

City Tourism



# The Philippines

Chocolate Hills.

تلال الشكولاتا.

## Boracay: The island of the happy people

By **DOMINICK A. MERLE**

BORACAY, The Philippines — You won't find this tiny island on the map, but tourists from nearby Asian countries are starting to stream here and officials are confident that Europeans and North Americans will soon follow. Trouble is, there's just so much of it to go around, and the Filipinos are caught in a Catch-22: Do they promote and risk having this little paradise trampled and commercialized by too many visitors, or keep it under their hats and preserve it for as long as they can? A tough choice, considering the shaky state of the country's economy.

The big lure here is a four kilometer white beach, called Long Beach by the locals, situated on the west shore between the villages of Angol and Balabag. Filipinos, not surprisingly, routinely refer to it as the finest beach in the world. Residents of Bali, Hawaii and Florida would likely disagree, but if that is an exaggeration, it is slight. For if it is not THE best, it most certainly can hold its own with all of the above.

The powder-fine white sand is so soft and bright that it seems artificial from a distance. The warm shallow waters of the Sulu Sea come in three colors-blue, aqua and clear white. The beach is rimmed with perfectly shaped palm trees that look like they were arranged by a Hollywood set designer.

There are more than 200 beach resorts on Boracay ranging from native-style cottages to fairly plush hotels with all the trimmings. It's

come a long way, considering that there wasn't even any electricity here 20 years ago before the first tourists checked in.

Roughly shaped like a dumbbell, the entire island is only seven kilometers long with the narrowest spot about one kilometer wide. It lies about 345 kilometers south of Manila, and getting here is no easy feat, but then nothing worth while is usually easy.

There are daily flights from Manila to the nearby airports of Kalibo or Caticlan. We took the Kalibo route, about a one-hour flight. From Kalibo, we went 90 minutes by bus, followed by a 20-minute boat transfer to Boracay. Because of the tides, we had to walk into thigh-deep water to reach the boat, so it's wise to travel light and wear dollar store sandals.

Our accommodation was at Jony's Beach Resort, a medium-range hotel on the quiet stretch of the beach. I say quiet because

Boracay also has its share of honky-tonk bars and discos, along with beachfront restaurants that feature Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Indian, Spanish, French, German, Korean, Mexican and yes, even Filipino food.

With the beachfront so small, it is possible to go anywhere on foot. However, that is easier said than done, for while no autos are allowed on the small beachfront road, hybrid vehicles known as "pedicabs" are allowed, and there seems to be far too many of them, often causing minor traffic jams, along with being noisy. Not quite Paradise Lost, but enough to tarnish this near picture-perfect scene.

The Japanese were the first tourists to arrive here back in the early 80s. There were only about 5,000 island residents back then. Today, Boracay hosts close to 400,000 visitors a year, the island population has passed 13,000 and the Koreans have taken over the top tourist ➤


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Underground river.

نهر تحت الأرض.

position, using Boracay as a favorite honeymoon destination.

While the No. 1 attraction is the beach, other activities include boat trips, windsurfing, diving, sailing, horseback riding, snorkeling, golf and mountain biking. The northern and southern portions of the island are hilly and well suited for extensive hiking trips. Intertwining paths lead through tropical jungle and link the small villages to one another.

Rates for accommodations range from as low as \$15 to \$150. The best time of the year, weatherwise, is from November through April. The rain season is generally from May through October. You could get lucky during September and October and have perfect weather at reduced rates, but you also risk the chance of three days of constant downpours. There are more than 7,000 islands in the Philippines archipelago, the vast majority of them uninhabited. But tiny Boracay is poised to become the country's top tourist attraction, maybe eventually earning itself a place on the map.

I spent my last two days in Manila. I hadn't been there for over 20 years, when Marcos was still in power. Manila has grown into a teeming city of more than 12 million people, but sadly, seems to have lost much of its exotic charm of yesterday. The traffic jams are horrendous, caused mainly by "cowboy" bus and truck drivers who change lanes at will without as much as a blink, although by law they are restricted to one lane. Pollution and noise are just as horrendous. The "jeepneys," those colorful transportation vehicles that were elongated from leftover World War 2 U.S. army jeeps, are still in abundance, but not as well maintained as yesteryear.

And the Grand Dame of hotels, the Manila Hotel, once perhaps the finest hotel in all of Asia where Gen. Douglas MacArthur called home, is now beginning to look a little tattered and worn. It reminded me a bit of Gloria Swanson in Sunset Boulevard.

Tourism officials maintain that things are improving in The Philippines, that a visible middle class is beginning to form. If so, they were hard to find. To me, there still seemed a large gap between the haves and have-nots. "It will take time," one official said, almost sadly. On the plus side, Manila police seemed much more people friendly, or at least tourist friendly, than on my previous visits. I took a different route walking back to my hotel one evening and became a bit disoriented. A traffic cop noticed this and pointed me in the right direction. A half block away I went astray again and the same officer left his post to set me straight. In the "old Manila," most cops were up to their eyeballs in corruption and would have turned a blind eye to someone walking in the wrong direction.

The biggest export from this nation continues to be its people. Professional men and women continue to move abroad to work as common laborers or household help. I was told that some doctors become nurses because they earn much more money as nurses over here than doctors over there.

But regardless of their station in life, there remains that distinctive Filipino or Filipina smile, which is as infectious as it is mysterious. Why are they so happy? What sets them apart from their more affluent neighbors in Japan, Korea, China and other Asian countries?

Perhaps they're all living in their own private Boracay.



Man &amp; sea.

الرجل والبحر.



Performer.

ممثل.

(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

### IF YOU GO:

We flew nonstop from Vancouver to Manila on Philippines Airlines, roughly a 13-hour flight. No visas are required for North Americans, only a passport valid for six months from the time of entry.

Bring sunblock, hats, light cotton clothing and comfortable walking shoes or sandals.

Dress is casual throughout The Philippines, including Manila. For formal dining, men often wear a Barong Tagalog, a long-sleeved shirt worn outside the pants. They are inexpensive and can be purchased in any shopping mall. Women often wear a light dress and shawl to formal dining.

The best buys are South Sea pearls, baskets, wood carvings, ceramics and shellcraft. There are many large and modern shopping malls, but for the more adventurous where bargaining is hot and heavy, visit the Greenhills Shopping Center in the San Juan district.

English is widely spoken throughout the country, and virtually all signs are in English, along with the major daily newspapers.

Taxis are plentiful and metered, but fares are sometimes negotiable because of the heavy traffic. Other public transportation in Manila includes city buses and a limited Light Rail Transit System. ■