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MORE POSTCARDS FROM LUZON

by Max Millard

Imagine a country that is smaller than California in area, but has triple its population. Imagine a place where millions of people live in houses with dirt floors and no running water.



living room of house in Luzon

Imagine a society where trash cans are rare, and where recycling is practically nonexistent, and the beaches are choked with litter.



Bituan Beach, Masbate, Philippines

That's the Philippines, where the national motto seems to be: "It happens when it happens." People don't usually plan things far ahead, so one must be ready to join in on short notice.

Last summer I made a trip there with my wife Salve, her brother Romeo, and his wife and their 3 daughters. The girls are the first generation born in America.

We stayed mainly on Salve's native island of Masbate. But at the end, we flew to Manila and rented a van so that we could explore central Luzon, the largest island of the Philippines.



Salve and I thought it would just be the seven of us plus a driver. Instead, we ended up with a 16-seat van and 15 travelers plus a dog. The extra passengers were all relatives. Salve and I were surprised when our party suddenly doubled in size, but as I said, it happens when it happens. Here I am with my vanmates.



the gang poses for a picture

We drove north from Manila on the SMC Skyway, an expensive toll road that towers over the slow city streets. It's owned by the San Miguel Corporation, best known for its alcoholic beverages. That explains the ad for gin (ginebra) that you see at the entrance.



SMC Skyway

The dog, named Migo, was well behaved and always wore a dog diaper, which is quite common in the Philippines.



Migo with diaper

My traveling companions were all Catholics, so we visited quite a few historic churches. Our first destination was the Shrine of Our Lady of Manaoag, a church that dates back to 1610, and has been credited with many miracles.



Shrine of Our Lady of Manaoag

Our first day on the road, we had no reservations for housing. But my sister-in-law made a phone call, and we were all invited to stay in a beautiful modern house with 4 bedrooms not far away. It was immaculate, and filled with large display cases of fine china and family photos. The owner was the aunt of the wife of one of Salve's countless nephews, who trusted us without ever meeting us. A typical example of Filipino hospitality.

The next day we headed for the Hundred Islands National Park, a collection of 124 islands off the west coast of Luzon. They sprouted from ancient coral reefs, and most of them are rocky at the base and covered with an explosion of trees, like a giant green Afro.





Quezon Island, one of the Hundred Islands

We had arrived at the park with no idea about where to sleep. But when we exited the van, a woman approached us and asked if we were looking for lodging.

We said yes, and she led us to a transient house nearby, that had several bedrooms and an outdoor kitchen. The price was \$90 a night. We took it.

As a vegan surrounded by meat eaters and seafood lovers, I wanted to do my own cooking. I purchased onions, potatoes, ginger, garlic, rice, garbanzos, donuts from a bakery, and wonderful fruit from a roadside stand.



At the beach, we first witnessed the banana boats – long, pencil-shaped inflatable boats that are pulled by a motorboat at high speed. They have no safety belts, but just a strap to hold onto.



All 15 of us climbed aboard two of these boats for a wild ride through the islands. Salve was seated in front of me, and at one point I saw that she'd released one hand from the strap. In response, I released one hand and waved it in front of her. Then she released her other hand, and I did the same. But this lasted for just a few seconds because it really was foolish to play chicken like that.



riding a banana boat

Our next destination was Baguio, the summer capital of the Philippines. It's at an elevation of almost 5,000 feet, and has a climate similar to San Francisco. It's a pleasant little city with steep winding streets and scenic views of the hillsides below.



view from Baguio

Here are my nieces getting an elevated look.



Wherever we went, someone in the group wanted to stop and take photos. Thanks to Facebook, many people think it's more important to **appear** to be having a good time than to be actually having one.

The next day we headed for Angeles City, the home of Clark Air Base, a US military facility that closed in 1991 and reopened in 2012. For the first time on our trip, we stayed in a first-class hotel, the Clarkton, with an outdoor pool and a hot tub in the bedroom.





swimming pool at Clarkton Hotel, Angeles City

It was quite a contrast to the home we visited in the old part of town, where some of our poor relatives were living.



relatives' home in Angeles City



street repairs outside their home

By the time we left Angeles City to return to Manila, our van was crammed with souvenirs and luggage.



We spent our last night in a Manila hotel, and visited one more church, the Parish of the Divine Mercy, which has an immense statue of Jesus overlooking the city like Gulliver in the land of Lilliput. Yes, this is a real photo.



When we arrived at the airport to fly back to San Francisco, I was approached by a porter who said, “Wheelchair sir?” Before I could answer, Salve said yes, and asked for one for herself too.

As a result, we didn't have to wait in line for an hour or more, but were whisked right through, along with our five other family members. You might call it foreigner privilege. I felt bad about taking advantage like that, but when you're with a group, you take on a mob mentality.

While being pushed, I told the attendant that it was the first time I'd ever been in a wheelchair. I tried to hand him a tip, but he gestured for me to put it away, and whispered, “Later.” When we were past the gate, he looked around carefully, then took the money.

That wheelchair ride was my final adventure in Luzon. But Salve and I are planning to return in December 2025 to celebrate Christmas Filipino style. I hope to share more stories and photos with you then.



till next time ...