



Mindanao

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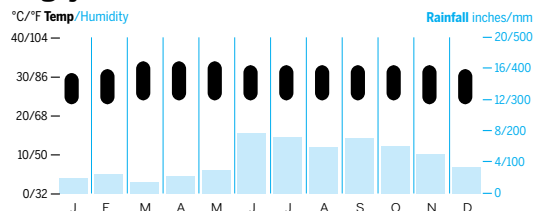
Why Go?

Despite jaw-dropping beaches, killer surf, rugged mountain ranges and indigenous cultures living very much as they have for centuries, Mindanao remains off tourism's radar. Of course, the conflict that has ebbed and flowed now for several generations bears much of the responsibility. 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 – but much of what has been lost elsewhere in the Philippines is alive in Mindanao.

Though the area is big, because of its varied ethnographic make-up, competing land claims and highly prized abundant natural resources, Mindanao can seem undersized. 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 pending Bangsamoro, an autonomous region previously known as the ARMM that includes islands stretching towards Malaysia and Indonesia.

When to Go

Cagayan De Oro



Jun-Sep The driest season on the eastern seaboard; big swells.

Nov-Mar The wettest season on the eastern seaboard.

Nov-Apr The driest season for most of the island; Helobung Festival in Lake Sebu held in November.

History

Mindanao's history diverged early on from that of the rest of the Philippines simply because of geography, and 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, the region 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. Others claimed it was the occupation and annexation of their homeland and armed resistance developed in the late 1960s.

Soon after, large multinational agricultural companies entered the region en masse, invariably impacting small-scale farming and traditional ways of life regardless of ethnicity or religion. Less militant groups (as well as the communist NPA which is active in Mindanao) argue that the crux of the 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 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 in mysterious circumstances.

In 1976 an agreement was struck with one of the rebel groups, the Moro Islamic National Liberation Front (MNLF), establishing the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (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 (of course, some objected because they weren't considered when divvying up the spoils); 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 (estimated 300 members) affiliated with Al Qaeda. The government also claims that Jemaah Islamiyah, an Indonesia-based organisation, and other separatist groups are using remote parts of Mindanao to train recruits.

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 Misuari, 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. However, in early August 2008, before the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD) was signed by the Arroyo administration, the Philippines Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. One of the primary sticking points was the MILF's desire for an independent court system. The agreement called for a separate Muslim homeland and would have recognised the 11,000-strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as a juridical entity.