



The Visayas

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Why Go?

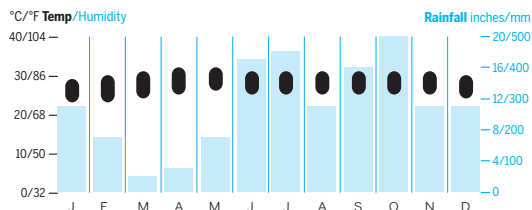
Forming the geographical heart of the Philippines, the Visayas is a star-studded collection of islands that has managed to slip under the tourist radar. While they have a common ground in offering world-class diving and fantastic beaches, each has its own unique personality. One has bug-eyed tarsiers, the next volcano trekking or killer surf, while further along there's heritage architecture or shaman folk healers. It's this diversity that makes this underrated region worth exploring in more depth.

By far the most visited part is Boracay – the Philippines' most famous beach. It's brash, crass and overdeveloped, yet remains one of the most beautiful white-sand beaches in the world and the country's biggest tourist magnet.

This suits the other less flashy islands just fine, who are more than happy to laze in its shadow. Islands like Negros, Bohol, Siquijor and Samar are far from household names, yet continue to win over visitors as their favourite spot in the Philippines.

When to Go

Cebu



Dec–Apr Generally good weather, perfect for diving.

May–Oct It may be 'rainy season' but crowds are fewer and there's often not much rain.

Aug–Dec Best time to catch waves in Guiuan.

CEBU

POP 2.4 MILLION

Simply being from Cebu carries a certain cultural heft, and it's not hard to see why. Cebu is the hub around which the Visayas revolve. It is the most densely populated island in the Philippines and is second only to Luzon in its strategic and economic importance to the country. Cebuano, spoken on Cebu, is considered to be the standard or 'prestige' variety of Visayan, a heterogeneous language counting over 20 million speakers throughout the central Philippines.

The main attractions are its white-sand beaches and spectacular diving, namely off the northern tip of the Cebu at Bantayan and Malapascua islands, as well as on the southwest coast at Moalboal.

Getting There & Around

Cebu City is the gateway to the Visayas. It has the nation's busiest port and its second-busiest airport. If you happen to be travelling from Asia, it's an attractive alternative to entering the country at Manila, with several direct international flights to Cebu City. There also many domestic flights connecting Cebu with at least a dozen destinations in the Philippines, Manila of course included.

Cebu City is the busiest port with boats bound for almost every destination (though not always directly and often not daily). Negros is best accessed from towns on the west side of the island, with numerous places up and down the coastline with regular ferry services; via Lilo-An is the most popular route, linking it to Dumaguette. Alternatives to Cebu City for accessing neighbouring islands include Siquihor via Mainit, Bohol from Argau, Camotes via Danao and Leyte from Maya.

Air-con buses and vans provide good, reliable connection between towns.

Cebu City

 032 / POP 798,809

Cebu City is like an entrée-sized Manila; it's energetic, exciting and fast-paced, or loud, dirty and ruthless, depending on your perspective. On the surface, it does its worst to attract tourists, with its honking jeepneys spluttering exhaust fumes, shopping-mall culture and lack of world-class sights. While it lacks any amazing attractions, you can have a good time here by focusing on its great clubbing, friendly Cebuanos and rich history before escaping to a more appropriate 'holiday' spot.

With its vast seaport, the city is the best-connected hub in the region and as such it is something of a vortex, sucking in travellers and spitting them out again at destinations throughout the Visayas. The average foreigner here is your long-term male visitor – a retiree with a much younger Filipina clinging to his arm.

History

When Ferdinand Magellan sailed into the Port of Cebu on 7 April 1521, an eyewitness account relates that he was already a late-comer: 'Many sailing vessels from Siam, China and Arabia were docked in the port. The people ate from porcelain wares and used a lot of gold and jewellery.'

He may not have been the first outsider to visit Cebu, but Magellan brought with him something that nobody else had: missionary zeal. Even his death at the hands of warrior chief Lapu-Lapu on Mactan Island, a few weeks later, would only afford the natives temporary respite from the incursions of the conquistadors. The arrival of avenging Spaniard Miguel López de Legazpi in 1565 delivered Cebu – and eventually the whole of the Philippines – to Spain and Catholicism. The founding in 1575 of Villa del Santísimo Nombre de Jesús (Village of the Most Holy Name of Jesus) marked Cebu City as the first Spanish settlement in the Philippines, predating Manila by seven years.

Sights

The city is divided roughly into uptown and downtown; the latter has more impoverished, vice-strewn streets and most of the 'sights' are here. A visit to the city's principal attractions – Fort San Pedro, Magellan's Cross and the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño – is an ideal way to sample the chaos and sordidness of downtown before beating a hasty retreat. As well as Museo Sugbo, there are a number of smaller museums worth checking out if you have the time – Cebu Normal University Museum, University of San Carlos Museum and Cebu City Museum all have some interesting pieces.

Basilica Minore del Santo Niño

CHURCH

(Map p206; admission free; Pres Osmeña Blvd) This holiest of churches is a real survivor. Established in 1565 (the oldest church in the Philippines) and burnt down three times, it was rebuilt in its present form in 1737. Perhaps it owes its incendiary past to the perennial