

# Palawan

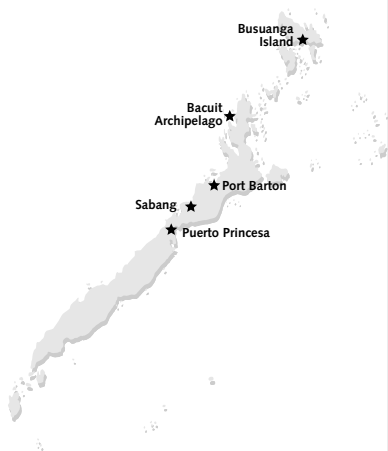


You can never escape it. Everywhere you look there it is. Whether it's the Sulu Sea to the east or the South China Sea to the west, as much a highway as a source of sustenance, nothing defines Palawan more than the water surrounding it. The proverbial island paradise with seascapes the equal of any in Southeast Asia, wildlife, both terrestrial and aquatic, this, the Philippines' most sparsely populated region is also its most beguiling. Historically, it was always an outlier, an island apart. Known as Pa Lao Yu (island of beautiful harbour) before the arrival of the Spanish who later referred to it as *paragua* (umbrella) for its shape, control of Palawan was contested by the colonisers and Moros from Borneo for over a hundred years. These days the struggle is overdevelopment versus maintenance of the largely untouched environment. Gaisano, Robinson's and SM – the signifiers of urbanisation elsewhere – have yet to make inroads.

Because of its silhouette – a long sliver stretching 650km all the way from the Mindoro Strait to the tip of Borneo – there's a certain liberating logic to travel in Palawan. Centrally located Puerto Princesa, the administrative and culinary capital, is also the transport hub. To the south, where there's little government footprint, populated by indigenous tribal groups and Muslim communities, it's rough but potentially rewarding travel for those with reserves of endurance. The majority of travellers go north, without question the highlight. Watching the sunset standing on El Nido's ramshackle beachfront with a glorious view of Cadlao Island, or skimming along in a bangka around a maze of uninhabited islands in the Calamian Group feels somewhat post-apocalyptic – like the morning after the proverbial flood.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Snorkelling in and out of lagoons – nature's aquariums – in the **Bacuit Archipelago** (p420)
- Making the most of a day in **Sabang** (p409), from the cavernous darkness of the underground river to chilling on the beach at sunset
- Wriggling through the portholes of WWII-era wrecks while diving around **Busuanga Island** (p423)
- Moving to the slow village pace, from hammock to beach and back again, in **Port Barton** (p412)
- Breezing around on a motorcycle through the countryside outside **Puerto Princesa** (p401)



## Climate

Palawan is generally typhoon-free. The north-east monsoon (*amihan*) from November to February is considered the high season in part because it coincides with holiday periods in Europe and North America. These are also the cooler and drier months. The southwest monsoon (*habagat*) from June to October is considered the wet season and therefore the low season as well – there can be especially strong winds in October and November. Periods of heavy rainfall aren't uncommon; these last for days or more commonly the afternoon. The best time for sea travel is from March to May.

## Getting There & Away

Puerto Princesa is the transport hub for all of Palawan. However, domestic airline and ferry schedules to destinations other than Puerto Princesa and Busuanga are fluid in nature and hard to predict.

### AIR

Palawan's main airport is in Puerto Princesa, but there are three smaller airports further north. El Nido and the Bacuit Archipelago are served by small El Nido Airport. Cesar Lim Rodriguez Airport (formerly Sandoval), about 30km north of Taytay, serves as an alternative entry point for northern Palawan and places like Club Noah Isabelle. On Busuanga Island, there's the YKR Airport, which serves Coron town and the resorts of the Calamian Archipelago.

The following airlines offer flights between Manila and Puerto Princesa (1¼ hours) and Manila and Busuanga (one hour):

**Cebu Pacific** (☎ in Manila 02-551 6250, in Puerto Princesa 048-433 5541, in Busuanga 0920 654 9484; [www.cebupacificair.com](http://www.cebupacificair.com))

**PAL** (☎ in Puerto Princesa 048-433 4565, in Busuanga 0918 558 6478; [www.palexpressair.com](http://www.palexpressair.com))

**SEAIR** (☎ in Manila 02-884 1521, in Puerto Princesa 048-434 5272, in Busuanga 0920 654 9484; [www.flySEAIR.com](http://www.flySEAIR.com)) Now connects Puerto Princesa to Boracay and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah in Malaysia (one hour). Schedule is in flux.

**Zest Air** (☎ in Busuanga 0928 284 3716; [www.zestair.com](http://www.zestair.com))

Cebu Pacific and **PAL Express** ([www.palexpressair.com](http://www.palexpressair.com)) fly between Cebu and Puerto Princesa (1½ hours).

SEAIR flies to Taytay's **Cesar Lim Rodriguez Airport** (formerly Sandoval; ☎ in Taytay 0916 452 8197) several days a week; the cost is around P7100 one way.

At the time of research **ITI** (☎ in Manila 02-815 5674, in El Nido 0920 908 1025; [www.islandtransvoyater.com](http://www.islandtransvoyater.com)) was the only airline flying between Manila and El Nido, however guests of the offshore luxury resorts are given priority; these are not large planes (12kg luggage weight limit per passenger) and the three daily flights are sometimes booked far in advance. The fare is over P7400 one way. Until recently SEAIR also flew to El Nido, and it is worth checking to see if flights have resumed.

Be advised that the timetables (as well as the routes and fares) of the different airlines are subject to frequent change and it's not unusual for flights to be cancelled because of weather or other less explicable reasons. If you are trying to make an international connecting flight in Manila, always leave yourself a buffer day.

### BOAT

Palawan has boat connections to and from Manila, and Caticlan and Iloilo (both on Panay).

### Manila

Both **SuperFerry** (☎ in Manila 02-528 7000, in Puerto Princesa 048-434 5734-38; [www.superferry.com.ph](http://www.superferry.com.ph)) and **Negros Navigation** ([www.negrosnavigation.ph](http://www.negrosnavigation.ph); ☎ in Manila 02-244 0408, in Puerto Princesa 048-434 4735) sail once a week from Manila to Puerto Princesa via Coron and back again (P800 to P1800, 28 hours). The Negros Navigation boat departs Manila on Thursday evening, arrives in Coron Friday morning, leave shortly thereafter and then arrives in Puerto Princesa later that evening. The return trip departs Saturday morning, arrives in Coron Saturday night and then in Manila around noon on Sunday. SuperFerry follows the same pattern only a day behind, meaning ferries leave Manila for Coron on Friday evening and so on.

**Atienza Shipping Lines** (☎ in Manila 02-243 8845, in Coron 0920 381 7566, in El Nido 0918 566 6786) operates an unreliable El Nido–Coron–Manila trip, leaving El Nido Wednesday morning, arriving in Coron Wednesday afternoon, leaving Coron five hours later and arriving in Manila Wednesday evening. Because this is a cargo ship that accepts passengers, it's only an option for the extremely hardy or masochistic.