

EARTH FIRE & WATER

FROM VOLCANOES TO WHITE-SAND BEACHES AND BUSTLING CITIES TO RICE TERRACES, THE PHILIPPINES IS A COUNTRY OF CONTRASTS. WITH 7,107 ISLANDS MAKING UP THE ARCHIPELAGO, THE PEARL OF THE ORIENT IS A TREASURE-TROVE OF ADVENTURE

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The thick air of Manila engulfs me as I step out of the plush lobby of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Makati and straight into the waiting air-conditioned van. "Welcome to the Philippines," says guide Richard from Baron Travel, flashing his pearly whites in a face-splitting grin. Richard and driver Patrick are whisking my friend, Tracey and I away for the day. We've come to the Philippines for a week of outdoor adventure, and a volcano hike seems like a good place to start.

The guys keep a friendly banter going as we weave through Manila's congested road network. "See all of this? It's all owned by one person," says Richard, gesticulating to the Ayala Center, a recreational, shopping, dining and entertainment development that encompasses several of the city's upscale malls and hotels, stretching over 50 hectares. Despite the traffic and the crowds – Manila is one of the most densely populated cities in the world – there's a plethora of greenery to greet the shoppers, who are out in full force.

In under an hour we reach the city of Tagaytay, one of the Philippines' most popular domestic tourist destinations. "You have to try coconut pie," Richard directs. "It's the specialty here." We pull in to a tiny store, packed with local products from civet coffee to sweets. "No, not that one," Richard says as Tracey lifts a boxed coconut pie off the shelf. He places his hand on the lid of each box. "This is the one. It's still warm," he confirms. ⇒

Lava flows from the Mayon Volcano with its near-perfect cone in the province of Albay, on the island of Luzon in the Philippines.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Taal Volcano; diving with whale sharks at Donsol; Mayon ATV Tour provide quad bike adventures to the lava flow of Mayon Volcano; a coconut cracked open on the peak of Taal Volcano; the Mandarin Oriental's Club Lounge is the perfect place to relax; *bangka*, local outrigger-boats transport visitors to Volcano Island; horses on the trail to the top of Taal Volcano.



This is Vulcan Point, a geological anomaly; an island in a lake, on an island in a lake, on an island



The Philippines is a scuba-diver's paradise, with a phenomenal array of aquatic life, and dive sites dot the resort's surrounds

Munching on slices of the warm, lightly-spiced pie, our noses pressed to the van windows it's easy to see the appeal of this area. The high altitude city lies along Tagaytay Ridge stretching around 32 kilometres from Mount Batulao to Mount Sungay, the province's highest point. Lush, green hills point to the horizon, overlooking the expanse of Taal Lake, blue-tinted volcanic peaks rising from the centre of the freshwater expanse like icebergs.

"We're actually on the rim of a volcano," Richard explains as we stop to take in the vista. "Don't worry, it erupted a long time ago," he reassures, avoiding mentioning that it is still classified as an active volcano – the second most active in the Philippines with 33 historical eruptions, although none since 1977. "What about that one?" I ask, pointing to Volcano Island in the centre of the lake. "That's where you're going," Richard says, sidestepping the question deftly.

Minutes later our new guide, June, settles us into a *bangka*, the outrigger-boat that will transport us to Volcano Island. He hands us a sheet of orange plastic as protection from the spray as he motors away from the dock, racing over the waves that ripple across the lake's surface.

Locals gaze at us curiously as we disembark onto the slate-grey sand of the island. "Do you want to ride a horse or walk?" June asks. "Walk. Definitely walk," Tracey replies emphatically, looking at the motley assortment of diminutive horses tethered nearby. Neither of us are featherweights and it seems unfair to weigh down the small-but-sturdy steeds with our bulk.

Judging by the clouds of dust kicked into the air on the trail, most visitors take the horses. "That's where they should offer them. I might have been tempted," Tracey mutters when we glimpse the steep finale ahead. Shuffling past natural vents pumping steam out into the sunlight, an indication of the volcano's inner life, we tackle the last incline.

The view at the top is worth every breath of dust-packed air. We look down into the volcano's crater-lake, where another island pokes its tip above the water. This is Vulcan Point, a geological anomaly, an island in a

lake, on an island in a lake, on an island. It's best admired while sipping coconut water from coconuts cracked open to order by the store-keeper on the rim.

No ordinary meal would suffice after a volcanic adventure, so we track down an epicurean journey at the Sofitel Philippine Plaza. The hotel's signature restaurant, Spiral, offers a buffet like no other. Food stations stretch as far as the eye can see, full of chefs circling in a merry dance as they constantly prepare fresh dishes to feed the waiting patrons. Spiral is divided into 21 dining *ateliers*, leading diners across the globe. Every cuisine imaginable is represented, from freshly sliced sashimi at the Japanese atelier to steam baskets of delicious *shu mai* at the dimsum station and seared *foie gras* at the French stove. It's hard to decide whether the *piece de resistance* is L'Epicerie, the cheese room packed with *fromage* and charcuterie from across the globe, or the Chocolaterie, where expert chocolatiers create artisanal truffles and pralines. You could eat for weeks here without ever tasting the same dish twice.

Tracey makes a bee-line for fresh seafood at L'Ecailler, while I head towards the Korean station choosing a sizzling serving of *bulgogi* [Korean barbecue]. Spiral is buffet meets fine dining, with the best aspects of both – quality food, freshly-prepared – and judging by the packed room, it's been a hit with the locals.

Staying in a comfortable suite on the Mandarin Oriental's Club Floor means access to the Club Lounge, the perfect place for a relaxed start to the day. Freshly-squeezed juices, a selection of pastries, and a full a la carte menu greet us in the morning, fortifying us for the quick flight to Legazpi in Albay Province. The end goal is Misibis Bay Resort on Cagaray Island, but first we have another volcano to explore.

Misibis Bay's activities manager, Arlie Juarez, greets us at the airport with an assessing glance. "How tired are you?" he asks. "Not very," we say. "Great. Lunch then an ATV tour," he grins, bundling us into a van. After a quick bite at Misibis Bay's sister hotel, Hotel Venezia, and a change of clothes, we're ready. ⇒



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: A rice farmer working in his paddy with Mayon volcano in background; aerial view of Misibis Bay; Spiral restaurant at the Sofitel Philippine Plaza; Bicol Express, a local specialty dish at Misibis Bay.

The return trip takes us through local villages. Rice paddies provide a vibrant green contrast to small homes of thatch and bamboo



The weather's playing along nicely. The sun peeks out from behind a scattering of ominously-dark clouds.

Ramil from MayonATVTour will be leading our adventure, but first we need to learn to drive. "This is the accelerator," he says, pointing to a lever on the left handle bar, "...the brakes are here, and the emergency brake is here. Now practice." I slowly press my left thumb on the accelerator and the quad bike growls, moving barely an inch. A little more pressure and I'm on the move, building up courage as I complete my first circuit, gliding in to a smooth stop next to Ramil. "Great driving," he says approvingly as I promptly stall.

When Ramil deems our skills sufficient, we cautiously head onto the road in single file, picking up speed as we go. A left-hand turn and we are off-roading, roaring over rocks and through gravel. Inching gingerly through our first river crossing I breathe a sigh of relief when I reach the safety of the far bank.

We're aiming for the Mayon Volcano, Taal's competitor in terms of activity, erupting over 48 times in the past 400 years. The last major eruption was in 2009, although a brief phreatic eruption last year produced ash clouds that

reached 500 meters above the volcano's summit; a summit currently obscured by a blanket of clouds.

Parking the ATV in a neat row, we climb a bank of lava rocks, landing at the base of one of Mayon's lava flows. "Look," says Arlie, holding out his phone with a photo of the volcano mid-eruption, the flows glowing an angry-red. "I took that photo from over there," he says, pointing to a distant hill. We're standing on a helicopter landing pad. A dark road of jagged rocks climbs directly up the sides of the volcano, looking like something from the fabled land of Mordor from *Lord of the Rings*.

The return trip takes us through local villages. Rice paddies provide a vibrant green contrast to small homes of thatch and bamboo. Children rush out to wave a greeting, giggling as we pass, and the occasional chicken crosses the road without a punch line. It's an idyllic, peaceful scene despite the ever-present threat of the volcano.

A trio of dancers dressed in local outfits welcomes us to Misibis Bay Resort, which covers five hectares of lush, green land,



Cagaray is the ideal place for adventure-seekers, with the rivers, caves, beaches and mountains surrounding Misibis Bay representing a microcosm of the natural wonders of the Philippines

fringed by golden sands. Our deluxe villa has a beach-house feel; light and airy décor complementing its shoreline position. Cagaray is the ideal place for adventure-seekers, with the rivers, caves, beaches and mountains surrounding Misibis Bay representing a microcosm of the natural wonders of the Philippines. Perusing the extensive activities list we realise there is so much to do here and not enough time; from sailing to Segways, snorkelling to kayaking, helicopter tours to zip lines.

The Philippines is a scuba-diver's paradise, and dive sites dot the resort's surrounds. From a manta cleaning station to shark-spotting sites and "Tuna Alley" the ocean provides, although it's also had its share of knocks. "The resort area was badly damaged by dynamite fishing," Arlie explains, "But Misibis Bay spent a lot of money on buying giant clams and transplanting them here, and now the coral is growing back and the marine life is coming."

As a keen scuba diver, I've long held a fascination for big fish, and whale sharks are at the top of the list. The whale shark interactive experience at Donsol, around two

hours away, allows you to snorkel alongside the gentle giants of the sea. While the krill-eaters can also be spotted at some of the island's dive sites, in Donsol Bay they regularly swim close to the surface, allowing local fishermen retrained as guides to spot them and drop snorkellers into the water nearby. "This is nature though," warns Arlie while we book. "There's no guarantee they'll show up. Yesterday there were six, but today there was only one. And we have to leave early."

Bleary-eyed at 6am we trudge to the van. The sky is dark and it's drizzling. "Do you think we'll see any?" whispers Tracey. "Whales sharks don't care if it's raining. Fingers crossed," I reply. Pulling into Donsol, we are greeted with the news that the coastguard has cancelled all boats – the winds are too dangerous. There'll be no whale shark spotting today.

Back at Misibis Bay we while away the day on watersports. Massages at the in-house spa also console us, all thoughts of opportunities-missed erased by our therapists' soothing hands. As we dine on deliciously spicy Singaporean chili crab at the resort's Spice Market restaurant we reach a resolution; we'll just have to come back. 🍷

EXPERIENCE THE PHILIPPINES

FOR SLEEPING: MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL, MANILA

The Mandarin Oriental Hotel, in the heart of Makati, Manila's business district, offers premium luxury and exceptional service with a smile, from the moment you arrive. The guest suites are beautifully appointed, and the concierge can arrange airport transfers and travel across the city. Splurge on a Club room to receive access to the suave Club Lounge, the ideal spot for an evening aperitif.

WWW.MANDARINORIENTAL.COM/MANILA

FOR TAAL TOURS: BARON TRAVEL

Baron Travel is an internationally-recognised and accredited full service travel company. Whether you're looking for domestic flight tickets, island-hopping, or Taal Volcano tours, their friendly staff will eagerly help.

WWW.BARONTRAVEL.PH

FOR WATERSPORTS: MISIBIS BAY RESORT

Misibis Bay is a private tropical hideaway built on a pristine stretch of beach along the southern tip of Cagaray island in Bacacay, Albay. The five-hectare island resort is a short hop from Legazpi, a 50-minute flight from Manila. The highlight is the multitude of adventures on offer, from volcano treks to snorkelling with whale sharks and scuba diving.

WWW.MISIBISBAY.COM

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