



Manila

Capital of The Philippines

We were trying to cross the street, when out of the blue, a barrage of buses bore down upon us, trumpeting their horns like a herd of enraged elephants. In a shiver of chrome they zoomed across the junction, weaving in and out in a death-defying race to the next set of lights. That was our introduction to "jeepneys", the flashy, colorful vehicles that are the main form of transport in Manila, capital of the Philippines.

Jeepneys evolved from the jeeps left behind by American troops during World War II, but the buses of today bear little resemblance to the utilitarian military motors. Jeepneys are painted all the colors of the rainbow and they're covered with chrome accessories. Horses, five abreast, prance across the hoods. Flags, garlands and religious relics dangle from the windows. Saucy slogans such as I Love you Truly, One More Time, and Be Mine Tonight, scream their messages all over the front. Female figures sprawl across the paintwork. On one jeepney I spotted a voluptuous Barbarella-like lady vying for space with no less a personage than the Virgin Mary, complete with halo and the infant Jesus.

Filipinos are deeply religious (the country is 85 per cent Roman Catholic) but at the same time superstitious and the jeepneys are, in a sense, like Manila itself—vibrant, gaudy and exotic. It's a fast-paced, exciting destination for a holiday, but certainly not the place to choose if you want a quiet time, far from the madding crowd.

The Philippines is made up of over 7,000 islands. They lie off the southeast coast of Asia, between Taiwan to the north and Borneo, to the south. The country has traded for centuries with the Chinese and it has been ruled by both Spain and the United States, a colonial legacy that has produced a handsome people of mixed blood, who characteristically combine the Oriental wish to please with the Latin love of flamboyance, passion and drama.

About eight million people live in Manila, and as is the case in so many Asian cities, there is a startling contrast between the rich and the poor, the old and the new. Beggars are a common sight and the sprawling Tondo district has some of the worst slums in the world. Intramuros, the old walled city, was built by the Spanish in the middle of the 16th century. Makati, a super-modern enclave of highrise hotels, offices, stores and restaurants, is a bustling, business section on the south side of the city.

Many of Manila's best restaurants are on or around Makati Ave. Here you find every conceivable kind of cuisine—Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, Malay, American and Indonesian, to name but a few. Manila, which is on the ocean, is renowned for its seafood and we opted for dining at the Zamboanga (8739 Makati Ave.), an eatery that is famous for its fish dishes.

As far as accommodation goes, Manila is well-gearred to visitors. Several of the chain organizations (Hilton, Mandarin, Ramada Inns, Hyatt Regency and Inter-Continental) have hotels here and rooms average \$50 U.S. for a single, \$60 U.S. for a double.

The Manila Hotel in Rizal Park is a grand, old colonial establishment straight out of Somerset Maugham's era with a huge pillared lobby, chandeliers and potted palms in the dining room. The hotel has recently been refurbished and a single room rents for \$85 U.S. (a double for \$75 U.S.).

The good hotels fall into the four-or-five-star category, and although you can find accommodation for as little as \$18 per night, Manila isn't really the kind of place where visitors should stay in a rundown area. Nor is it wise to wander down alleyways at night. Robberies and street fights are not uncommon (though, one suspects, people often start punchups just for the sheer hell of it) and the Marcos government, has from time to time, imposed a military curfew.

During the daytime, there's certainly little chance of anything sinister happening, even in Intramuros, the old, walled part of town. The walls once stretched around the city for three-and-a-quarter miles, but like the city they contain, they have been badly damaged down the years, by earthquakes, typhoons and military attacks.

Manila bore the brunt of some of the worst air raids of World War II, and in 1945, when the Americans liberated the city from the Japanese, the handsome Spanish cathedral was bombed to smithereens. A couple of statues survived and they have been incorporated into a new cathedral, constructed in 1958.

San Augustin, another fine colonial church, somehow managed to escape the bombardment, which is more than can be said for Fort Santiago. All that remains of that complex is a couple of crumbling walls. One pile of ruins has been made into an open-air theatre. Another surrounds a shrine commemorating Jose Rizal, the freedom fighter who founded the Philippine League in 1891, to fight for liberation from the Spanish.

Hotels and travel organizations run organized tours around Intramuros, which take about three to four hours. We did most of our exploring on foot and after a couple of days, we even plucked up the courage to jump on a jeepney. After getting over our initial fear, we started to enjoy the rambunctious roaring around, but then we chose a bus that bore the slogan "Jesus will get you there" which was just as well really, since if we'd had to rely on the driver, we might never have made it home.

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