

# Davao

## Meat eating plants and sweet fruits with foul smells

By **DOMINICK A. MERLE**

DAVAO, The Philippines---"Is it safe?" That was the usual reaction whenever I mentioned I was going to The Philippines--to the southern region of Mindanao, in fact, where the armed groups are headquartered. It was a fair question, given the fact that every travel advisory was strongly warning against visiting the Philippines, especially the south, unless absolutely necessary. I was heading for the sprawling city of Davao on the eastern coast of Mindanao to attend a travel show known as the Asean Tourism Forum which represents 10 countries from that part of the world.



Young girls with handmade baskets

فتيات يحملن السلال

Even before heading out, the obvious answer was, "Not exactly," the same response one could give to just about any destination these days. As it turned out, the city of Davao might have been a little safer than most, thanks to its colorful and controversial mayor

who operates more like a Wild West sheriff than a politician. More on him later. The show was originally scheduled to take place in Yangon, Myanmar (formerly Burma), which ranks even higher on the "don't-go-there" list, but the country pulled

out for "political reasons" and the venue was awarded to The Philippines. At first blush, it seemed like going from the fire back into the frying pan.

In any event, getting to this part of the world was no easy ride, at least 24 hours flying ➤



Boy peeking through durian fruit stand

صبي يتطلع من خلال محل الفواكه



**Davao is not a picturesque city, but an interesting one representing a typical slice of Philippine life, with prices often one-fourth those of major tourist centers like Manila and Cebu. Although its population is just over a million, it is spread over 244,000 hectares, making it one of the largest cities in land area in the world. It would take more than two hours to drive from its northern to southern limits.**

time alone if one begins on the east coast. Adding the airport waiting time would make it a 36-hour trip each way.

Whenever possible and prices are competitive, I try to use the national airline of a far-off destination to get the feel of the country before I arrive. Often, by talking to the locals returning home, you can receive some good inside information on what and what not to do. In this case, I flew Philippine Airlines nonstop from Vancouver to Manila, continuing on the airline for the 90-minute flight to Davao.

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The man in charge of this sprawling city is Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, and he runs a no-nonsense, tight ship. He routinely, for

example, announces the names of suspected drug dealers, sex offenders and other violent criminals and gives them until sundown to get out of town. Many of those who ignore the warning end up as victims of mysterious accidents, like getting run over by a truck, and charges are rarely if ever laid.

Duterte is also brutally frank in his condemnation of the Philippine government and international global powers for casting a negative light on his city, claiming they have a hidden agenda to protect their own tourism income. "We are better prepared than most Asian cities in responding to crisis situations," he claimed. Right or wrong, Duterte has an almost guru-like following from his constituents and is often described as "the number one tourist attraction in Davao."

I stayed at the Marco Polo Hotel in mid-city and walked the streets alone in the early evening and never experienced an uncomfortable moment. Residents, in fact, seemed eager to help me whenever I asked. But security might be one of Davao's major

industries; it was everywhere and highly visible. Bloodhounds sniff your luggage as you arrive at a hotel, and you are then frisked by guards before entering the lobby. Security guards inspect your bags and frisk you as you enter all public places, even some small convenience shops. Armed police, security guards and camouflaged militia routinely patrol the city on foot. Just about every successful businessman hires at least two plainclothes bodyguards.

In an odd sense, the preponderance of weapons on the street had an almost calming effect. I still can't come to grips with that.

While the Davao city core has few tourist attractions, a 30-minute drive can bring you to an exotic rainforest where there are giant eagles with eight-foot wingspans that whisk away small monkeys for food, and plants that eat meat!

The Philippine eagle is the world's biggest and most powerful bird and is now on the endangered species list, with only about 100 left in the wild. We visited a reserve where efforts are being made to breed the eagle ➤

in captivity.

Nearby in the woods are pitcher plants that are shaped like a cup and about as large. They have a sticky substance in the base, and any tiny rodent or bird that enters becomes stuck and entombed. The meat eaters are known as the beast of plants. Then there is the beauty of the species, Davao's unique "waling-waling" plant, the queen of orchids.

The waling-waling orchid was discovered in Davao by a German botanist in the 1880s. The name is derived from an ethnic term that describes the graceful movement of a butterfly in flight, and the bloom is so delicate it can only thrive on fresh and balmy air. Retailing at several hundred dollars a plant, the queen of the rainforest has become an attractive business proposition.

In the distance, serving as a backdrop for this magnificent rainforest, is the impressive Mount Apo, the grandfather of all Philippine mountains almost 3,000 meters high. Many

ancestral tribes live on the mountain and carry on life today as their forefathers did centuries ago.

Davao is also known for its vast orchards of sweet pomelo, mangosteen, rambutan and the foul-smelling but delicious (to some) durians, the king of fruits.

On my plane back to Manila, there were many passengers carrying crates of pomelos and durians.

The two main festivals in Davao are "Kadayawan Sa Dabaw" in mid-August, a Thanksgiving-type celebration that lasts a week and features numerous parades with spectacular floral floats, craft and street fairs, cultural shows, street dancing and entertainment, and "Araw Ng Dabaw" on March 16, a one-day event highlighting Davao's multicultural population.

And then of course there is Mayor Duterte. He takes center stage year-around.

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

## IF YOU GO:

Philippine Airlines flies nonstop to Manila from Vancouver, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The airline also has several flights daily from Manila to Davao.

No visas are required for North Americans; only a valid passport.

Davao enjoys a mild tropical season year around, with no pronounced wet or dry season.

There are several dialects in Davao--Pilipino, Cebuano and Chinese--but almost everyone can also understand and speak English. Learning a few local phrases is always appreciated.

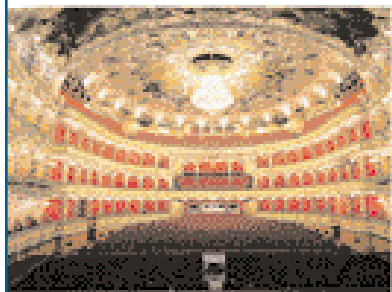
Dress is casual throughout the Philippines. For men, a shirt worn outside the pants known as both a tagalog or barong is acceptable at even the most formal occasions. For women, a light dress and shawl.

The best buys are South Sea pearls, baskets and woodcarving. Bargain with a smile. ■



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