Mindanao & Sulu

Despite boasting jaw-dropping beaches, killer surf, rugged mountain ranges and indigenous cultures living very much as they have for centuries, Mindanao remains off the tourism industry’s radar. Walk a couple of kilometres in any direction in the island’s interior and you’ll find yourself in a real honest-to-god jungle. That’s not to say there isn’t urbanisation – much of the northern coastline has been paved over, and the southern city of Davao is cosmopolitan and sophisticated – just that much of what has been lost elsewhere in the Philippines is alive in Mindanao. Of course, the conflict that has ebbed and flowed now for several generations bears much of the responsibility.

Mindanao is big and bulky, but because of its varied ethnographic make-up, competing land claims and highly prized abundant natural resources, it can seem undersized. Hundreds of languages and dialects are spoken by Lumads, the indigenous peoples of Mindanao. Since the 1950s Muslims have been the minority and are the majority in only four of the 21 provinces, where 14,000 sq km are given over to the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), an area that includes the hundreds of islands of the Sulu archipelago that stretch towards Malaysia and Indonesia.

Zamboanga City, at the far western tip of the island, is a good place to experience the melting pot of migrant cultures. To the south, the thriving and vibrant city of Davao, which should be part of any culinary tour of the country, boasts outdoor adventures on its doorstep. Then there’s the well-trodden and action-packed path from buzzing Cagayan de Oro to volcanic Camiguin and the offshore island of Siargao.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Rolling through white water on the Cagayan de Oro River (p366)
- Hopping from natural springs to waterfalls around lush Camiguin (p368)
- Catching a wave at Cloud Nine (p379), the surf break on Siargao
- Bar-hopping from one buzzing compound to the next in cosmopolitan Davao (p380)
- Taking in the island’s history and ethnic diversity in Zamboanga (p390)
History

Mindanao’s history diverged early on from that of the rest of the Philippines simply because of geography, more specifically its proximity to centres of Arab influence. Islam was introduced in the Sulu archipelago in the early 1300s, and was soon after brought to Cotabato and the Lanao area. Afterwards it was united by the sultanate under a supreme council and most of the population converted to Islam. When the Spaniards arrived in 1527, their dominance was stymied by an already entrenched and semi-organised power, and they were only able to establish outposts in northern Mindanao and Zamboanga.

It was only in the middle of the 19th century that the Spaniards, with the advantages of superior firearms and steam power, were able to make substantial inroads in Mindanao and assert their sovereignty. The US became the next colonial power in 1898, but its presence in Mindanao wasn’t felt for years and it wasn’t until a decade or so later that the province was formally incorporated as an administrative region under the suzerainty of the government in Manila.

From the beginning, the rights of tribal minority groups and traditional property rights were violated. The peoples of Mindanao were economically and demographically threatened by the influx of Christian Filipinos from the north, who were encouraged by the government to settle in less populated Mindanao. Some argue that the policy simply opened up a sparsely populated region to immigration and created a more diverse ethnic mix.

Armed resistance developed in the late 1960s as a response to what some claimed was the occupation and annexation of their homeland. Soon after, large multinational agricultural companies entered the region en masse, invariably impacti ng small-scale farming and traditional ways of life regardless of ethnicity or religion. Less militant groups argue that the crux of this armed conflict is not simply the inevitable result of Muslim and Christian populations living as neighbours, but the result of the exploitation of the island’s resources without ensuring that the people are fairly compensated or see the benefits of development.

In the late ’60s, Presidents Macapagal and Marcos both hoped to add a large chunk of territory to the archipelago by taking advantage of its historical independence, which was causing so much conflict. They made a bid to annex Sabah, a part of North Borneo recently incorporated into Malaysia. After an unrealistic proposal to include the region in a superconfederacy called Maphilindo fell flat, Marcos initiated a program to train Muslim commandos from Mindanao with vague plans to promote unrest in Sabah, but the secret was exposed and ended with most of the guerrilla recruits being killed under mysterious circumstances.

In 1976 an agreement was struck between one of the rebel groups, the Moro Islamic National Liberation Front (MNLF), and the government established the ARMM; in 1996 the MNLF was legitimised as a political group by Manila. Other groups didn’t agree that limited autonomy within a federalised system was adequate, when for all practical purposes most significant issues are resolved in Manila; as a result a breakaway group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), was established in 1978. The most radical of the groups is the Abu Sayyaf, a small group of former MILF members dissatisfied with the drift towards compromise; it continues to call for a separate Islamic state in the southern Philippines.

Successive government regimes have tried to assert their control through different means; Marcos tried through a combination of military action and amnesty offers, but it was talks between Cory Aquino and Nur Misururi, the founder of the MNLF, that finally led to a reduction in violence in the late 1980s. Unfortunately, most of the outstanding issues were never resolved and in the late 1990s and early 2000s the violence resumed.

In August of 2005 Zaldy Ampatuan was elected the new governor of the ARMM, which made him the first leader not to be a member of a rebel group. It was enough to provide the optimistic with hope that the conflict could be brought to an end. However, after peace talks that would have expanded the ARMM collapsed in 2008, the conflict has been reenergised and Mindanao has seen some of its worst violence in almost a decade. Since the late 1960s more than 120,000 people have died as a result of the conflict between government troops and rebel groups.