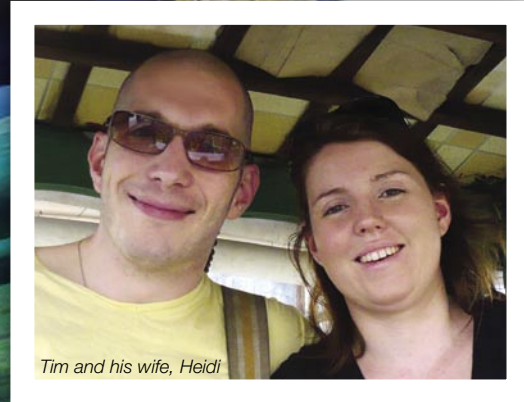


“The streets Downtown, are fantastic: a blur of people, colour and steel; the kind of chaos that only a global city can endure, or wear well.”

On Finding a New World

Words and pictures by Tim Lyddiatt



Tim and his wife, Heidi

As introductions to Asia goes, the Philippines offers the excited traveller everything they could have dreamed of and much, much more.

The streets Downtown, are fantastic: a blur of people, colour and steel; the kind of chaos that only a global city - long established, its story told in the scars of its streets and the people that walk them, in their eyes and their smiles and their sense of belonging - can endure, or wear well. It is exhilarating and exciting and the traffic - both wheeled

and foot - is vivid and noisy. Jeepneys - once stretched out jeeps left over from the time American GIs patrolled and controlled the city: their Asia Pacific Base, but now brightly coloured originals are the cheapest - and most fun - way to get around town; all are named - Rita, Peggy: Emanuel - and are emblazoned with their Praises to God. The pedicabs and tricycles - tiny three wheeled things powered by pedals and small motorbike engines respectively - weave in between them and the taxis and the mopeds are like mosquitoes looking for a place to feed. There are thousands of these wheeled transports, more than enough for even the 20 million or so souls that call the myriad, once separate cities in Manila's immediate surround home.

The sun is shining and the temperature is hot. It is humid, but delightfully so. It is Christmas and this is a Christian Country. Everywhere lights are hung and trees adorned with ornaments rejoicing the season: it is impossible to underestimate how lovely Christmas can be. We are walking past vendors setting



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up for the day; their barbeques just lit and orangely flaming, their pots of oil and peanut ovens beginning to get hot. The smell is incredible, and on the corner, marketers are hawking fresh fruit and their freshly squeezed or pressed juice. Others are spreading dried fish or mounds of freshly baked cakes and sweet bread onto cloths draped over empty cases of San Miguel: the colours and textures are from another world; the sun shimmers off glistening scales and sweet syrup oozing from deep inside the pastries.

Welcome to Manila, capital of the Philippines.

It is a city of extremes. In the Chinese cemetery, villa sized mausoleums pay tribute to the city's wealthy deceased; down tree lined avenues, hundreds of marble floored, stain glassed structures come replete with running water, sofas - even fridges. The cemetery has its roots in the 19th century when Chinese citizens were denied burial rights in Catholic cemeteries throughout the Spanish colonial period. Walking the extremities of the vast site, it is possible to see the corrugated roofs of the near shanty town further down the hill. The dispersal of wealth in Manila is anything but equally distributed.

Later, in another Chinese part of the city, jewellers offered us intricate gold creations, festooned with precious stones and the kinds of watches sold in exclusive boutiques in malls throughout the Gulf. We had stumbled across Chinatown after

being buffeted around Manila's street markets for most of the morning. There, all human life walked the streets looking for a bargain. It was a week before Christmas and the children's toys and sweet treats were brightly coloured and shiny. Fruit and vegetables were piled high and chickens were stacked in crates shoulder high, their white feathers ruffling in the wind. Every now and then we would stop, tempted by something delicious to eat or drink. We pretty much lived on street food everywhere we went in the Philippines.

We had three weeks to explore the 7,000 islands that go to make up the Philippines; we managed four! But in visiting just these four islands we encountered opposite ends of the spectrum with regard to the environment we found ourselves in. From the hustle-bustle of Manila to the quiet mountains of Sagada to north or the white sandy



beaches of Sabang to the dense thick forest that climbs down the mountains to meet the strong currents of the South China Sea in Palawan, we could have been in a different country practically everywhere we slept at night.

From Manila we travelled over land to the mountains and paddy fields of Sagada. The drive is long and slow, but the views are some of the most spectacular I have ever seen. To make ends meet and to feed themselves, over the centuries industrious farmers have carved endless terraces from the mountains. They then irrigate these, flooding them by channelling water from mountain top lakes that form in the rainy season, to grow rice.

In Sagada, we walked mountain paths and, on one memorable day, swam in the icy waters of a gushing waterfall. The air, especially having come from the congested streets of Manila, was cool and clear; flowers grew everywhere and the forest was filled with life. Another day, we climbed deep into the belly of a mountain and explored the complete darkness. At about 500 metres below ground, we swam in a lake lit only by our guide's paraffin lamp. ▶



We spent Christmas outside of the Philippines in a land called über luxury at the Mandarin Oriental in Manila. Not accustomed to such luxury, it was a treat but a snip at less than half what you'd pay for an equivalent bed in the Gulf. Massaged, pampered and extremely well fed, from there we flew to Palawan and its white sandy beaches - on two different oceans - and its tropical forests teeming with life. We saw monkeys in the trees and huge monitor lizards skulking below; we saw butterflies the size of birds and swam with shoals of brightly coloured fish that ate bread from our outstretched hands. We explored ancient mangroves and saw vividly coloured snakes sleeping in the trees; in Sabang, our chalet deep in the jungle was opposite the tree where snow white herons congregated for the night - literally hundreds of them appeared to be sleeping in its branches.

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The Philippines was my first experience of Asia proper, and we barely scratched the surface what the country has to offer. For example: we didn't make it to the Mall of Asia, the fourth largest in the world but only the second largest in Manila (we didn't make it there either); and we didn't make it to Palawan's Bacuit Archipelago or El Nido, a place described by Jacques Cousteau as having one of the most beautiful seascapes in the world. The food was incredible, especially the Spanish/Filipino food we discovered at Pia Y Damaso which stayed open for us even though it was New Year's Day and they should have closed early. Thank you.

The people we met are lovely and everywhere is clean; coming from the Gulf it was pleasantly surprising to find the towns and cities, even the poorer parts, so completely litter free. Litter collection is segregated into metals, plastics, paper and organics, and everything that can be recycled is: it shames litter collection in many other parts of the world. It is a cheap place to explore too. In fact, in terms of cost, it was the time it takes to travel from one place to another that was most expensive, and we found ourselves cash rich but time poor. The Philippines is a vast archipelago and, given the distances to travel and the contortions the environment forces the roads to take, to explore it properly takes time.

But as with Sri Lanka in the summer, the Philippines then, is my new favourite place on earth ■

