

PHILIPPINES

IF YOU crave a dose of South-East Asia – minus the hordes of tourists – then a trip to the Philippines could be for you. Often overlooked because of its location on the less familiar side of the South China Sea, the Philippines rewards those who go the extra distance to reach it. From awe-inducing private island paradises to culturally rich cities and adventure-laden rainforests; the world's second-largest archipelago needs to be seen to be believed.

Sightsee in Manila

A trip to the Philippines will start and end with the capital city of Manila, no matter if all you do is clock up a few hours in the airport, so it's definitely worthwhile setting aside a day or two to explore. Chaotic, carnal and congested it may be, yet Manila is important for understanding the Filipino culture of the present day.

First-time visitors to the city may find the busy labyrinthine streets clogged with traffic a little hard to handle, so opt for a guide, which will make your experience more comfortable and much more informative. ToursByLocals connects travellers with guides who offer bespoke tours that will veer away from the typical tourist trail.

Standout attractions in the city include: Intramuros, the old walled Spanish quarter, for a glimpse into the Philippines' fascinating colonial history, Chinatown, which dates back to the late-1500s, making it the oldest Chinatown in the world, and the American cemetery and war memorial – the largest American cemetery outside of the US.

Ride the waves

Forget Bali – if you're looking for serious surf, then the Philippines is where it's at. Siargao Island, in the province of Surigao del Norte, is a Mecca for surf-lovers. Though the waves surrounding both Siargao and its neighbouring islands are world-class, there's one spot in particular that has put the region on the international map: Cloud 9. A powerful reef break, which crashes on to shallow razor-sharp coral.

Good surfing happens year round but it's generally best from August to November when typhoon winds bring in really big breaks. There's even an international surfing contest each year during the last week of September.

Welcome to the jungle

If you're hankering after a bit of adventure akin to an Indiana Jones flick, then the ancient rainforests on the island of Palawan should be on your travel agenda. It has one of the oldest, largest (it covers more than half the island) and most diverse rainforests in South-East Asia, and almost 25 per cent of all animal species in the Philippines can be found only on this island.

The island is also home to the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, that has been named one of the world's best



Islands for all seasons

With more than 7000 tropical islands to choose from, it can be hard to decide where to go. **Paul Ewart** unearths the top 10 experiences in the Philippines



TROPICAL GETAWAY: (from main) A traditional "bangka" boat; the spectacular Huma Island Resort; and a horse-drawn calesas waits for tourists in Intramuros, a historical part of Manila. **Pictures:** Paul Ewart, iStock

natural wonders. Visitors can take guided boat tours through the subterranean cave system, taking in the array of underground chambers.

Little wonder then that Palawan was named "island of the year" last year in the *Condé Nast Traveler's* Readers' Choice Awards.

Indulge in a luxury resort

The adventurer's appetite is easily sated in the Philippines, but for luxury-lovers there's one definite go-to: the five-star, Maldivian-inspired Huma Island.

Located in northern Palawan, here cocktails can be sipped on your private sundeck, all the while taking in the panorama of sea and sky. An hour's

flight from Manila with a boat transfer, this is the pinnacle in Filipino island retreats. Pampering aside, nearby island gems include the likes of Calumbuyan Island, which lays claim to one of the Philippines' best coral gardens.

Island-hopping in El Nido

If you're after palm-fringed, white-sand beaches, El Nido has more of them than you can shake a stick at.

A mishmash of pristine islands, towering limestone cliffs and sparkling emerald lagoons, here the ocean is your highway and visitors are ferried in traditional "bangka" boats between fishing villages and the maze of uninhabited islands.

Hike the Chocolate Hills

While not edible, these famous – and incredibly unique – geological limestone formations are a definite must-see. Spread over more than 50sq km, at least 1260 huge conical hills covered in green grass that turns chocolate brown (hence the name) during the dry season, rise up from the green, rice paddy-filled landscape.

Declared the country's third National Geological Monument and proposed for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List, the hills make for a truly unique hike.

Swim with gentle giants

In the small town of Oslob, which, until a few years ago, was a sleepy fishing village, enterprising locals have decided to take advantage of their biggest attraction: whale sharks. Getting up close with these gentle giants is truly one of life's ultimate experiences. At 10-18m long, they're the largest fish in the world and happily, this is one location where sightings of these gentle giants are virtually guaranteed.

Feel the high

If you're feeling beached-out, then go inland and hit the high road in the Cordillera Central mountains in North Luzon. Rising 3000m, the mountains house the famous Banaue rice terraces.

Carved out of the mountainside, the UNESCO World Heritage rice terraces are a sight to behold. Built more than 2000 years ago by ancestors of the same indigenous tribes who populate the

area, today, the structure is considered by locals to be the Eighth Wonder of the World and has earned the tiny town a place on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites. Hire a local guide and trek among the spectacular scenery, all the while marvelling at one of the most impressive feats of natural engineering.

Take the plunge

Located at the centre of the "coral triangle", the Philippines is truly a haven for divers. Its warm, crystal-clear waters offer year-round diving, and ocean walls and reefs teeming with coral abound.

The arena of aquatic life spans the gamut, with more than 1200 species – including hawksbill sea turtles, manta rays and reef sharks – calling the waters home. And wreck enthusiasts can navigate their way through at least 10 Japanese World War II warships off Coron Bay – voted one of the 10 best wreck dive sites in the world.

Get hot

Spewing out lava and ash on unpredictable occasions, the Philippines is a hotbed of volcanoes. Positioned on the Pacific ring of fire, there's a whopping 37 of them, of which 18 are active. The most violent is Mt Mayon, which last erupted in 1993. Travellers can climb the mountain in two days with a mandatory guide.

A much safer option is the Taal Volcano – the smallest active volcano in the world. At just 70km from Manila, it's easily accessible and therefore understandably popular with tourists.

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GETTING THERE

Philippine Airlines flies direct from Sydney to Manila five times a week (daily from October 26). Flights from Melbourne, Brisbane and Darwin are three times a week.

See philippineairlines.com or ph 1300 887 822

GETTING AROUND

For internal flights, Cebu Pacific offers the most extensive network in the Philippines. See cebupacificair.com

STAYING THERE

Shangri-La, Makati. Located in the heart of the modern Makati district – an epicentre for business, shopping and entertainment – the hotel is a perfect base to explore the city. See shangri-la.com

Huma Island. A luxurious resort comprising 81 overwater and beach villas, all combining contemporary comforts with castaway charm. See humaisland.com

Amorita Resort, Bohol. Perched atop a limestone cliff on the southern edge of Bohol's Panglao Island, Amorita or "little darling" is a great jumping-off point for the nearby Chocolate Hills. See amoritaresort.com

El Nino Resorts, Miniloc Island. Positioned with two lagoons on either side, the 50 traditionally-built Filipino cottages (some directly on the beach and some perched over the water) provide the perfect base for exploring the surrounding islands and lagoons. See elnidoresorts.com

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