

Fun in the sun? The Philippines dreams big for tourism

Written by JOE JACKSON
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Tourists enjoy lunch aboard a floating restaurant heading down the Loboc River in Bohol, the Philippines, in April 2012. (Photo by Joe Jackson)

It's lunchtime on the Loboc River, an emerald green stretch of water that runs through the Philippine island province of Bohol, and I'm about to embark on a boat tour with a group of Japanese, Korean and Filipino tourists.

We pass a sign asking us to deposit our guns at the tourist information gate and then amble aboard our floating restaurant.

Over a buffet lunch of fruit, meat and cheese, we watch kids perform choreographed dance numbers on the riverbank and listen to the musical stylings of a pair of 12-year-old singers.

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The highlight comes when we reach a series of miniature waterfalls, where the sound of rushing river competes with the girls' rendition of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way."

Tourism, Philippine-style, is slowly taking off.

For years, the country has been overlooked in favor of its Southeast Asian neighbors, due largely to enduring security concerns and its crumbling infrastructure.

Nearly 4 million tourists visited the Philippines last year, compared with some 19 million visitors in nearby Thailand.

But the government hopes to change that, devising a plan to double the number of visitors to the archipelago by 2016.

As part of this effort, it launched a multimillion-dollar global media campaign in January promising prospective tourists: "It's more fun in the Philippines."

As we motor down the stream, enjoying the show and laughing at the kids dive-bombing into the water from the riverbank, I'm inclined to agree.

But in a country where visitors' fun can sometimes collide with violent crime, terrorist threats, potholed roads and antiquated airports, the slogan has been subject to criticism.

After releasing a report detailing what it calls the country's "disturbing" crime rate last year, the anticrime group Volunteers Against Crime and Corruption came up with its own catchphrase: "It's more dangerous in the Philippines."

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Indeed, if the country wants to attract more tourists, it's going to have to shake off a reputation for violence that became even more entrenched by a 2010 hostage crisis on a Manila bus that claimed the lives of eight Hong Kong tourists.

To this end, officials are promoting Bohol as the family-friendly face of the Philippines, playing up the province's rich culture, history, natural beauty — and security.

In many ways, Bohol seems a safe bet.

It has beaches every bit as picturesque as those on Boracay, a popular Philippine destination for beach lovers and divers.

Plus, the oval-shaped island is home to some amazing sights: thousands of unique limestone mounds known as the Chocolate Hills, fireflies that light the night sky like Christmas trees and the country's second oldest church.

Local authorities say they're also pursuing a sustainable-growth plan so Bohol retains its distinct island charm and doesn't turn into another Phuket.

"For so long, Bohol was just within itself, not so open to the outside world," says Maria Fe M. Dominise, who runs the Bohol Investment Promotion Center. "We're taking it slow, and I think that's very good — we're cautious about overdeveloping."

The province has implemented building-height restrictions, forbids construction within 30 yards (25 m) of the shore and stipulates that materials used for buildings reflect "the culture of Philippines," according to Jo Remolador-Cabarrus, head of the Bohol Tourism Office.

"We went to some places, like Phuket, and thought this is definitely not what we want Bohol to become," she says.

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But there are downsides to its current less developed state.

Whereas flights to Phuket practically land you on the beach, getting to Bohol is arduous.

The nearest international airport is in the neighboring province of Cebu, a two-hour boat ride away.

After I arrived on an evening flight from Hong Kong, I had to stay the night in Cebu and travel to the island the next morning; I nearly missed my return flight following a 90-minute delay for the boat.

Getting around the island can be uncomfortable in places, with some roads still made of dirt and others under repair.

The island's power supply is spotty too.

Despite, or perhaps because of all of this, I found it easy to fall in love with the place; it feels totally unspoiled and unpretentious.

A rapid growth in tourism will no doubt change this laid-back atmosphere — as well as the local economy.

Yulo Penoso, a 54-year-old father of three, used to weave palm branches for roofs, which earned him \$3.75 per day.

For the past year, he has started running nighttime firefly-spotting tours on the river beside his

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home.

For this, he earns nearly triple the money in a fraction of the time.

He wants to see more tourists coming to the island, but not at the expense of Bohol's peace and tranquillity.

"It's quite difficult to do both," he said.

Some development plans are already upsetting locals.

In order to accommodate international flights, local authorities are pursuing a controversial plan to relocate the airport from the outskirts of Bohol's main city, Tagbilaran, to the small, quiet neighboring island of Panglao — a move residents oppose.

"It's not good for the island because of the noise, and it will destroy the environment there," says Samme Gepayo, 44, a tour driver. "I think people are worried it will change too much."

The project remains in the planning stage, but Bohol Governor Edgar M. Chatto tells TIME that construction will begin by 2016.

The arrival of big resorts also stokes fears. Several large-scale properties have sprung up on Panglao recently, and a new, 159-room hotel called the Bellevue is scheduled to open there in June.

Residents wonder if the small island, and indeed Bohol as a whole, can cope with the large influx of tourists that authorities envision.

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“We’re concerned about the carrying capacity of the island,” says James F. San Diego, manager of the boutique Amorita Resort, which opened in 2007.

“The challenge is to supply electricity and water,” he adds, pointing to the resort’s infinity pool that was not entirely full because of a temporary water-supply breakdown.

Poor infrastructure is not limited to Bohol — it’s hampering economic development across the entire country.

World Bank figures show that foreign direct investment fell in 2010 to only \$1.7 billion compared with rises that year in nearby Vietnam (\$8 billion) and Thailand (\$9.68 billion).

After his election in 2010, Philippine President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III made improving the country’s infrastructure and tourism facilities one of his top priorities, but overall progress has been slow.

Philippine media reports that only a handful of Aquino’s signature Public-Private Partnership infrastructure proposals have advanced as far as the contract stage.

Meanwhile, the country was embarrassed last October when a leading online budget-travel guide named Terminal 1 at Manila’s international airport the worst terminal in the world.

The site’s readers complained about thieving staff, dirty toilets and a collapsing ceiling, prompting the country’s Transport Secretary to pledge to improve conditions.

These are the types of things you can’t pass off as fun.

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It seems for the time being at least, it's going to take much more than songs and slogans for Bohol and the Philippines to lure tourists away from the crowded sands of Phuket.