

## RP Tourism's Next Big Thing

## Bohol Basics for Beginners

By MOMAR G. VISAYA / AJPress

**P**ANGLAO ISLAND—Finally, Bohol as a major tourist destination in the Philippines is getting the recognition it truly deserves.

Forever languishing in the shadows of neighboring Cebu, Bohol was once a sleepy province, where tourism was limited to locals. Back in the day, people did not think about how tourism could give them jobs.

Today is different.

The second leg of our China Airlines/Mango Tours familiarization trip brought us to this wonderful island. After arriving in Manila from a very early morning flight from Taipei, we proceeded to the Heritage Hotel to have lunch. Afterwards, we were whisked off to the airport to catch our PAL flight to Tagbilaran City.

One of my colleagues in this trip—maybe feeling a little bit lost and disoriented asked me if we were in the same airport (we landed at the NAIA old terminal, and our flight to Bohol was at the centennial terminal) and I told her that we went to two different airports. She quipped, “how come your domestic airport is better than your international?”

Long story short, I explained to her that Philippine Airlines has its own terminal and it doesn't matter if the flight is domestic or international. All the other international airlines call the old terminal home while domestic airlines fly from the domestic airport. Others, I was told, flew from Terminal 3. A tad confusing, I know, so my new friend just nodded.

I was seated by the window so I was able to see the view of Bohol from the top. Up there, I was already in love with the place. How much more if I got to know more of it? There was a minor hitch to this blossoming story and it

had some-

thing to do with how low we flew and from where I was seated, I saw that we were really flying low.

I found out later from our tour guide that flying low was the only way to go as the runway of Tagbilaran airport is one of the shortest in the country and that pilots need to fly low to shorten the descent time. One more proof that even government officials back in the day had no inkling that Bohol was going to be the next big thing.

Therefore, our guide said, pilots who flew the Tagbilaran route were the best in the business because landing properly would require such expertise. But don't let that dampen your travel plans.

#### Bohol's place in history

When we were little, the only thing we knew about Bohol was the Chocolate Hills. It was also taught in school that the blood compact between Boholano chieftain Sikatuna and Spanish conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi was held in the island in 1565.

The Blood Compact that took place on March 16, 1565 is considered as the first “Treaty of Friendship between the brown and white races. A marker of this historic event can be found in Barangay Bool in Tagbilaran City.

With this recent trip (and further reading), I found out that there's way more to Bohol than the Chocolate Hills and tarsiers and that the province plays an important role in the nation's history. Indeed, Bohol is endowed with natural and historical attractions waiting to be explored and shared with the rest of the world.

Speaking of Chocolate Hills, our guide told us that the hills are actually not hills but are unusual geological formation which consists of at least 1,268 and are scattered throughout the towns of Carmen, Batuan, and Sagbayan or over an area of 50 square kilometers (20 square miles). The hills are covered in green grass, which turn brown during the summer season, making them look like mounds of chocolates. Without a doubt, the Chocolate Hills is the most famous among Bohol's numerous attractions.

Because of its unique geographic location, Bohol is home to numerous dive sites and white sand beaches. Balicasag and Pamilacan islands are two of the very best and most popular dives in the Visayas with the black coral forest among its main attractions while the town of Cabilao is renowned for the hammerhead sharks that shoal around the clear waters.



The famous Philippine tarsier



with her stories about her province. She also shared that discovery channel recently had a feature on the tarsiers and she was fortunate enough to have joined the shoot.

#### Loboc River Cruise

A major highlight of our Bohol adventure would have to be the majestic Loboc River.

A total of 14 floating restaurants that cruise on the emerald green

river has become the town's main attraction. They serve local cuisine while local bands play a combination of pop and traditional songs during the cruise.

The Busay Falls marks the end of the cruise and before going back, locals who play rondalla (a group of string instruments) serenade and dance

with tourists. Our boat ride in the calm and serene waters of Loboc River was simply fascinating.

Bohol is also the home of the famous Loboc Children's choir which has won numerous international competitions and has performed in various US cities such as New York.

Going to the town of Carmen to see the hills and climb 214 steps up to see the magnificent view, we passed through the man-made forest, which was also a sight to behold. Our guide was so proud to share

the story that every single person in the province of Bohol contributed in making sure that the huge Mahogany trees grow and protected the forest from the illegal loggers.

The island province takes pride in producing great men, including Carlos Polistico Garcia, the fourth President of the Republic of the Philippines and National Artist Napoleon Abueva.

#### Rise of eco-tourism

The future looks bright for this upcoming tourism giant. In fact, the rest of the country has begun looking at Bohol's eco-tourism projects as a model for the other provinces.

The province's eco-tourism concept involves responsible travel to nature areas, doing activities like bird-watching, caving, farm visits and rice field walks, kayaking or simply sightseeing.

Crucial to this project is instilling in the tourists' mind the idea of preserving nature, the natural landscape, the watershed, the forest ecosystem and the province's history and cultural heritage.

“It took a while before our fellow Boholanos came to realize the equal importance of tourism and taking care of our environment,” Gina told us, as she recalled the days when fisher-folk used to hunt dolphins for a living. Educating them was an arduous process but it was all worth it.

Now, the locals themselves protect the marine sanctuaries of the province, because they know that preserving these would mean a better future and a better Bohol for their children to enjoy.

[China Airlines flies from New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles to Manila via Taipei. For more information, contact your travel agent or visit [www.china-airlines.com](http://www.china-airlines.com).]



#### Panglao Island

We were billeted at the Panglao Island Nature Resort and Spa, a veritable haven of lush gardens, cottages and manicured lawns overlooking either the forest or the sea. Either way, staying in the resort is an ideal way to unwind and relax.

Upon our arrival, we were given our welcome drinks and hot towels. Upon entering the lobby, I noticed the infinity pool, with a small islet on the horizon. Room assignments were given and each one of us went to our respective cottages through the resort's golf carts.

Some colleagues went for a swim on the beach while others preferred the pool. A few lounged around and the rest trooped to the Mit-hi spa for their complimentary 30-minute massage.

We had a grand time talking with each other about our respective cottages. Some had open air rainwater showers with beautiful views of the beach and the blue waters beyond while a lucky few had their own private outdoor jacuzzis or tropical garden whirlpool to relax and rejuvenate tired muscles.

The whole resort provided a sense of peace and tranquility, and was the perfect solution to relax and rejuvenate, definitely a wonderful way to r-and-r.

#### Tenth Largest

Bohol, the tenth largest island in the country, has a colorful history and this includes old churches built centuries ago by the spaniards. One of the oldest stone churches on record is Baclayon Church, located in the town of Baclayon, six kilometers from Tagbilaran City. This ancient massive edifice still retains its charm and architectural design. Baclayon is the oldest town in Bohol and the mother town of Albuquerque, Balilihan, and Sikatuna.

A visit to Bohol is not complete without visiting the Bohol tarsiers. Tarsiers, with eyes bigger than their brain, are considered as the smallest primate in the world. Like the owl, the tarsiers are nocturnal and they can rotate their head 180 degrees.

In between the sights and destinations, Gina regaled us

### Outside Bohol



The 18 participants of the China Airlines/Mango Tours familiarization trip to Taiwan and the Philippines also visited famous tourist hot-spots such as Magellan's Cross in Cebu (top photo) and Rizal Park or Luneta in Manila (bottom photo). Middle photo shows tour leaders Anson Hung (China Airlines) and Nonette Roldan (Mango Tours) with Manila Peninsula Hotel's GM Jonathan Crook, who welcomed the participants with a cocktail party at the Peninsula's famous lobby and breakfast by the pool the following morning.



Baclayon Church



Bohol Beach Club's pristine beach