

# Traveling with Friends to the Philippines

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In February 2001, I went to the Philippines as part of a Group Study Exchange program sponsored by Rotary International. My local sponsor was the Furnitureland Rotary Club for which I am eternally grateful. Each year, groups of four young professionals are sent to different countries to live and to study the culture. After our return, the host country sent a team to visit our country. The program is to promote international peace and understanding. That's how and why I was there but now I'd like to tell you about my wonderful adventure.

The Philippines consists of 7,107 islands in the Pacific Ocean, spanning 1,840 kilometers north to south. As part of the East Indies, this vast island group lies south and east of mainland Asia.

While in the capital city of Manila, we were given the opportunity to visit several fascinating places:

- Las Piñas Bamboo Organ (the world's only pipe organ made of bamboo) is housed in an old church made of cobbled stones.
- Intramuros - A preservation of Spanish rule in the Philippines. Within the Intramuros complex are Fort Santiago (once a prison for revolutionary Filipinos, now a peaceful park and museum), the Manila Cathedral (a magnificent architectural feat with its intricate stone carvings, stained glass mosaics, and rosette windows), and the San Augustin Church (the oldest structure in the country).
- Chinatown – where we were treated to lunch and a walking tour.

Our visit to city of Tagaytay and the Taal Volcano was breathtaking. It is, on a good traffic day (and there aren't many of those) about an hour and half drive from Manila. The city sits on a ridge overlooking Taal Lake and the volcano on the south, Manila Bay on the north, Laguna Bay on the east, and China Sea on the west. Taal Lake Volcano is reputed to be the world's smallest.

On the climb up, one can see the crater rising out of the lake of its original crater. In turn, the new crater has its own lake with its own island, an unusual phenomenon of “a lake within a lake and a volcano within a volcano.”

We also went to Corregidor Island where General MacArthur spoke the words “I shall return.” This was truly a spectacular visit. The island is now a historic military site. Situated 26 nautical miles west of Manila, Corregidor lies just off the southern tip of Bataan Peninsula. Corregidor is the largest of the five islands lying across the entrance to Manila Bay.

During the Spanish era, Corregidor was used as a signal station. Bonfires were lit to alert Manila of homecoming galleons. Later on, the Spaniards built a lighthouse there. All ships entering or leaving the bay were stopped to have their papers checked, hence the name Corregidor, the Spanish word for “corrector.”

The big guns of Corregidor were used in support of Filipino and American defenders of Bataan until the island itself was invaded. The pounding by Japanese guns reduced its defenses and compelled its surrender. On January 22, 1945, Corregidor was once again caught in the fury of war when the Americans retook the island. On October 12, 1947, in an impressive turnover ceremony, the American flag was lowered for the last time and the flag of the Republic of the Philippines was hoisted in its place. After more than 300 years of Spanish, American and Japanese occupation, Corregidor once again belonged to the Filipino people.

We had the opportunity to go through the Malinta Tunnel. Completed in 1922, Malinta Tunnel is 835 feet long and 24 feet wide with 24 lateral tunnels branching out from it. Originally an arsenal and underground hospital, its unique location beneath the Malinta Hill made it an ideal bombproof headquarters for embattled Filipinos and Americans, and served as the seat of the Philippine government under President Manuel L. Quezon. An informative light and sound show gave a reenactment of World War II's dramatic events.

One of my favorite visits was to Palawan. Situated southwest of Mindoro and north of Malaysia, Palawan is the country's largest province. Consisting of more than a thousand islands and islets, this province is an ideal breeding ground for tropical flora and fauna. We explored underground caves with outstanding rock formations and what seemed like millions of bats. While island hopping there, we saw rice being harvested and dried and also a crocodile rescue retreat.

The most challenging visit was Subic Bay Freeport. We participated in a JEST - Jungle Survival Training. It was great after it ended but we thought it was never going to end. Our guide made a fire from bamboo shavings and twigs and carved eating utensils out of bamboo. We drank water from a bamboo vine (the only water provided). On the plus side while in the jungle, I saw the world's smallest bats and actually held one in my hands.

The trip was a great experience and made even more so by the fact that we were staying with Rotarians who took excellent care of us all. The shopping and dining were beyond belief. Everything was much less expensive to purchase there. The variety of fresh seafood was unimaginable. After a month I wanted no more seafood. We also had the most incredible fresh fruit selection possible. I developed a definite taste for fresh mango and papaya. If you want to know more, just ask - but I definitely would recommend a trip to the Philippines.