

COME AND BE HAPPY IN THE PHILIPPINES

People always wearing a smile on their face, 30,000 thousand kilometers of coastline to chill out, a fusion of Latin and Eastern gastronomy: the trip to the Indian Ocean Archipelago is an initiation (or immersion) in Southeast Asian culture and landscapes. Boracay and Manila are just the beginning

By Cristiane Sinatura

It is clear that who crosses the globe towards the Indian Ocean is in search of simply chilling out on a dream beach. Just google "Philippines" and you will have your screen flooded by bungalows bathed by the turquoise sea. It was thus, after all, that those 7,000 Southeast Asian islands entered the world tourism map, especially because of Boracay. Since the journey is not exactly short (flying with Ethiopian Airlines, which has one of the best cost-benefits, we take about 30 hours from São Paulo), the tourist just deserves to enjoy upon getting there. In the Philippines, however, the beach divides its attention with History, especially in the capital Manila – the gateway to most international flights. Hence, the combo Manila-Boracay traces the ideal panorama of history plus beaches, getting even more interesting if combined with other Asian countries such as Japan, Indonesia and Singapore.

MANILA: STARTING POINT

"Filipinos are like jeepneys," says Milagros, the smiling short lady who was our tour guide for two days in Manila. To begin to understand the Philippines, therefore, one must understand the jeepneys, an inheritance of the period in which the United States occupied the country for 40 years. At the end of World War II, the American soldiers went way, leaving their jeeps behind. Experts in transforming adversities into practicality, the Filipinos made a deal with the vehicles, converting them into public transport. Today, 70 years later, the streets of Manila look like a samba

school parade, with hundreds of jeepneys fighting for space with makeshift carts, tour buses and the ‘infamous’ tricycles – the Filipino equivalent for tuk-tuks, so ubiquitous in Southeast Asia.

Each jeepney is decorated in its own way, almost never discreet, almost always with neon lights, stickers, advertisements, funny phrases. Squeezed and muffled inside them, people wave smiling at us, tourists watching the heavy traffic from inside an air-conditioned van. Jeepneys are, in short, creative, cheerful, well-humored, simple, and practical. Here is the description of the Filipino people according to Milagros, our guide. And it is easily felt by any visitor, even in a short time contact with a resident.

In order to get to know the History of the Philippines, aside from the jeepneys, it might be worth booking one day in Manila before leaving for the beaches (and also to rest after the journey from Brazil). Manila became the capital in 1571 and today is part of a tangle composed of 17 cities known as Metro Manila, home to nearly 13 million people. It's all that is expected of a metropolis in Southeast Asia: a chaotic traffic (putting Sao Paulo to shame), food stalls in the street, crowded with people and things and long queues to the trains. But there are also vibrant neighborhoods full of modern skyscrapers, where the nightlife and gastronomy are gaining the tourist's attention. And still a place of cool people, who cannot resist a good night out in countless karaoke sessions – we are not talking about a bunch of drunks screaming *Evidences*, but really true singers with a band and even more.

The most touristic place in Manila is Intramuros, a historic center delimited by more than five kilometers of Spanish walls, along the Pasig River. It is where you will begin to understand this cultural melting pot that is the Philippines, which was colonized with the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 and named after King Felipe II. From the Spanish domination, which lasted for more than 300 years, the names of the people and the streets, the currency (Philippine peso), influences on food, fervent Catholicism and a series of words of the native language, Tagalog, were also inherited. At the end of the 19th century, when they thought they were independent, the country was then passed on to American hands, after

having been taken over by the Japanese and British as well, hence the English that comes out easily from the Filipinos' mouth in almost any corner, as official as the Tagalog language.

For this very reason, Intramuros is filled with colonial houses in Latin style. And it has undergone a laborious revitalization after succumbing to earthquakes, typhoons, fires and wars. So, all you see there today is a reconstruction of the original. Being one of the oldest buildings in the city, Fort Santiago is the starting point to explore the area. It was part of the defense system erected by the colonizers and, with its torture chambers and dungeons, it played an important role in various conflicts. The most striking is, possibly, as a prison place for national hero Jose Rizal, sentenced to death for fighting for Philippine independence in 1896. A trail of footprints shows his last steps, from his cell to the park where his execution took place – today 'baptized' in honor of the martyr.

More of the Spanish heritage is seen in churches, from the Cathedral founded in 1571 to the one of Saint Augustine, listed by Unesco. Attached to its baroque structure, greatly sought after for weddings, a small museum tells the maritime and religious history of the Philippines, showing how they have become an important trading post in the spice trade route. Another place in Intramuros to have a taste of life in colonial times is the Manila House, which reproduces the residence of a wealthy family of the 19th century. You see offices, sleeping quarters, living rooms, chapel, kitchen, bathroom (with two latrines!), all decorated with antique furniture.

To heighten the local experience, it's worth having lunch at Barbara's, a restaurant in the house courtyard. The typical food buffet is accompanied by traditional music and dance performances at dinner. And maybe you have no idea what you will possibly eat in the Philippines or you may think it is something like other countries in the region. And the truth is that I never expected to find that much pork and stew – after all, a lot [of the Philippine culinary] comes from the Spanish table (with pepper, pepper, and pepper!). Lechón (pork roast) and adobo (stew of any type of meat) are some specialties served at Barbara's, but there is also a lot of Asian influence, such

as yakisoba noodles, spring rolls and tempura.

Wanting more samples from Asia, you can cross the bridge from Intramuros to Binondo, as Manila Chinatown is known. Markets, street stalls and restaurants with indecipherable recipes, satisfy the curiosity especially of those who steps in Southeast Asia for the first time. Good place to fill the eyes, the mouth and the camera with the native fruits sold on the sidewalk, such as mango (sweet, very sweet), rambutan, pita, atis and mangostim.

THE MODERN SIDE

It is obvious that in a metropolis like Manila there will also be the cosmopolitan side and it seems totally disconnected from the historic Intramuros, where the mess gives way to planned avenues, buildings shaken by earthquakes and wars have become mirrored skyscrapers, the typical food appears in refined versions or even replaced by high gastronomy, where the jeepneys disappear and we almost think we are in the United States.

It is so mainly in Bonifacio Global City (or simply BGC), a business district that technically forms part of Taguig, city of Metro Manila. It's a very interesting area to stay – the Shangri-La at the Fort, for example, opened its doors last year in one of the tallest buildings in the Philippines. The five-star hotel surprises not only for the comfort of its 576 rooms but also the variety of restaurants – seven in total, with the most popular steak house Raging Bull (pick a knife to cut your steak and learn the story behind it). There is also the Canton Road Chinese, the Peruvian Samba (!) and the simply unforgettable breakfast buffet of the High Street Café, which ranges from ice cream to sushi, in addition to continental classics.

BGC's main road, the High Street, offers an enjoyable evening stroll, when locals take advantage of the cooler weather to walk their dogs and tourists end the day at outdoor tables. Surrounded by gardens, the pedestrian promenade gathers restaurants such as Lorenzo's Way, with Filipino food, and Pound's hamburger, as well as Mexican, Italian and Japanese cuisine. And of course, you cannot miss out on the ubiquitous Jolibee, a Filipino fast-food chain that has prices as low as US\$1. The street also concentrates international stores such as Calvin Klein, GAP, Lacoste,

Mango and Old Navy.

For this reason, Bonifacio has the potential to become the most expressive financial center of Metro Manila, but this status still belongs to the nearby city of Makati, where the skyline of tall buildings is also present. Here we find, markedly, another national passion of the Filipinos: the malls. It seems natural that, in a place where temperatures reach more than 30 ° C in summer, people want to spend time in the air conditioning after all. The SM network has shopping malls throughout the metropolitan area - the Makati unit gathers from international stores such as Uniqlo, Forever 21 and H&M, to the unmissable Kultura, good for local products such as teas, coffee, chocolate, handicrafts, clothes and souvenirs.

In Makati we also find the "gourmetized" side of the Philippines. It is where even the typical food gains a sophisticated air, as in the Romulo Café, a restaurant of modern decoration in which it is worth to taste the fish and squid balls (a delicacy coming directly from the streets), the crab cakes and the famous sisig. The latter deserves a detailed explanation – its recipe has even won the celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, who promises to take it to his new restaurant in New York. It is more or less this: the pork meat (cheek and liver) is shredded, braised with seasoning, plus the juice of a typical lemon called kalamansi and topped with a soft egg yolk. *Voilà*, this is the sisig.

Even more interesting is the experience at The Test Kitchen, still in Makati. The young chef Josh Boutwood receives only 20 people per night, under reservation, to taste his menu which varies according to season and availability. In six stages, we ate delicate portions of squid, lamb, fish, pork and beef, always served with some surprises – whether popcorn or edible ashes as dish decoration. Being able to be harmonized with wines, the banquet costs not more than US\$60 – which is a great deal considering the quality and presentation of the food, prepared in an open kitchen right next to the guests.

As creative as The Test Kitchen, The Curator is a speakeasy, dimly lighted, hidden bar, behind a coffee shop, two miles from the former, where visitors can choose from a varied cocktail menu options (including smoky drinks) or, if in a more daring mood, ask for a surprise to the bartender, who

creates the drink from scratch according to the customer's preferences. I said "refreshing;" here came gin, cucumber, lemon and mint. This goes for Manila as a whole: from overwhelming traffic jams to mysterious drinks, let yourself be surprised.

STRETCHED UP TO TAGAYTAY

A 60-kilometer journey from Manila (which can take three hours due to traffic jams) leads to Tagaytay, a mountainous city, quite popular among Filipinos for refreshing weekend getaways. For tourists, the great attraction is the Taal volcano, quite violent, but dormant since 1977 – one of the smallest active volcanoes in the world. It is not a simple volcano: it has a lake in its crater, and, within the lake, there is an islet. And the Taal itself sits on an island within another lake. Even more confused – the joke here is to understand what it means "an island inside a lake inside a volcano inside an island inside a lake". Ufa! Tongue, and brain, twisters aside, the best place to see the phenomenon (and try to understand it) is the belvedere of the Taal Vista hotel, hoping for a clear sky with no haze. With more time and disposal, one can reach the volcano island by boat and hike up to its top. For lunch, it is worth a stop at the lovely Sonya's Garden, which serves fresh salad, harvested right there in the property courtyard, plus pasta with vegetables, mushrooms, olives and other side-dishes.

BORACAY: FINALLY, AT THE BEACH!

The Philippines has entered the bucket list of many people and it is not just a coincidence: blue sea, green mountains, white sand ... After all, in a country made of 7 thousand islands, that scenery is more than expected. But precisely because of the number of options, it is difficult to decide on which beach to base the *dolce far niente* (Italian for pleasant idleness). Well, Boracay is always present in the list of "best islands in the world".

In addition to the landscape, it has reasonable structure of hotels and restaurants, being compatible with romantic trips of two or for groups of bachelors – the island, after all, is famous for its exciting nightlife. To get there, you need to take a one-hour flight from Manila to Caticlan – Philippine

Airlines and Cebu Pacific Air operate the stretch on very small planes (so be aware of the size of the baggage, which cannot exceed ten kilos).

In front of Caticlan airport, there will be several tricycles and vans waiting to take the passengers to the port, from where boats leave for Boracay. Some hotels also offer shuttles. Once on the island, do not expect much sophistication: Boracay is rustic in nature and it is on simplicity that its grace lies. It is, in a way, a relief to get here after facing the chaos of Manila. We will not be free from traffic jams (given the right proportion, of course): a single main thoroughfare permeates the entire island and, of course, gets quite crowded during high season. On the sidewalks, a series of stalls are lined up selling all kinds of products – the so-called *sari-sari*, which range from soap to cell phone chips, not to mention hanging meat.

The epicenter of Boracay is White Beach, the beach that matches all those images you may possibly have of the Philippines. Summing almost five miles, it is divided into three stations and has the waterfront taken by hotels and restaurants offering beach services. In Station 1, you find its postcard: Willy's Rock, a cliff on the edge of the sea that houses a statue of the Virgin Mary. Nearby, The Lind Hotel is a charming, design-packed option for those who want to be in a place close to the buzz yet restful. The borderless pool facing the sea is a blast and even if you are not a guest you can take a break at the Crust restaurant, which prepares pizzas in the wood fired oven and homemade pasta.

In the evening, the walkway along the beach becomes a hit, where there is a lot of restaurants and bars with live music, tables on the sand, lit candles or torches. And since we're in the Philippines, of course there's going to be a karaoke in every corner – no wonder you run into the whole staff of a restaurant, from the waiter to the chef, singing at the door to attract customers. Another cool place of Boracay's night is the hub known as D'Mall, which gathers shops and restaurants around pedestrian-only streets. Good tip over there is the Italian Aria, which serves pasta and pizzas.

During the day, the best way to take a look at the surroundings of Boracay is by taking the boat trip known as Island Hopping. The itinerary of Southwest, which organizes a range of activities and transfers around the island, includes a stop at Coral Garden (great spot for snorkeling); Aron

Magic Island, with several trampolines to jump off the cliffs directly into the sea; and Crystal Cove, an island that has great diving caves plus trails and a mini-museum of Filipino culture. It also includes a stop for a very simple but very tasty lunch with fish, crab, shrimp, chicken, rice, fruit and beer.

The Island Hopping starts in Bulabog beach, which, in its sea dotted with paraws (typical local boats), is also a point for various water activities, such as banana boat, flying fish (a giant ball that seems to take off), parasailing and kayaking. Dives with a helmet (where the traveler walks on the seabed with something like a diving suit), glass bottom boats, jet skiing and quad biking are other options for sightseeing in Boracay.

More quiet, perfect for doing nothing, is Puka Beach, in the north of the island, whose sand is full of shells – and is also often a stopover for boat trips. It is next door to the five-star Shangri-La resort, where guests arrive by speedboat and are greeted with typical music and dance performances, plus a refreshing drink upon check-in. Even the most basic rooms can have delightful views of the sea – now imagine the villas that are either isolated in the mountains vegetation or have direct access to the beach, several of them have their own jacuzzi or swimming pools. Not to mention the huge communal borderless pool, with lots of little spots to explore. After lazing in the almost deserted beach and relax in the spa, the day ends with a drink while watching the sunset, under the breath-taking views of the Solana bar. From there, just end the evening with the seafood banquet of the Sirena restaurant – all of this without stepping out of the resort. Because in Boracay you will never feel guilty for not leaving the hotel at all.

Take this trip as an invitation from Ethiopian Airlines and the Philippine Department of Tourism

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