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Postcards from Luzon by Max Millard

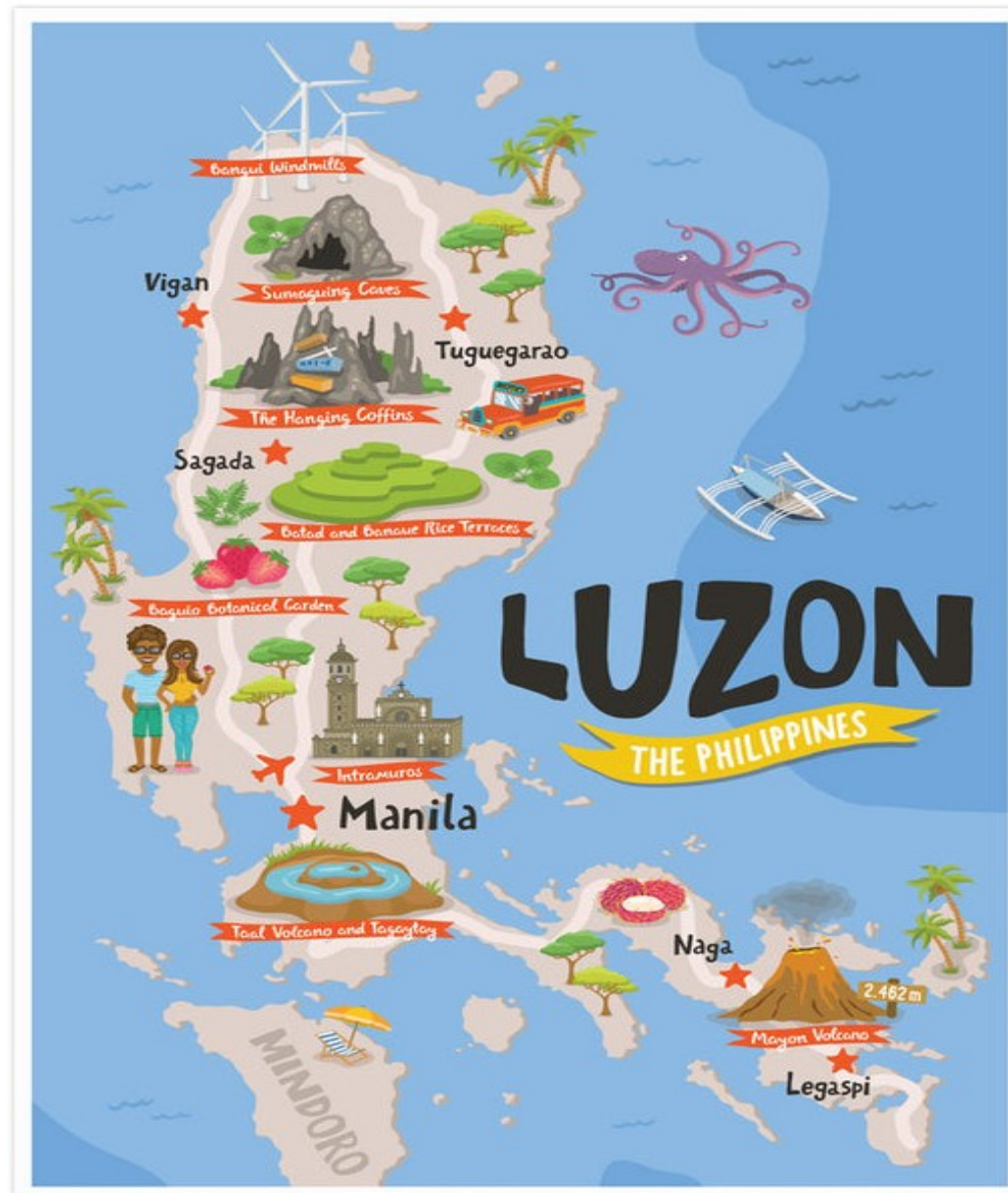
I'd like to tell you about a trip I made to the Philippines last summer with my wife Salve, her brother Dhoy and his wife, and their 3 daughters, all of whom live in San Francisco. We spent most of our time on the island of Masbate, where the 3 adults grew up. Masbate is circled; it's in the geographical center.



Here's the Filipino flag. The sun with 8 rays represents the 8 provinces that revolted against Spain in 1896. The 3 stars stand for the 3 principal areas of the Philippines: Luzon, Mindanao, and the Visayas.



The Philippines is about 3/4 of the area of California and has a population of 110 million. Luzon is the largest island, with Manila dominating a huge natural harbor. Mindanao is the big island in the south. The Visayas consist of many smaller islands including Masbate.



Here's a tourist map of Luzon. You'll notice the volcano in the lower right, near the city of Legaspi. That was our destination on July 15 when we caught a ferry from Masbate City to the port of Pilar in southern Luzon.

We saw these posters at the ferry terminal promoting Masbate's annual rodeo, which is the biggest in the country:



We arrived in Pilar after a 2-hour trip.



There we found a minibus driver who drove us to Legazpi, 2 hours north. We settled into a comfortable hotel, and the next day hired a driver with an 8-seat van to take us around. Two other relatives had joined us for the trip, so we were a total of 10. Most Filipinos have no sense of personal space. The van usually looked like this.



We didn't think we'd be stopped by a cop because practically no one pays attention to traffic laws in the Philippines. You hardly ever see stop signs, traffic lights, or crosswalks, and the laws on seat belts and helmets are pretty much ignored. You take your life in your hands when you try to zip across the street amidst the flow of motorcycles and tricycles.

We weren't worried about running out of gas because so many little stores sell it by the liter in Coke bottles.



By the way, gasoline in the Philippines has almost the same price as in the US. -- \$4 to \$5 a gallon. Whenever we drove somewhere, relatives wanted to come with us and fill the vehicle. The average Filipino income is about one-twentieth that of the average American, so gasoline for recreation is a luxury.

My traveling companions were all Catholics, so we stopped to visit Daraga Church outside of Legazpi. It was built in 1773 and is a National Cultural Treasure of the Philippines. The walls are made of volcanic rocks, which are rich in the area.



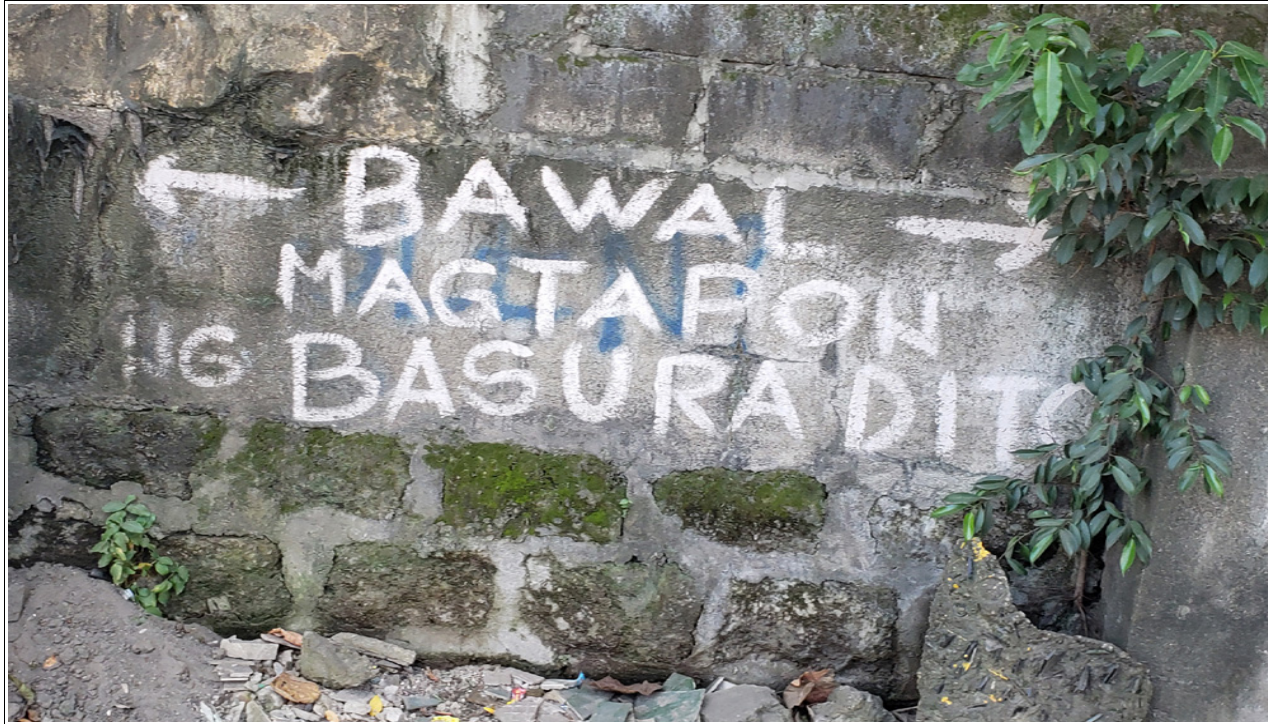
It was well worth the visit. Mass was in progress, but it was in the Bicol language, which our party could not understand. The side aisles displayed statues of famous saints. Young boys walked around selling garlands of sampaguitas, the fragrant national flower, to place around the neck of a favorite saint.

The town of Daraga was founded by people from the town of Cagsawa near Mayon Volcano, who sought a safer place to live. Mayon has erupted over 50 times in the past 500 years.

The sign in the church parking lot.



Trash is a major major problem in the Philippines. Most people just throw their candy wrappers, empty bottles, plastic bags, and cigarette butts on the ground, partly because you see so few trash cans. Here's a sign that you see everywhere in the Philippines:



Bawal magtapon ng basura dito: Forbidden to leave trash here.

We also visited the Cagsawa ruins, the legacy of the people of Cagsawa who unfortunately decided to stay, despite the rumblings of an angry volcano. The bell tower is all that remains of a church built in 1724.



Mayon blew its top on February 1, 1814, burying Cagsawa with dark ash and rock fragments up to 30 feet deep. It was the most lethal eruption in Mayon's recorded history, and took the lives of about 1200 Filipinos.

Today the Cagsawa ruins are surrounded not by lava, but by tourist shops selling snacks and souvenirs. I bought a rubber chicken.



That same day we visited Albay Park and Wildlife, a zoo with hundreds of animals from around the world. The tickets were 90 cents for adults and 40 cents for kids.



It's a fun place for kids because you can rent bikes and get right up close to many animals. Here's my niece Regina approaching a friendly donkey.



And here's a bird I'd never seen before, a cassowary. It is the most dangerous bird in the world.



The place was a bargain for families, but frankly it was a pretty sad spectacle. Many of the animals had just one of each, and they must have been very lonely. I saw a lion in a tiny concrete cage, pacing back and forth ceaselessly.

A reviewer from Trip Advisor wrote: "This place is so terrible it should be closed down. The animals are kept in the smallest cages with nothing in them but dust and sharp rusty metal that's falling off the ceiling. I cannot believe this place is allowed to stay open. You can clearly see how mistreated these poor animals are. It is disgusting !!! Do not go here !!!"

Later that day, we visited a park with a beautiful landscape view of the city and some giant hand sculptures.





During our stay we had caught glimpses of Mayon volcano, which is an almost perfect cone. But we were disappointed because the peak always seemed to be covered in clouds, like a giant's head wrapped in cotton wool.



Finally, on our last night in Legazpi, we were at a shopping mall when darkness fell, and we heard people repeating the word bulcano -- volcano. The food court had an outdoor viewing platform with a clear view of Mayon, and I joined the crowd to watch. The mountain put on a spectacular show. You could see the fire at the top, and lava pouring slowly down the sides.



That was the highlight of our trip to southern Luzon. But later we flew to Manila and spent a week driving around central Luzon. Stay tuned for More Postcards from Luzon.