



# North Luzon

## Includes »

Pundaquit & Capones Island .....	101
Iba & Botolan.....	104
San Fernando (La Union) & Around....	108
Vigan.....	111
Laoag.....	116
Pagudpud & Around.....	118
Baguio .....	120
Kabayan.....	129
Sagada & Around .....	131
Bontoc.....	135
Banaue .....	138
Baler & Around.....	145
Babuyan Islands.....	149

## Best Places to Eat »

- » Log Cabin (p134)
- » Uno Grille (p115)
- » Bliss Cafe (p126)
- » Hill Station (p126)
- » Oh My Gulay (p126)

## Best Places to Stay

- » PNKY (p125)
- » Villa Angela (p114)
- » Pacita Batanes (p151)
- » Casa Vallejo (p125)
- » Sagada Homestay (p133)

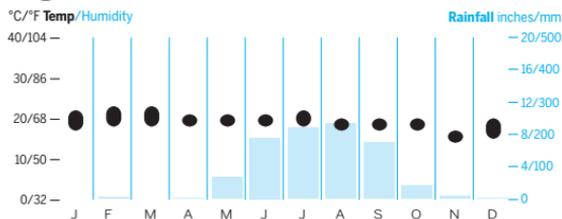
## Why Go?

North Luzon encapsulates a nation in miniature. A mountainous spine studded with machete-toting hill tribes who are quick to smile and quicker to share their rice wine. Surfers racing waves onto sunny beaches. A stormy fist of land inhabited by the Philippines' earliest inhabitants. Spanish colonial cities where sunlight breaks through seashell windows. The lonely, fortress-flecked edge of the archipelago.

For most travellers, the main event is the emerald rice terraces of the Cordillera, a mountain range that hides hanging coffins, mummified ancestors and the old ghosts of the forest. Trekking is a prime activity in this wild frontier, and outdoor activities of all stripes shape the experience of exploring North Luzon. Culturally, this is humanity at its most diverse, as the peoples of the mountains, Zambales, Ilocos and beyond are notable for a mindboggling diversity of language and ritual. Yet a similarity is shared by all these groups: an unrelenting, almost overwhelming friendliness to guests.

## When to Go

### Sagada



**Nov–May** A nice time to experience the best weather the Philippines has to offer – you won't be alone!

**Apr–Jul** The heat is on but the crowds are down.

**Jul–Oct** Rice terraces are green, but typhoons can be a problem.

## 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 Baguio, Baler, Basco (Batanes), Cauayan (Isabela Province), Laoag, San Fernando (La Union) and Tuguegarao. Air-con 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.

## ZAMBALES COAST

The lonely Zambales coast lies between a rock and a wet place. The rock? The angry massif of Mt Pinatubo. The wet? Well, the sea of course, with some fine surfing (especially around Pundaquit), and often as not

the rains that unrelentingly lash this 100km of coastline every summer. Outside this season you'll find sunny days, offshore islands and beach resorts, many of them small and family run. At all times you will find small villages populated by intensely friendly locals, and you may see the area's diminutive Negrito Aeta tribespeople.

## Pundaquit & Capones Island

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Just a three-hour drive from Manila you can sleep under the stars on hourglass-shaped Capones Island, a 20- to 30-minute bangka (outrigger canoe) ride from the small fishing village of Pundaquit. Hiring a bangka for a day of island hopping is P1200; if that doesn't appeal, see if your accommodation can arrange a discount fare. 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 Cove is accessible only on foot or by boat. Call Crystal Beach for wave reports before you set out.

## **Crystal Beach Resort & Campsite** SURFING

( 913 4309; [www.crystalbeachzambales.com](http://www.crystalbeachzambales.com)) Part evangelical retreat, part surf camp, Crystal Beach Resort & Campsite in San Narciso gives new meaning to the word 'bizarre', but it does have Zambales' steadiest waves, boards for rent (P200 per hour) and surfing instruction (P200 per hour). From Manila, these are your closest surfing lessons. There's basic accommodation here but you're better off in nearby Pundaquit or in Subic, just 30km south.

## Sleeping

'Resorts' in Zambales usually consist of low-slung apartment blocks near the sea. See the **Zambales Resort Owners Association** ([www.zambalesresort.com](http://www.zambalesresort.com)) for a comprehensive list. During low season (June to September), many of these places go into hibernation;