

welcome to the Philippines



Cultural Quirks

The Philippines is a land apart from mainland Southeast Asia – not only geographically but also spiritually and culturally. The country's overwhelming Catholicism, the result of 350 years of Spanish rule, is its most obvious enigma. Vestiges of the Spanish era include exuberant town fiestas (festivals) like Kalibo's Ati-Atihan, unique Spanish-Filipino colonial architecture, and exquisite, centuries-old stone churches lording over bustling town plazas. Malls, fast-food chains and widespread spoken English betray the influence of Spain's colonial successor, the Americans. Yet despite these outside influences, the country remains very much its own unique entity.

The people are, simply, Filipinos – and proud of it. Welcoming, warm and relentlessly upbeat, it is they who captivate and ultimately ensnare visitors.

Island Life

The Philippines consists of more than 7000 islands, and at certain times of the year it will feel like you have them all to yourself. The typical island boasts a jungle-clad, mountainous interior and a sandy coastline flanked by aquamarine waters and the requisite coral reef. But you'll find plenty of variations on this theme, from marooned slicks of sand in the middle of the ocean to sprawling, overpopulated mega-islands like Luzon and Mindanao. Beach bums



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The Philippines is defined by its emerald rice fields, teeming megacities, graffiti-splashed jeepneys, smouldering volcanoes, bug-eyed tarsiers, fuzzy water buffalo and smiling, happy-go-lucky people.

(left) Hundred Islands National Park, North Luzon
(below) Fiesta time, Negros Occidental



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and divers should head straight to the Visayas, where island-hopping opportunities abound and the perfect beach takes many forms. More adventurous travellers can pitch a tent on a deserted stretch of coastline and play solo *Survivor* for a few days.

Accessible Adventures

The Philippines isn't just about finding an isolated beach and getting catatonic. From trekking in the mountains of North Luzon, to getting airborne on a kite board in Boracay, to spelunking in the cave systems of Samar, the Philippines can capably raise any adrenaline junkie's pulse. Much of the action in the Philippines naturally takes place in and around the water. Kitesurfing

and windsurfing are big in Boracay and in Daet, Bicol. While surfers are just catching on to the tasty waves that form on both coasts at certain times of the year, divers have long been enamoured of the country's underwater charms. You need only know how to snorkel to go fin deep with the gentle *butanding* (whale sharks) in Southeast Luzon. Freshwater pursuits include rafting, kayaking and wakeboarding. On terra firma, the rice terraces around Banaue are most popular for trekking, but there are peaks – including many volcanoes – to be bagged across Luzon, the Visayas, Mindoro and Mindanao.