

Island Paradise - Or Not

Written by McXer Donoso Saga
Monday, 26 June 2017 19:44

Island Paradise or Not?

This island paradise is getting a lot of bad press lately which doesn't do it a lot of good when tourism is supposed to be one of its major earners. Problems in the autonomous region, not with the Muslims that live there, but the extremists that are amongst them, has resulted in a mini war in Marawi. The Maute, supposedly ISIS backed rebels, are on the move, and Duterte, in a manner that has definitely become his signature style, has one aim – crush and obliterate.

But the country has far more deeply rooted problems than unhappy rebels in northern Mindanao, which, by the way is where I currently reside. The tourism industry in the Philippines is growing and improving - but I agree it's much weaker than it should be.

In **2015** there was a record **5.4 million visitors** to the **Philippines**. Compare that with **Thailand** which had **29.9 million visitors**

in the same period. Now, I've been to both countries and you can just about get the same sort of experiences. If I was to do a real comparison I would say that the Philippines might be a little better when you want to be closer to nature and a greater choice of beaches. So much of the country, made up of over 7000 islands, remains untouched.

There are a few things holding the tourism industry back such as:

Questionably Bad Reputation

People even now ask me whether I feel safe here because the Philippines has a reputation of being an unsafe and dangerous destination to visit. In my humble opinion, this is a little unfair and undeserved. The recent incident at the Manila Casino, terrorism, and the ongoing problems in Mindanao probably haven't helped the perception change either. The president's solution to the drug problem, lauded by some, certainly has raised the eyebrows of the Human Rights watchdogs.

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It's all about perception by the public. Places like Bali and Thailand have had their share of terrorism, military coups and criticism by Human Rights groups, so why do they get all the visitors? Simple – they have a much better public relations machine which does a better job of marketing them.

Even back home in Australia, backpacker murders, terrorism, crime and violence haven't really kept the tourists away.

Infrastructure Nightmare

I'm not talking about hotels, because the Philippines has some very impressive hotels and resorts. Things like transportation, airports, ports and the roads and highways need some serious investment. It was only yesterday I was reading the report from the Philippines Finance minister and they have budgeted for about 700 billion PHP to be allocated into these areas over the next 10 years. That's a start. Trying to get around in the provinces and cities is difficult, at times almost impossible.

Lacking Publicity

They had, probably still have, the '*It's More Fun in the Philippines*' marketing campaign but that was not nearly enough. I have T-Shirts over 5 years old with those words on them. Apart from reading this weekly travel blog from me, what else do you know about the Philippines? Not much, I bet. This place still seems to be a bit of a niche destination for backpackers and the more adventurous types.

Culture and Traditional Customs

At the risk of upsetting those that know differently, it's probably true to say that Westerners think places like Thailand are a little more exotic when we talk about culture and landmarks and even the food. Let's face it, the Philippines is a rather westernized place, and it's where the USA has

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had a strong presence both with military and aide for over 60 years. Also, the country was Spanish up to 200 years ago.

Poverty

The poverty and the lifestyles of the poorest is not pretty to watch. I live right in it and I see where people sleep, what they eat (or don't eat), and their scrimping lifestyle. The barangays (suburbs) have become places where the 'haves' and the 'have nots' live, interspersed with squatters. Personal security employed by the slightly better off has resulted in veritable fortresses, walled, with embedded glass, razor wire, dogs and spear shaped steel uprights, protecting property.

But...

There are so many incredibly beautiful places here, that you would be amazed. And it's true that some have not even been discovered. Maybe known by locals and not recognized by them as a goldmine. However, the fact that you can be the only one around in a paradise spot lends it a bit of the exotic charm I talked about before.

Frustrations

There are plenty. Lack of service (in everything!), availability of products, transport, island mentality, laziness, and always being taken for a mark, all work towards raising your blood pressure. You can wash all that away with a nice swim in the warm, tropical waters of all the different seas, oceans, beaches, bays, straits and coves that exist in the Philippines.

I hope to be able to write some more interesting articles, historic as well as personal that might help you to understand a bit more about this country over the next few weeks.{jcomments on}