



THE ROUGH GUIDE TO THE PHILIPPINES



INSIDE THIS BOOK

INTRODUCTION What to see, what not to miss, itineraries and more

BASICS Pre-departure tips and practical information

THE GUIDE Comprehensive, in-depth guide to the Philippines, with area highlights and full-colour maps throughout

CONTEXTS History, religious beliefs and Filipino culture, plus recommended books and a useful language section

We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the Guide with the ★ symbol



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THE ROUGH GUIDE TO THE
PHILIPPINES

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Mike MacEacheran**





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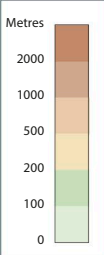
Introduction to

The Philippines

Separated from its Southeast Asian neighbours by the South China Sea, the Philippines has always been a little different. As the only Asian nation colonized by the Spanish, this lush archipelago of dazzling beaches, year-round sun and warm, turquoise waters remains predominantly Roman Catholic, and culturally – a blend of Islamic, Malay, Spanish and American influences – it often feels light years away from its neighbours, with a string of elegant colonial towns that have more in common with Latin America than the rest of Asia. It's an enticing mix: all over the archipelago you'll discover tantalizing food, friendly people and exuberant festivals. And the variety is astonishing: you can surf, island-hop or dive pristine coral reefs in the morning, and in the same day visit mystical tribal villages, ancient rice terraces and jungle-smothered peaks.

Indeed, the Philippines is often underrated and misunderstood by travellers and its Asian neighbours, casually dismissed as a supplier of maids, tribute bands, mail-order brides and corrupt politicians, epitomized by the gaudy excesses of Imelda Marcos. Don't be put off: while poverty and corruption remain serious problems, the Philippines is far more complex – and culturally rich – than the stereotypes suggest.

The **Filipino people** are variously descended from early Malay settlers, Muslim Sufis from the Middle East, Spanish conquistadors and friars, and later, from Chinese traders. It's an old cliché, but largely true: Filipinos take pride in making visitors welcome, even in the most rustic barangay home. Equally important is the culture of entertaining, evident in the hundreds of colourful **fiestas** that are held throughout the country, many tied to the Roman Catholic calendar. Never far behind partying is eating: Filipino **food** is heavily influenced by Spanish and native traditions – expect plenty of fresh fish, roasted meats (pork and chicken) and, unlike in the rest of Asia, a plethora of addictive desserts, many utilizing the vast array of tropical fruits on offer.



SOUTH CHINA SEA

PHILIPPINE SEA

SULU SEA

CELEBES SEA

Sandakan
MALAYSIA
(SABAH)

Batanes Islands

Luzon Strait

Babuyan Islands

SIERRA MADRE

Laoag

Vigan

Sagada

Bontoc

Banaue

San Fernando

Baguio

Dagupan

Mt. Pinatubo

Angeles

San Fernando

Olongapo

MANILA

Corregidor

Anilao

Puerto Galera

Calapan

Apo Reef

Busuanga

Calamian Islands

El Nido

Taytay Bay

Palawan

Puerto Princesa

Brooke's Point

Balabac

Cuyo Islands

Lucena

Batangas

City

Marinduque

Boracay

Romblon

Masbate

Masbate

Roxas

Kalibo

Iloilo City

Panay

Visayas

Bacolod

Cebu

Mt. Kanlaon

Cebu City

Negros

Dumaguete

Siquijor

Bohol

BOHOL SEA

Dipolog

Zamboanga City

Basilan

Jolo

Sulu Archipelago

Daet

Naga

Legazpi

Donsol

Sorsogon Town

Mt. Mayon

Masbate

Masbate

Cataman

Samar

Catbalogan

Tacloban

Leyte

Ormoc

Surigao

Camiguin

Butuan

Mindanao

Cagayan de Oro

Cotabato

Zamboanga City

Davao

Mt. Apo

General Santos

Basilan

Tawi-Tawi

Sulu Archipelago

Catanduanes

Boracay

Romblon

Masbate

Masbate

Roxas

Iloilo City

Panay

Visayas

Bacolod

Cebu

Mt. Kanlaon

Cebu City

Negros

Dumaguete

Bohol

BOHOL SEA

Dipolog

Zamboanga City

Basilan

Jolo

Sulu Archipelago

Tawi-Tawi

Sulu Archipelago

FACT FILE

- The **population** of the Philippines was estimated to be just over 102 million in 2016; half reside on the island of Luzon.
- The Philippines officially comprises 7107 islands, though the actual figure varies depending on the definition of “island”; reef tips and shoals number in the tens of thousands.
- The Philippines has the largest **diaspora** in the world; 11–12 million Filipinos live and work overseas, mostly as nurses, maids or on cruise ships.
- The richest individual in the Philippines is thought to be mall tycoon **Henry Sy** (SM Group), with a US\$13.7 billion net worth – in a country where the average wage is less than US\$300/month.
- **Tanduay rum** dates back to 1854, and today remains the nation’s spirit of choice. Made with sugar cane milled in Negros, it’s frequently cheaper than bottled water.
- Most Filipinos have at least one **uncle or aunt** named Boy, Girlie or Baby.
- Filipino and English are the **official languages** of the Philippines (Filipino is just a standardized version of Tagalog), but there are at least 171 languages spoken throughout the archipelago, with Cebuano following Filipino in popularity.

Even the **politics** in Asia’s first democracy is rich in showmanship and pizzazz. From Ferdinand Marcos to the “housewife President” Cory Aquino to current controversial President Duterte, the country’s leaders have never been short on charisma. But despite impressive economic gains in the last twenty years, all have conspicuously failed to rid the country of its grinding **poverty**, visible everywhere you go in shanty towns and rickety barangay, and brutally exposed by **Typhoon Yolanda** in 2013. Ordinary people somehow remain stoical in the face of these problems, infectiously optimistic and upbeat. This determination to enjoy life is a national characteristic, encapsulated in the common Tagalog phrase *bahala na* – “what will be will be”.

Where to go

Most flights to the Philippines arrive in **Manila**, the crazy, chaotic capital which, despite first impressions, is worth at least a day or two of your time. The city’s major historical attraction is the old Spanish walled city of **Intramuros**, while the best museums in the country can be found in nearby **Rizal Park** and skyscraper-smothered **Makati**. There are also some worthwhile day-trips from the city; top of the list is the island of **Corregidor** in Manila Bay, which was fought over bitterly during World War II and, with its now-silent guns and ruins, is a poignant place to soak up the history of the conflict.

Within easy striking distance of Manila – about two hours south by road – a highlight of the province of Batangas is the city of **Tagaytay** and its mesmerizing views over **Lake Taal**, the picture-perfect crater lake with **Taal Volcano** in the middle. Around the small coastal town of **Anilao** you’ll find the best scuba diving near Manila, while the adjacent agricultural province of **Laguna** is known for its therapeutic hot springs and luscious *buko* (coconut) pies.

To the north of Manila the theme parks, beaches and wreck-dives of **Subic Bay** make a tempting break before the long bus ride to the extraordinary attractions and spell-binding mountain scenery of **northern Luzon**. From the mountain city of **Baguio**, it’s a rough but memorable trip north along winding roads to tribal communities



JEEPNEYS

Millions of Filipinos depend on **jeepneys** – a kind of informal minibus service – to get to school and the office, or to transport livestock to market. Jeepneys are able to operate where roads are too narrow for regular buses, and as a result most travellers end up using them at least once. Despite the discomfort, for many it's one of the highlights of their trip – a genuine slice of Filipino life.

The original jeepneys, cannibalized from vehicles left behind by departing Americans at the end of World War II, have evolved over the past six decades into the mass-produced versions that you see on the streets today, decorated with chrome trinkets, blinking fairy lights and images of celebrities. Others sport religious mottos, crucifixes and images of saints, perhaps understandable given the high accident rates they rack up.



such as **Sagada**, known for its hanging coffins, and **Banaue**, where you can trek through awe-inspiring rice-terrace countryside. Off Luzon's northern tip are the alluring islands of **Batanes**, one of the country's greatest secrets, while along Luzon's west coast you can surf around **San Fernando** or explore the ravishing colonial town of **Vigan**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Head south from Manila through the **Bicol** region and you'll reach perhaps the best-known of Philippine volcanoes, **Mayon**, an almost perfect cone that towers over the city of Legazpi and is a strenuous four- or five-day climb. Around **Donsol** you can swim with whale sharks, and in **Bulusan Volcano National Park** trek through lush rainforest to waterfalls, hot springs and volcanic craters. Even further off the tourist trail, **Catanduanes** offers excellent surfing, while **Marinduque** is a pastoral island backwater that only gets touristy for the annual **Moriones festival**, held at Easter.

For most visitors, the myriad islands and islets of the **Visayas**, right at the heart of the archipelago, are top of the agenda. In the Western Visayas, the captivating little island of **Boracay**, with its pristine beach, is on almost everyone's itinerary. If Boracay is too touristy for you, try laidback Siquijor or tiny Apo Island near Negros, a marine reserve where the only accommodation is in rustic cottages. For even less developed spots, head over to the Eastern Visayas for Panglao Island off Bohol, or the tantalizing beaches and waters of Malapascua off the northern tip of Cebu Island. For trekking and climbing make for **Mount Kanlaon National Park** on Negros, one of the country's finest wilderness areas. The largest city in the Visayas is **Cebu City**, the arrival point for a limited number of international flights – as well as

a major hub for domestic airlines – making it a good alternative base to Manila. It's friendly, affordable and has a buzzing nightlife scene, with great restaurants and live music.

If you're looking for some serious diving, head for **Puerto Galera** on the northern coast of **Mindoro Island**. It also boasts some excellent beaches and trekking through the jungles of the interior to tribal communities. There's more world-class diving off the west coast of Mindoro at **Apo Reef**, although it can be pricey to get here.

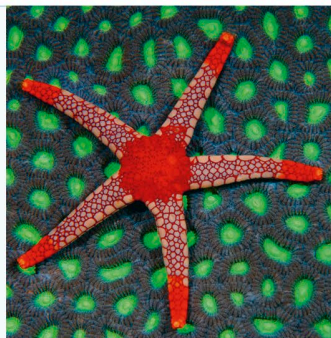
To the west of the archipelago, out in the northern Sulu Sea, is the bewitching province of **Palawan**, most of it still wild and unspoilt. Many visitors come for the superb scuba diving, especially on the sunken World War II wrecks around **Coron Town** in the **Calamian Islands** to the north of Palawan proper. Palawan itself is home to the seaside town of **El Nido** and the **Bacuit archipelago**, hundreds of gem-like limestone islands with sugar-white beaches and lagoons. From **Puerto Princesa**, Palawan's likeable capital, strike out for the laidback beach town of **Port Barton** or the **Underground River**, an entrancing cavern system only accessible by boat.

In the far south, the vast island of **Mindanao** has long been the Muslim heartland of the Philippines, an enticing yet sadly troubled region (see box, p.405). The two offshore islands that are regarded as completely safe and still see large numbers of visitors are **Siargao**, which boasts surf beaches and secret lagoons, and wonderfully friendly and scenic **Camiguin**. You should check the security situation very carefully before considering a visit to the pristine waters of the **Enchanted River**, the durian capital and largest city of **Davao** or nearby **Mount Apo**. Note that western Mindanao, including the **Sulu archipelago**, at the time this book went to print was definitely too dangerous to visit due to continuing Muslim separatist unrest.



DIVE PARADISE

The Philippines is blessed by a dazzling richness and diversity of marine life and **diving** is one of the most popular activities in the archipelago. Under the waves lies an underwater wonderland of stupefying **coral gardens** teeming with brilliantly coloured reef fish, turtles, giant clams and starfish, while at depth there are giant rays and prowling sharks. Indeed, this vast tropical archipelago is at the heart of Southeast Asia's "coral triangle", the most biologically diverse marine ecosystem on earth, with over 300 types of coral and 350 fish species. Diving here is affordable and, thanks to warm waters, can be enjoyed year-round. If you're serious about your diving, booking a trip on a **liveaboard** (see p.39) can be a memorable experience, giving you the opportunity to get away from the more popular dive resorts and explore the wilderness.



When to go

The Philippines has a hot and humid tropical climate with a **wet season** (southwest monsoon, or *habagat*) from May to October and a **dry season** (northeast monsoon, or *amihan*) from November to April. The **best time to visit** is during the dry season, although some regions get quite a lot of rain till February, and even the wet season sees many sunny days with short, intense downpours at dusk. January and February are the coolest months and good for travelling, while March, April and May are very hot: expect sunshine all day and temperatures to peak at a broiling 36°C. As well as higher humidity, the wet season also brings **typhoons** (see box, p.48), with flights sometimes cancelled and roads impassable. The first typhoon can hit as early as May, although typically it is June or July before the rains really start, with July to September the wettest (and stormiest) months. The Palawan, Mindanao and the southern Visayas are less prone to typhoons, and Mindanao sees less rain during the wet season.

AVERAGE TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
MANILA												
°C	25	27	28.5	31.5	31	29	28.5	28	28	28.5	28	27
°F	77	81	83	89	88	84	83	82	82	83	82	81
Rainfall (mm)	0.74	0.46	0.58	1.1	4.2	8.5	13.9	13.6	11.8	6.2	4.8	2.1
BAGUIO (NORTHERN LUZON)												
°C	17	19	20.5	23.5	23	21	20.5	19.5	20	20.5	20	18.5
°F	63	66	69	74	73	70	69	67	68	69	68	65
Rainfall (mm)	0.74	1.2	1.1	1.4	4.8	10.2	14.8	14.2	12.6	8.4	6.6	3.2
SIARGAO (MINDANAO)												
°C	25.5	26	26	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	26	26.5
°F	78	79	79	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	79	80
Rainfall (mm)	17.5	13.4	16.3	8.4	5	4.2	5.7	4.1	5.6	8.8	14.2	20

Author picks

Scaling the heights of its awe-inspiring volcanoes, enduring sweltering jungle heat and traversing some of Asia's most isolated roads, our hard-travelling authors have visited every corner of this vast, magnificent archipelago – from the rice terraces of Luzon to the beaches of the Visayas. Here are their personal favourites:

Best beach hideaway You don't have to travel for days by bangka to find a slice of serenity in the Philippines; *Tuko Beach Resort* in Abra de Ilog, Mindoro (p.255) is just a couple of hours from Batangas but seems a million miles from anywhere, with dolphins off the beach and monkeys lounging in the trees.

Eat like a Filipino The best fried chicken in the Philippines? For purists, it's still knocked out by *Aristocrat* in Manila (p.89). The *halo-halo* here is amazing also, but *Aling Taleng's* (p.108) in Pagsanjan is sublime. For *buko* pie it's a close call, but *Orient* in Los Baños (p.107) is hard to beat.

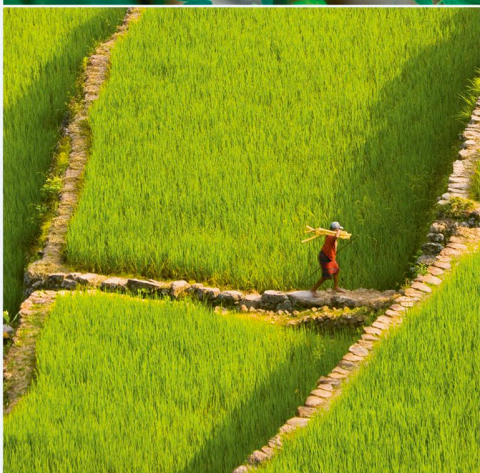
Go wild Tackle the pristine jungle wilderness of Mindoro with an epic climb up Mount Halcon (p.247), or conquer Mount Kanlaon on Negros (p.295); trekking through the UNESCO World Heritage rice terraces in northern Luzon remains an enchanting experience (p.176), while seeing (or even snorkelling with) whale sharks, the world's largest fish, in Donsol (p.220) is truly magical.

Best stash of gold One of many reasons to resist the desire to flee Manila as soon as possible, the Ayala Museum (p.76) is an intriguing introduction to the history and lavish pre-Hispanic culture of the Philippines.

Go paddling Soak up the beauty of southern Luzon by taking a boat through the crystal-clear waters and exploring the awe-inspiring limestone cliffs of the Caramoan Peninsula (p.210).

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.

FROM TOP JUVENILE MACAQUE, MINDORO; RICE TERRACES, BATAD; THE CARAMOAN PENINSULA



18

things not to miss

It's not possible to see everything the Philippines has to offer in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows is a selective taste of the country's highlights: idyllic beaches, spectacular hikes, historic sites and fascinating wildlife. All highlights are colour-coded by chapter and have a page reference to take you straight into the Guide, where you can find out more.

1





1 BORACAY

Page 258

You'll never be short of things to do on picture-postcard Boracay Island, with its busy but stunning White Beach.

2 SURFING AT SIARGAO

Page 419

Avid surfers will find several locations where they can catch some decent waves, but Siargao, off the tip of Mindanao, is one of the best.

3 APO REEF MARINE NATURAL PARK

Page 254

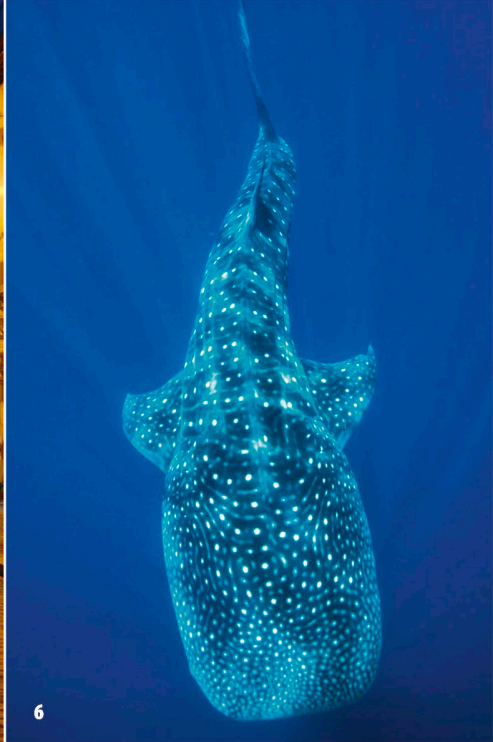
The gin-clear waters of Apo Reef, off the west coast of Mindoro, are a scuba diver's dream.

4 CHOCOLATE HILLS

Page 349

Soak up the bizarre landscape of Bohol's iconic Chocolate Hills, conical brown-green mounds said to be the calcified tears of a broken-hearted giant.





**5 VIGAN**

Page 138

Wonderfully preserved slice of Spanish-era Philippines., with cobblestone streets and gorgeous Baroque architecture.

6 WHALE SHARKS

Page 220

Getting up close to these gentle giants off the coast of Donsol, in southern Luzon, is an unforgettable experience.

7 MOUNT MAYON

Page 215

The almost perfectly symmetrical cone of volcanic Mount Mayon makes for a challenging but thrilling climb.

8 ATI-ATIHAN FESTIVAL

Page 284

At this lively annual festival in Kalibo, on Panay Island, everyone wears indigenous dress and learns tribal dances.

9 BATANES

Page 181

Blissfully remote islands halfway between Luzon and Taiwan, home to rolling hills and wild stretches of coast.

10 MALAPASCUA

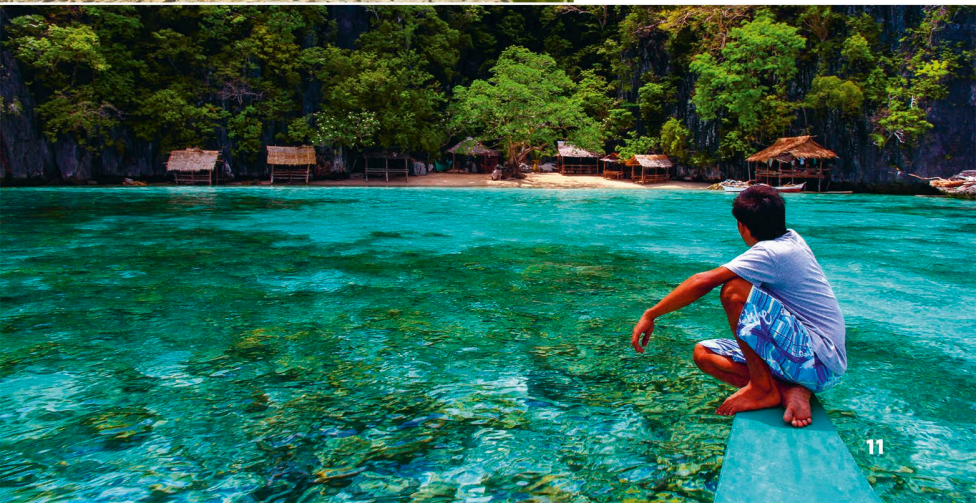
Page 334

Gorgeous and isolated island hideaway, with bone-white Bounty Beach and superb diving.

11 CORON ISLAND BY BANGKA

Page 397

Tour the jagged, gasp-inducing coast of Coron Island by bangka, taking in hidden coves, secret beaches and two pristine mountain lakes fed by springs.



12 MOUNT PINATUBO

Page 119

The lower slopes of Mount Pinatubo feature canyons formed after the massive 1991 eruption, while the crater is filled by a sulphuric mountain lake.

13 UNDERGROUND RIVER

Page 383

Near Puerto Princesa, Palawan, this is one of the longest subterranean rivers in the world, with eerie stalactites, vast caverns and hidden chambers.

14 RICE TERRACES

Page 176

The mind-boggling rice terraces around Banaue stand as one of Asia's greatest sights, and offer superb trekking.

15 TARSIERS

Page 349

Admire these tiny primates with the enormous, sorrowful eyes at their protected sanctuary in Bohol.

16 SAN AGUSTIN CHURCH

Page 62

This elegantly weathered Spanish pile in the heart of old Manila is the archipelago's oldest stone church.

17 HALO-HALO

Page 32

Nothing beats a tall glass of this icy Filipino treat on a hot day, a concoction of syrups, beans, fruits and ice cream.

18 EL NIDO

Page 388

The strikingly beautiful limestone islands around El Nido in Palawan offer exceptional exploring and adventure.



12



13



14



15



16



17



18



Itineraries

The following itineraries span the entire length of this incredibly diverse archipelago, from the historic cities of Luzon to the idyllic islands of the Visayas and the remote jungles of Mindanao. Given the time involved moving from place to place, you may not be able to cover everything, but even picking a few highlights will give you a deeper insight into the natural and cultural wonders of the Philippines.

THE GRAND TOUR

This three- to four-week tour gives a taster of the Philippines' iconic landscapes and islands from the nation's chaotic capital to the pristine sands of Boracay.

➊ **Manila** The nation's initially chaotic capital is a vast, boiling blend of history, high culture and wild nightlife. *See p.56*

➋ **Banaue rice terraces** It's worth taking the journey north to see one of the world's great man-made wonders. *See p.176*

➌ **Sagada** Extend your stay in northern Luzon with a trip to this rambling old town, home of the famed hanging coffins. *See p.170*

➍ **Puerto Princesa** Backtrack to Manila for the flight to Palawan's sleepy capital and the trip along the Underground River. *See p.375*

➎ **El Nido** Continue along the Palawan coast to the spectacular limestone scenery of the Bacuit archipelago. *See p.388*

➏ **Coron** Take the bangka across to Coron, where wreck-diving and dazzling coves await. *See p.397*

➐ **Cebu City** Fly to the nation's third city, home of Magellan's Cross and a host of historic attractions. *See p.315*

➑ **Bohol** Take the ferry to this historic island, home of the Chocolate Hills and the loveable tarsier. *See p.342*

➒ **Boracay** Backtrack to Cebu for the short flight to this famed resort island, where you can end your tour on a sugary white-sand beach. *See p.258*

ISLAND-HOPPING: THE WESTERN ROUTE

This tour takes in popular Mindoro en route to the western side of the Visayas, the physical and historic heart of the nation. This is perhaps the most alluring region of the Philippines, a sun-bleached concentration of islands littered with beaches, crumbling churches, sugar plantations and untouched reefs. This itinerary needs at least three weeks to complete in comfort, though you could race through it quicker.

➊ **Puerto Galera** Begin your tour at this accessible and congenial beach on the tip of Mindoro, which is also a prime dive resort. *See p.237*

➋ **Romblon** Ferries link Mindoro to the more remote Romblon archipelago, three main islands offering a laidback capital, challenging mountain and some splendid beaches. *See p.269*

③ **Boracay** A short boat ride south via Caticlan is the jewel of Philippine beach resorts, justly renowned for its mesmerizing (if crowded) white sands and its party scene. See p.258

④ **Guimaras** Bus across from Caticlan to Iloilo City on the south side of Panay, from where it's another short boat ride to this island of mangoes, mountain bikes and handsome Spanish chapels. See p.285

⑤ **Silay** After arriving on Negros by boat, connect via busy Bacolod to this delightful small town, where you can stay in the converted mansion of a sugar baron. See p.293

⑥ **Dumaguete** Traverse Negros and spend some time in the pleasant city of Dumaguete, which has a lovely seafront promenade and is well placed for diving around Dauin and Apo Island. See p.298

⑦ **Siquijor** Take another swift ferry ride across to the island of witches, rich in legend, culture and rugged beauty, as well as a growing number of relaxing resorts. See p.305

ISLAND HOPPING: THE EASTERN LOOP

Skip Manila altogether by beginning and ending your trip in Cebu City, taking in the wonderful variety of the Eastern Visayas. This route includes everything from urban nightlife, through remote islands and beaches with superb marine life, to inland natural wonders. This itinerary needs at least three weeks to do it justice.

① **Cebu City** Start off in the Philippines' surprisingly cosmopolitan second city, which has great dining, nightlife and shopping, as well as cultural sights and nearby Mactan Island for swimming. See p.315

② **Moalboal** Bus across to Cebu's west coast, where you can lounge on lovely Panagsama Beach, near the quiet town of Moalboal, or take a diving trip to tiny Pescador Island. See p.339

③ **Oslob** Several hours south by bus from Moalbal is the small town of Oslob, famous for its friendly whale sharks. See p.341

④ **Bohol** Travel by sea via Dumaguete to this fascinating island, which offers the charms of offshore Panglao Island, the Chocolate Hills and those adorable tarsiers. See p.342



⑤ **Padre Burgos** Take a boat from Ubay in eastern Bohol across to Bato on Leyte and on to the up-and-coming scuba centre of the southern Philippines. See p.368

⑥ **Sohoton Natural Bridge National Park** Travel by bus north to Tacloban and nip across to the island of Samar to experience this jungle-clad, limestone wilderness. See p.357

⑦ **Camotes Islands** Double-back to Leyte via Tacloban and take a ferry from Ormoc to this tranquil, picture-perfect island chain, with excellent diving and snorkelling. See p.336

⑧ **Siargao Island** Return to Cebu for the short flight to Siargao, best known for surfing but also rich in empty, wild, sandy beaches and offshore islands. See p.417

THE DIVE MASTER

Millions of visitors come to the Philippines primarily for what's below sea level – the waters surrounding the island chain harbour some of the world's richest marine life. The following tour

would ideally take at least three weeks – and lots of advance planning – to complete.

1 Puerto Galera This easy-to-reach resort makes a great introduction to the local dive scene, with plenty of resorts and operators to choose from. **See p.237**

2 Apo Reef Take a day or two to explore this protected reef off the west coast of Mindoro, home to sharks, turtles and rays. **See p.254**

3 Coron Try to take the bangka across to Coron for some spectacular wreck-diving, primarily Japanese ships from World War II. **See p.394**

4 El Nido Continue on to the Palawan mainland where the numerous dive schools at El Nido can help arrange trips to stunning Tubbataha. **See p.388**

5 Apo Island From Puerto Princesa fly to Cebu City then head south to Dumaguete and Apo Island, another dive hot spot. **See p.303**

6 Panglao Island From Dumaguete it's a short boat ride to this languid island, home to congenial resorts, beaches and dive sights. **See p.345**

7 Padre Burgos Cross over to Leyte to experience this exciting dive location, home to whale sharks, dolphins and manta rays. **See p.368**

THE BEST OF THE BEACH

The appeal of hiking volcanoes or trudging city streets can wilt (especially in the tropical heat), when compared to the dazzling white beaches on offer in the Philippines. This tour takes in the best of the nation's strips of sand. This itinerary needs a minimum of three weeks, but given the focus on beaches, this route could obviously be extended into a much longer trip, especially as you will need to break up some of these journeys.

1 Marinduque Take the short flight from Manila to this lesser-visited island and seek out some of the sandy beaches off its eastern coast. **See p.195**

2 Caramoan Peninsula Hop on a ferry back to the Luzon mainland and head east to this rugged promontory, which harbours blue-water coves and enticing resorts. **See p.214**

3 Malapascua Island Fly from Legazpi to Cebu City, where it's a four-hour bus and boat ride to this tiny islet ringed by chalky white sands. **See p.334**

4 Panglao Island Double back the same way to Cebu City, then jump on a ferry to Taglibaran on Bohol, where the offshore Panglao Island boasts several glorious stretches of sand and great diving. **See p.345**

5 Camiguin Island A sporadic bangka service from Jagna on Bohol connects with the compact, easy-to-explore Camiguin Island off the Mindanao coast, boasting gorgeous beaches, hot springs and hikes. **See p.410**

6 Sugar Beach Travel back via Bohol to Dumaguete on Negros, then on via Sipalay to Sugar Beach, an ultra-laidback budget spot, close to idyllic Danjugan Island. **See p.296**

7 Boracay After another long haul through Negros and across Panay to Caticlan, you'll be ready to flop out on legendary White Beach in Boracay, then join in the partying when you've got your energy back. **See p.258**





THE TIME TRAVELLER

Evidence of the Philippines' long and complex history is sprinkled all over the archipelago, but northern Luzon is the most evocative of its tribal and colonial past, with handsome old cities and enigmatic remains. This itinerary could be completed in a fortnight, especially if you take some flights, but you'll get a lot more out of it over a good three weeks.

❶ **Intramuros, Manila** The oldest part of Manila drips with history, from Spanish churches and forts to illuminating museums. **See p.62**

❷ **Taal** Take a tour of this beautiful old town, home to the biggest church in Southeast Asia and *bahay na bato* architecture still redolent of colonial Spain. **See p.112**

❸ **Paete** The nation's woodcarving capital makes for an intriguing detour, sprinkled with the stores of local craftsmen. **See p.108**

❹ **Malolos** The oft-overlooked capital of Bulacan province is crammed with colonial remnants, from the elegant Barasoain Church to a smattering of sixteenth-century Spanish homes. **See p.117**

❺ **Vigan** The best-preserved colonial town in the Philippines is a treasure-trove of tiny museums, chapels and crumbling villas. **See p.138**

❻ **Laoag** The capital of Ilocos Norte boasts plenty of historic attractions of its own, while the Malacañang of the north, former holiday residence of the Marcoses, is a short ride away. **See p.143**

❼ **Sagada** Head into the mountainous heart of Luzon, where Sagada is a focus for the Igorots (Cordillera tribes) and the enigmatic hanging coffins. **See p.170**

❽ **Banaue and Batad** You'd be remiss to travel up here and not spend time among the legendary rice terraces, fantastical ridges in the mountains often shrouded in mist. **See p.176 & p.179**



BANGKA

Basics

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Getting there

There are several options for non-stop flights to the Philippines from North America and from Australia; from Europe, the only non-stop flights are from London with Philippine Airlines. Otherwise, reaching the Philippines from outside Asia usually involves a stopover in Hong Kong, Singapore or Dubai. Most major airlines in the region have regular connecting flights to Manila; a few also fly direct to Cebu.

High season for Philippines travel is November to April, though airfares vary relatively little through the year. This is because the low season for the Philippines (May–Oct) is the peak season in Europe and the US, so flights heading out of these regions to various hub airports are often full.

If the Philippines is only one stop on a longer journey, you might want to consider buying a **Round-the-World** (RTW) ticket. Some agents and airline alliances also offer **Circle Pacific** tickets, which cover Australia, New Zealand, the west coast of North America and destinations in the Pacific; you can include Manila and/or Cebu on some itineraries.

From the UK and Ireland

Philippine Airlines (PAL) currently operates daily non-stop flights between **London** and Manila (14hr–14hr 30min). The second-fastest option is to fly via Hong Kong, from where there are numerous onward daily flights to Manila and Cebu. Plenty of airlines offer connecting flights to Manila from UK airports, such as KLM, via Amsterdam.

From Ireland, the speediest option is to take a budget airline to London and change there. London–Manila non-stop costs around £540–700, and from around £460 with stops. From the Republic of Ireland, the best fares are around €600–750 via the UK and the Middle East.

From the US and Canada

Philippine Airlines operates non-stop flights to Manila from **Los Angeles**, **San Francisco** and **Vancouver** (and direct flights from Toronto with a stop in Vancouver), charging around US\$800–1000 for the round trip. However, other airlines offer alternative routes for as low as \$500 return, such as **Korean Air** via Seoul and **Japan Airlines** via Tokyo. From New York and other east-coast cities, return flights cost around \$600–1000. Note that in most cases, the longer you stay in the Philippines the cheaper your flight will be.

From Los Angeles or San Francisco, the flying time to Manila is around eleven hours. From the east coast of North America, flying via the Pacific, the journey will take around twenty hours excluding any layover (allow at least 2hr extra) along the way. If you choose to fly from New York via Paris, say, expect the journey to take around 24 hours altogether.

From Australia, New Zealand and South Africa

Philippine Airlines flies non-stop to Manila from **Sydney** (8–9hr) daily and from **Melbourne** (8–9hr) three times a week; it also flies from **Brisbane** (9–10hr), via **Darwin** (4hr 30min). Return fares online can be as low as Aus\$700. **Qantas** also flies Sydney to Manila non-stop four times a week, but fares are usually much higher, starting around Aus\$1000. If you want to get to **Cebu City**, you can fly via Hong Kong or Kuala Lumpur, although it's probably easiest simply to change in Manila.

From **New Zealand** there are no non-stop flights to the Philippines, so you'll have to go via Australia or a Southeast Asian hub such as Singapore or Hong Kong. Prices are in the NZ\$1000–1300 range for Auckland–Manila via Hong Kong (15–20hr).

From **South Africa** you'll always make at least one stop en route to Manila, and often two. Depending on the length of the stop, the trip will take from 16 to 26 hours. Fares via the Gulf, Singapore or Hong Kong start around ZAR10,000 return in high season from Johannesburg.

A BETTER KIND OF TRAVEL

At Rough Guides we are passionately committed to travel. We believe it helps us understand the world we live in and the people we share it with – and of course tourism is vital to many developing economies. But the scale of modern tourism has also damaged some places irreparably, and climate change is accelerated by most forms of transport, especially flying. All Rough Guides' flights are carbon-offset, and every year we donate money to a variety of environmental charities.

From elsewhere in Asia

You can fly direct to the Philippines from almost every major city in Asia, with several budget airlines offering cheap fares. Many of these fly to **Clark International Airport** (see p.119), 80km northwest of Manila, so make sure you factor in additional travel time if necessary. Numerous flights make the two-hour trip **from Hong Kong** to Manila, with rates as low as HK\$1400 (US\$180).

AirAsia Zest zips between Manila and Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur, Macau and Seoul. **Cebu Pacific** also offers cheap flights from Bangkok, Jakarta, Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, Seoul and Taipei to Manila, and several routes direct to Cebu City. The **Singapore–Manila** route (3hr 30min) is very competitive, served by Philippine Airlines, Singapore Airlines, Jetstar Asia Airways, Tigerair and Cebu Pacific from S\$140 (US\$100).

Handy **regional flights** include: Silk Air from Singapore to **Davao** on Mindanao (3 weekly; 3hr 50min); Malaysia Airlines from Kota Kinabalu (Sabah) to **Puerto Princesa** (3 weekly; 1hr 30min); and China Airlines from Taipei (Taiwan) to **Laoag** (northern Luzon). **Kalibo International Airport**, serving Boracay, has non-stop flights to Hong Kong, Seoul, Taipei and Singapore.


By boat

Many unlicensed boats ply back and forth between the Malaysian state of Sabah and the southern Philippines, but these are considered unsafe for tourists. At the time of writing even the primary licensed ferry route linking **Zamboanga City** with **Sandakan**, Sabah (non-stop) was not advised because of the security situation in Zamboanga (see p.433).

AIRLINES

AirAsia Zest  airasia.com

Cathay Pacific  cathaypacific.com

Cebu Pacific  cebupacificair.com


China Airlines  china-airlines.com

Delta Airlines  delta.com


Jetstar Asia Airways  jetstar.com

KLM  klm.com


Korean Air  koreanair.com


Malaysia Airlines  malaysiaairlines.com

Philippine Airlines  philippineairlines.com



Qantas  qantas.com.au

Silk Air  silkair.com

Singapore Airlines  singaporeair.com



Tigerair  tigerair.com



AGENTS AND OPERATORS

Absolute Travel US  1800 736 8187,  absolutetravel.com.

Luxury tours to the Philippines that can be combined with other destinations in Southeast Asia. The fourteen-day Highlights of the Philippines tour includes Manila, Banaue, Sagada, Baguio, Bohol and Cebu City (US\$255, excluding international flights).

Allways Dive Expeditions Australia  1800 338 239 or

 03 9885 8863,  allwaysdive.com.au. All-inclusive dive packages to prime locations in the Philippines and Southeast Asia from around Aus\$750 for seven nights (not including flights). Destinations in the Philippines include Coron, Dumaguete, Malapascua, Moalboal, Donsol and Puerto Galera. Also liveaboards to Cebu, Dauin, Tubataha and Apo reefs, Coron wrecks and Anilao (from Aus\$2400).



Bamboo Trails Taiwan  886 7 7354945,  bambootrails.com.

Small travel company offering some unique group itineraries in the Philippines, including the “Sugar Trail” through Negros and Siquijor.



Dive Worldwide UK  01962 302087,  diveworldwide.com.

Specialist dive operator offering trips to a number of destinations in the Philippines. A typical fourteen-day trip to Donsol to see the whale sharks including flights, domestic transfers and accommodation starts at £2145.

Grasshopper Adventures UK  020 8123 8144, US  818 921

7101, Australia  03 9016 3172;  grasshopperadventures.com.

Bicycle and guided tour specialists, with a variety of bike tours all over Asia and an eight-day guided tour of Bohol for US\$2350.




North South Travel UK  01245 608291,  [nouthsouthtravel](http://nouthsouthtravel.com)

.co.uk. Friendly travel agency offering discounted fares worldwide. Profits are used to support projects in the developing world, especially the promotion of sustainable tourism.

Philippine Island Connections UK  020 7404 8877,  [pic-uk](http://pic-uk.com)



.com. Philippines specialist offering flights to the Philippines, plus hotel bookings, holiday packages and tours. They also offer domestic flight reservations, though it's often cheaper to book once you're in the Philippines.



STA Travel UK  0871 230 0040, US  1800 781 4040, Australia

 13 47 82, New Zealand  0800 474 400, South Africa  0861

781 781;  statravel.co.uk. Worldwide specialists in independent

travel; also student IDs, travel insurance, car rental, rail passes and more. Good discounts for students and under-26s.

Traifinders UK  0845 058 5858, Ireland  01 677 7888,

Australia  1300 780 212;  traifinders.com. One of the best-informed and most efficient agents for independent travellers.

Getting around

The large number of budget airlines and ferry services between major destinations makes it easy to cover the Philippine archipelago, even on a tight budget, though the main drawback is that almost everything routes through Manila and Cebu. Long-distance road transport largely comprises buses and jeepneys – the utilitarian passenger

vehicles modelled on World War II American jeeps. Throughout the provinces, and in some areas of cities, tricycles – motorbikes with steel sidecars – are commonly used for short journeys.

Note that **holiday weekends** are bad times to travel, with buses full and roads jammed, particularly heading out of big cities to the provinces. Cities start to empty on Friday afternoon and the exodus continues into the night, with a mass return on Sunday evening and Monday morning; Metro Manila is especially gridlocked. Travelling is a particular hassle at Christmas, New Year and Easter with buses and ferries full (sometimes illegally overloaded), airports chaotic and resorts charging more than usual. If you have to travel at these times, book tickets in advance or turn up at bus stations and ferry piers early and be prepared to wait.

By plane

Air travel is a godsend for island-hoppers in the Philippines, with a number of airlines linking Manila with most of the country's major destinations; you will usually, however, have to backtrack to a major hub when jumping from one region to another. **Philippine Airlines** (PAL; 📞philippineairlines.com) has a comprehensive domestic schedule, while **Cebu Pacific** (📞cebupacificair.com) offers even more routes and very cheap fares, particularly if you book some way in advance. There are several smaller budget airlines – **AirAsia Zest** and **Philippines AirAsia** (both 📞airasia.com) and **Tigerair** (📞tigerair.com).

Cebu Pacific runs numerous flights out of its hub in **Cebu City**, saving you the effort of backtracking to Manila – you can, for instance, fly straight from Cebu City to Caticlan (for Boracay) and Siargao. **Davao** on Mindanao is a less developed third hub, with connections to Cebu City, Cagayan de Oro, Iloilo and Zamboanga, but you'll have to transfer in Manila and Cebu for other destinations.

Airfares

There's not a great deal of variation in **domestic airfares** offered by the main budget carriers, though PAL is usually the most expensive, being the only one offering traditional cabin service (snacks, drinks etc). Cebu Pacific has been known to sell seats for P1, and regularly offers fares of P499 one-way Manila to Coron (Busuanga) and P999 Manila to Zamboanga. But note that the low prices you see quoted on budget airline websites usually don't include taxes, and, unlike most PAL flights, you

can't change bookings once you've paid; there are also charges for bags and seat selection (P230 and P180 respectively on Cebu Pacific).

By ferry

Ferries and bangkas – wooden outrigger boats – were once the bread and butter of Philippine travel. Though still important, especially in the **Visayas**, most of the longer routes have been made redundant by the growth of budget air travel. Not only are flights faster and as cheap (or cheaper) than cabins on longer ferry routes (Manila to Mindanao for example), they are invariably safer. Indeed, despite some improvements in recent years, ferry accidents remain common in the Philippines and even in the dry season the open ocean can get surprisingly rough. The smaller bangkas are often poorly equipped, with little shelter from the elements, while even many of the larger vessels have been bought secondhand from Japan or Europe and are well past their prime. Ferries of all sizes are frequently crowded.

That said, for many shorter inter-island trips, ferries remain the only form of transport available, and – especially in the Visayas – island-hopping by boat can be an enjoyable and rewarding part of your trip.

There's a hierarchy of vessels, with proper ferries at the top; so-called big bangkas, taking around fifty passengers, in the middle; and ordinary bangkas at the bottom.

Filipino **ferry companies** (see below) operate ships of varying sizes on fixed schedules between major ports, while the timings of bangkas are usually more flexible. The major operator is **2GO**, with SuperCat part of the same group; the other key players are **Montenegro Shipping Lines**, **Cokaliong Shipping Lines**, **Oceanjet** and **TransAsia Shipping Lines**. These companies have regular sailings on routes between Manila, Batangas or Cebu and major cities throughout the Visayas and Mindanao, and on secondary routes within the Visayas.

FERRY COMPANIES

2GO 📞02 528 7000, 🌐travel.2go.com.ph

Aleson Shipping 📞062 991 4258, 🌐aleson-shipping.com

Besta Shipping Lines 📞02 345 5568

Cokaliong Shipping Lines 📞032 232 7211,

🌐cokaliongshipping.com

CSGA 🌐facebook.com/CSGAferrycorporation

E. B. Aznar Shipping 📞032 467 9447

F.J. Palacio Lines 📞032 255 4540

FastCat 📞02 842 9341, 🌐fastcat.com.ph

George & Peter Lines 📞035 422 8431

Island Shipping Lines 📞032 422 6329

Jomalia Shipping 📞 0905 399 8259
Kinswell Shipping Lines 📞 032 255 7572
Lite Shipping 📞 032 255 1721
Montenegro Shipping Lines 📞 043 740 3201
Moreta Shipping 📞 0917 844 2894, 🌐 moretashipping.com
MV Star Crafts Pier 1 📞 0906 789 6363, 🌐 mvstarcrafts.com
Navios Shipping Lines 📞 0908 146 2243
Oceanjet 📞 032 255 7560, 🌐 oceanjet.net
Roble Shipping 📞 032 416 6256
Si-Kat 📞 02 708 9628, 🌐 sikatferrybus.com
Starcraft 📞 0906 789 6363
Starlite Ferries 📞 02 724 3034, 🌐 starliteferries.com
Super Shuttle 📞 032 4127688, 🌐 supershuttleroro.com
SuperCat 📞 032 233 7000, 🌐 supercat.com.ph
Trans-Asia Shipping Lines 📞 032 254 6491,
 🌐 transasiashipping.com
VG Shipping Lines 📞 032 416 6226, 🌐 vg-shipping.fi
Weesam Express 📞 032 231 7737, 🌐 weesam.ph

Fares and tickets

Ferry **fares** are very low by Western standards, especially if booked in advance, for example Manila–Cebu (P950), Manila–Puerto Princesa (P1450); add on around P500–1000 for a private cabin. **Tickets** can be bought at the pier up until departure, though it's often more convenient to avoid the long queues and buy in advance: **travel agents** sell ferry tickets, and the larger ferry companies have ticket offices in cities and towns. 2GO also offers online ticketing.

Accommodation and facilities

The cheapest ferry **accommodation** is in bunk beds in cavernous dorms either below deck or on a semi-open deck, with shared toilets and showers. Older ships might have just a handful of cramped cabins sharing a tiny shower and toilet. The major operators generally have newer ships with a range of accommodation that includes dorms, straw mats in an air-conditioned area and shared cabins (usually for four) with bathrooms. These ferries usually also have a bar, karaoke lounge and a canteen serving basic meals.

By bus

Bus travel can be relatively uncomfortable and slow, but you'll get a real glimpse of rural Philippines from the window, and meet Filipinos from all walks of life. Buses are also incredibly convenient: hundreds of routes spread out like a web from major cities and even the most isolated barangay will have a service of some sort. You won't go hungry either. At most stops local vendors will

jump on and offer you various snacks and drinks, while on the longer hauls, even express buses stop every three or four hours to give passengers a chance to stretch their legs and buy some food.

There are some downsides. Though the largest bus companies have fleets of reasonably new air-conditioned buses for longer routes, they rarely have toilets. On shorter routes buses can be dilapidated contraptions with no air conditioning and, in some cases, no glass in the windows. You'll also need to develop a high tolerance to loud music or Tagalog movies played at full blast throughout the trip.

Bus fares and frequencies

Fares are low: around P445 from Manila to Baguio and P647 to Tuguearao. Beyond Manila roads can be poor, and even when the distances involved aren't great, the buses will make numerous stops along the way. Some bus companies advertise express services, but in reality a bus that goes from A to B without stopping is unheard of. Buses that have a "derecho" sign (meaning "straight" or "direct") in the window usually make the fewest stops.

Published **timetables** for most bus companies are non-existent, but departures on popular routes such as Manila to Baguio or Manila to Vigan usually happen every hour or half-hour. The larger operators – such as Victory Liner (🌐victoryliner.com) and Philtranco (🌐philtranco.com.ph) – allow you to book seats in advance on some routes, either online, by telephone (often engaged) or at the terminal. A list of bus destinations and the companies that cover them is given in the Manila chapter (see pp.81–83), and details of bus routes, with local contact details, appear throughout the Guide. Note, however, that there are so many bus companies (many of which go in and out of business on a regular basis, or have permits suspended), and so much variation in routes and journey times, that the information we give in the Guide is just a guideline and always subject to change.

By jeepney

The **jeepney** is the ultimate Philippine icon (see box, p.8), and remains an important form of transport, particularly in Manila, Cebu City, Davao and Baguio, where there are frequent services between key locations in each city. In the provinces, jeepneys connect isolated barangays to nearby towns and towns to cities, but they might run only two or three times a day, depending on demand (they often only leave when full), the weather and the mood of the driver. There are absolutely no timetables.

Routes are painted on the side or on a signboard in the window. Even so, using jeepneys takes a little local knowledge because they make numerous stops and deviations to drop off and pick up passengers. There's no such thing as a designated jeepney stop, so people wait in the shade at the side of the road and flag one down. The vehicles are cramped and incredibly uncomfortable, usually holding at least twenty passengers inside and any number of extras clinging to the back or sitting precariously on top. It can be a hassle to get luggage on and off – small items might end up on the floor, but larger items often go on the roof.

Fares are very low: in the provinces they start at P7 for a trip of a few kilometres, rising to P50 for two- or three-hour drives. In the cities, trips up to 4–5km cost P7, rising to P20 on longer routes. To pay, hand your money to the passenger next to you and say "*bayad po*" ("pay please"). If you're not sitting close to the driver, the fare will be passed down the line of passengers until it reaches him; he will then pass back any change; alternatively, you can run round to the front when you get off.

By FX taxi, city taxi and van

Not unlike jeepneys in the way they operate, **FX taxis** are air-conditioned Toyota Tamaraw vehicles (a bit like Range Rovers), with signs in the window indicating their destination. They made their debut in Manila in the late 1990s, and now operate in other cities and on some popular inter-city routes. However, routes are often not set, so it takes a little local knowledge to know where to catch the right vehicle. They can be a little claustrophobic – the driver won't even think about moving until he's got ten people on board, three more than the vehicle is designed for. In Manila most of these taxis charge P2–3 per kilometre.

Elsewhere in the Philippines you may encounter "**vans**" (often labelled "GT Express" meaning "Garage to Terminal"), which are generally cramped Isuzu, Suzuki and Nissan minivans (what would be called small passenger vans in the US) that follow fixed routes. They're usually a little more expensive than buses but they're much faster, as, unlike buses, they don't stop off every few hundred metres. In Luzon, vans often have their own terminals in major towns, and operate in competition with bus companies and jeepneys over long distances. Destinations are usually clearly marked on the windscreen.

City taxis generally fall into two categories: yellow airport taxis charge P60 base rate plus P4 per 500m; regular white taxis charge P30 plus P3.50 per

500m. The app-based taxi service **Uber** is available in Manila and Cebu, and is rapidly expanding to other parts of the country.

By tricycle and "habal-habal"

The cheapest form of shared transport, **tricycles** are ubiquitous in the provinces. In Manila and Cebu City they are prohibited from using certain roads, but almost everywhere else they go where they like, when they like and at speeds as high as their small engines are capable of. The sidecars are usually designed for four passengers – two facing forwards and two backwards – but it's not uncommon to see extras clinging on wherever they can, the only limiting factor being whether or not the machine can actually move under the weight of the extra bodies. Tricycles never follow fixed routes, so it's usually a question of flagging one down and telling the driver your destination.

Closely related but even more life-threatening is the motorcycle-for-hire, popularly known as "**habal-habal**" (the nickname is a sexual allusion – ask a Filipino friend). These motorcycles have two wooden platforms attached to each side, sometimes accommodating up to thirteen persons (believe it). Though there have been moves in Congress to change things, at the time of writing the habal-habal was still technically illegal; laughable when you consider how essential they have become in many parts of the country. In some rural areas, locals offer rides on ordinary motorbikes for negotiable rates.

Habal-habal **fares** typically start at P10 per person for a short trip of a few hundred metres on both forms of transport. Many tricycles charge a set rate per person for trips within town or city boundaries, usually around P10–25 (more in Manila). If you want to use the tricycle as a private taxi you'll have to negotiate a price – P25–30 is reasonable for a trip of up to 2km in the provinces. Anything further than that and the driver will ask for at least P50, though you can always try to bargain him down. Note, however, that tricycle drivers are notorious for ripping off foreigners, and especially in touristy areas you'll need expert bargaining skills to pay anything close to the local rate.

By car

It's possible to **rent a car** in the Philippines – a standard saloon car costs about P2000 per day – but you may not want to. Not only is traffic in cities often gridlocked, but most Filipino drivers have a very relaxed attitude towards the rules of the road.

Swerving is common, as is changing lanes suddenly and driving with one hand permanently on the horn, particularly if you're a bus or jeepney driver. That said, if you're used to driving in big cities this might not faze you too much, and in any case, once you reach more rural areas – northern Luzon for example – travelling by car can be incredibly convenient and open up a whole range of otherwise hard-to-reach destinations. Many travellers also rent **motorbikes**, but this is only recommended for experienced riders – the chances of having an accident are statistically fairly high. It's best to avoid driving at night altogether.

If you do drive, you'll need your **driving licence**; be prepared to show it if you get stopped. Rentals are allowed for up to ninety days – longer stays will require a Philippine licence. Vehicles in the Philippines drive on the right side of the road and distances and car speeds are in kilometres. The highways usually have a nominal speed limit of 100kph, but anywhere else you'll rarely be going faster than 30kph due to congestion.

Always **drive defensively** – cars, animals and pedestrians will pull out in front of you without warning (in many rural areas people are still not used to traffic), and always give way to jeepneys, which will happily drive you off the road. When passing anything, sound your horn twice as a warning (horns are rarely used in anger).

Note that **police** and "traffic enforcers" – uniformed men and women employed by local authorities to supplement the police – might try to elicit a bribe from you. If this happens it's best to play the dumb foreigner and hand over the "on-the-spot fine" of a few hundred pesos (make sure you have cash with you). If you take the moral high ground and refuse to play along, you'll probably end up having your licence confiscated or, in the worst case, your car towed away and impounded until you pay a fine to get it back.

CAR RENTAL AGENCIES

Avalon Transport Services 📍 avalonrentacar.com.

Avis 📍 avis.com.ph.

Budget 📍 budget.com.ph.

Europcar 📍 europcar.com.ph.

Hertz 📍 hertzphilippines.com.

JB Rent A Car 📍 jbrentacar.com.

Manila Rent a Car 📍 manilarentacar.org.

National 📍 nationalcar.com.

Nissan Rent-A-Car 📍 nissanrentacar.com.

Rent A Car Manila 📍 rentacarmanila.com.

Viajero Rent A Car 📍 viajororentacar.com.

VIP Rent-A-Car 📍 viprentacar.com.ph.

Hiring a driver

For about P2000–2500 (plus fuel, driver's food and parking/toll fees) you can hire a small car and driver from some car rental agencies for up to eight hours, the extra expense more than justified by the peace of mind a local driver brings. Try Manila Rent a Car or the Chauffeur Drive packages at Europcar Philippines.

Beyond Metro Manila, it can be much cheaper to strike a private deal with a car or van owner looking for extra work. A typical rate for their services is P1500 a day (plus fuel and tolls), although you'll need to negotiate. A good way to find someone with a vehicle is to ask at your accommodation; alternatively, locals with cars wait at many airports and ferry ports in the hope of making a bit of money driving arriving passengers into town. You can ask these drivers if they're available to be hired by the day.

By bike

Given the volume of traffic (and driving standards) on most major roads, cycling around the Philippines can be a dangerous idea, but plenty of locals and travellers do use bikes in rural areas. Outfits such as **Bugoy Bikers** 📍 bugoybikers.com can help arrange guided or self-guided day-tours or longer excursions by mountain bike.

Accommodation

The Philippines has accommodation to suit everyone, from international five-star hotels and swanky beach resorts to simple rooms – sometimes no more than a bamboo hut on a beach – and budget hotels.

It's generally not necessary to book in advance unless you are visiting at the peak times of Easter, Christmas, New Year or during a major local festival (see pp.36–38). As always, you'll find the cheapest rates online, but if you do want to book by phone,

ACCOMMODATION ALTERNATIVES

The following websites are worth checking for useful alternatives to standard hotel and resort accommodation.

Airbnb 📍 airbnb.com.

CouchSurfing 📍 couchsurfing.org.

Vacation Rentals by Owner 📍 vrbo.com.

ACCOMMODATION PRICES

All accommodation prices published in the Guide represent the cost of the **cheapest room for two people sharing** – or beach hut sleeping two – **in high season**, namely November to April. Prices during the May–October rainy season are usually about twenty percent lower. Conversely, during Christmas, New Year and Easter, rates in the popular beach resorts such as Boracay can spike by around twenty percent. In some cases hotels will include **breakfast** in the price but it's worth asking about this when you book. You'll also find that as a "walk-in" guest you'll usually be able to get a cheaper rate than the rack rate listed on hotel websites, especially in the off-season and in less touristy areas.

Value Added Tax of twelve percent and an additional service charge is often included in the published rates, but not always. If you see a room advertised at P1000++ ("**plus plus**") it means you'll pay P1000 plus VAT plus service charge – always ask for clarification if you aren't sure which charge is which. These additional charges have been factored into all our rates.

Where **dormitory accommodation** is available, we've given the price of a dorm bed.

note that some hotels in out-of-the-way areas won't have a landline telephone on site, in which case they may have a mobile number and/or a booking office in a city (often Manila); details are given in the text as appropriate.

Hotels and beach resorts

The terms **hotel** and **beach resort** cover a multitude of options in the Philippines. A hotel can mean anything from the most luxurious five-star establishment down to dingy budget pensions or guest-houses with bars on the windows. Beach resorts in turn range from sybaritic affairs on private atolls, with butlers and health spas, to dirt-cheap, rickety one-room cottages on a deserted island. "Resort hotels" are a mid-range or top-range hybrid of the two, sometimes with their own area of private beach.

Many hotels and beach resorts accept credit cards, although there are exceptions, such as in rural areas where electricity supply is not dependable and also in the cheapest budget accommodation, where you must pay cash. It can be worth checking that the air conditioner, where available, isn't noisy. Rooms on lower floors overlooking main roads are best avoided as they can be hellishly noisy; always try to go for something high up or at the back (or both).

Note that in smaller towns and cities beyond Manila, hotels often use the English term "single" room to mean one double bed, and "double/twin" to mean a room with two double beds; in these cases "single" rooms will obviously be big enough for two people – you will rarely find a room that can only sleep one. In the Guide, prices quoted are always based on the **cheapest room for two people sharing** (a "double" in the Western sense), regardless of what the hotel calls it.

Budget

Budget hotels (typically P450–1000) offer little more than a bed, four walls and a fan or small air-conditioning unit, although if you're by the beach, with a pleasant sea breeze blowing and the windows open, air conditioning isn't really necessary. If you do get a private bathroom it will probably only have cold water, and the "shower" is sometimes little more than a tap sticking out of the wall producing a mere trickle of water. Breakfast is unlikely to be included in the rate, though there may be a canteen or coffee shop on the premises where you can buy food. At the higher end of the budget range, rooms are usually simple but can be reasonably spacious, perhaps – if they are on or near a beach – with a small balcony.


Mid-range

There are plenty of **mid-range hotels** (typically P1000–3000), mostly in towns and cities. The rooms typically have air conditioning and a private bathroom with hot water, and usually basic cable TV. Beach cottages in this bracket tend to be quite spacious and will often have a decent-sized veranda too. Most mid-range accommodation will feature a small coffee shop or restaurant with a choice of Filipino and Western breakfasts that may be included in the rate; if it's not, expect to pay around P100–150.

Top end

In Manila and Cebu, as well as the most popular beach destinations such as Boracay, you can splash out on extremely comfortable accommodation (from P3000). **Five-star comfort** is offered by some hotels and beach resorts, many of them owned and operated by international chains (well over P10,000). Cottages at the most expensive resorts are more like chic apartments, often with a separate living area. Many of these establishments include a

WI-FI

Most hotels and guesthouses in the Philippines now offer free **wi-fi**, although connections can be slow and unreliable in remote locations. If there is a charge for usage or you can only get online in restricted parts of the establishment, this is noted in our accommodation reviews. Wi-fi availability is denoted by the  symbol.

lavish buffet breakfast in the rate, and sports facilities and outdoor activities are on offer, though you'll have to pay extra for those.

Campsites, hostels and homestays

Campsites are almost unknown in the Philippines. A small number of resorts allow you to pitch tents in their grounds for a negligible charge, but otherwise the only camping you're likely to do is if you go trekking or climbing and need to camp overnight in the wilderness or on a mountaintop. Note that rental outlets for equipment are few and far between, so you might need to bring your own gear from home.

There are very few **official youth hostels** in the country, most of them in university cities where they may be booked up by students throughout term time. A Hostelling International (HI) card can in theory give you a tiny saving of around P25 a night at the handful of YMCAs and YWCAs in the big cities. The problem is that few staff have any idea what an HI card is. On the other hand, **private hostels** can be found in many cities and touristic areas, plus it is quite common for budget hotels and resorts to have **dormitories**.

There's no official **homestay** programme in the Philippines, but in rural areas where there may be no formal accommodation, you'll often find people willing to put you up in their home for a small charge, usually no more than P200 a night, including some food. If you enjoy the stay, it's best to offer some sort of tip when you leave, or a gift of soft drinks and treats for the children. You can ask around at town halls if you're interested.

Food and drink

The high esteem in which Filipinos hold their food is encapsulated by the common greeting "Let's eat!" Though

Filipino food has a reputation for being one of Asia's less adventurous cuisines, there is a lot more to it than adobo (see box opposite), and young, entrepreneurial restaurateurs and chefs have started to give native dishes an increasingly sophisticated touch.

In the Philippines snacks – **merienda** – are eaten in between the three main meals, and not to partake when offered can be considered rude. It's not unusual for breakfast to be eaten early, followed by merienda at 10am, lunch as early as 11am (especially in the provinces where many people are up at sunrise), more merienda at 2pm and 4pm, and dinner at 7pm. Meals are substantial, and even busy office workers prefer to sit down at a table and make the meal last. Never be afraid to ask for a doggy bag – everyone does. At smarter restaurants, the final bill you get usually includes VAT of twelve percent and a service charge of ten percent, adding 22 percent to the price shown on the menu. Simple establishments do not add these surcharges.

Don't be confused by the absence of a knife from most table settings. It's normal to use just a fork and spoon, cutting any meat with the fork and using the spoon to put the food in your mouth. This isn't as eccentric as it first seems. Most meat is served in small chunks, not steak-like slabs, so you usually don't have to cut it at all. Fish can be skewered with your fork and cut with the side of your spoon. And a spoon is so much easier for the local staple, steamed rice, than a knife and fork. That said, in some "native-style" restaurants food is served on banana leaves and you're expected to eat with your hands, combining the rice and food into mouthful-sized balls with your fingers – if you don't feel up to this it's fine to ask for cutlery.

Filipino cuisine

Filipino food is a delicious and exotic blend of Malay, Spanish, Chinese and American traditions. Dishes range from the very simple, like grilled fish and rice, to more complex stews, paellas and artfully barbecued meats, many using local fruits such as calamansi, coconuts and mangoes. **Seafood** is especially rich – expect anything from meaty crabs and milkfish to grouper and stingray on the menu. Most meals are served with San Miguel, the local beer, and are followed by sumptuous tropical fruits and decadent desserts.

The staples

Rice is the key Filipino staple, often accompanied by little more than freshly caught fish with a vinegar

sauce. **Lapu-lapu** (grouper) and **bangus** (milkfish) are commonly served, while squid, crab and prawns are especially good and cheap in the Philippines. **Chicken** is another key staple – competition for the best fried or barbecued chicken (*lechon manok*) is fierce. Popular dishes on virtually every menu include **sinigang**, a refreshing tamarind-based sour soup; **kare-kare**, a stew made from delicious peanut sauce with vegetables and usually beef; and sizzling **sisig**, fried pig's head and liver, seasoned with calamansi and chilli peppers. Filipino Chinese dishes such as **pancit** (noodles) and **lumpia** (spring rolls) are common. Probably the most popular meat is **pork**, transformed into dishes such as crispy **pata**, **adobo** (see box below) and **lechon**, roasted pig cooked whole on a spit over a charcoal or wood fire. In the Philippines, *lechon* is usually served with vinegar or special sauce (unique to each *lechon* shop but normally made from fruits or liver pâté, garlic and pepper). The meat is deliciously fragrant and juicy, but the real highlight is the crispy smoked skin, a fatty, sumptuous treat sold by the kilo. Pork is also the basis of **Bicol Express**, the best known of very few spicy local dishes, which consists of pork cooked in coconut milk, soy and vinegar, with chillies. Most of these dishes cost P100–250 in a typical restaurant.

Vegetables are not considered an integral part of Filipino meals, but may well be mixed in with the meat or offered as a side dish. In restaurants serving Filipino food, some of the most common vegetable dishes include *pinakbet*, an Ilocano dish (usually bitter melon, squash, okra, aubergine and string

beans cooked in *bagoong*, a fermented fish sauce), and a version of Bicol Express with leafy vegetables such as *pechay* (aka pak choy) and *camote* tops (sweet potato leaves) in place of pork.

Breakfast

At many hotels and resorts you'll be offered a Filipino breakfast, which typically consists of **longganisa** (garlic sausage), **tocino** (cured pork), fried *bangus* fish, corned beef or **beef tapa** (beef marinated in vinegar); you'll usually be offered **tapsilog**, a contraction formed from *tapa* (fried beef), *sinangag* (garlic fried rice) and *itlog* (egg), which is exactly what you get: a bowl of garlic rice with *tapa* and a fried egg on top. Other "combo" dishes include *tosilog* and *longsilog* (you get the idea).

If this sounds too much for you, there's usually fresh fruit and toast, though note that local **bread**, either of the sliced variety or in rolls known as *pan de sal*, is often slightly sweet (wholegrain or rye breads are unusual in all but a few big hotels). Another option is to ask for a couple of hot *pan de sal* with corned-beef filling; the beef takes away some of the bread's sweetness.

Street food

Though not as common as it is in Thailand or India, **street food** still has a special place in the hearts (and stomachs) of Filipinos as much for its plain weirdness as for its culinary virtues. Hawkers with portable stoves tend to appear towards the end of the working day from 5pm to 8pm and at lunchtime in bigger cities. Much of the food is grilled over charcoal and served on sticks kebab-style, or deep fried in a wok with oil that is poured into an old jam jar and re-used day after day. Highlights include deep-fried **fishballs** and **squid-balls** (mashed fish or squid blended with wheat flour), grilled **pig intestines** and *adidas* – **chicken's feet**, named after the sports-shoe manufacturer. Prices start from a few pesos a stick.

Street vendors also supply the king of Filipino aphrodisiacs, *balut*, a half-formed **duck embryo** eaten with beak, feathers and all; sellers advertise their proximity with a distinctive baying cry.

Carinderias and seafood buffets

Carinderias are usually humble eateries that allow you to choose from a number of dishes placed on a counter in big aluminium pots. Carinderia fare is usually a blend of Filipino and Asian dishes; typical choices might be adobo, pancit, *pinakbet*, chicken curry, grilled pork, sweet and sour fish, fried chicken and hotdogs. The only problem with carinderias is

ADOBO HEAVEN

It might seem simple – stewed pork and chicken – but it's hard to resist the justly revered national dish of the Philippines.

Adobo originally meant "sauce" or "seasoning" in Spanish, but its use has morphed throughout Spain's former colonies – the Filipino version is actually indigenous to the islands, dating back to a dish cooked up here long before Magellan's arrival. Philippine adobo consists of pork, chicken or a combination of both slowly stewed in soy sauce, vinegar, crushed garlic, bay leaf and black peppercorns – it's the latter two ingredients that gives true adobo its distinctive flavour and bite. No two adobos are exactly alike however – you'll discover different versions all over the country.

that the food has usually been standing around a while and is often served lukewarm.

In urban areas and some beach resorts you'll also find **seafood** restaurants displaying a range of seafood on ice; order by pointing at what you want and telling the waiter how you would like it cooked.

Desserts and snacks

Filipinos adore **sweets** and **desserts**. Sold all over the Philippines, **halo-halo** (from the Tagalog word *halo*, meaning "mix") is a mouthwatering blend of shaved ice, evaporated milk and various toppings such as sweetened beans, fruits and taro, served in a tall glass or bowl – the "special" version usually has taro ice cream on top. A speciality of Laguna province (see p.107), **buko pie** is made by layering strips of young coconut and cake mix into a crispy pie crust – the addictive dessert has cult status in the Philippines and an intense rivalry exists between many pie-makers. The most popular traditional Filipino sweet is **polvorón**, a sort of short-bread made with flour, sugar and milk, and often sold in flavours such as cashew nut, chocolate and *pinipig* (crispy rice). Sold on every street corner, **turon** is a crispy deep-fried banana in a spring roll wrapper, while **leche flan** (caramel custard) is a

staple on every restaurant menu. Filipinos also eat a huge amount of **ice cream** in an unorthodox range of flavours, including *ube* (purple yam), jackfruit, corn, avocado and even cheese.

For a snack in a packet, try salted dried fish like **dilis**, which can be bought in supermarkets and convenience stores. *Dilis* are a little like anchovies and are eaten whole, sometimes with a vinegar and garlic dip. They're often served along with other savouries (under the collective name *pulutan*) during drinking sessions. Salted dried **pusit** (squid) is also common.

Fast food

You'll find McDonald's in almost every big town, but the Philippines has its own successful **fast-food chains** fashioned after the US giant. There are hundreds of branches of Jollibee (chicken, burgers and spaghetti), Chowking (noodle soups, dim sum), Mang Inasal (barbecue and unlimited rice) and Max's (fried chicken) throughout the country – indeed, the corpulent "jolly bee" mascot is more ubiquitous than Ronald McDonald. Western-style **sandwich bars** have appeared in recent years too.

Most shopping malls also have **food courts**, indoor marketplaces that bring together dozens of small stalls serving Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Korean food. Here you can easily get a decent lunch for under P200 including a soft drink.

In many provincial cities, look out also for **ihaw-ihaw** (grill) restaurants, usually native-style bamboo structures where meat and fish are cooked over charcoal and served with hot rice and soup.

International cuisine

There are some excellent French, Spanish and Italian restaurants in Manila and Cebu City, and dozens of **European** restaurants in Boracay. Prices depend on where you are. In areas of Manila, you can spend P2500 or more for a good three-course meal for two; in Boracay you could have a similar meal for half that. However, European cuisine on the coast tends to be a little less sophisticated, simply because it's hard to guarantee supplies of the necessary ingredients.

There are **Chinese** restaurants in every city and in many provincial towns. Don't expect modish Oriental cuisine though; most Chinese restaurants are inexpensive places offering straightforward, tasty food designed to be ordered in large portions and shared by a group. A filling Chinese meal for two often costs no more than P500. Another of the

VEGETARIAN FOOD

Committed **vegetarians and vegans** face a difficult mission to find suitable food in the Philippines. It's a poor country and many Filipinos have grown up on a diet of what's available locally, usually chicken and pork. If you ask for a plate of stir-fried vegetables it might come with slices of pork in it, or be served in meat gravy. Fried rice always contains egg and meat. That said, most Filipinos will be familiar with the concept of vegetarian food and will try to accommodate you where possible.

Chinese and Japanese restaurants offer the best range of vegetable-based dishes, though you'll have to emphasize that you want absolutely no bits of meat added. In Manila, and to some extent in other cities, and in Boracay, pizzas are an option, or you could head to an upmarket restaurant and ask the chef to prepare something special. At least breakfast is straightforward – even in the most rural resorts, you can ask for toast or pancakes and, if you're not vegan, an omelette or scrambled eggs.

FILIPINO FRUITS

The Philippines is justly celebrated for its variety and quality of fresh fruit, especially its mangoes, which are ubiquitous throughout the islands and always juicy and delicious. The list below is just a selection.

Atis (custard apple or sugar-apple) This fruit is pine-cone shaped, and about 10cm long with green scaly skin, and its ripe flesh is gloriously sweet and soft; it might look a bit like custard but it tastes like a combination of banana, papaya and strawberry or, more prosaically, bubble gum. With its black pips scattered throughout it can be messy to eat. The main season is late summer to October.

Balimbing (starfruit, aka *carambola*) Crunchy, juicy fruit, with a slightly sweet flavour that tastes a bit like a blend of apple, pear and grape.

Bayabas (guava) Fruit with a tough green skin and distinctive deep-pink pulp that has a sweet flavour, similar to passion fruit mixed with strawberry.

Buko (coconut) Another Philippine staple grown throughout the archipelago year-round, harvested casually by villagers as much as by commercial plantations for its refreshing juice and nutty white flesh. Used to make *buko* pie and a variety of desserts.

Calamansi Little green lime that is squeezed into juices, hot tea, over noodles, fish and *kinilaw* (raw fish salad) and into numerous dipping sauces.

Chico (sapodilla) Roughly the size of an egg, with brown skin and sticky, soft flesh that has a malty, exceedingly sweet flavour.

Durian The “king” of tropical fruit is spiky, heavy and smells like a drain blocked with rubbish – but its creamy inner flesh tastes like heaven. Rich in protein, minerals and fat, the durian is one of the more expensive fruits in the Philippines, though in Davao, the centre of production, you can buy whole ones for P50.

Guayabano (soursop) A large, oval fruit with knobbly spines outside and fragrant flesh inside.

Kaimito (star apple) Plum-coloured and round, about the size of a tennis ball, with leathery skin and soft white pulp inside that tastes a bit like grape.

Langka (jackfruit) The largest tree-borne fruit in the world (it can reach 40kg) is also one of the most delicious, with an interior of large, yellow bulbs of sweet flesh that tastes like flowery bananas.

Lanzones Small round fruit grown mostly on southern Luzon, especially in Laguna, and available October to December. It's also grown in northern Mindanao and especially Camiguin, where there is a festival in its honour (see p.410). It tastes a bit like a combination of grape and sweet grapefruit.

Mangga (mango) Eat as much mango as you can in the Philippines – you won't taste any better. Most grown on the islands turn from green to yellow as they ripen and are always very sweet. The main season runs June to August.

Mangosteen Nothing like a mango, this sumptuous fruit the size of a tangerine has a thick, purplish skin and creamy white flesh. The season runs June to August.

Marang If you travel in Mindanao look out for this special fruit. A bit like a breadfruit, it's a cross between jackfruit and *atis* but with a taste all its own.

Pakwan (watermelon) Usually available, but best between April and June.

Papaya You'll see papaya plants growing in gardens and along roadsides all over the Philippines and it's one of the cheapest fruits. Some 98 percent of the annual crop is consumed locally and it's extremely nutritious.

Piña (pineapple) The Spanish introduced the pineapple to the Philippines and, thanks to huge plantations run by Del Monte and Dole (both in Mindanao), it's one of the nation's biggest export earners.

Saging (banana) A staple crop in the Philippines, with a remarkable range of size and types grown in Mindanao and the Western Visayas throughout the year; the country is one of the largest exporters of bananas in the world.

Santol The *santol* is an apple-sized fruit, with a white juicy pulp often eaten sour with some salt. It's also popular as a jam or a bitter marmalade.

Philippines' favourite cuisines is **Japanese**, ranging from fast-food noodle parlours to expensive restaurants serving sushi and tempura.

Drinks

Bottled **water** is cheap; good local brands such as Nestlé Pure Life, Viva and Hidden Spring cost P20–30 for one litre in convenience stores. Note, however, that many hotels and restaurants have huge bottles of **mineral water** for guests and customers, which save you money and cut down on plastic waste. You can also purify your own water; chemical sterilization using chlorine is completely effective, fast and inexpensive, and you can remove the nasty taste it leaves with neutralizing tablets or lemon juice. Alternatively, you could invest in a purifying filter incorporating chemical sterilization to kill even the smallest viruses. Fizzy **soft drinks** such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi are available everywhere.

At resorts and hotels, the **"juice"** which usually comes with breakfast is – irritatingly, in a country rich in fresh fruit – often made from powder or concentrate. Good fresh juices, usually available only in the more expensive restaurants, include watermelon, ripe mango, sour mango and papaya. Fresh *buko* (coconut) juice is a refreshing choice, especially on a hot day. In general, sugar is added to fresh juices and shakes unless you specify otherwise, though you might well want sugar with the delightful drink made from calamansi, a small native lime.

Filipinos aren't big **tea** drinkers and, except in the best hotels, the only tea on offer is usually made from Lipton's tea bags. **Coffee** is popular and can be ordered anywhere, but the quality varies widely. It's usually instant, served in "three-in-one" packets, and dominated by Nescafé, although local, Malaysian and Indonesian brands are also available. Where real brewed coffee is served, it's often local and very good. Latte-addicts may be tempted by Starbucks which has scores of branches across Manila and is popping up in provincial towns such as Bacolod. Fresh milk is rare outside the cities so you'll often find yourself being offered tinned or powdered milk with coffee or tea.

Alcohol

The **beer** of choice in the Philippines is **San Miguel**, the local pilsner established in 1890 and still dominating ninety percent of the domestic market. San Miguel also produces Red Horse Extra Strong lager and a good apple-flavoured beer. The only major competition comes from Asia Brewery, which

produces the uninspiring Beer na Beer and Colt 45 brands. Only a few foreign beers are available in bars and supermarkets, notably Heineken, Budweiser and Japanese brands. The worldwide fad for **craft ales** is gradually making its presence felt, however, with a number of decent Filipino microbreweries, especially in Metro Manila. For something stronger there are plenty of Philippine-made **spirits** such as Tanduay rum, San Miguel Ginebra (gin) and Fundador brandy. Wine can be found in liquor stores in the larger cities, though the range is usually limited to Australian or New Zealand mass-market brands and it tends to be pricey.

All restaurants, fast-food places excepted, serve alcohol, but **wine** is rarely drunk; a cold beer or fresh fruit juice is much preferred. European restaurants usually have a limited wine list. For an average bottle of Australian Chardonnay or Merlot expect to pay at least P750. For something authentically native, try the strong and pungent **tapuy** (rice wine) or a speciality called **lambanog**, made from almost anything that can be fermented, including fruit. In the provinces both can be difficult to find because they're usually brewed privately for local consumption, though *lambanog* is now being bottled and branded, and can be found on some supermarket shelves in Manila and other cities.

Health

As long as you're careful about what you eat and drink and how long you spend in the sun, you shouldn't have any major health problems in the Philippines. Hospitals in cities and even in small towns are generally of a good standard, although health care is rudimentary in the remotest barangays and anything potentially serious is best dealt with in Manila or Cebu. Doctors and nurses almost always speak English, and doctors in major cities are likely to have received some training in the US or the UK, where many attend medical school.

We've listed **hospitals** in the accounts of cities and major towns in the Guide; for a full list, plus a searchable database of doctors by location and area and expertise, check [Ⓜrxpinoy.com.oursite.com](http://rxpinoy.com.oursite.com). There are **pharmacies** on almost every street corner where you can buy local and international brand medicines. Branches of Mercury Drug, the country's biggest chain of pharmacies, are listed on Ⓜmercurydrug.com.

If you are hospitalized, you'll have to pay a deposit on your way in and settle the bill – either in person or through your insurance company (see box, p.50).

We strongly recommend you are up to date with tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis A **vaccinations**.

Stomach upsets

Food- and waterborne diseases are the most likely cause of illness in the Philippines. Travellers' **diarrhoea** can be caused by viruses, bacteria or parasites, which can contaminate food or water. There's also a risk of typhoid or cholera – occasional cases are reported in the Philippines, mostly in poor areas without adequate sanitation. Another potential threat is that of hepatitis A. The authorities in Manila claim that **tap water** in the capital and most cities is safe for drinking, but it's not worth taking the chance – unless you filter it yourself, stick to bottled or mineral water (see opposite).

Mosquito-borne diseases

Dengue fever, a debilitating and occasionally fatal viral disease, is on the increase across tropical Asia. Many cases are reported in the Philippines each year, mostly during or just after the wet season when the day-biting mosquito that carries the disease is most active. There is no vaccine against dengue. Initial symptoms – which develop five to eight days after being bitten – include a fever that subsides after a few days, often leaving the patient with a bad rash all over their body, headaches and fierce joint pain. The only treatment is rest, liquids and paracetamol or any other acetaminophen painkiller (not aspirin). Dengue can result in death, usually among the very young or very old, and serious cases call for hospitalization.

In the Philippines, **malaria** is found only in isolated areas of southern Palawan and the Sulu archipelago (Basilan, Jolo and Tawi-Tawi), and few travellers bother with anti-malarials if they are sticking to the tourist trail. If you are unsure of your itinerary it's best to err on the safe side and consult your doctor about malaria medication. Anti-malarials must be taken before you enter a malarial zone. As resistance to chloroquin-based drugs increases, mefloquin, which goes under the brand name of Lariam, has become the recommended prophylactic for most travellers to the Philippines. This has very strong side effects, and its use is controversial; alternatives are atovaquone-proguanil (malarone) and doxycycline.

To avoid mosquito bites, wear long-sleeved shirts, long trousers and a hat. Use an insect repellent that contains DEET (diethylmethyltoluamide) and –

unless you are staying in air-conditioned or well-screened accommodation – you could even pick up a mosquito net treated with the insecticide permethrin or deltamethrin. Mosquito nets are hard to find in the Philippines, so buy one before you go. If you are unable to find a pre-treated mosquito net you can buy one and spray it yourself.

Leeches and rabies

If you're trekking through rainforest, especially in the rainy season, there's a good chance you'll encounter **leeches** (known locally as *limatik*), blood-sucking freshwater worms that attach themselves to your skin and can be tricky to remove (the bite doesn't hurt though). If you find a leech on your skin it's important not to pull it off, as the jaw could be left behind, leading to the risk of infection. Repeatedly flick its head end with your fingernail, or rub salt, tiger balm or tobacco juice onto the leech, then treat the wound with antiseptic. You can guard against leeches in the first place by securing cuffs and trouser bottoms. Climbers in the Philippines say that rubbing detergent soap with a little water on your skin and clothes helps keep leeches at bay. Though leeches might seem unpleasant, they actually present a negligible risk to healthy hikers, and it's fine to let them drop off of their own accord.

Stray and badly cared for dogs are everywhere in the Philippines and are far more dangerous than leeches: **rabies** claims about eight hundred lives a year. The stereotype of rabid animals being deranged and foaming at the mouth is just that; some infected animals become lethargic and sleepy, so don't presume that a docile dog is a safe one. If you are bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately with soap and running water for five minutes and apply alcohol or iodine. Seek treatment immediately – rabies is fatal once symptoms appear. You should also consider getting a rabies shot before arrival in the Philippines.

MEDICAL RESOURCES

Canadian Society for International Health 🌐 csih.org.

Extensive list of travel health centres.

CDC 🌐 [1877 394 8747](http://1877.394.8747), 🌐 cdc.gov/travel. Official US government travel health site.

Hospital for Tropical Diseases Travel Clinic 📞 0845 155 5000 or 020 7387 4411, 🌐 www.thehtd.org.

International Society for Travel Medicine 📞 1770 736 7060, 🌐 istm.org. Has a full list of travel health clinics worldwide.

MASTA (Medical Advisory Service for Travellers Abroad)

📞 0870 606 2782, 🌐 masta-travel-health.com. For the nearest clinic in the UK.

South African Society of Travel Medicine ☎ 011 025 3297, sastm.org.za. Offers latest medical advice for travellers and a directory of travel medicine practitioners in South Africa.

Travel Doctor ☎ 1300 658 844, tmvc.com.au. Lists travel clinics in Australia.

Tropical Medical Bureau Republic of Ireland ☎ 1850 487 674, tmb.ie.

Worldwise ☎ 09 522 9476, worldwise.co.nz. Travel health advice and list of clinics in New Zealand.

The media

Filipinos are inordinately proud of their nation's historic status as the first democracy in Asia, a fact reflected in their love of a free press. Once Marcos was gone and martial law with him, the shackles truly came off, and the Philippine media became one of the most vociferous and freewheeling in the world.

There is a dark and apparently contradictory side to this, however – the Philippines is also one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist, with many killed every year. Though **press freedoms** are enshrined in the Philippine constitution, paramilitary groups, privately owned militias and even politicians (especially in Mindanao) who have been targeted by the press often seek violent retribution. Due to corruption, few are brought to justice.

Newspapers

Major English-language daily broadsheet **newspapers** include the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (inquirer.net), the *Philippine Star* (philstar.com), *Manila Bulletin* (mb.com.ph) and the *Manila Times* (manilatimes.net). There are dozens of tabloids on the market, all of them lurid and often gruesome. Most of these are in Tagalog, though *Journal Online* (journal.com.ph) is largely in English with some articles in Tagalog. Foreign news publications are harder to find. The best bet is to visit a five-star hotel, where lobby gift shops sometimes stock *New York Times The International Edition*, *Time* and *The Economist*.

Some of the most trusted reporting on the Philippines comes from the **Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism** (pcij.org), founded in 1989 by nine Filipino journalists who wanted to go beyond the day-to-day razzmatazz and inanities of the mainstream press. Journalists working for the PCIJ were responsible for the exposé of former

President Joseph Estrada's unexplained wealth, which led to his eventual downfall. More recently, they have not shied away from publishing articles critical of controversial President Duterte.

Television and radio

Terrestrial **television networks** include GMA (gmanetwork.com) and ABS-CBN (abs-cbn.com), offering a diet of histrionic soaps, chat shows and daytime game shows with sexy dancers. Cable TV is now widely available in the Philippines, with the exception of some of the most undeveloped rural areas. Most providers carry BBC World, CNN and Australian ABC. During the season, there's American football, baseball and most of all basketball on various channels, though outside of Manila it's very hard to find the Be-in channel that carries Premier League football. Movie channels include HBO, Cinemax and Star Movies.

There are over 350 **radio** stations in the Philippines, and between them they present a mind-boggling mix of news, sport, music and chitchat. Radio news channels such as DZBB and RMN News AM tend to broadcast in Filipino, but there are dozens of FM pop stations that use English with a smattering of Filipino. The music they play isn't anything special, mostly mellow jazz and pop ballads by mainstream artists. Among the most popular FM stations are Wow FM (103.5MHz) and Crossover (105.1 MHz). A shortwave radio also gives access to the BBC World Service (bbc.co.uk/worldservice), Radio Canada (rcinet.ca), Voice of America (voa.gov) and Radio Australia (abc.net.au/ra), among other international broadcasters.

Festivals

Every community in the Philippines – from small barangay to crammed metropolis – has at least a couple of festivals a year in honour of a patron saint, to give thanks for a good harvest, or to pay respects to a biblical character. It's well worth timing your visit to see one of the major events: the beer flows, pigs are roasted, and there's dancing in the streets for days on end.

The main fiesta months are from January to May; exact dates often vary. Major mardi-gras-style festivals include the **Ati-Atihan** in January in Kalibo (see box, p.284) and the **Sinulog** in January in Cebu (see box, p.317). One of the biggest nationwide festivals is the

Flores de Mayo, a religious parade held across the country throughout May in honour of the Virgin Mary.

A festival calendar

Listing all Filipino festivals is impossible. Those included here are larger ones that you might consider making a special trip for, at least if you happen to be in the area.

JANUARY AND FEBRUARY

Feast of the Black Nazarene (Jan 9) Quiapo, Manila

🌐 quiapochurch.com. Devotees gather in the plaza outside Quiapo Church to touch a miraculous image of Christ. See p.73.

Ati-Atihan (variable, culminating on third Sun in Jan) Kalibo, Aklan. Street dancing and wild costumes at arguably the biggest festival in the country, held to celebrate an ancient land pact between settlers and indigenous Atis. See box, p.284.

Sinulog (third Sun in Jan) Cebu City, Cebu 🌐 sinulog.ph. Cebu's biggest annual event, in honour of the Santo Niño (an image of Jesus as a child). Huge street parade, live music and plenty of food and drink. See box, p.317.

Dinagyang (fourth week of Jan) Iloilo, Panay Island 🌐 [facebook.com/DinagyangSaloiloFestival/](https://www.facebook.com/DinagyangSaloiloFestival/). Relatively modern festival modelled after the Ati-Atihan; includes a parade on the Iloilo River.

Philippine Hot Air Balloon Fiesta (Feb) Clark, Pampanga 🌐 philballoonfest.net. Balloon rides, microlight flying, skydiving and aerobatics displays.

Pamulinawen (first two weeks in Feb) Laoag City, Ilocos Norte. Citywide fiesta in honour of St William the Hermit. Events include street parties, beauty pageants, concerts and religious parades.

Panagbenga (Baguio Flower Festival; third week in Feb) Baguio City, Benguet 🌐 panagbengaflowerfestival.com. The summer capital's largest annual event includes parades of floats beautifully decorated with flowers from the Cordillera region. There are also flower-related lectures and exhibitions.

Suman Festival (third week in Feb) Baler, Aurora. Another mardi-gras-style extravaganza featuring street parades, dancing and floats decorated with the native delicacy *suman* – sticky rice cake rolled in banana leaves.

MARCH AND APRIL

Moriones (Easter weekend) Marinduque. A celebration of the life of the Roman centurion Longinus, who was blind in one eye. Legend says that when he pierced Christ's side with his spear, blood spurted into his eye and cured him. See box, p.197.

Arya! Abra (first or second week of March) Bangued, Abra. Highlights include hair-raising bamboo-raft races along the frisky Abra River and gatherings of northern tribes.

Bangkerong Festival (first or second week of March) Pagsanjan, Laguna. Parade along the Pagsanjan River.

Kaamulan (first week of March) Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, Mindanao. Showcase of tribal culture and arts.

Pasayaw (third week of March) Canlaon City, Negros Oriental. Thanksgiving festival to God and St Joseph, with twelve barangays competing for honours in an outdoor dancing competition. The final “dance-off” is held in the city gym.

Boracay International Dragon Boat Festival (April) Boracay, Aklan. A local version of Hong Kong's dragon-boat races, featuring domestic and international teams competing in long wooden canoes on a course off White Beach.

Allaw Ta Apo Sandawa (second week of April) Kidapawan City, Cotabato. Gathering of highland tribes to pay respects to the sacred Mount Apo.

Turumba Festival (April & May) Pakil, Laguna. Religious festival commemorating the seven sorrows of the Virgin Mary. The festival consists of seven novenas, one for each sorrow, held at weekends.

MAY

Flores de Mayo (throughout May) Countrywide. Religious procession celebrating the coming of the rains, with girls dressed as the various “Accolades of our Lady”, including Faith, Hope and Charity. Processions are sometimes held after dark and lit by candles – a lovely sight.

Carabao Carroza (May 3–4) Iloilo, Panay Island. Races held to celebrate the humble carabao (water buffalo), beast of burden for many a provincial farmer.

Pahiyas (May 15) Lucban, Quezon; also in the nearby towns of Candelaria, Tayabas, Sariaya, Tiaong and Lucena. Colourful harvest festival which sees houses gaily decorated with fruits and vegetables. It's held in honour of San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of farmers.

ALL SAINTS' DAY

It's the day for Catholic Filipinos to honour their dead, but **All Saints' Day** on **November 1** is nothing to get maudlin about. Sometimes called All Souls' Day, it's when clans reunite at family graves and memorials, turning cemeteries throughout the country into fairgrounds. You don't pay your respects in the Philippines by being miserable, so All Saints' Day is a chance to show those who have gone before how much those who have been left behind are prospering. Filipinos approach All Saints' Day with the same gusto as Christmas, running from shop to shop at the last minute looking for candles to burn, food and offerings. The grave is painted, flowers are arranged and rosaries fervently prayed over, but once the ceremonial preliminaries are over, the fun begins. Guitars appear, capacious picnic hampers are opened and alcohol flows freely. Many families gather the night before and sleep in the cemetery. With many family graves in the provinces, Manila empties fast the day before All Saints' Day, as people leave the city by anything on wheels. Needless to say, it's a bad time to travel.

Obando Fertility Rites (May 17–19) Obando, Bulacan. On the feast day of San Pascual, women gather in the churchyard to chant prayers asking for children, an intriguing combination of traditional dance, Catholicism and far older animist beliefs.

AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER

Kadayawan sa Davao (third week of Aug) Davao City, Mindanao.

Week-long harvest festival with civic and military parades and street dances.

Peñafrancia Fluvial Festival (third Sat in Sept) Naga, Camarines Sur.

A sacred statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia, the patron saint of Bicol, is paraded through the streets, then sailed down the Bicol River back to its shrine.

OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER

Kansilay (Oct 19 or closest weekend) Silay, Negros Occidental.

Modern festival commemorating Silay's charter day. Eating and drinking contests, beauty pageants and an elaborate street parade.

Ibalong (third week of Oct) Legaspi, Albay and throughout Bicol region. Epic dances and street presentations portraying Bicol's mythical superheroes and gods.

Lanzones Festival (third week of Oct) Lambajao, Camiguin.

Vibrant and good-natured outdoor party giving thanks for the island's crop of lanzones (a tropical fruit). See p.410.

Masskara Festival (third week of Oct) Bacolod, Negros Occidental.

Festivities kick off with food fairs, mask-making contests, brass-band competitions and beauty pageants, followed by the climax – a mardi gras parade where revellers don elaborate masks and costumes and dance to Latin rhythms Rio de Janeiro-style. See p.289.

MIMAROPA Festival (November) Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon

and Palawan. An annual celebration of different Filipino cultures, featuring impressive street parades and dancing. Held in a different city each year.

DECEMBER

Christmas (December 25). The Christmas season officially starts Dec 16 and lasts until Epiphany on Jan 9. Churches are full for Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, and some towns hold a Panunuluyan pageant in the days leading up to it, commemorating the journey of Joseph and the pregnant Virgin Mary to Bethlehem. Though Christmas is primarily a

family festival, celebrated in the home, without the pageantry on show at other festivals, you'll still see groups of children singing carols all over the archipelago. Christmas Day itself is spent with family and friends – the country largely shuts down for the day.

Outdoor activities

For a sizeable proportion of the tourists who visit every year, the main attraction of the Philippines is the scuba diving. The abundance of exceptional dive sites and the high standard of diving instruction available have made the archipelago one of the world's foremost diving destinations.

It's not all about getting underwater though: there are some superb wilderness areas in the Philippines and dozens of volcanoes and mountains to be **climbed**, from the tallest in the country, Mount Apo (2954m), to more manageable peaks close to Manila in Batangas and Rizal provinces, some of which can be tackled in a day-trip. The country also offers opportunities for **caving, whitewater rafting, surfing** and **sailing**.

Scuba diving

Diving is possible **year-round** in the Philippines, with surface water temperatures in the 25–28°C range, the warmest conditions being from February to June. On deeper dives temperatures can drop to 22°C due to the upwelling of deeper, cooler water, so a light (3mm) wet suit is essential. During the typhoon season from June to November, be prepared for your plans to be disrupted if a major storm hits and dive boats are unable to venture out.

Visibility depends on water temperature, the

DIVING DOS AND DON'TS

Divers can cause damage to reefs, sometimes inadvertently. Be aware of your fins as they can break off coral heads that take years to regrow. Don't grab coral to steady yourself, and always maintain good buoyancy control – colliding with a reef can be destructive. Don't kick up sediment, which can choke and kill corals. Below is a list of additional dos and don'ts:

- **Collecting aquatic life** Don't take home corals or shells, and never take souvenirs from wreck-dives or remove anything dead or alive – except rubbish – from the sea.
- **Touching and handling aquatic life** For many organisms this is a terrifying and injurious experience – it's best left to people who have experience with the creatures concerned.
- **Riding aquatic life** Hard to credit, but some divers still think it's a great lark to hang onto the back of a turtle or manta ray. Simply put, there are no circumstances in which this is right.
- **Spear-fishing** This has been outlawed in the Philippines, and environmental groups are increasingly reporting spear-fishers to the authorities for prosecution.

TOP 10 DIVE SITES

Anilao Closest dive site to Manila, teeming with soft coral and tropical fish. See box, p.116.

Apo Island Not to be confused with the reef (see below), this island off Negros is swamped with fish and forests of coral. See p.303.

Apo Reef Few divers and lots of big fish, two hours off the coast of Mindoro. See p.254.

Coron The best wreck-diving in the country, possibly in the world. There are 24 charted wrecks, Japanese ships sunk in one massive attack by US aircraft in 1944. See box, p.398.

Puerto Galera Unrivalled all-round destination with something for everyone, from novices to old hands. See box, p.242.

Padre Burgos Out of the way in undeveloped southern Leyte and a prime spot for discovering new dive sites. See p.368.

Panglao Island The dive sites close to the congenial Alona Beach resorts offer an exceptional range of marine life. See box, p.345.

Samal Island This sleepy island just off the coast of Davao, Mindanao, harbours numerous dive sites. See p.429.

Subic Bay The former US Navy base is an exceptional location for wreck-dives, with the USS *New York* one of the highlights. See box, p.124.

Tubbataha Reef You'll need to book a liveaboard trip but it's worth it, with guaranteed sightings of sharks and a good chance of mantas and whale sharks. See p.378.

strength of the current and wind direction, but generally lies in the 10–30m range.

There are currently seven **recompression chambers** (aka hyperbaric chambers) in the Philippines to treat recompression sickness (see p.40), including a mobile ship-based unit. All ostensibly offer a 24-hour emergency service, but note that facilities do close for maintenance and/or because there are no staff qualified to run them. You might want to check that your dive operator is aware of the nearest operational facility. If it's not, go somewhere else.

Dive trips

Most dives **cost around** P1300 to P1800 for certified divers, including rental of the boat and equipment such as mask, booties, wet suit, fins, weight belt and air tanks. For night dives and more demanding technical dives, expect to pay around P500 extra. If you've booked a package that includes accommodation at a dive resort, two dives a day will normally be included in the cost.

Courses

All PADI-accredited resorts offer a range of courses run by qualified professional instructors. If you haven't been diving before and aren't sure if you'll take to it, try a gentle twenty-minute **"discovery dive"**, guided by an instructor for around P2000, or the longer PADI **Discover Scuba Diving** course for around P3000. The main course for beginners is the PADI **Open Water Diver Course** (from around P2,200) which will allow you to dive at depths up

to 18m. You might want to consider doing the pool sessions and written tests before you travel, then doing the check-out dives at a PADI resort in the Philippines. It saves time and means that you don't have to slave over homework in the tropical heat. If you choose this option, make sure that you bring your PADI referral documents with you.

Once you've passed the course and been given your certification card, you are free to dive anywhere in the world. You might also want to take another step up the diving ladder by enrolling in a more advanced course. There are many to choose from, including **Advanced Open Water Diver** (from P17,000), **Emergency First Response** (from P8000), which is also suitable for non-divers, and **Rescue Diver** (from around P24,000).

Liveaboards

There are two great advantages to diving from a **liveaboard** (a boat that acts as a mobile hotel) – you can get to places that are inaccessible by banca and once you're there you can linger for a night or two. Liveaboards allow you to explore terrific destinations such as Apo Reef off the coast of Mindoro and Tubbataha in the Sulu Sea, arguably the best dive spot in the country. Packages include all meals and dives, but vary significantly according to destination; Tubbataha costs at least US\$1200–1600 per week, while trips around Coron start at around US\$130 per day. Most of the boats used have air-conditioned en-suite cabins for two. Packages often include unlimited diving and are always full board.

MARINE LIFE

The beauty of diving in the Philippines is that you don't have to dive deep to see some incredible marine life. Among the commonest are the exotic and brightly coloured **angelfish**, **damselfish** and eye-catching **humbugs**, striped black-and-white like the sweet. In shallow coral gardens you'll see inquisitive **clownfish** defending their coral nests either singly or in pairs, perhaps with minuscule juveniles at their sides. Also unmissable are the frenetic shoals of **dragonets** and **dottybacks**, with their psychedelic colouring. **Moray eels** take shelter in crevices in the reef and it's not unusual to see one, even in the shallows. Even **turtles** can be seen at this depth.

Where the coral plunges away steeply into an inky darkness, at depths of five or six metres, you'll see bright-green **parrot fish** and mesmerizing **batfish**, who patrol the reef edge in family shoals. These slopes and fore reefs are also home to **snappers**, **goatfish** and **wrasses**, the largest of which – the Napoleon wrasse – can dwarf a person. Deeper still, but usually in the more isolated dive sites such as Tubbataha, it's possible to see sharks, including **white tip reef sharks** and **grey reef sharks**, while if you're lucky an immense but gentle **manta ray** or **whale shark** might drift lazily past.

Poisonous species include the beautifully hypnotic **lionfish** (also called the flamefish), which hunts at night and has spines along its back that can deliver a nasty dose of venom, while shoals of **jellyfish** are common at certain times of year.

LIVEBOARD OPERATORS

Atlantis Dive Resorts 📍 atlantishotel.com. Operates the 32m-long *Atlantis Azores*, which has eight luxurious cabins with private bathrooms. Trips to Puerto Galera and Apo Reef (Oct–Dec), Tubbataha (mid–March to early June), Dumaguete (June–Sept) and southern Leyte for the whale sharks (Jan–March). Most trips US\$3495–3995 for 6 days, 7 nights.

Expedition Fleet 📍 expeditionfleet.com. Trips to Tubbataha on the ten-cabin *MV Stella Maris Explorer* (from P97,000; 7 days, 6 nights).

Busuanga Seadive Resort 📍 seadiveresort.com. Trips to Apo Reef and the Coron wrecks with varying room rates and dive packages.

Discovery Fleet 📍 discoveryfleet.com. Various routes with two large ships, *MV Discovery Palawan* and *MV Discovery Adventure* (from US\$2200; 6 nights, 7 days).

RECOMPRESSION CHAMBERS

Batangas City St Patrick's Hospital, Lopez Jaena St 📞 043 723 8388, 📍 divemed.com.ph.

Cavite City Sangley Recompression Chamber, NSWG, Philippine Fleet Naval Base 📞 046 524 2061.

Cebu City Cebu Recompression Chamber, Viscom Station Hospital, Military Camp Lapu-Lapu, Lahug 📞 032 232 2464.

Makati City Makati Medical Center, 2 Amorsolo St, Makati City 📞 02 817 5601.

Manila V. Luna Recompression Chamber, AFP Medical Center, V. Luna Rd, Quezon City 📞 02 920 7183.

Roving Chamber Royal Coast Guard Action Center (two ships based in Cebu) 📞 02 527 3880.

Subic Bay Subic Recompression Chamber, Olongapo City 📞 047 252 7566.

DIVING RESOURCES

Asia Divers 📍 asiadivers.com. Thoroughly professional dive outfit with an office in Manila and a dive centre and accommodation in Puerto Galera. Good people to learn with.

Divephil 📍 divephil.com. Useful guide to scuba diving in the Philippines, plus information about destinations and accommodation.

SeaQuest 📍 seaquestdivecenter.net. Long-established operator with centres in Bohol and Cebu, offering general diving advice, safaris, courses and accommodation.

Underwater 360° 📍 uw360.asia. Online diving portal for several organizations, including *Asian Diver* diving magazine and Scuba Diver AustralAsia.

Trekking and climbing

The Philippines offers plenty of opportunities to explore pristine **wilderness** areas. Luzon, for example, has the Sierra Madre (see p.153), rarely visited by tourists and offering exhilarating trekking through dense rainforest and across dizzying peaks. In Bicol there are some terrific volcano climbs (Mt Mayon and Mt Isarog, for instance; see p.215 & p.209), while Mindoro, Palawan and the Visayas between them have dozens of national parks, heritage areas, wildlife sanctuaries and volcanoes. Mount Kanlaon (see p.295), an active volcano in Negros, is one of the country's more risky climbs, while Mount Halcon (see p.247) on Mindoro offers a raw, mesmerizing landscape of peaks, waterfalls and jungle, typical of wilderness areas throughout the archipelago.

The country actually has more than sixty **national parks** and protected areas, but because funds for their management are scarce, you won't find the kind of infrastructure that exists in national parks in the West. While the most popular climbs – Mount Apo in Mindanao (see p.432) and Mount Pulag in Mountain province (see p.165), for example – have trails that are relatively easy to find and follow, it's

important to realize that for the most part trails are generally poorly maintained and hardly marked, if they're marked at all. There are seldom more than a few (badly paid) wardens or rangers responsible for huge tracts of land, and where accommodation exists, it will be extremely basic. Some national parks have administrative buildings where you might be able to get a bed in a dorm for the night, or where you can roll out a mattress or sleeping bag on the floor. They may also have basic cooking facilities, but the closest you'll get to a shower is filling a bucket and washing outside. Deep within park territory, the best you can hope for is a wooden shack to shelter in for the night.

This lack of facilities means you'll need to hire a reliable **guide**. Often, the place to make contact with guides is the municipal hall in the barangay or town closest to the trailhead. **Fees** range from P700–1500 per day depending where you are, plus food and water, which you'll have to bring with you as it's unlikely that you'll come across anywhere to buy anything once you're on the trail.

There are some **outdoor shops** in big cities – mainly Manila – where you can buy a basic frame tent for P3000 and a sleeping bag for P1500. Other essentials such as cooking equipment, lanterns and backpacks are also available, and you may be able to rent some items, though the range of gear on offer is limited even in the best shops.

TREKKING AND CLIMBING RESOURCES

Metropolitan Mountaineering Society [🌐 metropolitanms.org](http://metropolitanms.org).

Sociable trekking group running expeditions throughout the year. On the easier treks they may well be willing to take you along at short notice, though you might need to take a basic survival course to be allowed on the more challenging expeditions.

Mountaineering Federation of the Philippines [🌐 mfpi.wordpress.com](http://mfpi.wordpress.com). An umbrella group that can offer general information about routes and practicalities.

Pinoy Mountaineer [🌐 pinoymountaineer.com](http://pinoymountaineer.com). This detailed and well-maintained site is a good place to read up about trekking and climbing, with sample itineraries for major climbs and a long list of climbing clubs in the country.

Caving

It's hardly surprising that **caving** – spelunking – is a growth industry, as there are huge caves to explore throughout the country. The largest cave systems are in northern Luzon – in Sagada (see p.171) and in Cagayan province near Tuguegarao, where the Peñablanca Protected Area (see p.152) has three hundred caves, many deep, dangerous and not yet

fully explored. The other exciting caving area is the Sohoton Natural Bridge National Park in Samar (see p.357).

Whitewater rafting and ziplining

Whitewater rafting is becoming more popular in the Philippines, notably along the Cagayan River and Chico River in northern Luzon (see p.174) and Cagayan de Oro River in Mindanao (see box, p.407).

Ziplines have mushroomed all over the islands, but some are much tamer than others – some of the best are near Cagayan de Oro (see p.407) and Tibiao (see p.281).

Surfing and other watersports

Surfing is now well established in the Philippines in eastern Bicol (see box, p.202), Catanduanes (see p.229), eastern Mindanao (especially Siargao Island; see p.419), and around San Fernando in La Union (see p.136). There are also any number of hard-to-reach areas in the archipelago that are visited only by a handful of die-hard surfers, such as Baler in northern Luzon (see box, p.155), or around Borongan (see p.358) in eastern Samar. For general information visit [🌐 surfingphilippines.com](http://surfingphilippines.com) and [🌐 surfingthephilippines.com](http://surfingthephilippines.com).

Other sea-based watersports such as **kitesurfing**, **waterskiing**, **wakeboarding** and **ocean kayaking** are also growing in popularity, especially in major tourist destinations such as Boracay.

Spectator sports

When it comes to spectator sports, basketball and boxing are among the biggest passions in the Philippines. Pool – or what Filipinos call “billiards” – is also popular. Televised football (soccer) has some fans, though it is difficult to find in most of the country. Cockfighting is one of the few popular pastimes that harks back to the pre-Hispanic era.

Basketball

The Filipinos embraced **basketball** as they did everything else American, from pizza to popcorn. Every barangay and town has a basketball court, even if all it consists of are a couple of makeshift baskets nailed to wooden poles in the church

plaza. The major league – the equivalent of the NBA – is the **Philippine Basketball Association** (PBA; pba.inquirer.net), founded in 1975. Twelve teams compete for honours, all of them sponsored by a major corporation and taking their sponsor's name. You might find yourself watching Meralco Bolts play San Miguel Beermen, or NLEX take on Rain or Shine. PBA games are all played in Manila (see box, p.97).

The San Miguel-Petron franchise (under the name Beermen) is the most successful, while Barangay Ginebra Kings is the most popular. The players are household names to most Filipinos: June Mar Fajardo (San Miguel Beermen), Ababou Dylan (TNT KaTropa) and Aguilar Raymond (Blackwater) command huge attention.

Boxing

Boxing has been big business in the Philippines since the Americans introduced the sport in the early twentieth century. In recent years, one name stands out in particular: **Manny “the Pacman” Pacquiao**, the poor boy from Mindanao who became world champion (see box, p.445). Fights are held almost every week, often at major venues in Caloocan (Manila), Cebu City, Mandaluyong (Manila), Tagaytay City, Victoria (Negros) and Taytay in the Luzon province of Rizal. Tickets are cheap and often sell out; whenever there's a bout of any significance Filipinos gather around every available television set. You can check schedules for fights at philboxing.com.

Pool

Every town and city in the country has some sort of **billiards hall** (for **pool**, not traditional English billiards), even if it's just a few old tables on the

pavement where games are played by kerosene lamps between locals for the price of a few San Miguels. The sport has always been popular – it's cheap and reasonably accessible – but has boomed over the last twenty years or so because of the success of **Efren Reyes** and **Francisco Bustamante**. Reyes, sometimes called “The Magician”, is one of the pool world's great characters; a diminutive fellow with a toothy grin, he picked up the nickname “Bata” (“The Kid”) while helping out in his uncle's pool halls in Manila as a child. He was born in Pampanga province, to the north of Manila, and can still occasionally be found on a Friday or Saturday night shooting pool in his hometown bars around Clark, good-naturedly scalping unsuspecting tourists' drinks. In 2006, Reyes and Francisco “Django” Bustamante represented their country as Team Philippines and won the inaugural **World Cup of Pool** by defeating Team USA – a victory of major significance for a country with few global sporting heroes. They repeated the feat in 2009, on home turf. Countrymen Dennis Orcollo and Roberto Gomez then won the title in London in 2013.

Cockfighting

Cockfighting is the Filipino passion few foreigners get to see – or understand, for obvious reasons. It's a brutal blood sport where fighting cocks literally peck and jab each other to death as onlookers make bets on the outcome. The fight begins when the two roosters are presented to each other in the pit. Both have a razor-sharp curved blade three inches long strapped to their leg. The fight is over in a burst of feathers in no more than a few minutes, when one rooster is too bloodied and wounded, or simply too dead, to peck back at its opponent when provoked. To make the evening last, most

COCKFIGHTING AND THE FILIPINO

Cockfighting has a long history in the Philippines. National hero José Rizal, martyred by the Spanish in 1896, once pointed out that the average Filipino loves his rooster more than he does his children.

Contrary to received wisdom, cockfighting was not introduced to the country by the Spanish. When conquistadors landed in Palawan shortly after the death of Magellan, they discovered native men already breeding domestic roosters to fight, putting them in shared cages and letting them scrap over small amounts of food.

Social scientists say cockfighting is popular in the Philippines because it reflects the national passion for brevity or a quick payoff, the trait of **ningas cogon** (*cogon* being a wild grass that burns ferociously and quickly). Part of the appeal is the **prize money**. For a P200 entrance fee, a struggling farmer from the backwoods could finish the day with P300,000 in his pocket, all thanks to a trusty rooster he has groomed and trained assiduously for months.

major cockfights feature seven contests. Anyone who likes animals should definitely stay well away.

If you do attend a cockfight (*sabong* in Tagalog), you'll be experiencing Filipino culture at its rawest – at the very least it might make you think again about how much “American influence” dominates the culture. It's best to start at one of the major cockpits in Manila (see box, p.97), or ask your hotel for the nearest place to see one. Entrance fees are minimal, but you'll rarely see women attending – the cockpit is the exclusive preserve of men, who see it as an egalitarian refuge from the world's woes, a place where class differences are temporarily put to one side and everyone wears flip-flops and vests. In Manila, foreign women should be OK at the main venues, but in the provinces you'll probably feel more comfortable with a male companion.

Culture and etiquette

For many travellers the Philippines seems less immediately “exotic” than other countries in Asia. English is spoken almost everywhere, people wear Western clothes and visit malls and the main religion is Catholicism. Combined with the approachability and sunny disposition of your average Filipino, this appears to make for a trouble-free assimilation into the ways and values of the Philippines.

However, this can lead to a false sense of security, which over time – as differences begin to surface – gives way to bewilderment and confusion. There are complex rules of engagement that govern behaviour among Filipinos, and failure to be sensitive to them can cast you unwittingly in the role of the ugly foreigner, ranting and raving with frustration at everyone you interact with.

Filipino etiquette

One of the major controlling elements in Filipino society – undetected by most visitors – is **hiya**, a difficult word to define, though essentially it means a sense of shame. *Hiya* is a factor in almost all social situations. It is a sense of *hiya* that prevents someone asking a question, for fear he may look foolish. It is *hiya* that sees many Filipinos refuse to disagree openly, for fear they may cause offence.

STREET KIDS

Despite the very real economic progress made in the last twenty years, millions of Filipinos still live in poverty. **Street children** (many orphaned) are one of the saddest consequences of this – some reports estimate that around 1.5 million kids are living rough. In Manila and other large cities you'll see very small children begging for money in the street or dancing in front of cars at dangerous interchanges for tips. You'll also come across kids aggressively begging for change; sometimes they are known as “**rugby boys**” – nothing to do with the sport, but a famous brand of glue that they sniff. Many locals refuse to give them money for fear of encouraging dangerous behaviour – others give a few pesos out of pity. If you want to help, a good place to start is the Cavite-based Life Child (lifechild.org).

Not to have *hiya* is a grave social sin; to be accused of being *walang-hiya* (to be shameless) is the ultimate insult. *Hiya* goes hand in hand with the preservation of **amor-propio** (the term literally means “love of self”), in other words to avoid losing face. If you ever wonder why a Filipino fails to broach awkward subjects with you, or to point out that your flies are undone, it is because *hiya* and *amor-propio* are at work.

If you are ever in doubt about how to behave in the Philippines, bring to mind the value of **pakikisama**, which in rough translation means “to get along”. For example, don't confront the waiter or bark insults if he gets your order wrong. This offends his sense of *amor-propio* and marks you out as being an obnoxious *walang-hiya* foreigner. Talk to him quietly and ask that the order be changed. The same rules apply with government officials, police, ticket agents, hotel receptionists and cashiers. If there's a problem, sort it out quietly and patiently. A sense of **delicadeza** is also important to Filipinos. This might be translated as “propriety”, a simple sense of good behaviour, particularly in the presence of elders or women.

Yes, no, maybe...

One of the root causes of frustration during social intercourse is the use of the word **yes**. In their desire to please, many Filipinos find it difficult to say no. So they say yes instead. Yes (actually oo in

Tagalog, pronounced oh-oh, though most Filipinos would use the English word when talking to foreigners) can mean one of a great many things, from a plain and simple “yes” to “I’m not sure”, “perhaps”, “if you say so”, or “sorry, I don’t understand”. A casual yes is never taken as binding.

The concepts of *hiya* and *amor-propio* also filter through to the language in the form of a great many euphemisms for the word no (*hindi* in Tagalog). Instead of replying in the negative, in order not to upset you a Filipino will typically say “maybe” (*siguro nga*), “whatever” (*bahala na*) or “if you say so” (*kung sinabi mo ba e*).

These subtleties of language are symptomatic of the unseen ebbs and flows of the tides that govern all social behaviour in the Philippines, few foreigners ever fully coming to terms with the eddies and whirls underneath.

Questions and greetings

Filipinos are outgoing people who don’t consider it rude to ask **personal questions**. Prepare to be pleasantly interrogated by everyone you meet. Filipinos will want to know where you are from, why you are in the Philippines, how old you are, whether you are married, if not why not, and so on and so forth. They pride themselves on their hospitality and are always ready to share a meal or a few drinks. Don’t offend them by refusing outright.

In rural areas it’s still common for foreign men to be greeted by passers-by with calls of “Hey Joe!” This harks back to the GI Joes of World War II and American occupation.

Filipino time

Why do you never ask a Filipino to do something by the end of the week? He might think you’re being pushy. That’s an exaggeration of course, but beyond

PROSTITUTION AND SEX TOURISM

The Philippines, like some other Southeast Asian countries, has an unfortunate reputation for **prostitution** and **sex tourism**. It’s a huge industry domestically with an estimated 800,000 men, women and, sadly, children working in the trade. The country’s international image as a sex destination came about largely as a result of the US military presence here during and after World War II, when “go go” or “girlie” bars flourished around the bases at Clark and Subic Bay.

While it’s illegal to sell or procure sex, the trade still operates under the guise of entertainment: sex workers are employed as singers, dancers, waitresses or “guest relations officers” in clubs and bars where they are expected to leave with any client who pays a fee (the “bar fine”). Then there’s what are euphemistically dubbed “freelancers”, prostitutes who independently cruise bars looking for paying customers. In the Philippines it’s common (because it’s so cheap) to hire these girls for several days or weeks to have what’s called a GFE (“girlfriend experience”).

According to the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (catwinternational.org), some 15,000 Australian men a year visit Angeles, north of Manila, on sex tours; plenty of Americans, Brits and Europeans join them, while Koreans, Taiwanese and Chinese have developed their own networks, usually based in karaoke bars and restaurants. Manila, Cebu City, Subic Bay and Pasay City are also major sex destinations.

DATING WEBSITES

Though you will often see older Western men accompanied by young, attractive Filipina women all over the Philippines, don’t assume that these women are prostitutes. The situation is confused by the legal and equally popular phenomenon of **online dating websites** that exclusively pair Filipinas with foreigners – plenty of the men you’ll see have been matched with their Filipina “girlfriend” and intend to seriously date or even marry them (or already have), however dubious this might seem.

CHILD PROSTITUTION

The Philippine government estimates that almost half the sex workers in the country are **underage**, many of them street children lured from the provinces by the promise of work or simply food and water. In recent years, cyberporn has become a major problem – in 2014 the British-led Operation Endeavour uncovered a global network of paedophiles streaming live child abuse by video from the Philippines. If you suspect someone of being a paedophile or engaging in any abusive behaviour towards minors, call **hotline** ☎ 1-6-3 or visit abs-cbnfoundation.com.

VIDEOKE CRAZY

“Videoke” – **video karaoke** – is a major fad in the Philippines, with cheap videoke bars in almost every town and neighbourhood. While it can be fun to participate in a Filipino singing session, being regaled by drunken wailings wafting through your hotel window in the early hours isn’t so amusing. Adding to the mix, most Filipino families own one or more karaoke machines that they use throughout the week, and always on special occasions, birthdays and weddings. Incidentally, a Filipino inventor (Roberto del Rosario) actually holds the patent for the karaoke machine.

the cities, the old joke still resonates for long-time residents of the Philippines.

In recent years, perhaps due to the number of young Filipinos returning home after an overseas education, the attitude towards **punctuality** has begun to change. For medical or work-related appointments you’ll need to be on time, but for social gatherings turn up half an hour late: it is considered impolite to be on time for a party, for instance, simply because it makes you look like a glutton who wants to grab the food. The speed of service in restaurants in the Philippines has also improved, but you should still expect your patience to occasionally be tested.

Women travellers

Women travellers rarely experience problems in the Philippines, either travelling alone or as part of a group. The culture, however, is a **macho** one and, especially in the provinces, foreign women may experience being stared at or the occasional catcall or lewd comment in Tagalog. In the barangays, Filipino men hold dear the oft-regurgitated image of themselves in local movies as gifted romancers, able to reduce any lady to jelly with a few choice words and the wink of an eye.

Reacting to this attention is the worst thing you can do. If you smile and remain good-natured but distant, your potential suitors will get the message and leave you alone. To shout back or to poke fun, particularly if Romeo is with his friends, will cause him serious loss of face and lead to resentment and the possibility that they will try to get back at you.

Modesty is essential to the behaviour of young Filipinas, especially in the provinces, and this should also be the case with visitors. Shorts and T-shirts are

fine for women anywhere (except for immigration offices), but bikinis are only for the beach, and even then it’s considered bad form to wander through a resort’s restaurant or souvenir shop without covering up first (a sarong is perfect for this). Topless sunbathing is unheard of among Filipinas, and tourists in popular resorts such as Boracay who remove their clothes are likely to attract an amazed, gossiping crowd of locals. For some Filipino men this reinforces the stereotype that foreign women on holiday are game for anything.

Shopping

The Philippines is a great place to buy indigenous art, woodwork, masks and religious artefacts, mostly at rock-bottom prices. Manila also contains a number of shiny malls with stores offering much the same designer gear you can find in London or New York. The country’s two main department-store chains are Rustan’s and SM. Both are good for clothes and shoes, at slightly lower prices than in Europe; children’s clothes are especially inexpensive.

Souvenirs

Typical souvenirs include **models of jeepneys**, wooden **salad bowls**, cotton **linen** and small items such as **fridge magnets** made of coconut shell or carabao horn. In department stores you can find **cutlery sets** made from carabao horn and bamboo and costing less than P2000. **Woven place mats** and coasters are inexpensive and easy to pack to take home. Filipino **picture frames** are eye-catching and affordable. Made from raw materials such as carabao horn and Manila hemp, they are available in most department stores. All towns have markets that sell cheap local goods such as **sleeping mats** (*banig*) that make colourful wall hangings, and earthenware water jars or **cooking pots** that make attractive additions to a kitchen.

For serious souvenir-hunting, you’ll have to rummage around in small **antique shops**. There aren’t many of these, and they’re often tucked away in low-rent areas. The better shops in big cities are listed in the Guide; elsewhere, ask around at your hotel. Many of the items in these shops are religious artefacts (see p.46), although you’ll also find furniture, decorative vases, lamps, old paintings, mirrors and brassware.

BARGAINING

Prices are fixed in department stores and most retail outlets in malls, but in many antique shops and in markets, you're expected to **haggle**. Bargaining is always amicable and relaxed, never confrontational. Filipinos see it as something of a polite game, interjecting their offers and counter offers with friendly chitchat about the weather, the state of the nation or, if you're a foreigner, where you come from and what you're doing in the Philippines.

Never play hardball and make a brusque "take it or leave it" offer because that's likely to cause embarrassment and offence. Start by offering **fifty to sixty percent** of the initial asking price and work your way up from there. Note that foreigners tend to get less of a discount than Filipinos.

Some souvenir stores and antique shops will ship goods home for you for an extra charge. Otherwise you could send bulky items home by regular post (see p.51). Note that the trade in coral and seashells as souvenirs in beach areas is decidedly unsound environmentally, as is the manufacture of decorative objects and jewellery from seashells.

Tribal and religious artefacts

Not all tribal and religious artefacts are genuine, but even the imitations make good gifts. **Woven baskets and trays** of the kind used by Cordillera tribes are a bargain, starting from only a few hundred pesos. They come in a range of sizes and shapes, including circular trays woven from grass that are still used to sift rice, and baskets worn like a backpack for

carrying provisions. The best are the original tribal baskets, which cost a little more than the reproductions, but have an appealing nut-brown tone as a result of the many times they have been oiled. You can find them in antique shops around the country and also in markets in Banaue and Sagada.

Rice gods (*bulo*; see p.97), carved wooden deities sometimes with nightmarish facial expressions, are available largely in Manila and the Cordilleras. In Manila, they cost anything from a few hundred pesos for a small reproduction to P20,000 for a genuine figurine of modest size; they're much cheaper if you haggle for them in Banaue or Sagada. At markets in the Cordilleras, look out also for **wooden bowls**, various wooden wall carvings and fabric **wall hangings**.

The best place to look for Catholic **religious art** is in Manila (see p.97), though antique shops in other towns also have a selection. Wooden Catholic statues called santos and large wooden crucifixes are common. Cheaper religious souvenirs such as rosaries and icons of saints are sold by street vendors outside many of the more high-profile pilgrimage cathedrals and churches such as Quiapo in Manila and Santo Niño in Cebu.

Textiles

In market areas such as Divisoria in Manila and Colon in Cebu you can find colourful raw cloth and finished **batik products**. Another native textile is **Manila hemp**, which comes from the trunk of a particular type of banana tree. Both *piña* and Manila hemp are used to make attractive home accessories sold in department stores, such as laundry baskets, lampshades and vases. The versatile and pliable native grass, **sikat**, is woven into everything from place mats to rugs.

SARI-SARI STORES

A Philippine institution, the humble **sari-sari store** – *sari-sari* means "various" or "a variety" – is often no more than a barangay shack or a hole in the wall selling an eclectic but practical range of goods. If you're short of shampoo, body lotion, cigarettes, rum, beer or you've got a headache and need a painkiller, the local sari-sari store is the answer, especially in areas without supermarkets. All items are sold in the smallest quantities possible: shampoo comes in packets half the size of a credit card, medicine can be bought by the pill and cigarettes are sold individually. Buy a soft drink or beer and you may be perplexed to see the store holder pour it into a plastic bag, from which you're expected to drink it through a straw. This is so that they can keep the bottle and return it for the deposit of a few centavos. Most sari-sari stores are fiercely **familial**, their names – the Three Sisters, the Four Brothers or Emily and Jon-Jon's – reflecting their ownership.

The sari-sari store is also held dear by Filipinos as an unofficial community centre. Many sari-sari stores, especially in the provinces, have crude sitting areas outside, encouraging folk to linger in the shade and gossip or talk basketball and cockfighting.

Department stores everywhere have a good selection of Philippine **linen products** with delicate embroidery and lace flourishes. Some of these are handmade in Taal (see p.114); a good set of pillowcases and bedsheets will cost about P2000 in Taal's market, half the price in Rustan's or SM. In beach areas you'll find a good range of cotton sarongs, cheap (from P200), colourful and versatile.

Jewellery

The malls are full of stalls selling cheap jewellery, but you'll also find silver-plated earrings, replica tribal-style jewellery made with tin or brass, and attractive necklaces made from bone or polished coconut shell. In Mindanao – as well as in some malls in Manila, Cebu City and at souvenir stalls in Boracay – **pearl jewellery** is a bargain. Most of the pearls are cultivated on pearl farms in Mindanao and Palawan. White pearls are the most common, but you can also find pink and dove grey. They are made into earrings, necklaces and bracelets; simple earrings cost around P500, while a necklace can range from P1000 for a single string up to P10,000 for something more elaborate.

Musical instruments

In Cebu, and increasingly on the streets of Manila and Davao, you can pick up a locally made hand-crafted guitar, *bandurria* (mandolin) or ukelele. Though the acoustic quality is nothing special, the finish may include mother-of-pearl inlays, and prices are low – a steel-string acoustic guitar will set you back P2000. Mindanao's markets – such as Aldevinco in Davao – are a good place to rummage for decorative drums and Muslim gongs.

Travel essentials

Addresses

In the Philippines it is common to give an address as, for example, 122 Legaspi corner Velasco Streets, meaning the junction of Legaspi and Velasco streets (in the Guide this is written "122 Legaspi St at Velasco St"). G/F denotes street level, after which come 2/F, 3/F and so on; "first floor" or 1/F isn't used. Some addresses include the name of a **barangay**, which is officially an electoral division for local elections, but is generally used to mean a village or, when mentioned in connection with a town, a neighbourhood or suburb. The word barangay isn't always written out in the address, although it's sometimes included in official correspondence and

signposts, often abbreviated to "Brgy" or "Bgy". The term "**National Highway**" in an address doesn't necessarily refer to a vast motorway – on the smaller islands or in provincial areas, it just means the coastal road or the main street in town. When it comes to **islands**, Filipinos generally talk loosely in terms of the main island in the vicinity – so, for example, they would talk about visiting Panay when they actually mean offshore Pan de Azucar. We've adopted a similar approach in parts of the Guide, implicitly including small islands in coverage of the nearest large island.

Costs

While upmarket resorts in the Philippines can be as expensive as anywhere else in the world, for anyone with modest spending habits and tastes the country is inexpensive. Outside of Metro Manila you can get by on a frugal **budget** of around P1200 per person (£19.50/US\$24/€22.50) a day, but you might need to avoid the most popular tourist destinations such as Boracay (or visit during the off-season), and you'll be limited to bare-bones cottages and pokey rooms in basic hotels, usually without air conditioning or hot water. On this budget you'd also have to confine your meals to local restaurants and carinderias, with little leeway for slap-up feasts in nice restaurants. You'd also have to plan any flights carefully, only buying the very cheapest tickets online or limiting yourself to buses and ferries.

A budget of P2000 (£32.50/US\$40/€37.50) a day will take your standard of living up a few notches, allowing you to find reasonable beach cottage and hotel rooms and have enough left for modest eating out, drinking and budget flights. On P3500 (£57/US\$70/€66) a day, you can afford to stay in solid, reasonably spacious cottages on the beach, usually with a veranda and air conditioning, and have plenty left over for domestic flights, good meals in local restaurants and some shopping.

Crime and personal safety

The Philippines has a reputation as a somewhat dangerous place to travel (at least in the US and UK), but if you exercise discretion and common sense this really isn't the case. Politically, the Philippines is a

EMERGENCY SERVICES

The 24-hour **emergency number** throughout the Philippines is 911.