

Welcome to the Philippines

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.

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 fiestas (festivals), Spanish-Filipino architecture and centuries-old stone churches. Malls, fast-food chains and widespread spoken English betray the influence of Spain's colonial successor, America. Yet despite these outside influences, the country remains very much its own unique entity. The people are Filipinos – and proud of it. Welcoming, warm and upbeat, it is they who captivate and ultimately ensnare visitors.

Islands & Beaches

With more than 7000 islands, the Philippines is a beach bum's delight. There's an island to suit every taste, from marooned slicks of sand in the middle of the ocean to sprawling mega-islands such as Luzon and Mindanao. Sun worshippers 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.

Outdoor Adventures

The Philippines isn't just about finding an isolated beach and getting catatonic. From kayaking to kitesurfing to canyoning to spelunking, the Philippines can capably raise any adrenaline junkie's pulse. While surfers are just catching on to the tasty (if fickle) waves that form on both coasts, divers have long been enamoured of the country's underwater charms. Freshwater pursuits include rafting and wakeboarding. Back on terra firma, trekking can be done just about anywhere, while rock climbing is gaining popularity. And the Philippines is also, unofficially, the zipline capital of the world.

Tempestuous Tropics

We've all had it happen: your trip to paradise is ruined by day after day of torrential monsoon rain (in the Philippines that paradise is often Palawan). There are a couple of simple ways to avoid this. One: study the climate charts. The western parts of the country get hammered by rain at the peak of the southwest monsoon (July to September), so go east during this time (unless there's a typhoon brewing). Two: stay flexible. Dispense with advance bookings so you can migrate to fairer climes if need be.



Why I Love the Philippines

By Greg Bloom, Author

With 7000 tropical islands on my doorstep, all ripe for exploration, I find it easy to *like* the Philippines. Love, on the other hand, is borne of subtler things. Love is borne of long rooftop jeepney rides through the mountains of North Luzon; of a frosty San Miguel at sundown on a sublime slab of Visayan sand; of a fresh-fish lunch, followed by a siesta on an interminable *bangka* journey through Palawan's islands; of friends with names like Bing and Bong; of phrases like 'comfort room'; of – dare I say it – karaoke. Now that is love.

For more about our authors, see page 480