



The Philippines, many islands little time

Description

Well, Iâ€™m not feeling very comfortable with it. Ever since Palawan I havenâ€™t written a word and since then we have been to Cebu, Bohol, Panglao, Siquijor and now in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental. We will reach Cebu again within 8 days towards our approaching flight and end of visa here in the Philippines. On the way we will also be in Camotes which is â€œsweet potatoesâ€™ in Tagalog (the official language of the Philippines), but in this case it is an island. I really have no idea why it is called sweet potatoes.

By the way to those of you Spanish speakers who just jumped and said â€œHey, camotes is sweet potatoes in Spanish too!â€œ. Well, yes, there are many Spanish words in the formal language of the Philippines and it also contributes to the general Caribbean atmosphere here.

In less than two weeks from now our visa period runs off and with it ends our first visit in the Philippines, hopefully not our last, because we fell in love with them. Very much. With these Philippines, the land and the people. We are terribly in love and absolutely planning to come back here soon. A consensus in a family of five is not an every day event but when it comes to the Philippines we are all one single united party. Undoubtedly, the Philippines are the highlight of our family journey so far.

So here is a little bit about the Philippines. After all we are talking about a group of more than 7000 islands. The Philippines is a country with thousands of islands divided more or less to three geographical parts. The north which is mainly Luzon where the capital city Manila is to be found, the south â€œ Mindanao, a region with a relatively large population of Muslims, some of them quite radical, and thatâ€™s one place kids where weâ€™re not going! Last but not least is the central region of the Visayas with the major Cebu and Negros islands and also the magical Palawan (Western Visayas), bewitched Siquijor, Bohol, touristic Boracay (we didnâ€™t go there either) and Leyte. And that is only the tip of the fork and the spoon, yes, here too you will usually not get a knife, only a fork and a spoon, and a wish of good luck.

And if talking about food, and we have to talk about food, because we love food and food is something very fundamental in life. In short â€œ forget it. Food is not, and I repeat â€œ IS NOT the highlight of a trip in the Philippines. Excuse me, did I say itâ€™s not the highlight. Sorry, usually disgusting to be more precise, one hour or more of waiting in the local restaurants, lots and lots and lots of junk food, almost zero street food, limited availability of ingredients for those who wish to cook on their own and way too much sugar in everything.

I must elaborate on this matter because I suppose you rub your eyes thinking is it possible that I hereby

declare a lousy culinary destination as the highlight of a family journey in SEA ? Let's discuss it a bit.

In the Philippines we noticed a severe admiration of everything that is American and that's probably the reason for all this fast food around " international chains like McDonalds and KFC as well as local chains like Jolliebee and Chowking (what?). It could be that the looong waiting duration for food servings in local restaurants (one hour average and occasionally more) is another reason why the Filipinos are so enthusiastic about fast food. Because, honestly, I felt myself growing old here busy waiting for the food to come. And you can't say it was so much worth it. The food here is, let me say it plainly, not tasty. The only good thing we found here was the grilled chicken. They are quite good at it. In Siquijor we had a week with our own kitchen and after adding some rice with vegetables and curry and fresh vegetables salad the grilled chicken worked out just fine for us.

Even the Pancit, the local noodles is not bad but mine is definitely better. I am not sure what they put in it (except for oil) but our Pancit with garlic, chili, bell pepper, white cabbage, purple onion (which is more common here than the white onion), green onion, carrot, pumpkin and a bit of soy sauce " delicious. The nice thing about these noodles is that there is no need for boiling them in water in advance. You just fry all the vegetables, add water, soy sauce and then the noodles. They get soft while mixing it all within minutes and hurray " you got yourself a nice lunch after lazing the whole day in the sea (The Natives) and in the hammock (me, and why on earth do I need to get up from there for god sake). Sounds simple, ha ? So I forgot mentioning that the aforementioned nice list of ingredients is " well " almost all that you can get in the market here. Even if you have a kitchen the challenge would still be about fetching the necessary ingredients. It doesn't mean it's impossible (did anybody say pasta with coconut cream and pumpkin, garlic, chili and kalamansi, some kind of a small green citrus being sold here as a popular spicing ingredient). It just means it's challenging.

And if talking about challenges, let's talk about getting a birthday cake to Little One on the tiny island of Panglao which is right next to Bohol which is right next to Cebu " Well! Little One had the honor of being the first one of us to celebrate a birthday in our journey and the cake she wanted was no less than a baked cheese cake. In the Philippines like the rest of SEA there are no ovens in most of the houses, so that even if I did find myself in an uncontrollable baking frenzy well I still couldn't do anything about it. But birthday is only once a year and so it came that The One went on an excursion full with motivation to lay his hands on a baked cheese cake. And he made it. On a special order, priced accordingly, but indeed a baked cheese cake and it was even delicious. With crust full of butter and real cheese and all those goodies. We really enjoyed it. It was worth growing up a little aristocrat.

So we celebrated a first birthday in our family journey and Little One was happy and didn't want to go to sleep so that the wonderful day she had will not end. It was warm and full of simple love and family togetherness. It was really exciting watching the Natives anxiously preparing the Little One's birthday. The Central bought her present and made everybody write her greetings. We surprised her and we sang to her and she ordered a lunch of schnitzels and mashed potatoes which took me four hours to cook since I only had one stove and one little pot. It took me four rounds to cook the entire potatoes quantity but, hey, we got breadcrumbs and we prepared real schnitzels as the kid requested and it was really exciting to see through all that day including a single moment when I could actually see her stop and a thought emerges in her oh so busy brain, a thought of "wow, mommy and daddy and my brothers really bothered a lot for me. I am so beloved ". I have nothing else to say, some moment.

So we talked about food. I must add some words about accommodations. Well, after half a year trip in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos we arrived in the Philippines with some extensive experience of how to organize a place to sleep in. Guesthouses, hotels, homestays " you name it, we nail it. All the websites and applications around " we're on them. Agoda, airbnb, flipkey, homeaway,

hotels.com, booking.com, whatever.com – we’re there! We were sure that we can’t be beaten.

We were wrong. Accommodations in the Philippines are quite a story. It’s hard to find, the conditions are not splurge to say the least even for SEA standards and the prices are not cheap at all. If up to now in all the countries we’ve been at we managed to meet without too many problems our daily accommodation budget (around 20\$ per night for all of us), in the Philippines we beat this budget not once and not twice and definitely not for better places comparing with what we were used to. Hot water is almost nowhere to be available here. As a matter of fact I celebrated today my first hot shower since a month and a half, I kid you not. Some places don’t even have water at all during some parts of the day and you can only try imagining how stressing this can be. One family, five people, one toilet, zero water. It’s enough that one of us has an emergency –number two and there is no water in the flusher and the bucket was not filled up since last time when water was available and I’m better off dead!

And wi-fi too is not something to take for granted in the Philippines. Did I say not for granted? I meant none. In many places there’s simply no internet available or available only in public areas of the guesthouse/hotel or only theoretically available, like the one I’m using now to write this post. Here and there we used a local sim card with 3G internet and turned one of the devices into a hot spot shared by six other devices – the other cellular, two laptops and three tablets. It worked slow some of the time and very slow the rest of the time.

In short, this place is quite tough, the Philippines, you probably think. No food, nowhere to sleep, no wi-fi. Tough! So what is this weirdo excited all about? Didn’t she just say it was the highlight of the journey?? Ah, you probably think – you’re one of those who like living like beggars. Well, no! Definitely not. Sometimes I was really worried with all that toughness. But still the Philippines is an amazing place.

Because the people here are sweet, kind, hospitable and charming in ways we have never met before! I don’t have enough words to describe our astonishment and excitement and how we, let’s admit, fell in love with these charming people – the Filipinos.

They never try to cheat you or rip you off (hi Vietnam!), you don’t have to count the change or be suspicious at all during most of your waking hours (holiday in Cambodia anybody?), they speak excellent English (no dear Thais, Thai is not an international language and it’s about time you learn English it will be so cool especially if you are owners of a guesthouse in the Khao-fucking-San Road in Bangkok!). Ah! and yes! they are true Israeli lovers. You can’t even understand how people will be nice at you here. They will smile at you and call you –Kuya– which is the Tagalog word for –my brother/sister–. And if they are not sure you understood they will turn to you in English.

And the views. And the beaches. And the diving. Amazing! The pursuit after the perfect beach never ends. Up until now we think that the most wonderful beaches we’ve been at were in Palawan, one of them was a private lagoon of a charming man who hosted us and the other is called Nacpan Beach or Twin Beaches. We spent a full day in both of them and most of the time we were busy staring at each other muttering –no, it can’t be real–, and I personally also had tears in my eyes part of the time.



The amazing Twin Beaches, Palawan. The most beautiful beach weâ€™ve been at as of now

The One and The Natives had one dive so far which was declared as the best one ever, and he is a divemaster and has some experience with diving locations. In one of the sites where they dived, me and Little One snorkeled and I will just say that the minute I let my head into the water I got hyperventilation due to over-excitement. This inconceivable beauty. I just got my head out of the water and started screaming until I calmed down. In another site where they dived they saw many giant sea turtles and Little One and me watched from the boat and were lucky to spot some marvelous turtles right on the surface as they got their heads out of the water to breathe. Tomorrow thereâ€™s another scuba diving day in another world class site. I will update.

So the views and the beaches and the people and everything together create a magical vibe with unique colors.

And the bottom line, I spent so many words, and still itâ€™s not really possible to explain falling in love. But I tried.

Bohol

*An island in the Central Visayas very near to Cebu. Bohol itself is a medium size island comparing to its neighbors. We stayed there for 10 days, actually not in Bohol itself, but in a smaller island connected to it by a bridge named **Panglao**. We found there a nice house with two bedrooms and a kitchen through the website homestay.com next to the market and the local church for only 24\$ a night.*

*Bohol and Panglao are relatively touristic islands comparing to other places in the Philippines with a lot of interesting activities. The most popular activity like in the rest of the Philippines is beach bumming. There is the famous and overrated **Alona Beach**. Due to its fame it has an ample of restaurants and shops with goods (and prices) targeted to western tourists. The beach which was closer to us (and nicer in our opinion) was **Doljo Beach**, a shallow and isolated beach in the south western part of the island.*

*Another popular activity in Bohol is scuba diving and snorkeling. We dived near **Balicasag Island** where with a little luck it is possible to see on the way to it dolphins and sea turtles in the island itself. We did the dives with **Island Adventures Dive shop** for 25\$ per person per dive and they were very good. Entering Balicasag Island requires payment of an environmental fee of 2\$ per person. You will find there few locals that will offer to take you to the interesting locations for 5\$. You donâ€™t have to take them but it is better to do it if you donâ€™t want to miss the underwater attractions. Another nice place we visited was the **Virgin Island**. A magical place which is actually a tiny crescent shaped coast strip in the heart of the ocean. The island itself is dedicated to a Christian saint and is based on donations.*

*Additionally we took the island day tour in Bohol. The tour included a visit in the **Chocolate Hills**, an unexplainable concentration of dozens of perfectly shaped earth mounds that were formed somehow specifically and uniquely on this island. The site itself has a good viewpoint to the hills. They are called this way because during the dry season they turn brown and look like a collection of giant chocolate pralines. The next stop is a butterfly farm where you can see and learn about the kinds of local species of caterpillars, butterflies and other insects. Nice. Another must-do is the **Tarsier Sanctuary** â€” a tiny species of primate unique to the Philippines and Bohol in specific. The entrance fee to each one of these sites is 1\$ per person. One more thing we did is the zipline experience over one of the river channels that cross the island. The price is 8\$ per person. We paid for the day tour itself 45\$ which included a private car and a driver (and gas).*

We reached Bohol by ferry from Cebu City to the main city of Tagbilaran. The price is 11\$ for an adult (children pay half) and the ride is about 2 hours.



Starfish, the pristine water of Balicasag island



Walking on water in Virgin Island



Boholâ€™s Chocolate Hills



Cute little tarsier monkey in Bohol



Scuba diving in Balicasag Island

Siquijor

Siquijor is a peaceful island not far from the southern part of Negros island about two hours boat cruise from Bohol. It is quite remarkable with its serene and relaxed atmosphere. We spent here a week in a place called Lorna's End of the World in the town of **San Juan**. The place is very basic and its costs are respectively low (12\$ per night for a family room). It has an excellent location – five meters from the sea (depending on the tide conditions!) and a few minutes walking distance from a nice grill house and fishermen stalls with fresh supply of fish that just came out of the sea and also close to the town market.

The main activity in Siquijor is lying by the beach and watching sunsets. Apart of that you can rent a tricycle for an island tour for the price of only 8\$. The points of interest in the island are the **Capilay Springs** in San Juan, a nice natural pool of fresh, clean and not very cold spring water which practically serves as the local country club pool. The **Cambugahay waterfalls** is a set of beautiful three levels falls with an original tropical set of bamboo, coconut trees and brackens. There is a parking admission of 1\$ in the entrance to the falls. **The Enchanted Balete tree** is a couple of centuries old huge tree that according to the local legend attracts all kinds of local spirits and believed to be enchanted. In general, the island of Siquijor is considered full of witches and to this very day there are quite a few Filipinos that are afraid to get to it in fear of some ancient curse to fall upon them. Near the tree you will also find a natural fish spa. Simply dip your legs in the cool spring water and the fish will find and do the rest of the

job.

We arrived in Siquijor by a boat we rented from a fisherman in Bohol for 65\$.



Enchanted Balete tree near Lazi, Siquijor



Natural fish spa



Fresh fish supply all day long. In this case â€œ Milkfish.



Automatic car wash ??â€¦!



Capilay springs



The marvelous sunset in Siquijor

Category

1. The Philippines

Tags

1. bohol
2. family trip in the philippines
3. panglao
4. philippines with family
5. siquijor

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Author

nitzaneihotmail-com