Manila, Coron, El Nido and Puerto Princesa. Sample fares are P4000 for Manila–Coron, P3100 for Coron–El Nido, and P3200 for El Nido–Puerto Princesa.

SuperFerry (☎ 048-434 5736; Rizal Ave, Puerto Princesa) and **Negros Navigation** (Puerto Princesa Pier) both have weekly vessels to Puerto Princesa from Manila (from P1800, 26 hours) via Coron (P1450, 12 hours). Slower craft make the haul from Manila to El Nido via Coron (see p639). **Milagrosa J Shipping** (☎ 048-433 4806) sails between Puerto Princesa and Iloilo (P1150, 30 hours, two weekly) via the Cuyo Islands. From March to May, Negros Navigation runs a weekly ferry to Caticlan.

PUERTO PRINCESA

☎ 048 / pop 190,000

If only all Philippine cities could be a little more like earthy Puerto Princesa. Strictly enforced fines for littering (P200) keep the

streets clean (we're not kidding!), while the municipal government actively promotes the city as an eco- and adventure-tourism hub. Scattered around town is a handful of funky restaurants and guesthouses, where the design motif is part native Filipino, part tripped-out '60s hippy. Yes, there's the usual stream of tricycles down the main commercial drag, Rizal Ave. But even the tricycles seem a bit quieter and less dense than in most other provincial centres. In short, 'Puerto' makes a great launching pad for checking out the myriad natural attractions in the surrounding area. The big one is the Subterranean River, while overnight hikes to tribal villages in the south are also gaining traction. If you're in town, give the small **Palawan Museum** (City Plaza, Rizal Ave; admission P20; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat) a gander.

Information

Most internet cafés are clustered near the intersection of Rizal Ave and the National Hwy.

Equitable PCI Bank (Rizal Ave) Has the only working ATM in Palawan.

Provincial Tourism Office (☎ 433 2968; Provincial Capitol Compound, Rizal Ave; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) Distributes information-packed brochure on Palawan, including map of Puerto Princesa.

Tourist Information & Assistance Counter (☎ 434 4211; airport arrivals hall; ☎ 8am-5pm) Run by City Tourism Office, which has an office next door.

Underground River Booking Office (☎ 433 2409; 7 Plates Bldg, National Hwy, north of Rizal Ave; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) Issues Subterranean River permits (see p638).

Sleeping

Ancieto's Pension (☎ 0917 789 4664; cnr Mabini & Roxas Sts; s/d from P150/250; ☎) If Banwa is full – and it often is – walk three minutes down Roxas St to this family-run bargain. Rooms are basic and susceptible to some street noise, but there's a cosy sitting area with a TV.

our pick **Banwa Art House** (☎ 434 8963; www.banwa.com; Liwanag St; dm P225, s/d from P300/350; ☎) This backpacker oasis oozes charm from every artisan craft adorning its walls. There's a groovy bamboo lounge, surrounded by a waterfall of vines, that has cool tunes wafting from the house CD player.

Casa Linda Tourist Inn (☎ 433 2606; casalind@mozcom.com; Trinidad Rd; s/d P750/850; ☎) Slightly up-market, this splendid place off Rizal Ave is wall-to-wall bamboo and has a big, tranquil

WARNING

Malaria is an issue in rural areas. Use the mosquito nets provided by most guesthouses and coat yourself with insect repellent at dusk. Minuscule, stinging sandflies (aptly named *nik-niks*) delight in biting exposed skin and can be a curse on some western beaches.

garden courtyard with a bamboo reading gazebo. It has one coveted fan room (P600).

Eating & Drinking

Vegetarian House (cnr Burgos & Manalo Sts; dishes P30-50) Serves up incredibly cheap and tasty faux-meat dishes in decidedly austere surrounds.

Neva's Place (Taft St; mains P75-160) Great budget Filipino and Thai food, as well as pizzas, all served in a blissful garden.

Kinabuch Grill & Bar (Rizal Ave; mains P100-150) Sprawling 'KGB' has two pool tables and is the watering hole of choice for the thirsty masses. It's Russian owned. Really.

our pick **Ka Lui Restaurant** (369 Rizal Ave; meal P150-175; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) This seafood specialist in a funky *nipa* complex thoroughly deserves its reputation as one of the finest restaurants in the country.

Getting There & Around

The main bus terminal is at the San Jose market 6km north of town; to get there grab a multi-cab (mini-jeepney) from anywhere along Rizal Ave (P10).

From Puerto Princesa there are frequent buses south to Quezon (P150, 3½ hours) and north to Roxas (P130, three hours). There are three morning buses to El Nido (P300, eight hours). Buses also run to Sabang and Port Barton.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

To really see Palawan in all her jungle-clad glory, take the 'coast-to-coast' walk from Tanabag, an hour's drive north of Puerto Princesa, to Sabang. The three-day trek brings you up close and personal with Batak tribespeople, tropical birds, monkeys and possibly snakes. Local guides for this trek cost P800 per day; inquire at the Provincial or City Tourism Offices in Puerto Princesa.

The set tricycle rate into town from the airport is P40, but if you flag down a ride from the road out front it's only P16.

SABANG

☎ 048

Tiny Sabang has a long expanse of beach and is famed for the navigable **Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park** (admission P200), which winds through a spectacular cave before emptying into the sea. Tourist paddle boats are allowed to go 1.5km upstream into the cave (45 minutes return); in the June to November low season you can proceed 4.3km upstream (three hours return), but only with a separate permit (P400) from the Underground River Booking Office in Puerto Princesa (see p637). From the beach in Sabang it's a thrilling 5km walk through the jungle to the mouth of the river, or you can book a boat (P700 for up to six people, 15 minutes) through the Tourist Information & Assistance Center at the pier.

Sleeping & Eating

Most places shut off their generators at 10pm. That may change with the impending additions of two new resorts – native style Puerto Pension Resort and the Sheradon Hotel & Convention Centre.

Mary's Cottages (☎ 0919 757 7582; s P250, d P350-450) This is a half-decent budget option. Expect simplicity and you will not be let down. It's out past Taraw Lodge at the east end of the beach.

Taraw Lodge & Restaurant (☎ 0919 601 1227; cottages P450-600) A 10-minute walk east of the pier, this was our favourite, with five comfortable beachfront cottages, a lush garden, good food and plenty of hammocks. It's popular with Puerto Princesa travel agencies so book ahead.

Getting There & Away

The road out to Sabang is now about half sealed. Jumbo jeepneys between Sabang and Puerto Princesa leave at 7am, 9am and 2pm in either direction (P110, 2½ hours). Foreigners with luggage will be asked to pay P200. For Port Barton and El Nido back-track by road to Salvacion and flag down a northbound bus from the highway.

High season *bangkas* chug up to Port Barton (P800, 2½ hours) and El Nido (P1500, seven hours) about thrice weekly.

PORT BARTON

☎ 048 / pop 4800

People find themselves unable to leave Port Barton, and only partly because of the town's poor transport links. Set on a small, attractive cove, the area has some fine islands in the bay and good snorkelling, but most people spend their days reading and hammock-hopping. **Island-hopping excursions** (P1000) and **mangrove tours** (P600) are easily arranged. Port Barton shuts down in the low season.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick Greenviews Resort (☎ 0921 699 4339; www.palawandg.clara.net; s/d from P350/400) The last place on the east end of the beach is probably the best all-round choice. It certainly has the finest restaurant – try the shrimp omelette (P150). The basic rooms with shared bathrooms are more than acceptable, and the more luxurious cottages are set around a garden.

Elsa's Beach Cottages (☎ 0919 424 6975; d P350-650) The friendly family who runs this place recently gave the native-style beachfront cottages a much-needed facelift.

Ysobelle's Beach Resort (☎ 0928 503 0388; ysobellepalawan@yahoo.com.ph; d P700-800) The resort formerly known as Swissippini has a new owner. So far, so good. The newly renovated beachfront A-frames and garden cottages are Port Barton's classiest abodes.

Getting There & Away

In the high season (December to April), *bangkas* leave roughly every other day to Sabang (P800, 2½ hours) and El Nido (P1000, four hours). In the low season you'll have to hire a private *bangka*, although it's often possible to share with other travellers.

One excruciatingly slow bus per day departs at around 9.30am to Puerto Princesa (P200, four hours). The Puerto–Port Barton jeepney leaves around 7.30am. From Puerto, you can always take a more frequent Roxas-bound jeepney as far as San Jose and transfer to a motorcycle taxi (P600, 45 minutes).

To get to El Nido, make your way to Roxas, about 3km north of San Jose, and pick up a northbound jeepney.

EL NIDO

☎ 048 / pop 5100

Concealed in a cove on Palawan's northwest tip and punctured by immense limestone

cliffs, El Nido is the island's Aladdin's Cave. The friendly town clings to the bay's small brown beach and graciously integrates the swelling number of backpackers who find their way here. The edible nests of the tiny swiftlets that inhabit the cliffs give the town its name. There's some good snorkelling and limitless possibilities for exploring the islands, lagoons and perfect beaches of the **Bacuit Archipelago**.

Information

Run like Swiss clockwork by Judy, the **El Nido Boutique & Art Café** (☎ 0920 902 6317), near the wharf, is a repository for all things informative about El Nido. You can buy plane tickets here, check boat and bus schedules, get cash advances on Visa cards (with a hefty 12% surcharge), browse the library, buy art, eat good food and drink real coffee. It's also a good place as any to arrange boat or sea kayaking excursions into stunning Bacuit Bay.

Activities

All-day island-hopping trips cost P600 to P700 per person, including lunch. Miniloc Island's **Big Lagoon** and **Small Lagoon** are not to be missed; for full effect get there at dawn when you'll have them to yourself. There are several dive operators in town. Art Café has a list of short hiking expeditions you can do on your own.

Sleeping & Eating

There's a dearth of rooms in El Nido. If the following are full, a stroll down the main beach should turn something up. For cheap eats try the *turo-turo* (literally 'point-point'; restaurants that display their food in glass cases so you simply point-point to your order) restaurants near the corner of Real and Del Pilar Sts.

OG's Pensionne (☎ 0916 707 0393; Hama St; d P300-500, tr P700) Has enough rooms (15) that there's a good chance of something being available. The rooms are good value to boot – especially the luscious triples.

Ralf's Lodge & Restaurant (☎ 0920 584 4193; Serona Rd; s/d P350/400) The four rooms here are dead basic, but the views are great and the price is right.

El Nido Cliffside Cottages (☎ 0919 785 6625; Rizal St; s/d/tr P350/500/600) This tranquil place has simple courtyard bungalows under the eerie cliffs just south of town.

Our pick Alternative Centre (☎ 0917 896 3506; Serona Rd; r from P500; ☎) The beach-facing rooms here are beyond creative. Enter through garage-style front doors into a tangle of intricately carved wooden furniture, cascading streamers and vinelike plants. The cheaper rooms upstairs, with octagonal mattresses among other design liberties, adjoin an equally funky restaurant (it's 65% vegan, and 100% scrumptious; mains P160 to P260) and spa/wellness centre.

Seaslug's (Hama St; mains P90-180) Right in the middle of the beach, newcomer Seaslug's has quickly earned a loyal following among fans of grilled seafood and suds in the sand.

Getting There & Around

Seair flies from El Nido to Manila, Coron and Puerto Princesa (see Getting There & Around, p636). The only way to the airport is by tricycle for a non-negotiable P150 (we smell tricycle mafia).

San Nicolas Shipping (☎ in Manila 02-243 4595) and **Atienza Shipping Lines** (☎ 0918 566 6786) have weekly trips in small, fully loaded cargo boats to/from Manila (P1100, 32 hours). All passenger 'seating' is in cramped economy bunks. It's arguably worse than prison. Meals are included. Both of these companies also go weekly to Coron (P850, nine hours). The pricier option to Coron is a twice-weekly, 40-passenger *bangka* ferry (P2000, eight hours).

High-season *bangkas* wade down to Port Barton (P1200, four hours) and Sabang (P1500, seven hours) roughly every other day.

Three morning buses make the journey to Puerto Princesa (P300, eight hours).

CORON

pop 38,000

Divers know it as a wreck-diving hot spot, but the area known as Coron also has untouched beaches, crystal-clear lagoons and brooding limestone cliffs to tempt nondivers. Coron itself is actually just the sleepy main town of Busuanga Island – not to be confused with Coron Island to the south. Both Busuanga Island and Coron Island are part of the Calamian Group, located about halfway between Mindoro and Palawan.

Activities

Fifteen Japanese ships sunk by US fighter planes roost on the floor of Coron Bay just

south of Busuanga. Getting to the wrecks from Coron town involves a two- to four-hour boat ride, but diving is still affordable, averaging about US\$40 for a two-tank dive. Most of the wrecks are for advanced divers only, although there are a few in less than 25m that are suitable for beginners.

Coron town lacks a beach, but you can hire a motorbike (P500) or boat (per day about P1250 for three people) and bounce around the seemingly infinite supply of untouched beaches on the west coast of Busuanga and surrounding islands. **Coron Island**, with its towering spires of stratified limestone, is the star attraction. There's an incredible dive in Coron Island's **Barracuda Lake** (admission P75), where the clear water gets scorching hot as you descend through its swirling, volcanic thermals. You can also paddle around on a bamboo raft and swim in unspoiled **Lake Cayangan** (admission incl raft P200).

Sleeping & Eating

Apart from Sangat Island Reserve, all of the following places are in Coron town. All hotels listed have dive shops and hire out boats for island hopping.

Sea Dive Resort (☎ 0918 400 0448; www.seadive-resort.com.ph; d P400-800; 🏠) A three-storey monolith on the sea accessed by a long walkway, this place has it all – decent rooms, restaurant, bar, internet and a busy dive shop.

Krystal Lodge (d P600-1000) Like much of Coron, this sprawling bamboo complex is built on stilts over the water. It's a maze of shady walkways ending in rooms that range from passable boxes to simple 'apartments'.

Sangat Island Reserve (☎ 0920 954 4328; www.sangat.com.ph; cottages per person from US\$65) If you really want to treat yourself – and be close to the wrecks – this jewel of a resort is on its own island, about a one-hour boat ride from Coron (free transfer for guests). Prices include all meals.

our pick **Bistro Coron** (meals P150-500) A mouth-watering French bistro on one of the Philippines' most isolated islands? It works for us. Consider splurging for the jumbo prawns, one of the best meals we've had in the Philippines. Hopefully proprietor/chef Bruno won't move back to his former home in southern Palawan any time soon.

Getting There & Away

For air connections, see p636. Coron's YKR Airport is a bumpy one-hour ride

north of Coron town; jeepneys (P150, one hour) meet the flights.

The weekly Negros Navigation and SuperFerry vessels between Manila and Puerto Princesa pass through Coron town (see p636). To/from Manila takes about 13 hours and costs from P1500; Puerto Princesa takes about 12 hours and costs from P1200. For boats to El Nido see Getting There & Around, p639.

PHILIPPINES DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in the Philippines ranges from plush beachside bungalows to stuffy hotel shoeboxes, and everything in between. Many budget hotels offer a mix of fan-cooled and air-con rooms. In this book, unless otherwise noted, rooms in the P150 to P300 range are generally fan-cooled with a shared bathroom, and rooms in the P350 to P500 range usually have fans and private bathrooms. Anything higher should have air-conditioning. Prices are approximately double in Manila and in trendy resort areas such as Boracay and Alona Beach, although reasonable dorm beds can be had in Manila for about P350.

As the Philippines becomes more popular, it's becoming more difficult to just walk in and find a room in smaller resort areas and touristy towns such as Vigan. Booking ahead is a good idea, at least in the high season (roughly December to May, with some regional variations).

Prices listed in this chapter are high season rates. Room rates in tourist hot spots go down by up to 50% in the low season, but may triple or even quadruple during Holy Week (Easter) and around New Year's.

ACTIVITIES

Scuba diving is the most popular adventure activity in the Philippines, but there is also a small surf scene, kite-surfing and windsurfing on Boracay, and trekking just about everywhere. Other popular adventure sports covered in less detail in this book include cycling and mountain biking (see www.bugoybikers

DID YOU KNOW?

In the early 1900s, the Americans turned the Calamian Group island of Culion into what would eventually become the world's largest leper colony.

.com), spelunking (see www.bonifaciojoni.blogspot.com) and rock climbing (see www.geocities.com/powerupgym).

Diving

Despite the destruction wrought by widespread dynamite fishing, the Philippines still boasts some top-notch dive sites. The WWII shipwrecks at Coron (Busuanga Island) offer outstanding wreck dives, while the impressive reefs around Puerto Galera (Mindoro), Apo Island (Negros), Panglao Island (Bohol), Padre Burgos (Leyte), and Moalboal and Malapascua Island (Cebu) offer a more traditional fish-and-coral environment. Beginners should head for the dozens of competitive scuba schools in Puerto Galera or Boracay. Generally, it costs certified divers about US\$25 to US\$30 for a single-tank dive with all equipment. Open-water diving courses go for about US\$350 to US\$400. See www.divephil.com for more diving tips.

Kite-Surfing & Windsurfing

The island of Boracay is the Philippine mecca for windsurfers and kite-surfers. The east side of Boracay has a huge, shallow lagoon that gets steady winds from November to March. That and cheap prices (US\$300 to US\$350 for a 14-hour certification course, equipment included) make Boracay one of the best places in the world to learn kite-surfing.

Surfing

The top surfing destination in the Philippines is Siargao Island, off the northeast coast of Mindanao. In the right weather conditions, the waves here can be Hawaiian in scale. Cloud Nine, the best surfing spot on the island, is the setting for the annual Siargao International Surfing Cup held in October. Other good breaks can be found all along the Philippines' eastern border, although many of the best breaks are virtually inaccessible and must be reached by boat. The season on the east coast generally coincides with typhoon season, roughly August to November. There

is smaller surf to be had from December to March in San Juan, near San Fernando (La Union) on the west coast of Luzon.

Trekking

The entire archipelago is crisscrossed with paths and trails. They are not always clearly marked, so bring a guide unless you have extensive experience in backcountry navigation. Some of the best trekking areas are in the Cordilleras of North Luzon, the rain-forests of Palawan and the rugged interior of Samar and Leyte. Volcano climbing is a Philippine speciality – the big names are Mt Mayon in southeast Luzon and Mt Kanlaon on Negros.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet publishes *Philippines* and the pint-sized *Filipino (Tagalog) Phrasebook*. If you want to brush up on some recent history, Stanley Karnow's Pulitzer Prize-winning effort *In Our Image* takes an intriguing look at the US relationship with its biggest colony. *Ants for Breakfast – Archaeological Adventures among the Kalinga*, by James M Skibo, is a tasty work of asides and insights gleaned from fieldwork among the Kalinga people of the Cordilleras.

BUSINESS HOURS

Unless otherwise noted, restaurants are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The following are other usual business hours in the Philippines:

Airline offices ☎ 8am to 6pm (airport branches stay open until the last flight).

Banks ☎ 9am to 3pm

Government offices ☎ generally 8am to noon and 1pm to 5pm Monday to Friday

Shopping malls ☎ 10am to around 9pm

Tourist offices ☎ generally 8am to noon and 1pm to 5pm Monday to Friday

THE PERFECT BEACH

There's a rumour that the island described in Alex Garland's backpacker classic *The Beach* was somewhere in the Calamian island group. Garland set the book in Thailand, but admits that the real island was somewhere in the Philippines. He lived in the Philippines for a spell and set his second novel, *The Tesseract*, in Manila.

CLIMATE

The Philippines is hot and humid throughout the year, with brief respites possible in January and February. For most of the country, the dry season is roughly November to May. Rains start in June, peak in July through to September, and start tapering off in October. Typhoons are common from June to early December.

However, in parts of the country the seasons are flipped. Eastern Mindanao, southern Leyte, eastern Samar and parts of southeast Luzon are rainy from December to March and fairly dry when the rest of the country is sopping.

The central Visayas – including Bohol, Negros and Cebu – are sheltered from the monsoon rains and thus have less pronounced seasons. These areas are liable to have rain at any time of the year, but it usually won't be too serious unless there's a typhoon stirring up trouble on the eastern seaboard.

See also p916 for climate charts.

CUSTOMS

You can bring up to 2L of alcohol and up to 400 cigarettes into the country without paying duty.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Mindanao (the central and southwest regions in particular) and the Sulu Archipelago are the scenes of clashes between the army and US 'advisers' on one side and separatist groups on the other (see p584 and p633).

Bus companies and shipping lines in the Philippines are legendary for their cavalier attitude to safety. There have been a number of high-profile shipping disasters in recent

years, and bus accidents are common (as the author of this chapter found out first hand when the bus he was riding on lost its breaks and collided awkwardly, but not seriously, with an oncoming truck). By contrast, the record of Philippine aviation companies in recent years has been fairly good.

As for annoyances, you'll probably find you don't share the Filipino enthusiasm for roosters, particularly when the little beasts wake you for the 15th time in one night. Just as inescapable are the wail of karaoke and the whine of tricycles, which seem to start their engines in unison at 6am. Heavy air pollution is a serious annoyance in cities such as Manila and Cebu.

DRIVING LICENCE

Tourists are free to use their home-country driving licence in the Philippines.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Embassies & Consulates in the Philippines

The following are located in Manila:

- Australia** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-757 8100; 23rd fl, Tower 2, RCBC Plaza, 6819 Ayala Ave, Makati)
- Brunei** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-816 2836; 11th fl, BPI Bldg, cnr Ayala Ave & Paseo de Roxas, Makati)
- Canada** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-857 9000; 6th fl, Tower 2, RCBC Plaza, 6819 Ayala Ave, Makati)
- France** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-857 6900; 16th fl, Pacific Star Bldg, cnr Gil Puyat & Makati Aves, Makati)
- Germany** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-702 3000; 25th fl, Tower 2, RCBC Plaza, 6819 Ayala Ave, Makati)
- Indonesia** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-892 5061; 185 Salcedo St, Makati)
- Japan** (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-551 5710; 2627 Roxas Blvd, Pasay City)

SCAMS

Manila, in particular, has a fine tradition of con artists, rip-off merchants and pickpockets. Thankfully, most rely on guile, so violent crime isn't so common.

Beware of people who claim to have met you before or claim to be staying in your hotel, particularly in Ermita. Confidence tricksters prey on solo travellers, particularly new arrivals, and invite them home. The situation ends with the traveller being drugged and robbed. If you feel that a stranger is acting overly friendly to you, walk away.

People who approach you on the street to change money at kiosks on Mabini St can nail you with really good amateur-magician card tricks – turning P1000 into P100 with sleight of hand. If an exchange kiosk asks to recount the wad of pesos they've just handed you, don't let them.

Several of the *kalesa* (two-wheeled horse-drawn cart) drivers around Ermita and Intramuros can be hard work as well – prices can change suddenly. Just make sure you agree on the price before setting off.

Laos (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-852 5759; 34 Lapu-Lapu Ave, Magallanes, Makati)

Malaysia (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-817 4581; 107 Tordesillas St, Makati)

Myanmar (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-893 1944; Gervasia Bldg, 152 Amorsolo St, Makati)

New Zealand (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-891 5358; 23rd fl, BPI Buendia Center, Gil Puyat Ave, Makati)

Singapore (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-751 2345; 35th fl, Tower 1, Enterprise Center, 6766 Ayala Ave, Makati)

Thailand (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-815 4220; 107 Rada St, Makati)

UK (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-580 8700; 15th fl, LV Locsin Bldg, 6752 Ayala Ave, Makati)

USA (Map pp598-9; ☎ 02-528 6300; 1201 Roxas Blvd, Ermita)

Vietnam (Map pp596-7; ☎ 02-524 0364; 554 Vito Cruz St, Malate)

Philippine Embassies & Consulates Abroad

For Philippine diplomatic offices in Southeast Asia, see the relevant country chapter.

Australia (☎ 02-6273 2535; www.philembassy.org.au; 1 Moonah Place, Yarralumla, ACT 2600)

Canada (☎ 613-233 1121; www.philcongen-toronto.com; Suite 606, 130 Albert St, Ottawa, ON K1P5G4)

France (☎ 01 44 14 57 00; ambphilparis@wanadoo.fr; 4 Hameau de Boulainvilliers, 75016 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-864 9500; www.philippine-embassy.de; Uhlstrandstrasse 97, 10715 Berlin)

Japan (☎ 03-5562 1600; www.tokyope.org; 5-15-5 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-8537)

New Zealand (☎ 04-472 9848; wellingtonpe@dfa.gov.ph; 50 Hobson St, Thorndon, Wellington)

UK (☎ 020-7937 1600; www.philemb.org.uk; 9A Palace Green, Kensington, London W8 4QE)

USA (☎ 202-467 9300; www.philippineembassy-usa.org; 1600 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC, 20036)

FOOD & DRINK Food

The native cuisine blends a number of influences, particularly from China and Spain, with the main flavours being ginger, tamarind, onion, vinegar, soy sauce and herbs such as bay leaves rather than Asian spices. *Turo-turo* (literally 'point-point') restaurants are everywhere – they display their food in cafeteria-style glass cases and you simply point-point to your order.

Favourite Filipino snacks and dishes:

Adobo Chicken, pork or fish in a dark tangy sauce.

Arroz caldo Thick rice soup with chicken, garlic, ginger and onions.

TOP FIVE FESTIVALS

Every Filipino town manages to squeeze in at least one fiesta a year, accompanied by frenzied eating, drinking and merry-making. These are our top five festivals, in descending order:

- **Ati-Atihan** (p616) Kalibo, Panay; mid-January
- **Moriones Festival** Marinduque; Holy Week
- **Peñafrancia Festival** (p611) Naga, south-east Luzon; third week of September
- **MassKara** (p621) Bacolod, Negros; around October 19
- **Crucifixion Ceremony** Many locations, but the most famous is in San Fernando, Pampanga, central Luzon; Good Friday

Balut Half-developed duck embryo, boiled in the shell.

Halo-halo A tall, cold glass of milky crushed ice with fresh fruit and ice cream.

Kare-kare Meat (usually intestines) in coconut sauce.

Lechon Spit-roast baby pig with liver sauce.

Lumpia Spring rolls filled with meat or vegetables.

Mami Noodle soup, like *mee* soup in Malaysia or Indonesia.

Menudo Stew with vegetables, liver or pork.

Pancit Stir-fried *bihon* (white) or *canton* (yellow) noodles with meat and vegetables.

Pinakbet Vegetables with shrimp paste, garlic, onions and ginger.

Sisig Crispy fried pork ears and jowl.

Drink

The national brew, San Miguel, is very palatable and despite being a monopolist is affordable at around P20 (P25 to P35 in bars). San Miguel also brews a beer called Red Horse; it's ludicrously strong so make sure you are close to home when you order your 1L bottle. Tanduay rum is the national drink, and amazingly cheap at around P75 per litre. It's usually served with coke. Popular nonalcoholic drinks include *buko* juice (young coconut juice with floating pieces of jelly-like flesh) and sweetened *calamansi* juice (*calamansi* are small local limes).

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Bakla (gay men) and *binalaki* (lesbians) are almost universally accepted in the Philippines. There are well-established gay centres

DID YOU KNOW?

One of the first major email viruses was invented and unleashed by a Filipino IT student in 1999. It seems very Filipino that it was called the 'I love you' virus.

in major cities, but foreigners should be wary of hustlers and police harassment. Remedios Circle in Malate, Manila, is the site of a June gay-pride parade and the centre for nightlife. For up-to-date information on gay life in the Philippines, you can check out **Utopia Asian Gay & Lesbian Resources** (www.utopia-asia.com) and the **Asian Gay Guide** (www.dragoncastle.net).

HOLIDAYS

Offices and banks are closed on public holidays, although shops and department stores stay open. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are the only days when the entire country closes down – even most public transport stops running, and Asian Spirit even grounds its planes. The public holidays are:

New Year's Day 1 January

Maundy Thursday, Good Friday & Easter Sunday

March/April

Araw ng Kagitingan (Bataan Day) 9 April

Labour Day 1 May

Independence Day 12 June

Ninoy Aquino Day 21 August

National Heroes Day Last Sunday in August

All Saints' Day 1 November

Bonifacio Day (National Heroes Day) 30 November

Christmas Day 25 December

Rizal Day 30 December

New Year's Eve 31 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are all over the Philippines. Speedy connections are readily available in all cities for P15 to P25 per hour, and even some remote areas with limited electricity, such as Port Barton in Palawan, have slow connections available for no more than P60 per hour.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Department of Foreign Affairs (www.dfa.gov.ph) The Department of Foreign Affairs site has updated embassy listings and visa regulations.

Lakbay.net (www.lakbay.net) This site has lots of useful Philippines links, as well as some shipping and bus schedules, and an online air-ticket booking service.

National Commission for Culture & the Arts (www.ncca.gov.ph) This outstanding website contains primers on the arts and background on the Philippines' various ethnic groups and tribes.

Philippine Newslink (www.philnews.com) This has a fantastically thorough pile of local news and views, and includes links to all the main daily newspapers.

Tanikalang Ginto (www.filipinolinks.com) This vast directory has an extensive set of links relating to all aspects of the country.

US Department of State (www.travel.state.gov) Mildly paranoid but useful travel information and advisories. The US is said to have the best Western intelligence-gathering network in the Philippines.

WOW Philippines (www.tourism.gov.ph) This official tourism site is a good place to start, but is weak on adventure sports and ecotourism.

LEGAL MATTERS

Drugs are risky; even being caught with marijuana for personal use can mean jail, while traffickers could face life in prison. Should you find yourself in trouble, your first recourse is your embassy, so make a point of writing down the phone number. If you are arrested your embassy may not be able to do anything more than provide you with a list of local lawyers and keep an eye on how you're being treated. Another good number to know is the Department of Tourism's **Tourist Security Division** (☎ 524 1728, 524 1660). This unit is available 24 hours and is more reliable than regular police.

MAPS

The Nelles Verlag *Philippines* map is a good map of the islands at a scale of 1:1,500,000. More useful to the traveller are the excellent locally produced *E-Z* maps of each region, which cost P99 per map.

MEDIA**Magazines & Newspapers**

There are about 20 major national and regional English-language newspapers, ranging from the staid *Manila Bulletin* to the American big city daily-style *Philippine Daily Inquirer*

and *Philippine Star*. One of the better newspapers is *Business World*, which has national news and a good weekend guide in addition to business news. These national papers can be found in newspaper stands all over the country, although they have a heavily Manila-centric world view. *Newsbreak* and *Graphic* are weekly news magazines in the mould of *Newsweek*. International publications such as the *International Herald Tribune* and *The Economist* are readily available at airports and top-end hotels in major cities.

TV

There are about seven major channels broadcast from Manila, sometimes in English, sometimes in Tagalog. Most midrange hotels have cable TV with access to between 20 and 120 channels, including some obscure regional channels, a couple of Filipino and international movie channels, the big global news and sports channels such as BBC and ESPN, and the country's own 24-hour English-language news channel, ANC. The latter is owned by ABS-CBN, which competes with the GMA network for national supremacy, providing Tagalog-language programming aimed at the lowest common denominator. Think racy Latin American-style variety shows, cheap local soaps and Filipino action movies.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the peso, divided into 100 centavos. Banknotes come in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 500 and 1000 pesos. The most common coins are one, five and 10 pesos.

ATMs

ATMs are located in all major cities and towns throughout the country. Where a region covered in this chapter does not have ATMs (such as most of Palawan), it is noted in that chapter. The Maestro/Cirrus network is most readily accepted, followed by Visa/Plus cards, then by American Express (Amex). The most prevalent ATMs that accept most Western bank cards belong to Equitable PCI Bank (PCI), Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI) and Metrobank. Most ATMs have a P6000 per-transaction withdrawal limit; the HSBC and Citibank ATMs in Manila and Cebu let you take out P15,000 to P20,000 per transaction.

Cash

Emergency cash in US dollars is a good thing to have in case you get stuck in an area with no working ATM. Other currencies, such as the euro or UK pound, are more difficult to change outside of the bigger cities.

'Sorry, no change' becomes a very familiar line. Stock up on notes smaller than P500 at every opportunity.

Credit Cards

Major credit cards are accepted by many hotels, restaurants and businesses. Outside of Manila, businesses tend to charge from 5% to 12% extra for credit card transactions. Most Philippine banks will let you take a cash advance on your card.

Exchanging Money

Moneychangers are much faster than the banks and give a better rate for cash, but can be dodgy, particularly in Manila. They prefer US dollars. Ask your hotel front desk to recommend a local moneychanger. In the provinces, hotels will often change money for you.

Exchange rates at the time of writing were as follows:

Country	Unit	Pesos (P)
Australia	A\$1	39.02
Canada	C\$1	44.95
Euro zone	€1	64.24
Indonesia	10,000Rp	49.42
Japan	¥100	40.16
Malaysia	RM1	13.28
New Zealand	NZ\$1	33.04
UK	UK£1	92.92
US	US\$1	46.28

Travellers Cheques

We don't recommend bringing travellers cheques as banks in the Philippines seem to have a vendetta against them. Without exception you will need your passport and the original receipts and you may find that banks and moneychangers will only change cheques between 9am and 10am, or only at limited branches. You stand the best chance with Amex US-dollar cheques – other companies and denominations may not be changeable. The best places to cash Amex and Thomas Cook travellers cheques are at their respective branches in Manila (see p593).

LEGAL AGE

- you can begin driving at 16
- voting age is 18
- drinking is allowed from 18
- sex is legal at 18

POST

The postal system is generally quite efficient, but mail from the provinces can take weeks to reach Manila, let alone the outside world. Wait until you get back to the capital if you're sending anything internationally.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

As in other Asian countries, always allow locals a way of extracting themselves from an awkward situation. Publicly dressing down a Filipino is a sure-fire way to stir up trouble. Most Filipinos love having their photo taken, but tribespeople in rural areas in particular might resent it if you snap away without asking.

The Philippines is home to 100 or so cultural groups, and while visiting tribal villages is extremely rewarding, you should consider that your presence can have a destabilising and corrosive influence on their culture. Obvious displays of wealth are a no-no. Gifts are warmly received but should be kept modest; matches and small bottles of *ginebra* (local gin) work well. Ask to meet the village headman before staying overnight, and always respect the wishes of the locals. Ask permission to photograph, and don't insist if permission is denied.

The Philippines has an abominable environmental record, and visitors are often put off by the way Filipinos throw their garbage everywhere and urinate in public. This is one situation where the 'When in Rome...' maxim does not apply. Set an example by using garbage bins (when you can find them) and politely refusing the 7-Eleven clerk's offer to put your tiny pack of chewing gum in a big plastic bag. As with anywhere, tread particularly softly in environmentally sensitive areas

such as coral reefs, rice terraces, rainforests and whale shark zones.

TELEPHONE

Mobile phones are the biggest thing here since watches, and half the country spends much of the time furiously texting the other half. Many remote provincial villages lack landlines but are connected to one or both of the Philippines' two mobile networks – Globe Telecom and Smart Telecom. For travellers, a mobile phone can be a good thing to have in the event of an emergency. They are also useful for booking rooms (often accomplished by text message) and texting newly made Filipino friends.

The best strategy is to bring your own GSM phone and purchase a local prepaid SIM card (P100) to avoid hefty overseas roaming charges. Text messages cost only P1 per message, and calls to other mobile phones or landlines P7.50 per minute. International text messages cost P15 per message and international calls cost US\$0.40 per minute. Philippine mobile phone numbers all begin with 09.

If you don't have a mobile phone, international calls can be made from many hotels (for a hefty price) or from any PLDT or BayanTel office. PLDT and BayanTel offer flat rates of US\$0.40 per minute for international calls.

The country code for the Philippines is ☎ 63. The international dialling code is ☎ 00. For local area codes, dial the first zero when calling from within the Philippines. For the PLDT directory, call ☎ 187 nationwide. For the international operator, dial ☎ 108.

TOILETS

Toilets are commonly called a 'CR', an abbreviation of the delightfully euphemistic

'comfort room'. Public toilets are virtually nonexistent, so aim for one of the ubiquitous fast-food restaurants should you need a room of comfort.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Philippines' tourism authority is run out of the **Department of Tourism Information Centre** (DOT; Map pp598-9; ☎ 02-524 2384; www.wowphilippines.ph; TM Kalaw St; ☎ 7am-6pm) in Manila. The DOT's website has contact information for DOT representatives in the US, UK, Australia and other countries.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Steps up to hotels, tiny cramped toilets and narrow doors are the norm outside of four-star hotels in Manila, Cebu and a handful of larger provincial cities. Lifts are often out of order, and boarding any form of rural transport is likely to be fraught with difficulty. On the other hand, most Filipinos are more than willing to lend a helping hand, and the cost of hiring a taxi for a day and possibly an assistant as well is not excessive.

VISAS

Visa regulations vary with your intended length of stay. When you arrive you'll receive a 21-day visa free of charge. As usual, your passport must be valid for at least six months beyond the period you intend to stay.

To extend a 21-day visa to 59 days costs US\$42 at any immigration office. It takes less than an hour to extend your visa at most provincial bureau of immigration offices (see following). The process is infinitely more painful at the **Bureau of Immigration head office** (Map p600; ☎ 02-527 3248; Magallanes Dr, Intramuros, Manila; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) – consider paying a travel agent about P500 to do it for you.

For a full list of provincial immigration offices, see <http://immigration.gov.ph>. Useful offices include the following:

Boracay (Map p619; ☎ 036-288 5267; Nirvana Beach Resort; ☎ 2-5:30pm Mon, 8am-noon & 1-5:30pm Tue & Wed)

Cebu City (off Map p625; ☎ 032-345 6442; cnr Burgos St & Mandaue Ave) Relatively hassle-free visa extensions. It's behind the Mandaue Fire Station, opposite the Mandaue Sports Complex, 6.5km northeast of town.

Puerto Galera (Map p615; Puerto Galera municipal compound; ☎ Mon-Wed)

Puerto Princesa (☎ 048-433 2248; Rizal Ave; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Upstairs in a white building next to the Palawan Hotel.

LENDING A HELPING HAND

Andrea Gillespie, Volunteer

Volunteering in the Philippines, I learned that a coconut shell works better than a shovel sometimes and that a smile (and a lift of the eyebrows) can go a long way. This was my third time volunteering with Hands On Disaster Response and my first visit to the Philippines. It was amazing to be welcomed with such warmth and to have an opportunity to learn, work and activate change together.

If you just can't be bothered extending your visa, don't sweat it. You can extend it retroactively at the airport upon departure, paying all relevant fees plus a modest P1000 fine. Using this method will not adversely affect your chances of entering the country in the future.

VOLUNTEERING

Hands On Manila (☎ 02-843 5231; www.handsonmanila.org) is a wonderful organisation that is always looking for eager volunteers to help with disaster assistance and other projects. You might also inquire at the **Springboard Foundation** (☎ 02-821 5440; www.springboard-foundation.org), which has ties to various charity organisations that do volunteer work in the Philippines.

To get involved with biodiversity and species conservation projects contact the **Haribon Foundation** (www.haribon.org.ph) or **WWF Philippines** (www.wwf.org.ph).

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Many male Filipinos think of themselves as irresistible macho types, but can also be surprisingly considerate, and especially keen to show their best side to foreign women. They will address you as 'Ma'am', shower you with compliments and engage you in polite conversation. Note that in Filipino dating culture, striking up a private conversation may be seen as a step towards something more intimate.

Filipinas rarely miss the chance to ask personal questions out of curiosity – about your home country, family, marital status and so on. It's worth packing a few stock answers to these questions in your luggage for cheerful distribution.

Tampons are fairly widely available but it's a good idea to stock up.

PROSTITUTION IN THE PHILIPPINES

One social issue related to travel in the Philippines is prostitution and its most insidious form, child prostitution. In some European and Japanese magazines, the Philippines is actively promoted as a prime sex-tourism destination. Among the major sex-tour operators is the Japanese organised-crime group Yakuza.

Although prostitution is officially illegal in the Philippines, the 'red light' districts of most big cities operate openly and freely, with karaoke bars, 'discos', go-go bars and strip clubs all acting as fronts. The call girls are euphemistically called 'GROs' – guest relations officers.

The Asia-Pacific office of the **Coalition Against Trafficking in Women** (☎ 02-426 9873; www.catw-ap.org) is based in Quezon City. Its website has information about prostitution in the Philippines and several useful links. Travellers can also contact the Quezon City office of **End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism** (ECPAT; ☎ 02-925 2803; www.ecpat.net), a global network of organisations that works to stop child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

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