



PACK LIGHTLY

7,641 ISLANDS, THE ONES WORTH THE BOAT RIDE

Philippines

Which island for which trip, where the diving earns the journey, what a day really costs, and how to cross the water without losing days to the wrong ferry.

p. 09 The islands in one table: pick yours before you pick dates

p. 28 Inter-island travel, mapped: every leg by plane, ferry and bangka

p. 37 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt

52 PAGES

PHP PRICES

30-DAY VISA-FREE

EDITION 2026.06

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

the shape of a Philippines trip, what it costs, what to sort first



The Philippines is a sea with islands in it, not a country with a coastline. More than seven thousand of them scatter across a thousand kilometres of ocean, and the trip you take is decided less by what you want to see than by how far apart the pieces sit. The water is the point: limestone lagoons off Palawan, thresher sharks at dawn off Malapascua, a sardine wall you can swim into at Moalboal. The mistake first-timers make is plotting it like a road trip. There are almost no roads between the good parts. You fly or you ferry, you route through Manila or Cebu, and you build slack for the weather. This guide is built around that reality: pick the island that fits the trip, learn how the legs connect, then go.

The shape of a trip

Most people land in Manila or Cebu, then commit to one cluster: Palawan for lagoons, the Visayas (Cebu, Bohol, Siquijor) for diving and easy hops, or Siargao for surf. Two weeks fits one cluster well, with a side trip. Three weeks links two.

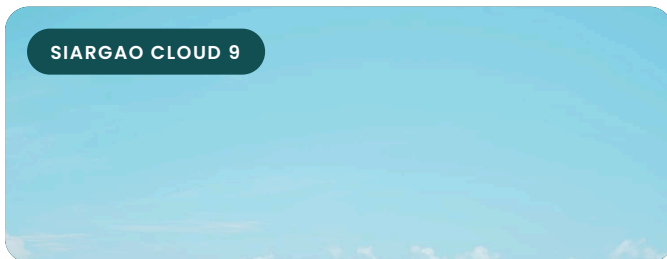
What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 28 USD a day, mid-range around 60, captured May 2026. Island-hopping boat days and domestic flights are the line items that move the budget. The full receipt, bed to nightcap, is on page 37.

Sort before you fly

Visa-free entry for 30 days for most passports, the eTravel registration in the 72 hours before you land, an eSIM, and the inter-island flights booked early. Page 36 lists the four bookings that reward going early.

SIARGAO CLOUD 9



LECHON



HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01	The country	06
02	The islands	08
03	Diving and the water	19
04	Getting around the islands	27
05	When to go	32
06	Practical	36
07	Safe and smart	42
08	Tools, print cards, sources	46

QUICK JUMPS

The 8-path route picker	29
What a day really costs	37
The scams, and the two real dangers	42

Your trip on one page

14 days · 28 to 150 USD/day · dry season Jan to May

If you read nothing else, this is the trip. Fly into Cebu, give the Visayas a week of diving and easy island hops, then take a short flight to Palawan for the lagoons. Budget from the bars below, not from resort rates. Book the three things at the bottom right before you fly; everything else, the rooms, the bangka tours, the canyoneering, is cheaper and easier to arrange once you are on the ground. The only timing rule that matters is the dry window against the typhoon season.

THE ROUTE



BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker		28 USD
Standard		60 USD
Comfort		150 USD

BOOK FIRST

- 01 International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out **Aviasales**
- 02 Domestic flights and ferries, 2 to 4 weeks out **12Go**
- 03 eSIM, install before departure **Saily**

BEST MONTHS



Philippines at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Nature

90

Budget friendly

85

Food and drinks

70

Culture

70

Tourist infrastructure

55

Safety

60

Budget travel

28 USD/day

Mid-range

60 USD/day

Comfort

150 USD/day

BEACH

DIVING

NATURE

ADVENTURE

SURF

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP



01

The country

What the Philippines is, how the three island groups divide up, who goes, and why the ocean between the islands is the thing to plan around before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One country, three island groups

07

What the Philippines is

115M people · 7,641 islands · three island groups

An archipelago of more than seven and a half thousand islands, strung across the western Pacific in three groups: Luzon in the north, the Visayas in the middle, Mindanao in the south. Around 115 million people, the only majority-Catholic country in Asia, and the one where you can get by in English almost everywhere. It is the value pick of the region for beaches and the best of it for diving, sitting at the apex of the Coral Triangle. The catch is the geography. The good parts are far apart and separated by water, the wet season turns into a typhoon season that reshuffles which half of the country works, and the infrastructure is thinner than Thailand or Indonesia. The trick is to treat each island cluster as its own trip and link only what connects by a short flight.

CAPITAL Manila ~14M metro	POPULATION 115M mostly Catholic	CURRENCY PHP 1 USD = ~58 pesos	BEST MONTHS Jan-May peak Dec-Apr
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THE ISLANDS, BY REGION



EL NIDO LAGOON

Palawan

lagoons + island-hopping · the headline

El Nido and Coron at the top, Port Barton and the underground river around Puerto Princesa. The karst-and-water scenery that sells the country, and the slowest to move around.

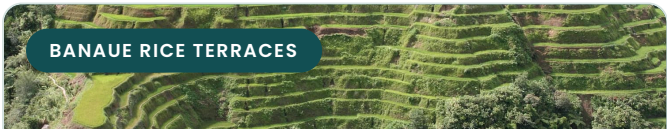


CHOCOLATE HILLS, BOHOL

The Visayas

diving + easy hops · the core run

Cebu, Bohol, Siquijor, Negros and Boracay, tied together by short ferries and the country's second hub. The easiest cluster to chain, and the densest for diving.

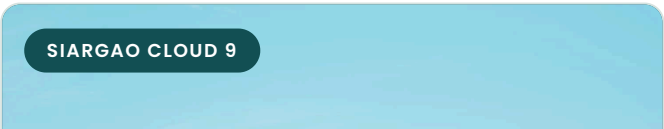


BANAUE RICE TERRACES

Luzon

the north + Manila · mountains and the gateway

Manila as the main air gateway, the Banaue rice terraces and Sagada in the Cordillera highlands, Mayon volcano and the Donsol whale sharks in the south. A road and rail network the islands lack.



SIARGAO CLOUD 9

Siargao and Mindanao

surf + the frontier · one safe island, one careful region

Siargao in the far southeast is the surf and lagoon island everyone means. The rest of Mindanao is mostly fine but carries regional advisories; check before you stray off the surf trail.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time, one cluster 14 days, mid-range, the Visayas or Palawan with one side trip by short flight.	Diver Malapascua threshers, Moalboal sardines, Anilao macro, Coron wrecks, or a Tubbataha liveaboard in season.	Surfer or backpacker Siargao base, Cloud 9 and the lagoon day-trips, then island hops on a tight budget.	Couple or nomad El Nido or Siargao for a stretch, Cebu or Bohol for the diving, calm beach bases between trips.
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02

The islands

The islands that earn a page, plus the quieter picks. Pick the island before the dates: El Nido in July and El Nido in February are two very different trips.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The islands, mapped to what you want	09
Palawan: El Nido	10
Palawan: Coron	11
Siargao	12
Cebu	13
Bohol and Panglao	14
Boracay, the verdict	15
Siquijor and Camiguin	16
Romblon and the quiet picks	17
Skip this, and the overrated	18

The islands, mapped to what you want

eight islands · pick the row, read across

This is the page that replaces a week of forum-reading. Decide what you want most from the trip, find the island that scores it highest, then read the page. The Visayas islands are the all-rounders and the easiest to chain; Palawan is the scenery prize but the slowest to move around; Siargao is surf-first. Quiet matters here: the famous spots get busy fast, and the off-radar islands trade infrastructure for empty water.

ISLAND	GATEWAY	BEACH	DIVING	SURF	EASE	QUIET
El Nido (Palawan)	Puerto Princesa	●●●	●●○	○○○	●○○	●○○
Coron (Palawan)	Busuanga	●●○	●●●	○○○	●○○	●●○
Siargao	Sayak (IAO)	●●○	●○○	●●●	●●○	●●○
Cebu	Cebu (CEB)	●●○	●●●	○○○	●●●	●○○
Bohol + Panglao	Panglao (TAG)	●●●	●●○	○○○	●●○	●●○
Boracay	Caticlan	●●●	●○○	●○○	●●●	○○○
Siquijor	via Dumaguete	●●○	●●○	○○○	●●○	●●●
Camiguin	Camiguin (CGM)	●●○	●●○	○○○	○○○	●●●

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)

assessment: pack-lightly Philippines cluster, 2026-06



Two weeks, first trip: one cluster, the Visayas or Palawan, plus one short-flight side trip. Three weeks: link two. A month buys the surf island and the far north as well.



The dry window is the planning lock. The Visayas and Palawan are calmest December to May; the typhoon season from June can cancel boats and flights with little notice.

GO DEEPER

Six islands ranked in the [islands rundown](#), the coast in the [beaches ranking](#), and the scenery in the [best places list](#).

Palawan: El Nido

the lagoon headliner • 3-5 nights • dry Dec-May



El Nido is the image the country sells itself on: jagged limestone karsts rising straight out of jade water, hidden lagoons you paddle into through gaps in the rock, and white-sand coves only a bangka reaches. The town itself is a scruffy, traffic-choked strip, and that surprises people. You do not come for the town. You come for the four standardised island-hopping tours, labelled A, B, C and D, that fan out into Bacuit Bay. Tour A is the classic, the Big and Small Lagoons and the Secret Lagoon; Tour C is the wilder, snorkel-heavy run that many rate the best.

Two honest notes. The headline lagoons are busy: go on the first boat out, and pick a tour operator that caps numbers. And the town's power and water cut out regularly, so manage expectations on the stay. For a quieter version of the same scenery, Port Barton and Nacpan Beach are a short hop away and a fraction of the crowd.



Tour boats leave together around 9am and hit the same lagoons at the same time. Book a private or small-group boat and start early, or you queue to enter the Big Lagoon.



An environmental fee covers the bay for ten days; keep the receipt, it is checked on every tour. The combined A and C is the best single-day pairing if you only have one.

Tour A: the lagoons

The Big and Small Lagoons, Secret Lagoon and Shimizu Island; the postcard run, busiest by mid-morning.

Tour C: the snorkel run

Helicopter and Matinloc islands, Secret and Hidden Beaches; wilder, better water, often the favourite.

Nacpan Beach

A four-kilometre crescent of sand 45 minutes north of town; the quiet half-day away from the lagoon fleet.

Port Barton

A slow fishing-village alternative midway to Puerto Princesa, with its own gentle island-hopping and far fewer boats.

READ ON

Picks in the [El Nido rundown](#), the classic run in the [Tour A page](#), and the snorkel loop in the [Tour C write-up](#).

Palawan: Coron

Lakes, wrecks and the better water • 3-4 nights



Coron sits at the north end of Palawan and rivals El Nido for scenery while keeping a slightly wilder edge. The signature is Kayangan Lake, ringed by black limestone cliffs and rated the cleanest lake in the country, reached by a short steep climb to the viewpoint everyone has seen. The Twin Lagoon, split by a low rock arch you swim or kayak under, and Barracuda Lake, a thermocline dive where the water shifts temperature in layers, round out the island-hopping day.

Coron's other claim is the diving. A Japanese fleet was sunk here in 1944, and a dozen wartime wrecks now sit in clear, shallow water, making this one of the most accessible wreck-diving sites in Asia. Above water, the Maquinit hot springs and Mount Tapyas sunset steps fill the land time. Coron town is small and functional; the scenery is all offshore.



Kayangan Lake caps daily visitors and the boats arrive in waves. The first departure beats the crowd to the viewpoint; by 10am it is a queue on the stairs.



The El Nido to Coron passage is a long bangka or a fast ferry, and it cancels in rough seas. If your dates are weather-risky, fly between the two via Busuanga.

Kayangan Lake

The cliff-ringed lake and its viewpoint; the most photographed scene in the north and the cleanest water around.

Twin Lagoon

Two lagoons split by a rock wall; swim or kayak under the arch between warm and cool water.

The WWII wrecks

A sunken Japanese fleet in shallow, clear water; some of the most accessible wreck diving in Asia.

Maquinit hot springs

A saltwater hot spring for the evening after the boats; the relaxed end to a long island-hopping day.

MORE ON THE SITE Picks in the [Coron rundown](#), the lake in the [Kayangan write-up](#), and the kayak split in the [Twin Lagoon page](#).

Siargao

surf, lagoons and the slow life • 4-6 nights • surf Aug-Nov

SIARGAO CLOUD 9



A teardrop island in the far southeast that went from secret surf break to the country's coolest base in a decade. Cloud 9 is the wave that built the reputation, a hollow right-hand reef break with a wooden boardwalk over the water, and it pulls a global surf crowd from August to November. You do not have to surf to enjoy it. General Luna, the main town, is a low-key sprawl of palm-shaded bars, motorbike rentals and good coffee, and the island reads as a lifestyle as much as a destination.

Off the surf, the day-trips are the draw: the three-island hop to Naked, Daku and Guyam, the Magpupungko rock pools that drain to natural tidal swimming holes at low tide, and the Sugba Lagoon for the paddle-and-jump. Rent a motorbike, the island is small and the coast road is the joy of it. Worth knowing: Siargao took a direct typhoon hit in late 2021 and rebuilt, so the scene is newer than its legend.



Cloud 9 is a reef break over sharp coral, not a beginner wave. Learn at Jacking Horse or Quiksilver on the smaller days; the season runs roughly August to November.



Magpupungko rock pools only work at low tide. Check the tide table before you ride out, or you arrive to a covered reef and a wasted morning.

Cloud 9

The famous reef break and its boardwalk; surf it in season, or just walk out for the sunrise watch.

Three-island hop

Naked, Daku and Guyam islands by bangka; sandbars, palms and a grilled-lunch beach day.

Magpupungko pools

Natural tidal rock pools that appear at low tide for a jump-and-swim on the east coast.

Sugba Lagoon

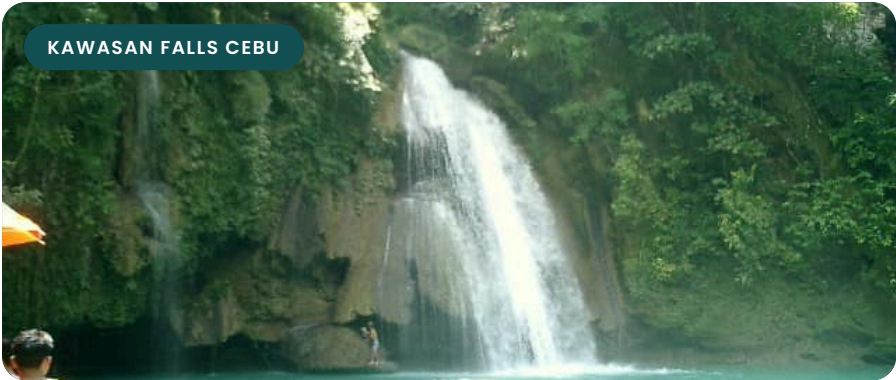
A turquoise mangrove lagoon with a paddleboard and a jump platform; a half-day boat from Del Carmen.

KEEP READING

Picks in the [Siargao rundown](#), the town base in the [General Luna page](#), and the wave in the [surf spots write-up](#).

Cebu

the dive-and-adventure hub • 4-6 nights • dry Jan-May



Cebu is the country's second hub and the practical heart of the Visayas: flights everywhere, ferries to a dozen islands, and the densest set of day-adventures in the country. The headline pairing sits on opposite coasts. Down south at Moalboal, you can swim straight off the beach into a swirling wall of millions of sardines, a free, year-round spectacle that needs only a snorkel. Up north at Malapascua, divers descend at dawn for the near-guaranteed thresher sharks. Between them, Kawasan Falls is the turquoise-water canyoneering circuit of jumps and slides that fills every adventure feed.

Cebu City itself is a transit and history stop, not a holiday: Magellan's Cross, Fort San Pedro and the Sinulog festival in January. One honest note on Oslob, the whale-shark spot south of the city: the sharks there are hand-fed to stay for tourists, a practice marine biologists widely criticise. For wild whale sharks, Donsol on Luzon is the ethical alternative.

💧 Skip the Oslob whale sharks. The animals are fed to perform for boats, which harms them. Donsol on Luzon offers a wild, regulated encounter instead.

⚡ Kawasan canyoneering is a real adventure with jumps up to seven metres. Go with a licensed guide and a life vest, and skip it after heavy rain when the river runs fast.

Moalboal sardine run
A wall of millions of sardines you snorkel into straight off Panagsama Beach; free and reliable year-round.

Kawasan canyoneering
A guided circuit of jumps and slides through turquoise gorges to the falls at Badian; the signature Cebu adventure.

Osmena Peak
The highest point on Cebu, a short dawn hike to a sawtooth-ridge sunrise over the southern hills.

Pescador Island
A small marine sanctuary off Moalboal for the dive-and-snorkel half of the southern coast day.

THE LONG VERSION Picks in the [Cebu rundown](#), the canyoneering in the [Kawasan write-up](#), and the sardines in the [Moalboal page](#).

Bohol and Panglao

hills, tarsiers and a beach base • 3-4 nights



A two-hour ferry from Cebu, Bohol packs the most variety into the smallest area in the Visayas. The Chocolate Hills are the oddity: more than a thousand near-identical grass mounds that turn cocoa-brown in the dry season, viewed from a hilltop platform. Nearby, the Tarsier Sanctuary protects the wide-eyed primate the size of a fist, one of the smallest in the world, in a genuine conservation setting rather than a photo-prop cage. The classic loop ties in the man-made mahogany forest and a lunch cruise on the Loboc River.

Panglao, joined to Bohol by a bridge, is the beach-and-dive base: Alona Beach for the bars and the dive shops, Balicasag Island offshore for the wall dives and turtle snorkelling. It is the natural place to sleep, with the Bohol day-trips an easy drive inland. Use the real Tarsier Sanctuary at Corella, not the roadside operations that wake the nocturnal animals for selfies.



Visit the official Tarsier Sanctuary at Corella, not the roadside cages. Tarsiers are nocturnal and stress to death; no flash, no touching, no noise.



Base on Panglao and day-trip inland. Balicasag's turtle and wall snorkelling is the dawn boat from Alona; the reef caps daily visitors, so book the night before.

Chocolate Hills

Over a thousand grass mounds that brown in the dry season; the viewing platform at Carmen is the easy stop.

Tarsier Sanctuary

The fist-sized nocturnal primate seen in a real conservation reserve at Corella; quiet and flash-free.

Alona Beach, Panglao

The beach-and-dive base: bars, dive shops and the launch for Balicasag's reef.

Loboc River cruise

A slow lunch cruise through jungle riverbanks; touristy but a pleasant break in the inland loop.

ON THE WEBSITE Picks in the [Bohol rundown](#), the beach base in the [Panglao page](#), and the wildlife in the [animals write-up](#).

Boracay, the verdict

the famous beach • rebuilt and busy • go in with eyes open



White Beach is the four-kilometre stretch of powder-soft sand that made Boracay the most famous beach in the country, and the sand genuinely earns the reputation. The honest verdict is the rest. Boracay got so overdeveloped that the government closed the whole island for six months in 2018 to clean it up, banned the worst of the beachfront construction, and reopened it under tighter rules. It is cleaner now, but it is still the busiest, most commercial beach destination in the Philippines: a dense strip of hotels, bars and vendors behind that one perfect beach.

So who is it for. If you want a polished beach holiday with sunset sailing, water sports, nightlife and an easy short flight, Boracay delivers and the sunset over White Beach is the real thing. If you came for empty sand and wild island-hopping, you will be happier on Siargao, Siquijor or Palawan. Bulabog Beach on the windward side is the serious kiteboarding and windsurfing spot, and a reason to come in its own right.



Boracay is a managed resort island now, with an environmental fee and rules on the beach. Go for the polish and the nightlife, not for solitude.



Station 1 has the best sand and the calmest water; Station 3 is cheaper and livelier. Bulabog on the far side is the kite and windsurf beach in the windy months.

White Beach sunset

The four-kilometre signature beach; Station 1 for the softest sand, paraw sailboats at dusk.

Bulabog kiteboarding

The windward beach and a genuine world-class kite and windsurf spot from November to April.

Island-hopping

Puka Beach, Crystal Cove and the snorkel stops by paraw; the standard half-day boat circuit.

The verdict

Worth it for a polished beach break; skip it if you want quiet or wild. Two nights is plenty.

MORE DETAIL

Picks in the [Boracay rundown](#), the sunset strip in the [White Beach write-up](#), and the wind sport in the [Bulabog kiteboarding page](#).

Siquijor and Camiguin

the quiet pair • waterfalls, springs and folklore • 2-3 nights each



Two small islands for travellers who want the scenery without the scene. Siquijor, a short ferry from Dumaguete, carries a reputation for folk healers and witchcraft that keeps mass tourism away and the roads empty. The reality is a slow, friendly island you loop by motorbike in a day: the tiered turquoise Cambugahay Falls with their rope swings, the old balete tree and fish-spa spring, and quiet white-sand beaches like Salagdoong. The clear water makes it a fine low-key diving and freediving base too.

Camiguin, off the north coast of Mindanao and reached by ferry or its own small airport, is the volcanic one: a compact island of hot and cold springs, the eerie sunken cemetery with a cross marking a town the sea swallowed, and the white sandbar offshore. Neither island has nightlife or big resorts, and that is the point. Pair either with a Visayas trip for a few days of genuine quiet.

 Both islands are motorbike islands; the loop road is the experience. Rent for the day, fuel up early, and you see everything without a tour.

 Reach Siquijor on the fast ferry from Dumaguete, itself a relaxed university town and dive base worth a night either side.

Cambugahay Falls
Tiered turquoise pools with rope swings on Siquijor; the island's signature swim.

Salagdoong Beach
A quiet white-sand cove with cliff jumps on Siquijor's east coast; the loop-road lunch stop.

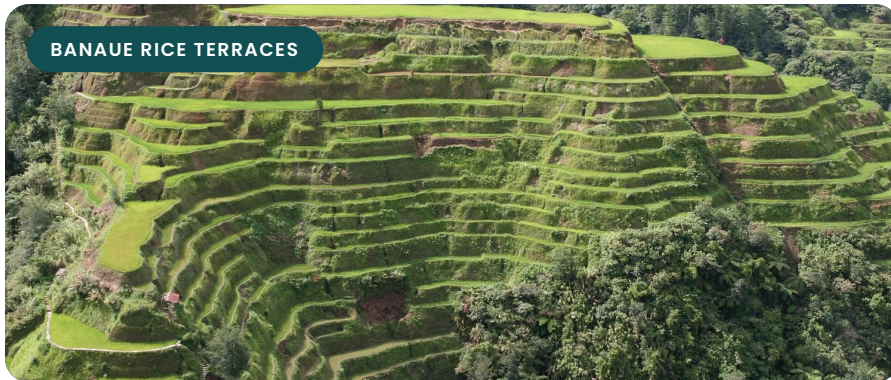
Sunken Cemetery
A cross in the sea off Camiguin marking a town a volcanic eruption pushed underwater; a snorkel and a story.

Camiguin springs
Hot and cold volcanic springs and the white sandbar offshore; the relaxed end of an island loop.

WORTH A READ Picks in the [Siquijor rundown](#), the falls in the [Cambugahay write-up](#), and the volcanic island in the [Camiguin page](#).

Romblon and the quiet picks

highlight • the off-radar islands • for second trips and slow travellers



BANAUE RICE TERRACES

The Philippines rewards travellers who go off the obvious chain. Romblon, a marble-quarrying island group in the middle of the sea between Luzon and the Visayas, is the slow-traveller secret: empty beaches, freediving water and a craft scene, almost no crowds. The Bantayan and Malapascua islands off northern Cebu offer powder sand and reef without the Boracay machine. Apo Island off Negros is one of the country's oldest marine sanctuaries, with turtle-rich shore snorkelling.

Two land detours earn the effort. The Banaue and Batad rice terraces, carved into the Cordillera mountains of north Luzon two thousand years ago, are a different country entirely: cool, green, mountainous, reached on a night bus from Manila. Nearby Sagada adds hanging coffins, caves and pine-forest hikes. These are not beach trips, they are the cultural counterweight to all that water, and they need their own few days.



Banaue and Sagada are a night bus from Manila, not a side trip from the beaches. Build three days minimum, and pack a warm layer for the highland chill.



The off-radar islands trade infrastructure for emptiness: fewer ATMs, patchier signal, irregular ferries. Carry cash and keep a spare travel day.

Romblon

A quiet marble-island group with empty beaches and freediving water; the slow-travel secret.

Banaue and Batad

Two-thousand-year-old mountain rice terraces in north Luzon; the cultural counterweight to the coast.

Apo Island

An old marine sanctuary off Negros with turtle-rich shore snorkelling; a day-trip from Dumaguete.

SEE ALSO The off-radar list in the [off the beaten path rundown](#), the terraces in the [Batad write-up](#), and the caves in the [Sagada page](#).

Skip this, and the overrated

where the photo lies • what to do instead

Here is what to skip, and why. None of these are bad in themselves; they are over-promised relative to the queue, the price, the ethics, or the detour. In each case there is a better use of the same day, usually a short distance away.

02

SKIP ON ETHICS

Oslob whale sharks

The sharks are hand-fed to stay near the boats, which harms them. See wild whale sharks at Donsol on Luzon instead.

OVERRATED

El Nido town itself

The town is dusty, traffic-jammed and short on power. The lagoons are the prize; sleep nearer the beach edge or in Corong-Corong.

SKIP IF RUSHED

Manila as a stay

The capital is a transit hub and a traffic test, not a holiday. Treat it as one night near the airport, then fly on.

DON'T DO IF

Typhoon-season Visayas boats

If your dates fall July to October, ferries and small flights cancel with little notice. Build slack, or favour the calmer dry months.

OVERRATED

Roadside tarsier cages

The selfie operations stress the nocturnal animals badly. Use the official Corella sanctuary on Bohol instead.

SKIP IF RUSHED

Three clusters in two weeks

Each cluster change burns a flight and most of a day. One cluster done well beats three in a blur; the water rewards depth.



Any wildlife encounter where the animal is fed, caged or woken for your photo is the one to skip. The wild, regulated version is always the better story.



Contrarian rule: the more a lagoon trends on social, the earlier you go and the shorter you stay. The first boat beats the fleet by two hours.

DIG IN

The under-the-radar alternatives in the [off the beaten path rundown](#), and the scenery that earns the trip in the [best places list](#).

03

Diving and the water

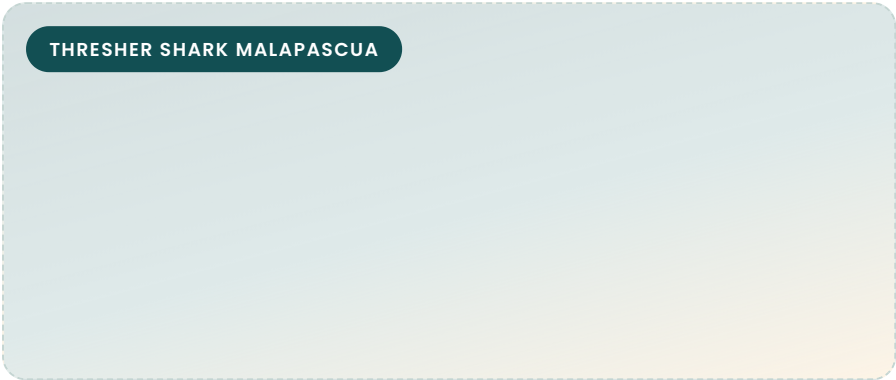
The thing the Philippines does better than almost anywhere. Thresher sharks at dawn, a sardine wall off the beach, wartime wrecks, and the liveaboard prize at the edge of the map.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The dive country, an overview	20
The signature dive sites	21
Snorkelling and learning to dive	22
Beaches and surf	23
Food, the calibration dishes	24
Stay: Palawan and Siargao	25
Stay: Cebu, Bohol and Boracay	26

The dive country

the apex of the Coral Triangle • world-class and cheap



If you only dive in one Asian country, make it this one. The Philippines sits at the apex of the Coral Triangle, the richest marine region on earth, and packs more variety into a single trip than almost anywhere: pelagic shark encounters, macro muck diving, wartime wrecks, drop-off walls and a remote atoll that needs a liveaboard to reach. The water is warm year-round, the courses are among the cheapest in the world, and an Open Water certification here costs roughly half what it does in Europe.

The tiers run from snorkel-off-the-beach easy to expedition-grade. Malapascua gives near-guaranteed thresher sharks at dawn; Moalboal's sardine run needs only a snorkel; Anilao on Luzon is the macro and muck capital; Coron is the wreck playground; and Tubbataha, a protected atoll in the middle of the Sulu Sea, is the liveaboard-only prize open only from March to June. Whatever the level: no flying for 18 to 24 hours after your last dive, and check your insurance covers diving.

No flying for 18 to 24 hours after your last dive. With this many inter-island flights, plan dive days well clear of a departure, never the morning of one.

Decompression chambers are scarce outside Manila, Cebu and Subic. Pick an operator that briefs properly, matches the site to your level, and carries oxygen.

Pelagic

Thresher sharks at Malapascua, whale sharks at Donsol, mantas in the right season; the big-animal tier.

Macro and muck

Anilao on Luzon is the world capital of macro critters: nudibranchs, frogfish, the camera-diver's site.

Wrecks

The Coron WWII fleet in shallow, clear water; some of the most accessible wreck diving in Asia.

The atoll prize

Tubbataha, a remote protected reef in the Sulu Sea, liveaboard-only and open March to June.

THE FULL PICTURE

Sites ranked by level in the [diving guide](#), the easy water in the [snorkeling rundown](#), and the marine parks in the [national parks page](#).

The signature dive sites

six sites · what swims there · the level it suits

Six dives that justify the trip on their own, with the level each needs. Read down the column that matches your experience: the sardine run and Apo Reef snorkel are open to anyone with a mask, while Tubbataha and the deeper threshers want logged dives behind you.

MALAPASCUA · ADVANCED Monad Shoal threshers A pre-dawn descent to a cleaning station where thresher sharks rise from the deep; the only reliable daily thresher dive in the world.	MOALBOAL · ALL LEVELS The sardine run A bait ball of millions of sardines that twists like smoke, swum off Panagsama Beach; free and reliable year-round, snorkel or dive.
CORON · INTERMEDIATE The WWII wrecks A dozen sunken Japanese ships from 1944 in clear, shallow water; penetration dives for the trained, swim-overs for the rest.	ANILAO · ALL LEVELS Macro and muck A two-hour drive from Manila and the country's macro capital: nudibranchs, frogfish and blue-ringed octopus on dark sand.
SULU SEA · ADVANCED Tubbataha Reefs A protected mid-ocean atoll reached only by liveaboard, March to June; sharks, walls and untouched coral, the trip-of-a-lifetime dive.	MINDORO · INTERMEDIATE Apo Reef The largest atoll-type reef in the country, off Sablayan; drop-off walls, reef sharks and turtles on a day boat or short liveaboard.
 Tubbataha sells out a year ahead and runs only March to June. If it is the goal, book the liveaboard before anything else and plan the trip around it.	 The thresher dive is a 5am boat to depth in low light. It needs the Advanced certification; book a refresher first if it has been a while.

GO DEEPER The full site list by level in the [diving page](#), the threshers in the [Malapascua write-up](#), and the atoll in the [Tubbataha page](#).

Snorkelling and learning to dive

no licence needed • the cheapest courses in the world

APO ISLAND TURTLE

You do not need a licence to see the best of the water. The Moalboal sardine run is a free snorkel off the beach. Apo Island off Negros has turtles grazing in the shallows you reach from shore. Balicasag off Bohol, Siete Pecados off Coron, and the Honda Bay islands off Puerto Princesa all snorkel beautifully from a bangka. Donsol on Luzon offers a snorkel-only, regulated swim with wild whale sharks from roughly February to May, the ethical alternative to fed encounters.

If you want to learn, this is one of the best and cheapest places on earth to do it. An Open Water course runs a fraction of European prices, and the calm, warm, shallow house reefs of Moalboal, Panglao and Dauin are ideal training water. Pick a dive shop affiliated with PADI or SSI, check it has insurance and oxygen on the boat, and never let a course be rushed to fit your schedule. Take the extra day.



For whale sharks, choose Donsol, not Oslob. Donsol is a wild, regulated, snorkel-only encounter; Oslob feeds the animals to keep them performing.



Bring or buy reef-safe sunscreen. Many marine parks now refuse entry with chemical sunscreen, and the reef thanks you either way.

Moalboal sardines

A free snorkel off the beach into a living wall of fish; the easiest world-class water in the country.

Apo Island turtles

Green turtles grazing in the shallows off Negros, reached from shore; an old, well-run sanctuary.

Donsol whale sharks

A regulated wild snorkel from February to May off southern Luzon; the ethical big-fish encounter.

Learn to dive

Open Water on the calm reefs of Moalboal, Panglao or Dauin; among the cheapest certifications anywhere.

READ ON

The easy spots in the [snorkeling rundown](#), the wild encounter in the [Donsol write-up](#), and the turtle reef in the [Apo Island page](#).

Beaches and surf, by what you want from the day

four moods • the coast is the whole country



With this many islands, the question is not where the beach is but what you want from it. The Philippines has powder-soft resort sand, near-empty castaway coves, a serious surf coast and glass-calm snorkel water. One pick per mood below, with the alternative where the islands differ. The Pacific swell that feeds the surf also means real currents on the east coast, so read the water and ask locally before you wade in.

FOR SURF

Siargao and San Juan

Cloud 9 reef break on Siargao for the season, San Juan in La Union as the easy mainland learner coast near Manila.

FOR EMPTY SAND

Nacpan and Kalanggaman

A four-kilometre crescent near El Nido, and a pure sandbar island off Leyte. Alternative: Bantayan off northern Cebu.

FOR THE SCENE

Boracay White Beach

The polished sand-and-sunset strip with bars and water sports. Alternative: Alona Beach on Panglao for a quieter version.

FOR SNORKEL

Apo Island and Balicasag

Turtles and reef off the sand at Apo, walls off Balicasag near Panglao. Alternative: Siete Pecados off Coron.



Pacific-facing east coasts run real rip currents, strongest in the surf season. Swim where locals swim, watch for warning signs, and ask before an empty beach.



Beginners should learn at San Juan or the Siargao beach breaks, not Cloud 9. The famous reef breaks are over sharp coral and not a first-lesson spot.

MORE ON THE SITE

Twelve rated beaches in the [beaches write-up](#), the breaks in the [surf spots rundown](#), and the mainland coast in the [San Juan page](#).

Food: the four calibration dishes, and the honest verdict

carinderia economy • 2 to 7 USD a plate

Here is the verdict nobody gives you straight: Filipino food is not Thai or Vietnamese. It is less herb-and-chilli, more sweet, salty, sour and savoury, built on rice, pork, vinegar and soy, with Spanish and Chinese layers from four centuries of trade. Eaten at the wrong place it can read as heavy and brown; eaten at the right one, a sizzling sisig or a fresh kinilaw is a genuinely great meal. Locals eat at the carinderia, the small turo-turo (point-point) eatery where you choose from the tray. Order these four early; they calibrate the rest of the trip.



Adobo adobong manok

USD 2-4 • everywhere

The unofficial national dish: chicken or pork braised in vinegar, soy, garlic and bay until tangy and deep. Every family makes it differently, and it is the fairest first test of any kitchen.



Lechon lechon

USD 4-7 • Cebu does it best

Whole spit-roasted pig with shattering crackling, the centre of every celebration. Cebu's version, stuffed with lemongrass, is widely called the best in the country. Worth seeking out fresh, not reheated.



Kinilaw kinilaw

USD 3-6 • coast and islands

The Filipino ceviche: raw fresh fish cured in vinegar and calamansi with ginger, onion and chilli. Bright, sour and clean, the dish that proves the cuisine is not all heavy and brown. Best where the catch lands.



Halo-halo halo-halo

USD 2-4 • everywhere

The national dessert: shaved ice over sweet beans, jelly, fruit and leche flan, crowned with ube ice cream, all stirred together. "Halo-halo" means mix-mix. Chaotic, cooling and a perfect end to a hot island day.

 Beyond the four: try sisig (sizzling chopped pork), sinigang (a sour tamarind soup) and balut if you are brave. Lambanog is the local coconut spirit, strong and cheap.

 A busy carinderia is a safe one: high turnover keeps the tray fresh. Order where the locals queue, and the food is both better and cheaper than the tourist cafe.

KEEP READING The full dish-and-drink list in the [food and drinks rundown](#), and what a plate costs street versus restaurant in the [budget breakdown](#).

Where to stay: Palawan and Siargao

prices per night, double room • base by what you will do most

Two rules for Palawan and Siargao. First, base by activity: El Nido for the Bacuit Bay lagoons, Coron for the lakes and wrecks, Siargao for the surf and the slow life. Second, book your first nights ahead in the dry season (December to May) and over the surf peak on Siargao (September to November), then move freely. Power and water can be unreliable in El Nido town; pay a little more for a place with a generator.

El Nido (lagoons base)

hostel 11 USD mid 40 USD comfort 120 USD

Stay near the beach edge or quieter Corong-Corong rather than the dusty town centre, an easy tricycle from the tour piers. [See what a room costs around El Nido](#) before you commit; backpackers run the dorm scene on [Hostelworld](#).

Siargao (General Luna)

hostel 12 USD mid 38 USD comfort 110 USD

General Luna is the main base for the surf, the bars and the day-trips; rent a motorbike to reach the quieter coast. [Pull up live Siargao prices](#), or find a social bed through [Hostelworld](#).

Mid-range and up across Palawan and Siargao, with free cancellation while your island plan is still moving.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

El Nido Tour A and C island-hopping, small group

from 35 USD

GetYourGuide
full day

Coron Ultimate Tour: Kayangan Lake and Twin Lagoon

from 30 USD

GetYourGuide
full day

Siargao three-island hop: Naked, Daku and Guyam

from 25 USD

GetYourGuide
full day

Live GetYourGuide search links, filtered to each area. Prices indicative, captured June 2026; open a card to see current tours and reviews.

Where to stay: Cebu, Bohol and Boracay

prices per night, double room • bases for the Visayas core

In the Visayas, base where the activity is and let the day-trips come to you. Moalboal on Cebu's southwest coast is the dive-and-sardine base; Malapascua up north is the thrasher base. On Bohol, sleep on Panglao for the beach and dive shops, with the inland loop an easy drive. Boracay is a short flight or ferry, all about White Beach. Cebu City is a transit and history stop, not a place to linger.

Cebu City and Moalboal

hostel 9 USD mid 30 USD comfort 80 USD

One night in Cebu City near the airport for transit, then base at Moalboal for the sardines and canyoneering. [Check live Cebu prices](#), or the dorm scene on [Hostelworld](#).

Panglao (Bohol beach base)

hostel 10 USD mid 35 USD comfort 100 USD

Alona Beach for the bars and dive shops, the Bohol loop an easy drive inland. Book the Balicasag reef boat the night before. [See what Panglao is charging](#); budget beds on [Hostelworld](#).

Guesthouses and resorts across the Visayas and Boracay, cancellable until a few days before check-in.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

**Kawasan Falls
canyoneering from Cebu or Moalboal**

from 40 USD

GetYourGuide
full day

**Bohol countryside:
Chocolate Hills and tarsiers**

from 45 USD

GetYourGuide
full day

**Boracay island-hopping
with paraw sunset sail**

from 22 USD

GetYourGuide
half day

Live GetYourGuide search links, filtered to each area. Prices indicative, captured June 2026; open a card to see current tours and reviews.

04

Getting around the islands

The page that separates the Philippines from the mainland: how the islands actually connect by plane, ferry and bangka, why almost everything routes through Manila or Cebu, and when the typhoon season forces a rethink.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The islands, mapped	28
How inter-island travel works	29
Pick your trip, 8 paths	30
14 days, the Visayas and Palawan	31
21 days, north to south	32

The islands, mapped

fly the long legs, ferry the short ones · the map is the plan

This is the page that separates the Philippines from its mainland neighbours: the distances are oceanic, so the logistics are the trip. There is no overland spine. The rule is simple. Fly the long legs, Manila or Cebu to Palawan, Siargao or the far south, where a 60 to 90 minute hop that costs 30 to 90 USD saves you a day or two on a boat. Ferries for the short, scenic crossings, Cebu to Bohol, Negros to Siquijor, where a fast craft beats a flight on time and cost. Bangka outriggers for the island-hopping day-trips themselves. Book the inter-island legs through 12Go, which bundles flights, ferries and the transfers between them in one search.



A Manila to El Nido flight is about 75 minutes against two days of bus-and-boat. On a two-week trip, fly the long inter-cluster legs and ferry only the short hops.



Cebu Pacific and Philippine Airlines hub through Manila and Cebu. Almost every island route connects through one of the two; build the connection time in.

THE LONG VERSION

Compare ferries and domestic flights and book combined tickets through [12Go](#); the flight playbook is in the [domestic flights write-up](#) and the road realities in the [traffic page](#).

How inter-island travel actually works

planes, ferries, bangkas • and the typhoon-season caveat

Four modes move you around, and knowing which to use for which gap is most of the skill. The honest truth underneath all of it: the network is hub-and-spoke through Manila and Cebu, the weather can break any leg from June to October, and you should never plan a tight connection on the day of an international flight.

THE LONG LEGS

Domestic flights

Cebu Pacific and Philippine Airlines fly everywhere through Manila and Cebu. Book 2 to 4 weeks out for 30 to 90 USD. Watch the strict, low checked-bag limits on the budget fares.

THE SHORT CROSSINGS

Ferries and fast craft

2GO runs the big overnight routes; OceanJet and fast craft handle the day hops like Cebu to Bohol. Book popular routes ahead in peak season, and keep the printed ticket.

THE ISLAND DAY

Bangka outriggers

The wooden double-outrigger boat is the island-hopping workhorse. Fine in calm bays, miserable and risky in swell. Check the weather, count the life jackets, and skip an overloaded boat.

ON LAND

Tricycle, jeepney, Grab

Tricycles and jeepneys are the cheap local transport; agree the tricycle fare first. Grab works in Manila, Cebu and a few cities; the motorbike is the freedom machine on the islands.

04

THE TYPHOON-SEASON CAVEAT

Roughly twenty typhoons cross the Philippines a year, most between June and October, and they hit the eastern seaboard of Luzon and the Visayas hardest. A typhoon does not just mean rain: it cancels flights and grounds ferries, sometimes for days, and the coastguard suspends bangka tours when the seas turn. The dry months from December to May are calmer and clearer. If you must travel in the wet season, favour the western, more sheltered islands like Palawan, watch the forecast, and build at least one spare day before any onward flight. When a storm is named, flip the plan inland or west rather than fight it.



Never connect a domestic island leg to an international flight on the same day. A cancelled ferry or a delayed hop strands you; overnight near the hub instead.



Budget airfares have brutal checked-bag fees added at the airport. Pre-pay the baggage allowance online when you book, not at the counter.

ON THE WEBSITE

The flight network in the [domestic flights write-up](#), the cheap-fare playbook in the [flight tips page](#), and road rules in the [traffic write-up](#).

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths • find yours, then read the route

Who you travel with, how long you have, and what you spend per night decide which islands you can chain before any list of sights does. The country is all water, so almost every path uses at least one internal flight. Find your row below; the two routes on the next pages cover the most popular paths in full.

SOLO • 9D • BACKPACKER

Cebu and Bohol

USD 460 • hostels + ferry

- Moalboal 3n: sardines, canyoneering
- Ferry to Panglao 3n
- Chocolate Hills, Balicasag reef

SOLO • 14D • BACKPACKER

Visayas plus El Nido

USD 850 • 1 internal flight

- Cebu + Moalboal 5
- Ferry to Bohol 3
- Fly to El Nido lagoons 5

COUPLE • 14D • MID

Palawan: El Nido and Coron

USD 2,400 for 2 • 3-star

- El Nido 5: Tour A and C
- Ferry or fly to Coron 4
- Lakes, wrecks, Maqinit springs

COUPLE • 18D • COMFORT

Boracay and Bohol, resorts

USD 2,800 for 2 • resorts

- Boracay 4: White Beach, sailing
- Fly via Cebu to Panglao 4
- Spa, reef trips, Chocolate Hills

FAMILY • 14D • MID

Bohol, Cebu, Boracay

USD 4,400 • family of 4

- Panglao 4: tarsiers, calm beach
- Cebu day-adventures 4
- Boracay 4: easy beach days

DIVER • 12D • MID

Malapascua and Moalboal

USD 2,200 • dives + boat

- Malapascua 5: dawn threshers
- Moalboal 4: sardines, walls
- Optional Tubbataha liveaboard add-on

SURFER / NOMAD • 30D • MID

Siargao base plus hops

USD 1,300 a month all-in

- Siargao 22: surf, coworking
- Lagoon and rock-pool day-trips
- Side hop to Cebu or Bohol

ADVENTURER • 21D • BACKPACKER

North Luzon to the Visayas

USD 1,300 • buses + flights

- Banaue + Sagada 5: terraces
- Fly south to Cebu + Moalboal 6
- Bohol and Siquijor 8

MORE DETAIL Full day-by-day versions online: the [7-day route](#), the [14-day route](#), the [21-day route](#), and the [28-day route](#).

14 days, the Visayas and Palawan

Cebu, Bohol, El Nido • one internal flight

The most popular two-week trip, refined. The Visayas to dive and settle in, a short ferry to Bohol, then a flight west to the lagoons of El Nido. Book the Cebu to El Nido flight and the Cebu to Bohol ferry through [12Go](#) a couple of weeks ahead; the rest can be decided on the day.

1 Arrive Cebu CEB • transfer	Land, one night near the airport or in the city. Magellan's Cross and a lechon dinner, then south in the morning.
2-4 Moalboal southwest coast	The sardine run off the beach, Kawasan canyoneering, the Pescador reef. Osmena Peak at dawn on the third day.
5 Ferry to Bohol 2h fast craft	Back to Cebu and across to Panglao. Settle into Alona Beach, sunset and a dive-shop briefing.
6-8 Bohol and Panglao beach + inland loop	The Balicasag reef boat, the Chocolate Hills and tarsier loop inland, a Loboc River lunch cruise.
9 Fly to El Nido via Cebu • ENI	Fly west to Palawan. Settle into El Nido or quieter Corong-Corong, brief the island-hopping tours.
10-12 El Nido lagoons Bacuit Bay	Tour A for the Big and Small Lagoons, Tour C for the snorkel run, a quiet day at Nacpan Beach.
13-14 Fly out via Manila MNL depart	Fly to Manila for the international connection, overnight near the airport, last flight home.



Almost all domestic flights route through Manila or Cebu. Build the connection time in; a missed link strands you a day on the wrong island.



Short on time? Drop Bohol and add two El Nido days. The El Nido flight from Cebu is small and pricey; the Puerto Princesa route plus a van is the budget swap.

21 days, north to south

Luzon terraces, the Visayas, and Palawan • the full sweep

The three-week version starts in the cool mountains of north Luzon, flies south to dive the Visayas, and finishes in the Palawan lagoons. It is the trip for travellers who want the full range, the culture as well as the coast, and do not mind moving. A night bus north, then two internal flights tie it together.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1-5
north Luzon | Banaue and Sagada
A night bus from Manila to the Cordillera. The Batad rice terraces, the Sagada hanging coffins and caves, cool pine-forest hikes. |
| 6
south
MNL to CEB | Back to Manila, fly south
Bus back to Manila and fly to Cebu. A transit night and a first taste of lechon. |
| 7-10
dive + adventure | Cebu and Moalboal
The sardine run, Kawasan canyoneering, Osmena Peak at dawn. Optional dawn threshers up at Malapascua. |
| 11-13
ferry hops | Bohol and Siquijor
Chocolate Hills and tarsiers on Bohol, then a quiet motorbike loop of Siquijor's waterfalls and beaches. |
| 14-16
via Cebu • USU | Fly to Coron
Fly to north Palawan. Kayangan Lake, the Twin Lagoon, a wreck dive, the Maquinit hot springs. |
| 17-20 | El Nido
Down to El Nido for the Bacuit Bay tours, a Nacpan Beach day, and a slower Port Barton overnight. |
| 21
MNL depart | Fly out via Manila
The connection back through Manila for the flight home, mountains and islands both behind you. |



Banaue is a 9-hour night bus from Manila, booked with Ohayami or Coda Lines. It is the cultural heart of the trip; do not rush it to under three days.



This route runs north to south. It works just as well reversed if your flights land you in the Visayas or Palawan first.

05

When to go

One rule: the dry season against the typhoon season. When the seas are calm and the water clear, where the crowds and prices spike, and the festivals worth planning around.

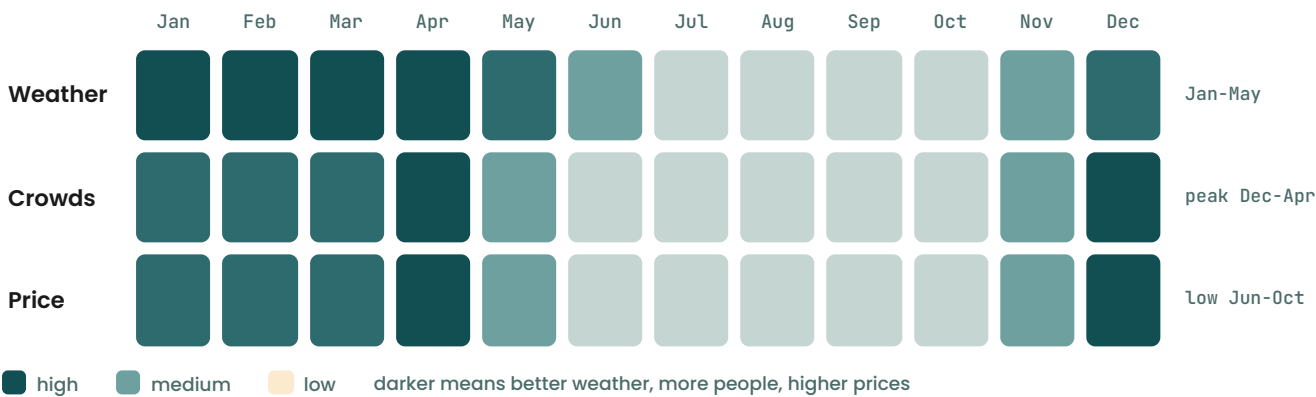
IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price	34
Festivals worth planning around	35

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · one dry window, December to May

There is no winter here, only the dry season against the wet, and the wet is also the typhoon season. The dry months run December to May and are the time to come: calm seas, clear dive water, reliable boats and reliable lagoon tours. The wet season, June to November, brings heavy rain and the named storms that cancel flights and ferries, hitting Luzon and the eastern Visayas hardest. The catch is that the dry season is also peak: the Christmas-to-Easter window fills the famous beaches and pushes prices up. The early dry months of January and February are the sweet spot. The heatmap averages the main islands; the surf coast of Siargao runs its own rhythm, best August to November.



source: best-travel-time dataset · captured 2026-05-17

WHAT THINGS COST: QUOTED VS PAID

SAMPLE DATA

Airport ride, Cebu to the city		12 USD airport taxi	5 USD via Grab
Adobo, one plate		6 USD beachfront cafe	2 USD at a carinderia
Motorbike, one day		12 USD resort desk	5 USD local rental
El Nido island-hopping tour		110 USD private boat	35 USD shared group boat

Festivals worth planning around

three to chase, three to plan around

The Philippines runs some of Asia's most exuberant festivals, and they fall conveniently in the dry season. The top row is worth building a trip around; the bottom row mostly fills the planes and shuts the offices. A few dates move with the calendar each year, so confirm them for your travel year before you book.

THIRD SUN OF JAN

Sinulog, Cebu

The country's biggest festival: a million people, a day-long street parade of drum-and-dance contingents in honour of the Santo Nino. Loud, joyful, and the reason to be in Cebu in January.

FOURTH SAT OF JAN

Ati-Atihan, Kalibo

The original Mardi Gras of the Philippines on Panay, near Boracay: soot-painted revellers, tribal drumming and open street dancing anyone can join. Wilder and rawer than the polished parades.

FOURTH SUN OF JAN

Dinagyang, Iloilo

A tightly choreographed tribal-dance competition that closes out the January festival run on Panay, rated by many the most spectacular of the three. Easy to pair with Ati-Atihan.

HOLY WEEK, ~APR

Semana Santa

The Catholic Holy Week sends the whole country travelling and shuts much of it down from Maundy Thursday. Beaches fill, transport books out, and some shops close. Book well ahead or avoid the week.

LATE DEC TO EARLY JAN

Christmas and New Year

The longest Christmas season on earth peaks here. Domestic travel surges, prices climb and the famous beaches fill; festive, but the priciest window of the year.

MOVES YEARLY

Election and local fiesta days

National holidays, local town fiestas and the occasional alcohol-ban election day can close shops or stop ferries with little warning. Check the public-holiday calendar for your dates.



The three big January festivals fall in the same fortnight on Cebu and Panay. Book accommodation months ahead; rooms sell out and prices triple over the festival weekend.



Holy Week is the one to plan around hard. Domestic transport books out and beaches fill nationwide; lock flights and ferries early or travel the week before.

WORTH A READ

Exact dates per year in the [public holidays calendar](#), and the monthly weather logic in the [best time to visit breakdown](#).

06

Practical

What to book first and what to leave, what a day really costs, how money and transport work on the ground, and the short health list that is mostly reassurance.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order	37
What a day really costs	38
Money and getting around	39
Bed, bag, signal	40
Health basics	41

Book in this order

four things before you fly • everything else on the ground

The Philippines rewards travelling light on bookings: most rooms, motorbikes and bangka tours are cheaper and easier arranged on the spot. Only four things genuinely pay to lock in early, and they have a natural order. The visa is a five-minute check for most passports, since visa-free entry for 30 days is granted to almost everyone, but the eTravel registration is mandatory in the 72 hours before you land.

8 wk
before

International flights

Fares to Manila or Cebu bottom out six to eight weeks ahead for the dry season. Flying into one hub and out of the other can save a backtrack across the islands.

Compare fares
on Aviasales

4 wk
before

Insurance + visa check

Buy travel insurance with strong medical and evacuation cover, and motorbike riding and diving included if you plan to do either. Most passports get 30 days visa-free; check your nationality, and register on the free eTravel portal in the 72 hours before arrival.

Check entry
rules per
passport

2-4 wk
before

Domestic flights + ferries

Book the inter-island flights and the popular ferry routes. Cebu Pacific seat sales drop weeks ahead, and the El Nido and Coron legs sell out in peak season. A Tubbataha liveaboard books a year out.

Book the legs on
12Go

1 wk
before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on landing. Coverage is strong in the cities and on the main islands, patchy on the remote ones. 10 to 15 GB covers two weeks of maps and uploads.

Set up a Saily
eSIM



Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival, and an onward or return ticket, which airlines do check at the gate. Register on eTravel within 72 hours of landing.



Pre-pay checked baggage when you book the domestic flight. Cebu Pacific and PAL charge punishing bag fees at the airport counter.

What a day really costs

itemised, bed to nightcap • island-hopping is the swing line

Three days, three budgets, every line itemised in pesos so you can see where the money goes. These are mid-island numbers; Manila and the polished resorts of Boracay and El Nido run higher, the quiet islands run cheaper. The single biggest lever is the island-hopping: a free shore snorkel holds the backpacker line, while a private bangka and a dive package push you to comfort fast. Rates use roughly 58 pesos to the dollar, captured May 2026.

A DAY IN THE PHILIPPINES * backpacker * hostel dormP 520 carinderia breakfastP 90 adobo lunchP 120 carinderia dinnerP 160 motorbike + petrolP 320 shore snorkel / site feeP 150 San Miguel x2P 130 coffee + waterP 90 TOTAL / DAY~28 USD budget-calculator data • 2026-05-17	A DAY IN THE PHILIPPINES * standard * guesthouse double, halfP 870 cafe breakfastP 290 restaurant lunchP 350 dinner with drinksP 700 Grab + tricyclesP 350 shared island-hop, splitP 700 coffee + a cocktailP 240 TOTAL / DAY~60 USD budget-calculator data • 2026-05-17	A DAY IN THE PHILIPPINES * comfort * resort room, halfP 4,000 hotel breakfastincl. restaurant lunchP 650 dinner, good tableP 1,200 private bangka, halfP day1,800 two-tank diveincl. above sunset cocktails x2P 850 TOTAL / DAY~150 USD budget-calculator data • 2026-05-17
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\$

The island-hopping line is the swing: a free shore snorkel holds the backpacker day, a private bangka and a dive package push you to comfort by lunch. Share boats to save.

Carry small peso notes for tricycles, site fees and carinderias. Cards work in malls and resorts, but the island economy runs on cash, and ATMs run dry on small islands.

SEE ALSO The full cost model in the [budget breakdown](#), and the exchange basics in the [currency rundown](#).

Money and getting around

cash-heavy · motorbike, Grab, tricycle, ferry, short flight

Cash runs most of the islands; cards work at hotels, malls and bigger restaurants in the cities. Draw pesos from bank ATMs (BPI, BDO, Metrobank), always pick PHP over your home currency, and note the per-withdrawal fee, which is high at around 250 pesos, so draw larger amounts less often. Smaller islands run short on ATMs, so stock up cash before you cross to El Nido, Siquijor or the remote spots.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Bed (dorm / guesthouse / resort)	USD 9	USD 30	USD 90
Carinderia meal / restaurant	USD 2	USD 7	USD 22
San Miguel beer	USD 1.20	USD 2.50	USD 5
Motorbike, per day	USD 5	USD 8	van USD 40
Grab / tricycle across town	USD 1	USD 3	USD 6

verified 2026-05-14 · per-category numbers in the budget guide

GETTING AROUND: WHAT BEATS WHAT

In Manila and Cebu, the Grab app settles cars and the metered fare, with nothing to haggle. Elsewhere, the tricycle is the local taxi, agree the fare before you climb in, and the jeepney is the cheap fixed-route workhorse. Between islands, fly the long legs and ferry the short crossings, booked through [12Go](#). The motorbike is the freedom machine for an island like Siargao, Siquijor or Camiguin, but it is also the single biggest cause of traveller injury here. Rent only with real experience, wear a helmet, photograph the bike at pickup, and never leave your passport as deposit.



Always pay in pesos when a card terminal offers "your" currency; the dynamic-conversion rate quietly costs 4 to 7 percent.



Agree the tricycle fare before you get in, and know the rough local rate first. The "special trip" quote to a foreigner can be triple the standard.

DIG IN The notes and rates in the [currency rundown](#), the road and licence rules in the [traffic page](#), and cheap legs in the [domestic flights write-up](#).

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For mid-range and above, [Booking.com](#) wins on free-cancellation depth and inventory. For dorms and social hostels in Siargao, El Nido or Moalboal, [Hostelworld](#) has the deeper review pool. For small family guesthouses on the quieter islands, message the host directly through Facebook; many of the best beachfront places never list on the big sites, and a direct booking keeps the cash local.

BAG: THE TWO-WEEK CARRY-ON LIST

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Two quick-dry tops, one light long-sleeve (sun + boat days) | ☐ Starter med-kit: loperamide, paracetamol, electrolytes, plasters |
| ☐ A light sarong or scarf (church entry, sun, towel) | ☐ Type A/C plug adapter, 20,000 mAh power bank (for the power cuts) |
| ☐ Rash guard for snorkelling and the strong tropical sun | ☐ Two payment cards in separate pockets, plus cash for the small islands |
| ☐ Reef-safe sunscreen and 30% DEET repellent | ☐ Passport copies in three places: phone, print, email |
| ☐ Sandals plus reef shoes for sharp coral and canyoneering | ☐ A dry bag for the bangka days and a snorkel mask if you have space |

Signal. Buy the eSIM the day before you fly and activate it on landing. A 5 GB plan covers a week (from ~4 USD); 10 to 15 GB covers two working weeks. Coverage is strong in the cities and on the main islands, patchy on the remote ones and at sea between them. Stays over a month are cheaper on a local Globe or Smart SIM, sold with your passport at the airport.

[Set up an Airalo eSIM](#)

THE FULL PICTURE

The full season-by-season list in the [packing list](#), what to wear where in the [dress code page](#), and data plans compared in the [eSIM write-up](#).

Health basics

six weeks out • most of this list is reassurance

For the main tourist islands this is a low-drama health destination, with the wrinkle that the good hospitals cluster in Manila and Cebu and the remote islands have little. Pharmacies (botika) are widespread and competent. The list below is everything that actually needs doing, in order, with the things worth packing for the gaps in coverage.

THE SIX-STEP LIST

- ☐ **Six weeks before:** travel-clinic visit. Confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, tetanus) are current.
- ☐ **Recommended:** Hepatitis A and typhoid for street-food and rural trips. Hep A is a two-shot series; start early.
- ☐ **Risk-based:** rabies pre-exposure if you will be near animals; Japanese Encephalitis for long rural stays.
- ☐ **Malaria:** low risk and none on the main tourist islands. Pills only for rural Palawan, Mindanao and remote forest. Check your exact route.
- ☐ **Pack:** the med-kit from page 40, plus reef-safe sun cream and strong DEET. Pharmacies restock most of it.
- ☐ **Insurance:** strong medical cover with evacuation (key for the remote islands), motorbike riding and diving included.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

The good private hospitals are in Manila (St. Luke's, Makati Med) and Cebu (Chong Hua, Cebu Doctors'); from the remote islands, serious cases are evacuated to them, which is why the insurance line matters. For small things, any botika handles stomach upsets, infected coral cuts and minor wounds over the counter. The national emergency number is 911. Coral cuts and traveller's stomach are the two most common complaints, both manageable; dengue is the one to take seriously.



Tap water is not reliably safe to drink. Bottled or filtered only; ice in busy places is commercially made and fine, which is what locals use.



Dengue is present year-round, more in the wet season. Daytime DEET is the whole protocol; there is no pill, so cover up at dawn and dusk.

GO DEEPER

The shot-by-shot schedule in the [vaccinations breakdown](#), hospital picks in the [hospitals page](#), and cover compared in the [travel insurance rundown](#).

07

Safe and smart

The two real dangers, the scams worth knowing, the regional advisory note for parts of Mindanao, the etiquette that is load-bearing, and the niche notes for solo, nomad, LGBTQ+ and vegan travellers.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The scams and the two dangers	43
Etiquette: the short list	44
Emergency numbers and phrases	45
Solo, nomad, LGBTQ+, vegan	46

The scams, and the two real dangers

the dangers can hurt you • the scams only cost money

The Philippines is a friendly, low-crime country for travellers, and Filipino hospitality is genuine. The things that actually go wrong split into two real physical dangers and a handful of money scams, plus one regional advisory to know. Know the dangers cold; the rest just cost you a few dollars and some patience.

DANGER 01

The motorbike and the bangka

Far more travellers are hurt on a rented motorbike or an overloaded boat than by any crime. Loose gravel, no helmet, no experience, and bangkas pushed out in rough seas are the recipe.

The fix: ride only if you genuinely can, with a helmet. On boats, count the life jackets, refuse an overloaded bangka, and trust the coastguard when they suspend tours.

DANGER 02

The sea and the storm

Rip currents on the Pacific coasts catch swimmers, and typhoons from June to October can turn a calm crossing dangerous within hours. Both are routinely underestimated.

The fix: swim where locals swim and heed warning flags; never an empty Pacific beach alone. Watch the storm forecast in the wet season and never push a crossing the coastguard has flagged.

SCAM 03

The motorbike damage shakedown

On return the rental "finds" pre-existing scratches and demands cash. They hold your passport as deposit, which is the whole leverage.

The fix: video every panel at pickup with the operator in frame. Never leave the original passport; offer a photocopy plus a cash deposit, or use another shop.

NOTE 04

The Mindanao advisory

Most of the country is very safe, but several governments advise against travel to parts of central and western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago over kidnapping and insurgency risk.

The fix: the tourist south, Siargao, Camiguin, Davao and Cagayan de Oro, sits outside the advisory zones and is fine. Check your government's current map before straying further into Mindanao.

READ ON The full risk picture by region in the [safety rundown](#), and the road and licence rules in the [traffic page](#).

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing • last four save you face

Eight things that matter in a warm, family-centred, mostly Catholic country where English is widely spoken and visitors are met with real friendliness. The first four cause real offense or real trouble if you ignore them; the last four mostly cost you face or money. Everything else is atmosphere.

DO NOT

Touch drugs, at all

The Philippines enforces severe penalties for drugs, including long sentences and a hardline anti-drug stance. There is no "small amount". Treat any offer as a trap.

DO

Dress modestly at churches

Cover shoulders and knees inside the old Spanish churches and for any religious occasion. Beachwear is for the beach, not the town square or the jeepney.

DO

Mind the wildlife ethics

Do not touch turtles or fish, do not chase the whale sharks, and skip any operator that feeds or cages animals. Reef-safe sunscreen, and never stand on coral.

DO NOT

Take photos in poor areas without asking

Poverty is real and visible. Ask before photographing people or homes, and never treat a slum or a fishing village as a backdrop.

DO

Use "po" and "opo" for respect

Adding "po" to a sentence and "opo" for a respectful yes, especially to elders, is small and lands warmly. A smile carries you a long way here.

DO

Accept the hospitality graciously

Filipinos are generous hosts and may insist on sharing food or paying. A genuine thank you and a return gesture matters more than refusing.

DO

Agree fares and haggle gently

Markets and tricycles expect a friendly negotiation; fixed-price stores and carinderias do not. Smile, keep it light, and start a little below.

DO NOT

Lose your temper to win

Raising your voice and causing someone to lose face backfires everywhere here. Calm and smiling gets you a better outcome and a faster fix every time.



English is everywhere, so a little Tagalog goes far as a courtesy. "Salamat" (thank you) and a smile open doors faster than any tip.



Tipping is not expected outside upscale spots; rounding up or leaving small change for a guide, boatman or driver reads as warm, not required.

MORE ON THE SITE

Religion, traditions and the full etiquette context in the [culture write-up](#), and what to wear where in the [dress code page](#).

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now • English works, the phrases earn a smile

ALL EMERGENCIES

911

single national line

POLICE

117

also via 911

RED CROSS

143

medical / ambulance

COAST GUARD

(02) 8527 8481

sea rescue

TOURIST HOTLINE

151-TOUR

Dept of Tourism

US EMBASSY MANILA

+63 2 5301 2000

citizen services

EIGHT PHRASES THAT EARN A SMILE		
ENGLISH	FILIPINO / TAGALOG (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello / how are you	kumusta (koo-moos-TAH)	"hi" works fine too
Thank you	salamat (sa-LA-mat)	add "po" for respect
Yes / No	oo / hindi (OH-oh / hin-DEE)	"opo" is the polite yes
How much?	magkano? (mag-KA-no)	essential for markets and fares
No meat / vegetarian	walang karne	"gulay lang" for veg only
Where is the bathroom?	nasaan ang banyo?	"CR" (comfort room) is understood
Excuse me / sorry	paumanhin / pasensya	"excuse po" is common
Help!	saklolo! / tulong!	emergencies only



Save 911 and your hotel's name and address in your phone before the first night out, plus your insurer's evacuation line. English gets you understood almost everywhere.



These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 49; cut it out and keep it with your room key.

Solo, nomad, LGBTQ+, vegan

the four overlays that change the trip

FOR SOLO TRAVELERS

Solo, especially female-solo

A comfortable, friendly solo trip helped by widespread English, with the motorbike and the sea the main hazards.

- Siargao, Cebu, Bohol and El Nido are social, easy and well-trodden for first-time solo travel.
- English everywhere makes asking directions and sorting transport simple compared with neighbours.
- Skip the motorbike at night, avoid empty Pacific beaches alone after dark, and keep cash split.

FOR NOMADS

Digital nomads and long-stay

Siargao, Cebu and El Nido have growing nomad scenes; the low cost of living and the English are the draw.

- Reckon on 900 to 1,400 USD a month all-in for a comfortable island base with coworking.
- The 30-day visa-free entry extends easily at a Bureau of Immigration office for longer stays.
- Fibre is decent in Cebu and parts of Siargao, patchy elsewhere; carry the eSIM as a backup line.

FOR LGBTQ+ TRAVELERS

LGBTQ+

One of the more tolerant countries in Asia socially, though it stays a conservative Catholic society at heart.

- Same-sex activity is legal, and visible LGBTQ+ figures are part of mainstream media and life.
- Manila, Cebu and the tourist islands are relaxed; rural and deeply Catholic areas, more reserved.
- Same-sex marriage is not recognised; public affection draws less comment in the tourist zones.

FOR VEGANS

Vegan and vegetarian

Harder than Indonesia or Thailand: the cuisine is meat and seafood heavy, but it is workable with a plan.

- Say "walang karne" (no meat) and "walang isda" (no fish); watch for fish sauce and shrimp paste.
- Lean on gulay (vegetable) dishes, lumpiang gulay, and the fruit, which is abundant and excellent.
- Siargao, El Nido and Cebu have dedicated vegan cafes; the remote islands lean fish and pork.

KEEP READING

The full safety picture in the [safety rundown](#), the visa routes in the [visa page](#), and the food in the [food and drinks breakdown](#).

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you	48
Print cards: cut, fold, take	49
Sources and methodology	50
A note on the links	51

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Philippines data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Philippines: 28 USD/day backpacker, 150 USD/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Country Map

Philippines spots mapped, from Palawan to Siargao.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/country-map/)



Best Time to Travel

Best: January to May. Month by month for 140+ countries.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



Mobile Data and eSIM Calculator

Which eSIM and how much data for your island route.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/mobile-data-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/mobile-data-calculator/)



What to Eat and Drink

Adobo from 2 USD, plus the rest of the menu with prices.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/local-food-and-drinks/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

FILIPINO / TAGALOG • ESSENTIALS <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Hello</td> <td>kumusta</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Thank you</td> <td>salamat (po)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Yes / No</td> <td>oo / hindi</td> </tr> <tr> <td>How much?</td> <td>magkano?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No meat</td> <td>walang karne</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Where is the CR?</td> <td>nasaan ang banyo?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Help!</td> <td>tulong!</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sorry</td> <td>paumanhin</td> </tr> </table> pack-lightly.com	Hello	kumusta	Thank you	salamat (po)	Yes / No	oo / hindi	How much?	magkano?	No meat	walang karne	Where is the CR?	nasaan ang banyo?	Help!	tulong!	Sorry	paumanhin	EMERGENCY • PHILIPPINES <table border="0"> <tr> <td>All emergencies</td> <td>911</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Police</td> <td>117</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Red Cross</td> <td>143</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tourist hotline</td> <td>151-TOUR</td> </tr> <tr> <td>US Embassy (Manila)</td> <td>+63 2 5301 2000</td> </tr> </table> My hotel: _____ Address: _____ Insurance #: _____	All emergencies	911	Police	117	Red Cross	143	Tourist hotline	151-TOUR	US Embassy (Manila)	+63 2 5301 2000
Hello	kumusta																										
Thank you	salamat (po)																										
Yes / No	oo / hindi																										
How much?	magkano?																										
No meat	walang karne																										
Where is the CR?	nasaan ang banyo?																										
Help!	tulong!																										
Sorry	paumanhin																										
All emergencies	911																										
Police	117																										
Red Cross	143																										
Tourist hotline	151-TOUR																										
US Embassy (Manila)	+63 2 5301 2000																										

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Philippines hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/philippines/



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the hotel.



Most Filipinos speak English, so you rarely need the phrases, but a "salamat po" lands warmly. Save your hotel address in your phone for the tricycle drivers.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, with diving and island-hopping across the Philippines from the Visayas to Palawan. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Hostel and hotel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05-14, across Cebu, El Nido and Siargao.
2. Currency rates: ECB reference rates, 2026-05-25 (approximately 58 pesos to the dollar).
3. Entry policy: the Philippine eTravel portal (etravel.gov.ph) and Bureau of Immigration, retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Community pricing checks: archived [r/Philippines](#) and [r/phtravel](#) threads, 2026-Q1.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Climate: Open-Meteo 10-year averages across the main islands, captured 2026-05-17.
7. Pack Lightly Philippines cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06-10: [visa](#) · [budget](#) · [safety](#) · [best travel time](#) · [eSIM](#)

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months; the last full re-score ran February 2026. Budget figures come from the live budget-calculator dataset, climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first Philippines release on the v2 design standard, built around the islands and the water rather than a single route, with the diving made a spine. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered in depth here: Mindanao beyond the surf trail, the far-north Batanes, and a standalone diving guide (it has its own [page](#)).

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the credits page. Tour data and prices come from GetYourGuide, captured June 2026.

Image credits

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12. **philippines cover**. Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 4.0.

13. **siargao cloud9**. Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. An island, a stay area or a transport platform is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. An overrated spot is still called overrated, a fed-wildlife attraction is still flagged, and a cheaper option that beats the famous one keeps the slot. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales · Booking.com · 12Go Asia · Saily · Airalo · Hostelworld · Stay22 · GetYourGuide · via Travelepayouts**



Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/philippines.



This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.