

North Luzon



Few regions of the Philippines have more to offer than this vast area of misty mountains, sprawling plains and endless coastline.

The central mountain range known as the Cordillera is North Luzon's trophy piece, a hinterland of lush green forests blanketing hectare after hectare of gloriously crooked earth. Isolated sandy beaches ring almost the entire coastline. In the rice terraces of Banaue and elsewhere, humans and nature have collaborated to produce one of the world's truly sublime displays.

The people of North Luzon are as fascinating as the landscape. You could spend weeks roaming the region and not begin to untangle the fascinating web of historical, traditional and linguistic ties that link the region's seemingly disparate peoples. In remote provinces such as Kalinga, tribespeople live much as they always have, tending to rice terraces, raising pigs and practising animistic rituals.

The region is an adventure-lover's paradise. The Cordillera, Zambales and Sierra Madre mountains are criss-crossed by a network of ancient walking trails, perfect for trekking. Caving opportunities exist in the northeastern province of Cagayan, while the Chico River in Kalinga has the country's best white-water rafting.

North Luzon offers plenty to more sedentary types as well. Culture aficionados can get their fill in Vigan, where old Spanish colonial mansions, with their capiz-shell windows and large living rooms, line the streets. History buffs can trace the footsteps of Aguinaldo and Yamashita, or make like MacArthur's men and waltz ashore on the wide beaches around Lingayen.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Feasting your eyes on the awesome rice terraces around **Banaue** (p170), **Batad** (p174) and **Bontoc** (p167)
- Taking a step back in time in the lovely **Mestizo District** (p146) of Vigan
- Chilling out for days – or weeks – in **Sagada** (p163), aka backpacker HQ
- Taking in the music, fine food and cool mountain air of **Baguio** (p154)
- Watching thousands of bats make their early evening pilgrimage over **Pinacanauan River** (p180), near Tuguegarao
- Getting up close and personal with the mummies of **Kabayán** (p161)
- Learning to surf in **San Fernando (La Union)** (p142)



Climate

Lowland areas of North Luzon adhere to the standard Philippine monsoon climate, with a dry season from December to April and a wet season from June to October. The rainy season is longer and more intense in the Cordillera Mountains and there are distinct microclimates; see p155 for more.

Language

Myriad languages are spoken in North Luzon, including dozens of dialects in the Cordillera alone. The language jumble is most confusing in Kalinga, where just about every village has its own dialect. In the Cordillera, people are more likely to understand Ilocano or, even, English than the national language, Tagalog.

In the lowlands, the principal languages are Tagalog and Ilocano, which is the predominant language not only in Ilocos but also in Cagayan, Isabela and La Union. Other common dialects include Pangasinan and Sambal, the language of the Zambales people.

Dangers & Annoyances

There are sporadic shootouts between the government and the New People's Army (NPA) in mountainous areas of North Luzon. Such violence usually occurs way off the beaten track in provinces such as Aurora and Isabela, and rarely, if ever, affects tourists.

Tribal wars occasionally break out between villages in Kalinga and Mountain Province. Not even the Philippine government bothers intervening in these squabbles, some of which go back centuries. The last thing mountain tribes want to do is involve tourists in their internal quarrels; still, before heading to Kalinga, check with the police in Bontoc to see if there are any hot spots you should avoid.

Getting There & Away

Regular flights connect Manila with Baler, Basco (Batanes), Cauayan (Isabela province), Laoag, San Fernando (La Union) and Tuguegarao. Aircon buses link Manila with the major North Luzon cities, including comfortable deluxe buses to Laoag, Vigan and Baguio.

Driving is a great way to see Luzon's more remote regions, such as the Zambales coast and the Cordillera. Keep in mind that you'll need a pretty good 4WD for much of the latter, although most of the Halsema Hwy linking Baguio with Bontoc is now paved. You can rent cars in Manila (see p112).

Travel times to North Luzon continue to shrink as new highways are opened. The opening of the Subic–Clark–Tarlac Expressway (SCTEX) in 2008 shaved almost an hour off the trip from Manila to Baguio (from six hours to five hours). However, only select 'deluxe' buses travel along this route. The SCTEX is due to be extended to Carmen by 2010.

ZAMBALES COAST

Trekking and surfing are what lure adventurous travellers to this lonely 100km stretch of coastline west of Mt Pinatubo. Several islands just offshore offer fine beach camping, while the anthropologically inclined can hobnob with loincloth-clad Aeta tribespeople in the foothills of the Zambales Mountains. The beaches around here are nothing special, but a gaggle of resorts along the coastline make fine bases from which to explore a region that gets remarkably little tourist traffic considering its proximity to Manila. The entire Zambales coast also offers good surfing for most of the year. The best surfing is around Pundaquit.

PUNDAQUIT & CAPONES ISLAND

☎ 047 / pop 2450

Just a three-hour drive from Manila you can sleep under the stars on hourglass-shaped Capones Island, a 20- to 30-minute bangka (wooden boat) ride (P800) from the small fishing village of Pundaquit. The island's east end boasts a brilliant white-sand beach with cave-like rock formations to protect you from the elements. You may have company here on weekends in the high season (March to May), but at other times you should have it to yourself. There are beaches suitable for camping along the north and south sides of the island as well. It's a short hike up to the island's scenic **lighthouse**.

Pundaquit also has a beach but it's too dirty and crammed with fishing boats to appeal.

Activities

July to October are the peak months for **surfing**, but decent swells linger into February. March to May is the flat season. The best spots are the south side of Capones Island, Anawangin Cove (south of Pundaquit) and San Narciso (7km north of San Antonio). Anawangin