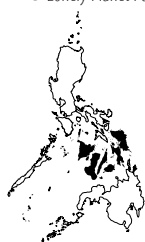


The Visayas



Suspended between Luzon in the north and Mindanao in the south, the Visayas move in a different cultural orbit to the rest of the nation, and don't the locals just know it. Gaudy fiestas and age-old indigenous traditions are reverently celebrated without so much as a backward glance at Manila, and the only place that Tagalog is routinely spoken is on TV.

It's not hard to see why Visayans are proud of their patch. After all, despite being the site of first contact with Europeans in the 16th century, it's also – amazingly – one of the most biologically diverse wonderlands in the world. Everywhere you'll see centuries-old Spanish churches hewn from coral stone and delightfully overgrown with lush jungle vegetation – this is where history persists and nature reigns.

Washing up on one of those too-perfect-to-be-real beaches framed by turquoise ocean and swaying palms is as easy as boarding a *bangka* (wooden boat). And with even more to gawp at under the water than above it, there are dive centres of international standard on hand wherever there are reefs to explore. Hard-core adventurers and nature-lovers alike will discover pristine splendour amid the caves, rivers and mountains of the national parks, while social animals are seduced by the pumping beach party that is Boracay, on the tip of Panay, and the cosmopolitan cool of Dumaguete on Negros.

Lesser travelled spots such as the Camotes Islands have castaway cred and provide an excuse to get into the lethargic flow. For those wishing to stop time altogether, there are thousands of tiny islands unmarked on most maps, their names known only to locals.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Snorkelling over the riotously colourful reef off **Apo Island** (p317)
- Exploring nature's time capsule on biologically diverse **Sibuyan Island** (p271)
- Diving with the weird and wonderful thresher sharks off tiny **Malapascua Island** (p253)
- Sea-sporting and sunning on the stunning beaches of **Boracay** (p285)
- Island-hopping the north coast of **Samar** (p351) and hiking underground and overground in its caves and forests
- Boating and diving Leyte's glorious **Sogod Bay** (p346) from the low-key comfort of **Padre Burgos** (p346)
- Recharging on the remote beaches of mysterious and idyllic **Anda** (p336)



Climate

Despite the fact that the Visayas extend so far in all cardinal directions, the water temperature is always pleasant no matter what the season, and the air temperature ranges from 25°C to 30°C year-round. The wet season is usually from May to October and the dry season from November to April, with slight variations in different parts of the region. For example, rainfall in Leyte and on the west coast of Samar is more or less evenly distributed throughout the year, and typhoons often strike eastern Samar from November to December.

Getting There & Away

Cebu is the transport hub of the Visayas. It's possible to fly directly there without having to pass through Manila, and it is serviced by many international airlines with connections to major and minor Asian cities. Several domestic airlines fly directly from Manila to Cebu, Negros, Bohol, Leyte, Samar, Panay and Romblon, and in some cases to more than one city in each of these island provinces. Siquijor is the only province at the moment without a direct connection.

It's also possible to reach many parts of the Visayas by boat from Manila or ports in Mindanao, but with such cheap domestic airfares on offer it's rarely worth the discomfort.

Getting Around

A Spanish Armada-sized fleet services the waterways in the Visayas; if viewed from above by satellite photo, the waterways would probably look like a slow-moving German autobahn. The vessels range from luxurious to 'there's no way that thing floats'. Cebu is the main hub, with boats bound for almost every destination (though not always directly and often not daily).

Dumaguete on Negros is probably second in terms of departures and accessibility to other islands in the region, followed closely by Iloilo City on Panay and Tagbilaran on Bohol.

Despite the Sulpicio ferry tragedy of June 2008 (see p446), accidents are extremely rare and the most significant dangers and annoyances you'll experience in the region are rapidly dwindling reserves of patience because of unreliable boat schedules. You can save yourself some bother by buying your tickets

from the source (ie the office at the port area itself), as opposed to a travel agent, so you can be absolutely certain of when your boat is leaving and from where.

CEBU

☎ 032 / pop 2.4 million

Simply being from Cebu carries a certain cultural heft, and it's not hard to see why. Cebu is the hub around which the Visayas revolve. It is the most densely populated island in the Philippines and is second only to Luzon in its strategic and economic importance to the country. Cebuano, spoken on Cebu, is considered to be the standard or 'prestige' variety of Visayan, a heterogeneous language counting over 20 million speakers throughout the central Philippines and parts of Mindanao.

Heavily developed, particularly on its eastern coast, Cebu has a long, bare backbone of a central mountain range that has confined most of the population to the coastal fringes.

The beaches at the northern tip of the island and on its southwest coast have the whitest sand and the most spectacular diving. To the north, the idyllic offshore islands of Bantayan and Malapascua are steadily increasing in popularity, and deservedly so. To the south, Moalboal's Panagsama Beach packs a concentrated dose of dive centres and budget hedonism.

Cebu City has the nation's busiest port and its second-busiest airport, and is the gateway to the Visayas. If you happen to be travelling from Asia, it's an attractive alternative to entering the country at Manila.

CEBU CITY

☎ 032 / pop 798,809

Cebu City is like an entrée-sized Manila; it's energetic, exciting and fast-paced, or loud, dirty and ruthless, depending on your perspective. A little overwhelming at first, it doesn't take long to get a good feel for the city, and journeying from one side of town to the other is actually a lot easier than it might seem. Taxi drivers are not as mercenary as their cousins in the capital, but underhanded habits are catching on fast.

With its vast seaport, the city is the best-connected hub in the region and as such it is something of a vortex, sucking in travellers and spitting them out again at destinations