

Fortitude Test

Philippines is a complicated country with a complex capital, Manila, that will test visitor's endurance. The main mode of transport are "flying coffins" which are enclosed

trucks that are given its nickname because they look like coffins and a lot of people die in these vehicles because of poor driving and poor roads. Light rail transit is another option, but all purses and luggage are checked by police with pointy sticks, due to terrorist attacks on the trains. Crossing the street by foot is also a real challenge. In Manila, I was met with a torrential downpour which made getting from place even more difficult and frustrating.



Survival mode in the Philippines can be sampled at a cockfight. The cockfight is in a small stadium with a scoreboard and dirt oval not in someone's basement as one might expect. There is a "VIP section", filled with wealthy people, government officials and police officers, which are the seats closest to the oval. There is over fifty fights and the people in the first section places their bet (I believe a minimum of ten dollars) for each fight and then they turn around and yell at the upper section to bet (minimum of one dollar bet). The trainers get the chickens ready by attaching blades and having other chickens peck at their chicken to get it mad. The fight then starts with two chickens and a referee in the ring. Sometimes, the chickens peck at the dirt ground so the referee needs



to get them to look at each other and then they start clawing each other. The fight is brutal with usually ends by a referee count out, which is usually mean there is a dead or seriously injured chicken. Since the chicken have to fight up to six times a night, survival is difficult. As you may expect, there are a lot of restaurants serving chicken around the stadium.

Despite the morbidity, there are some nice places in Manila. Rizal Park has welcome greenery in contrast to the dirt and grime of much of the rest of the city. There are small memorials, including one dedicated to the execution point of Rizal who was a revolutionary leader against the Spanish. There is also a pond with a three-dimensional map which would have

looked more realistic if there was more water in the pond area. There are gardens that can be visited; one interesting one is a Chinese garden with a pavilion and a lot of rock formations as well as a less developed Japanese garden. Another type of garden is a sculpture garden which is largely dedicated to the Stations of the Cross. There is a planetarium and an Orchard House full of orchards and lily pads. Also in the park is a large amphitheater on the side closest to Manila Bay.



Manila Bay is also attractive and a nice, scenic change to the chaos. Many people congregate here to see the sun set and one can take a horse-drawn carriage along the bay. Many of the posh hotels are located along the bay. The National Museum and Metropolitan, which houses fine arts, are also near the bay. Museum of Folk Art, amusement parks, convention centers, seven elevens, cats with their tails cut off (good luck charm for some people?) can all be seen in the area.

On a more historical note, one can visit the old capital area, Intramuros, dating to 1571. This is an attractive area with cobblestone streets, old churches, defensive walls, and calmness. Fort Santiago can be visited and is seemingly located next to the first tee of a golf course. There are soldiers' barracks, prisoners' cells, and nice views of the bay for the fort's wall. There is a university in the old town and has some interesting buildings as well. The most impressive religious building is the Manila Cathedral, which was originally built in 1581 but had to rebuild several times because it was destroyed by fire, earthquake and typhoon. Casa Manila is a fine colonial-era house, and the Philippine Art, Craft and Cultural Center has numerous antiques but seems to be designed more as a gift shop. There are other places to shop, most notably the Makati section, but this again is a chaotic area.



For peace and quiet, it may be better to leave Manila and head south to the island of Mindoro. Puerto Galera is the most accessible city on the island and allows for decent beaches, cheap accommodations and a lot of bars and restaurants most filled with young locals and their middle-aged sugar daddies. There are beaches near Puerto Galera, but also more scenic beaches as one ventures out of the port, such as White beach and Talipanan beach. There are also some neat and simple trekking possibilities around the island. As for accommodations, I was able to get my own bungalow for a few dollars, which had a bathroom and cable television which for me is a major step up in accommodations. Puerto Galera is a maze of streets with several bars and restaurants and women giving massages, some of these are legal massages some not. Despite the maze, it

is difficult to get lost as it is small and just head to the sound of water if you get lost. The city is obviously less hectic than Manila and there are opportunities to enjoy the water, through scuba diving or just swimming.

Heading north to Manila, one can stop at Lake Taal, Laguna de Bay or San Pablo City. There is nothing of note in San Pablo but it's a good way to look at Filipino life. The city is striking because it is reminiscent of Central America. Much like



Central America, there are volcanoes and a muggy, jungle climate which could just as easily be seen in Nicaragua than in Philippines. The Spanish took over this land as well, so Spanish and Catholicism are common here. Indeed, the Catholic churches dominate the architecture here.

One of the things I wanted to see but was off season was the crucifixions in San Fernando. The city is located about 30 miles north of Manila and the crucifixions take place on Good Friday. Usually about ten to fifteen largely local men volunteer to be tied to a cross and then nailed (real nails hammered through their hands) to the cross. Many drift in shock, which they think is a way to get closer to God and to share in the pain that Jesus felt. The Catholic Church does not support this, but the tradition does continue and many are still attracted to this tradition.

Even without crucifixions and cock fights traveling in the Philippines takes a lot of fortitude. There are safety issues, a lot of people in a small area and public transport is a bit iffy. But there are havens from the chaos throughout Manila and the rest of the country which can make the Philippines an enjoyable place to visit.