

# Manila: finding its place as a great regional city

**IT'S sprawlingly big, a collection of several cities. This diversity of districts, each with its own focal points, might be the reason why some people under-estimate Metro Manila. In truth, this is one of the key business centres of Asia and capital of a country that has an increasing regional influence.**

Metro Manila is home to the Asian Development Bank, one of the most vital factors in the development of Asia's infrastructure....and a huge source of business for suppliers and service contractors.

The city's regional and global status is coming through more clearly as major conferences and other events utilise its MICE facilities and services. And it's headquarters for Philippines Airlines, a carrier which has been to the brink and back again, virtually reinventing itself as it staved off a dual collapse in cashflow and morale.

Away from business and politics, Manila is also guardian of a colourful but rather tragic heritage, tangibly represented by unique areas such as Intramuros and Fort Santiago.

All this and it's a pleasant place to be. There's every Asian cuisine to hand, notably the country's own pinoy specialities, and the shopping is good for purchases from clothing to jewellery, electronics to craftware. Buy candied pili nuts to crunch on (my favourite — I pig out on them), sip a glass of premium Tanduay Rum, wander the Baywalk (bayside, as its name suggests) at Roxas Boulevard under carnival lights for entertainment and sustenance, explore the huge malls with outlets from the internationally famous to the locally specialist.

The business infrastructure is good: a wide choice of hotels, with new



establishments due to come on stream in 2005 — such as the Crowne Plaza alongside the Holiday Inn Galleria Manila in Pasig City, just a few minutes' walk to the Asian Development Bank and with the vast Robinson Mall integral to the complex.

**Bottom line:** this is a pleasant city, effective to do business in.

But Manila is definitely misunderstood. People who have not visited ask about the lack of a defined central district. But there is a CBD, in Makati City where the buzz of business grabs you the moment you're out of the taxi and standing on the sidewalk in the shade of office towers. And there are other focal points, such as the Malate nightlife district.

The biggest negative in recent years has been the gloomy international news coverage. Presidential shenanigans (tidied up under the command of the tough President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo), would-be army coups and

other unrest (there have been some problems but they were much less of a factor than media stories suggested), typhoons (some regions of the Philippines were badly hit, but Manila's damage was limited to a little flooding), kidnappings and Islamic separatists.

Those kidnappings and separatist action has occasioned some pretty damning travel advisories from Australia and other countries. Fair enough, governments are required to do the best by their citizens and there have been some grounds for worry in the past.

Tourism authorities endeavour to put the dangers in perspective and rightly assess that visitors are unlikely to get caught up in violence. But it's a good idea to give Mindanao a miss for the time being, especially coastal resorts. The Zamboanga Peninsula and the Sulu Archipelago, long featured on the Australian travel advisory, would also



## A cleaner, safer place to be now

be best omitted from the travel schedule for now.

But Manila itself is as safe as any big Asian or other world city, far from perfect in terms of personal security but also far from dangerous.

The chances of being kidnapped probably rank alongside those of being hit by lightning or winning Lotto's top prize two weeks in a row.

Kidnapping was, regrettably, a growth industry in Manila and other parts of the country until only a few years ago. Corrupt police helped this along. The Macapagal-Arroyo administration set out to clean up both kidnapping gangs and the cops and has gone a long way towards achieving these goals.

The turning point on kidnapping came when a young female Coca-Cola executive was killed and her body dumped. The incident became a symbol of the clean-up campaign.

Rogue cab drivers and muggers can be a hassle, but to read some advisories you'd think visitors were under constant siege. Commonsense goes a long way, as it does everywhere, including one's home city.

Security measures are very evident in Metro Manila. Even shopping malls have body-search checkpoints and security guards patrol all malls and other commercial properties. They are overtly polite and welcoming to obvious visitors which can on occasions be disconcerting for those of us more used to security personnel opting for threatening frowns.

Manila will come back into its own over the next few years as a major trading centre, transport hub and regional focal point.

Air links between Manila and Australasia are likely to get better, with Philippine Airlines looking to improve services to Sydney and Melbourne, add Brisbane and — further down the track — consider Auckland which is nowadays served by a large number of other Asian carriers.



## Getting around Manila

TAXIS, taxis, taxis... that's my call on moving around Metro Manila. Longer stay business visitors might find the urban rail system useful but it doesn't have the spread or flexibility that make its counterparts in Singapore and Hong Kong so indispensable.

Chauffeur-driven cars are an option. These can be booked in advance through travel agents or on an ad hoc basis through your hotel.

Using a rental car in Metro Manila isn't a good idea. You'll get lost, for sure, and driving conditions are such that you'll be a nervous wreck by lunchtime. Metro Manila drivers work on a bluff basis, betting that other vehicles will give way. A novice is likely to be shunted from lane to lane by charging jeepneys, buses and heavy trucks...all with their horns blaring.

It's good fun if you're a passenger but not if you're behind the wheel.

Taxi drivers have the art and, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, tend towards the aggressive side. That's in driving techniques — personally I find Manila cab drivers mostly pleasant, cheerful, ready with advice for a visitor and full of surprisingly up to date gossip, especially on political matters.

Cab ranks — real or makeshift — can be found by hotels, shopping malls and major office blocks. Or hail one from the sidewalk — the driver will pull in if he judges it possible, although solid traffic sometimes makes this difficult. Don't step into a traffic lane unless it is totally at a standstill.

Go by the meter, which is checked and should be dependable. Negotiating fixed rates is to be avoided, unless you do this through the hotel concierge — some hotels have affiliated cabs and promote fixed rate trips to key spots such as central Makati or the Asian Development Bank.

Have small notes and coins to hand because many cab drivers carry little change. A small tip is expected — 10 to 20 pesos usually suffices unless the cab driver has been extra-helpful.

Many hotels offer transfers from Ninoy Aquino International Airport but these should be arranged in advance. Well before departure, whether using a cab or hotel transfer, check with the concierge or reception as to how long it will take — traffic congestion can bring substantial delays.