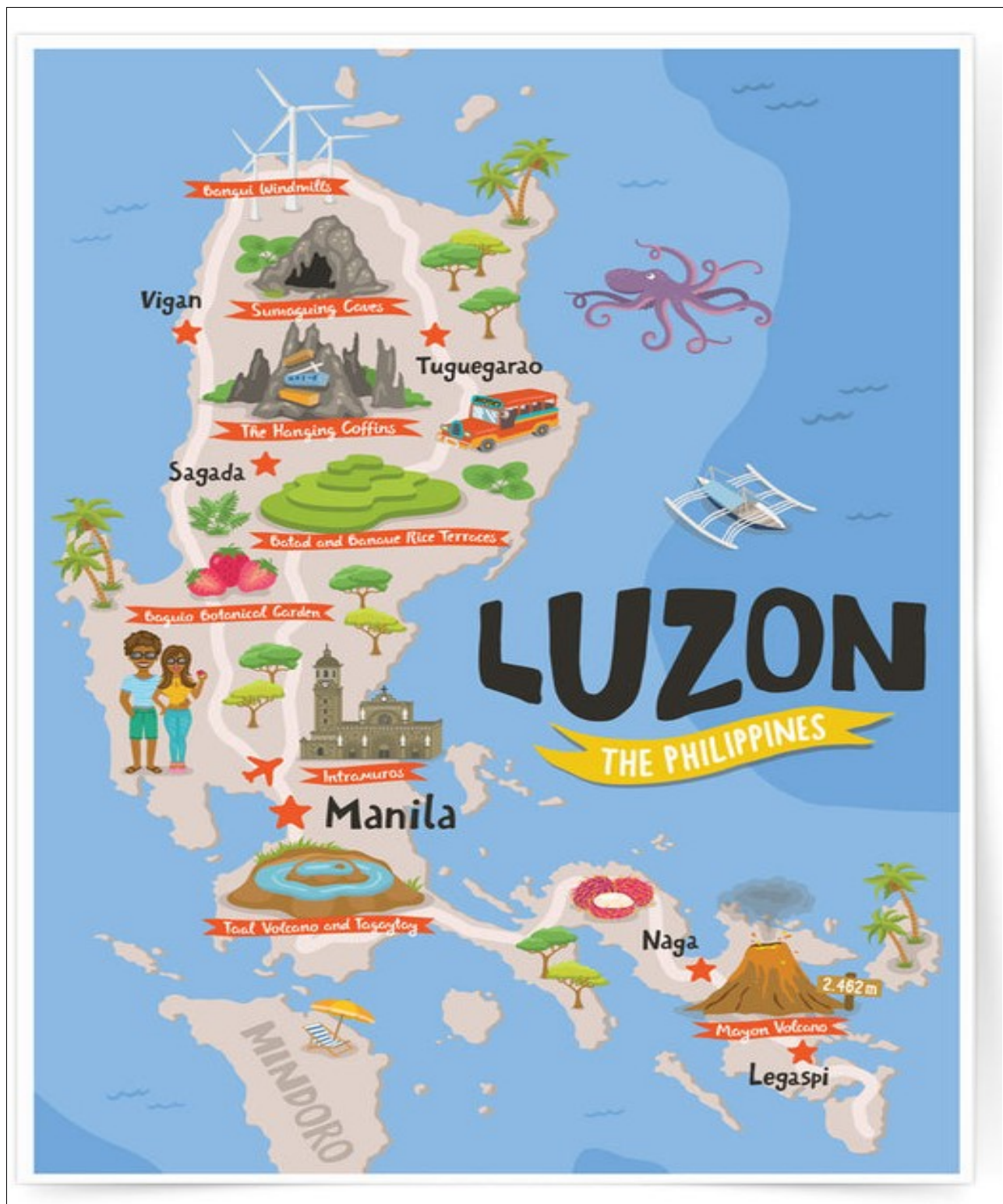


Thrillin' Manila  
by Max Millard



From 1565 until 1815, the most important vehicle linking Asia with the New World was the Spanish galleon. These were enormous ships, shaped like Noah's Ark, that carried a crew of 250 men and boys between Acapulco, Mexico and Manila, Philippines. They brought new crops to Asia including corn, potatoes, tomatoes, avocados, chili peppers, cacao, coffee, squash and peanuts, which all became part of the Filipino diet. From Asia they took silk, Chinese porcelain, ivory, precious stones, and spices that were literally worth their weight in gold.



The galleon trade ended when Mexico began its war of independence from Spain, but Manila kept growing,. Today it's a city of 15 million set in one of the world's finest natural harbors. It's as modern as any major city in the world, with world-class museums, restaurants and shopping malls.





**early morning in Manila**

Unfortunately, it has no subway system, and the traffic is in constant overload.



**rush hour**



Just in the last year the city debuted a ride-sharing service called Grabcar, which works like Uber. I was in Manila this summer, which is the rainy season. My phone kept flashing me a red rainfall warning, which meant that torrential rain was expected, with severe flooding in low areas. When that happens, the Grabcar drivers often cancel their trips.

But it doesn't stop the jeepneys, the public transportation vans designed after jeeps used by the U.S. Army in World War II.



**jeepney in Manila**

The city has four daily newspapers in English, which cost 40 cents each, and are at least as good as the *San Francisco Chronicle*. But the only place that sells them is the 7/11 stores.

I read the papers whenever I could get them. Here's an excerpt from a column by Pia Roces Morato:in the Philippine Star, August 7, 2026.

“If you live in Metro Manila, your day begins not with ambition, but with a series of endurance tests. You wake up before dawn to beat a traffic gridlock that will steal four hours of your life. You stand in a line that snakes around a train station, wait for a bus that may never come or squeeze into a jeepney under a heat wave that turns the air into heavy wool. By the time you ... reach your workplace, you have already run an invisible marathon.”

“... we are a nation intoxicated by the myth of our own resilience. For decades, we have worn our ability to adapt, endure and survive as a badge of honor.

But “As our national hero Jose Rizal said: ‘There are no tyrants where there are no slaves.’ When a society glorifies its ability to suffer with a smile or adapt endlessly to broken systems, it inadvertently acts as the slave.”



### **Metrobank Center, tallest building in Manila**

Despite these problems, Filipinos from all over the country flock to Manila because it's a place where they can always find work. I have several Filipino relatives in Masbate in the central Philippines who left their wives and children to work in Manila, so they could send money home. They can't visit their families often because It's a 20-hour trip by bus and ferry. There are no direct flights.



They work as drivers, nannies, security guards, or BPOs. That stands for business process outsourcing. It means they use their English language skills to help clients by phone, for everything from airline reservations to computer assistance. If they can't find a job in Manila, they can sign up with an agency to become an OFW, or overseas Filipino worker. More than 2 million Filipinos choose that route. They are most commonly sent to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates.

My hotel was a short walk from the Mall of Asia, one of the 10 biggest malls in the world.



**Mall of Asia**

The security guards allow only well-dressed people and foreigners to enter. It's a city within a city, with hundreds of shops and restaurants, a skating rink, a regulation soccer field, and just this year, the Museo del Galeón, a museum with a full-size replica of a Spanish galleon from 1603. You can walk the decks and imagine life on board 400 years ago.



## **Museo del Galeón**

Another Manila hot spot is the Venice Grand Canal Mall. The centerpiece is a long artificial lake with bridges, gondolas, and actors dressed for carnival season. You can ride with a gondolier who sings Italian opera as he paddles you from one end to the other. The mall



has lots of entertainment for kids, including robot animals that they can mount and ride around.



**Grand Canal, Manila**







**robot animal at Venice Grand Canal Mall**

Most of the mall's products are expensive imports. If you want to buy a pair of crocs, they'll cost you at least \$50. But on the street you can buy a knockoff pair for \$2.



**sign at mall**





**4 restrooms at mall**



**trans only**

If you went to Manila and took in just the hotels and malls, you might think the Philippines was prosperous.



**Johnn Lemon booth at mall**



**National Museum of Natural History, Manila**





**13<sup>th</sup> century water jar**



**20<sup>th</sup> century water jar used by Salve's family**

But there's another Manila, which you pass through on your way to the airport. What you see is a reminder that in World War II, when the Americans and Filipinos drove out the Japanese invaders, eighty percent of Manila was reduced to rubble, and 100,000 civilians died. The city was never rebuilt according to any grand design.

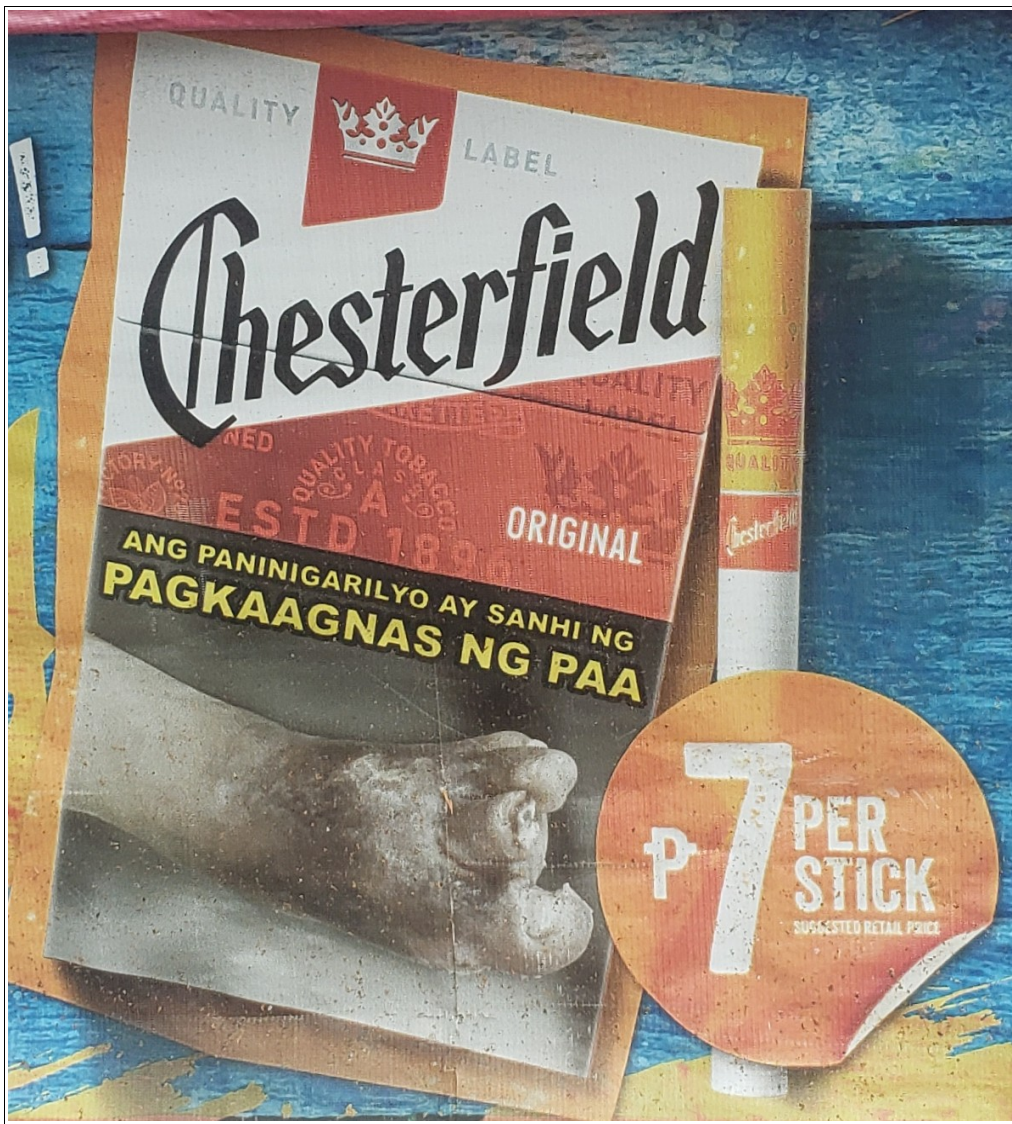
Outside the downtown, you'll see immense puddles of rainwater because of poor drainage, weeds sprouting from crumbling concrete, beggars at stop lights, neon signs with letters missing, and shapeless buildings like broken crates, with jumbles of electric wire crisscrossing the skyline. There are no suburbs – just slums with sheet-metal roofs and piles of garbage.

One improvement I've noticed since my first trip to Manila 16 years ago is that hardly anyone smokes in public anymore. You see these types of ads everywhere:





**translation: smoking causes lung disease**



**translation: smoking causes gangrene**

This was my fifth trip to Manila, but I was nervous because I'd read about the Iran war's devastating effect on the Philippine economy. I thought people would be desperate. The Philippines is the world's number one importer of rice, and the cost has gone way up this year. The minimum wage in Metro Manila is one dollar and 30 cents per hour, while gasoline is about the same price as in the U.S.

But I found the country hardly affected by the war. I think it's because the Philippines was never integrated into the global economy, and large parts of the country have been in an ongoing recession for decades.



The President of the Philippines, Bongbong Marcos, is the son of Ferdinand Marcos, the dictator who looted the country of billions of dollars and fled to Hawaii in 1986. The money was never returned. The current vice president, Sara Duterte, is now in the middle of an impeachment trial. She's the daughter of the previous president, Rodrigo Duterte, who is in jail at the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands for alleged crimes against humanity. The country rots from the top down.

Just last year the headlines exploded with a scandal about ghost flood control projects. Contractors received government money and pretended to work on flood control, but just kept the cash and did nothing. Manila is one of the biggest victims. On just one day this month, Manila was drenched with 8 inches of rain in 24 hours, paralyzing the transport system and forcing pedestrians to risk infection by wading through contaminated water.

Over the past 100 years, no country in Asia has received as much American aid as the Philippines. But in the words of historian Robert D. Kaplan, "the Philippines has remained among the most corrupt, dysfunctional, intractable, and poverty-stricken societies in maritime Asia, with Africa-like slums and Latin America-style fatalism and class divides."

But just as they did during the pandemic, Filipinos just keep going, trying to survive, even while the government ignores their plight.

Manila represents the best and the worst of the Philippines. If you're planning a trip to Asia, why not stop there for a few days, and hit the high spots? I guarantee: Manila will thrill ya.



**Mabuhay from Manila!**



