



Rizal Monument

MAGICAL MANILA



SANDIP HOR explores the South East Asian city often mistaken as Latin American

TRAVEL INFO

GETTING THERE: Philippine Airlines (www.philippineairlines.com) from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

STAY: Traders Hotel (www.shangri-la.com)

Deal: Specialist Holidays (www.specialistholidays.com.au)

More information: www.philippinetourism.com.au

THE SOUTH EAST ASIAN NATION OF PHILIPPINES, which is an archipelago comprising of 7107 islands, is famous for its friendly people and courteous hospitality and I get the first taste of it, the moment I board the Philippines Airlines brand new Boeing 777 aircraft for my trip to Manila, its capital city teeming with history that dates back over 600 years.

Dotted on the banks of River Pasig, Manila often struck as a Latin American city, has been marched over by the armies of several -Malays, Arabs, Spaniards, British, Japanese and the Americans, till the nation received total independence in 1946. No other city had suffered destruction as Manila did, during World War II, other than Warsaw, Poland.

After independence, the city has been gradually rebuilt into a 21st century metropolis and today the city of 12 million souls have no shortage of ingredients to attract modern travellers - hotels, restaurants and nightclubs to rival any in the region, endless shopping opportunities in some of Asia's most glittering malls, colourful and lively ambience, and above all some sites of great historical significance and ancient monuments.

The Spanish ruled Manila for nearly 350 years and have left behind a great architectural heritage dominantly, in the Intramuros - a medieval walled city located in the heart of present Manila and showcased as the mandatory destination for all visitors.

Built by the Spanish, after their conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi laid claim to the land in 1571 and proclaimed Manila as its capital, it encloses pentagonal area of 64 Hectares with high stone walls stretching over 4 kms in length and housed during its heyday government buildings, palaces, residential houses, stone citadels, army barracks, schools and churches, most of which got tragically obliterated during the during World War II. Whatever still

remains or has been redone, gives a glimpse of the city's colonial past in glory and brutality as well.

The best way to know the history of Philippines, is to visit the Light and Sound Museum, which was established in 2003 on the grounds of a 16th convent school and go through an hour long walking tour that portray the nations past, using Animatronics and Robotics in conjunction with latest light and sound technology. You will come across Spanish pioneering, Japanese atrocity, American takeover and most importantly meet Jose Rizal revered as father of modern Philippines, like Gandhi in India or Mandela in South Africa. A doctor, novelist and a prolific poet, Rizal was an Intramuros boy who was executed at the age of 35 for nationalistic activities. Prior to his death, he was held in a building inside Fort Santiago which today is like a pilgrimage for Filipinos.

Visit Casa Manila, a Spanish colonial home reconstructed by the then first lady Imelda Marcos where will not see her 3000 pair of shoes but taste of an elite Spanish household dating back in time.

Philippines is the only Christian nation in Asia, Christianity being introduced by the Spaniards. As expected there are churches and cathedrals scattered all over the land, but the two most beautiful and oldest - the San Agustin Church and Manila Cathedral lie in the Intramuros.

The 16th century built San Agustin Church has an extraordinary record of surviving calamities - it has withstood several devastating earthquakes and the American bombardment during World War II, ardent believers claiming all that to be miraculous escapes. The remains of the early Spanish conquerors, governors and archbishops lie inside, an effigy of Legazpi surmounts a tomb next to the main altar. The fate was not that favourable with Manila Cathedral which has been built, destroyed and rebuilt several times since 1571, the latest surfacing came only in 1958 after the previous one was levelled down by the American bombings a decade earlier.



There are lots of other things, beyond Intramuros in Manila to see and do such as exploring the colourful and vibrant Chinatown, visiting the Chinese Cemetery, often called the City of the Dead, joining early morning joggers in the gardens of Rizal Park, watching the sun set into the tranquil waters of Manila Bay, going through treasures of art at the National Museum and at the Ayala museum, spoiling in a shopping spree at the Mall of Asia, sizzling it up at the famous Spice Restaurant at the plush Manila Peninsula Hotel or after dark sampling some of exotic nightlife in Ermita or Malate.

Though a sort of westernised culture cloaks Filipino life style, their love for Indian cuisine didn't miss my attention. The city is dotted with several Indian restaurants serving authentic Tandoori and curries to locals and curry loving visitors

And if you have more time, then visit the Tall Lake and the Tall volcano, a two drive south wards from Manila which will

give you the opportunity to enjoy the green rural country comprising of rice terraces, pineapple orchards, banana plantations and welcoming villagers.

While doing so, I gained some fascinating experiences.

I visited a Honey Bee Farm (www.ilogmaria.com) and was highly impressed talking to the owner Joel Magsaysay who, with 36 years of experience with bees, strongly advocates natural therapies and makes every effort for the long term survival of bees which are said to be fast disappearing from the planet, had lunch at Sonya's Garden Restaurant (www.sonyasgarden.com) which serves a timeless organic menu that includes freshly baked bread and greens handpicked from their garden and finished the day trip indulged in pamper and wellness at the Nurture Spa Resort (www.nurture.com.ph) enjoying an one hour special Filipino therapeutic massage journey, the revitalising effects of which I felt even after going back to routine in Sydney.