

Southeast Luzon



The southern Luzon peninsula of Bicol is home to two of the Philippines' emblematic tourist attractions: the whale sharks of Donsol and the regal – and deadly – Mt Mayon volcano.

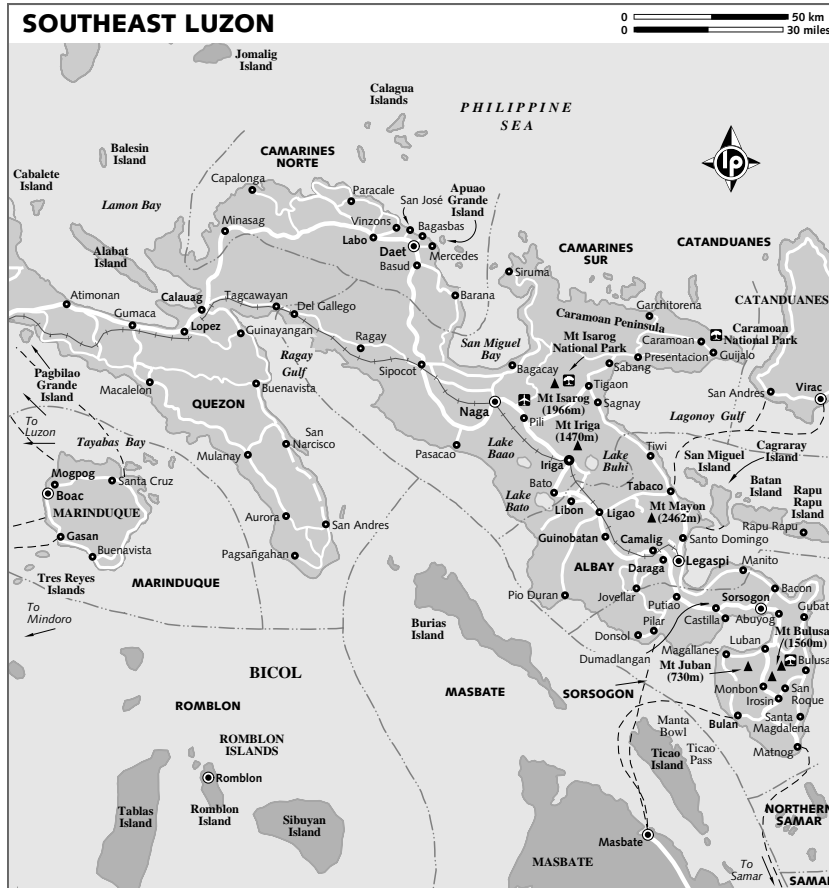
But the outdoor action hardly stops there. Bicol is home to no less than 22 volcanos, all of which can be climbed. Secluded beaches, limestone cliffs and nonpareil coastal exploration opportunities are available on the Caramoan Peninsula and elsewhere. Dive outfits have sprouted up recently to take advantage of newly discovered sites like the 'manta bowl' in Ticao Pass, off southwest Sorsogon, and Bagasbas Beach, near Daet, is one of the country's more laid-back and accessible surfing locales.

If you're not an adrenaline junkie, Bicol offers fiery food cooked in coconut milk, dozens of old baroque Spanish churches and the yearly pilgrimage to Naga's Peñafrancia Festival. Gorgeous white-sand beaches are everywhere and there are some reasonably priced high-end resorts for those who just want to relax. Bags, hats and mats made of the super-strong abaca fibre can be bought cheaply throughout the province.

Lying off Bicol's east coast is the pristine and very wet island province of Catanduanes, known for an erratic but sometimes perfect wave known as Majestics. Marinduque island, also unspoiled, lies to the west between Bicol and Mindoro. Here you can join a Passion play during the popular Moriones Festival, take the scenic drive around Mt Malindig in the south of the island or (should you feel the urge) repent your sins in Boac's lovely church.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Swimming alongside Bicol's gentle giants, the whale sharks of **Donsol** (p194)
- Scrambling up Bicol's decidedly nongentle giant, 'perfect' **Mt Mayon** (p192)
- Relaxing and waiting for the legendary Majestics surf break to kick in on **Catanduanes** (p198)
- Learning to hang 10 at equally fickle **Bagasbas Beach** (p186), outside Daet
- Exploring the limestone cliffs and pristine beaches of the beautiful **Caramoan Peninsula** (p189)
- Catching rays on the myriad isolated **white-sand beaches** of the Pacific Coast
- Watching rays on a dive trip to the '**manta bowl**' (p191) in Ticao Pass
- Mingling with mischievous masked men at Marinduque's wild **Moriones Festival** (p201)



Climate

Southeast Luzon's wet season begins and ends a little later than in Manila and the rest of Luzon. It kicks in around late August and lasts until February, but rain is likely at any time of the year, especially on the eastern (Pacific) side. Typhoon season is July to November. Most typhoons pass by a couple of hundred kilometres offshore, but they occasionally make landfall on the eastern shore.

Language

Most Bicolanos speak Bicol, but Filipino is also widely spoken and universally understood. Here's a language tip: numbers in Bicol correspond roughly to numbers in Spanish.

The region does not get a lot of tourists, so people's English is spotty outside the major cities. The main language in Marinduque, technically part of the Visayas, is Filipino.

Dangers & Annoyances

Bicol once had a reputation for being a prime base of the New People's Army (NPA). Today the NPA is a marginalised force, although every now and then you'll read of shoot-outs between the NPA and government forces, usually in remote areas. Despite the alarmist warnings of the US and Filipino governments, which categorise it as a terrorist outfit, the NPA rarely if ever hassles tourists. You only stand a chance of running into the NPA if you are way off the

beaten track, and even then it's extremely unlikely. Still, if you're worried about it, stick to the cities and the main trekking routes, like Mt Mayon and Mt Isarog.

Getting There & Away

The best way to get to Southeast Luzon is to take a comfortable 29-seat deluxe bus from Manila. These travel at night and cost only about P200 more than regular air-con buses. Most of the major bus companies servicing Bicol offer a deluxe service to the major cities. You can also fly to Naga, Legaspi, Catanduanes and Marinduque for about SUS55 one way. See those sections for specifics.

The islands of Marinduque and Catanduanes are served by frequent ferries. You can also take ferries from Matnog, at the southern tip of Bicol, to Samar, and from Pilar, near Donsol, to Masbate. See those sections for details.

BICOL

Bicol technically includes Luzon's southeastern peninsula and the islands of Catanduanes and Masbate, but this section of the chapter covers peninsular Bicol only. Catanduanes (p196) is covered in a separate section later in this chapter, and Masbate (p344) is included in the Visayas chapter.

DAET

☎ 054 / pop 80,632

In a country where it has become almost clichéd to describe cities as 'choked' with tricycles, Daet brings new meaning to the term. Indeed, during business hours it's almost impossible to cross the main thoroughfare, Vinzons Ave, on foot. Luckily one can escape the madness 4km north of town at Bagasbas Beach, a laid-back surfers' hang-out with maddeningly inconsistent waves.

Information

The major banks are well represented here and all have ATMs.

Joshnet (per hr P20; 7am-midnight) is one of several Internet cafés in town. It's at the south end of Vinzons Ave.

Activities

The surfing is best when typhoons churn up the Pacific's waters between August and

October. When the conditions are right, Bagasbas Beach, with its sandy bottom, is the perfect place to learn. The friendly family-run 1.4.3.4.4 Snack Hauz (☎ 440 1946) is surfer HQ and has a couple of boards for rent (P150 per hour). Instruction is available from any of the local surfing whiz kids (P150 per hour).

Snack Hauz proprietor Anton is a member of the Bagasbas Wave Riders Club and can tell you all you need to know. Bigger waves are found near Mercedes to the south and San José to the north. Call Anton for surf reports.

Be careful swimming here when surf's up; as many as 40 people get stuck in the rip each year.

From Mercedes, 6.5km east of town (P30 by tricycle), you can hire a boat to explore the islands in San Miguel Bay, including the beautiful white-sand beaches of nearby Apua Grande Island, site of a once-grand but now crumbling resort.

Sleeping

There's little viable accommodation in Bagasbas. Stay in Daet proper.

Canimog Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 440 2029; San Vicente Rd; d from P990; p a) Located out by Central Terminal, it's quieter, nicer and newer than anything in the centre. Rooms have wooden floors, big TVs, local artwork and toilets worthy of the name.

Dolor Hotel (☎ 721 2167; Vinzons Ave; d with fan/air-con P400/650) This is decent value and clean by Daet's less-than-lofty standards. Rooms are spacious but resourceful mosquitoes have a way of slipping through the minuscule cracks in the window frames. TV costs P50 extra.

Mines Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 571 2734; Vinzons Ave; s/d with fan P200/250, s/d with air-con P500/550) There are some very nice renovated rooms here and some disastrous old rooms with rocks for pillows – bring painkillers for the inevitable stiff neck.

Wiltan Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 440 2525; Vinzons Ave; s/d with fan P200/300, s/d with air-con P450/675) Has the noisy and tacky personality of a '70s talk-show host, but the rooms are OK.

Eating & Drinking

Alvino's Pizza House (☎ 440 1085; Bagasbas Beach) Also known as Winnie's, it serves great pizza (P185) and sizzling dishes (around

P90), and catches refreshing sea breezes. There are a couple of cramped bunk beds where surfers crash (P150).

Kusina ni Angel (Bagasbas Beach) Run by the charming Angel de la Cruz, it has a creative menu and specialises in seafood dishes like grilled dorado (*mahi mahi*; P170) and exotic shakes (P20 to P28). It's behind Alvino's.

Also recommended: **Golden Palace** (Zabala St; meal around P100; a) Chinese restaurant with huge helpings.

Q Grill Hub (J Lukban St) Outdoor eatery with good food and ambience.

Skwatohm Café (Bagasbas Beach) Cool little chill-out lounge popular with surfers.

Getting There & Away

Philtranco (☎ 571 2718; Martinez St) has two daily air-con buses (P520, seven hours) and one nightly deluxe bus (P685) between Daet and Pasay, Manila. Ordinary buses to Manila are easier to come by, but truly sweltering.

There are frequent bus/minivan services to Naga (P75/127, 1½/2½ hours) from the Central Terminal northeast of town. Transfer in Naga for Legaspi and points south.

NAGA

☎ 054 / pop 141,300

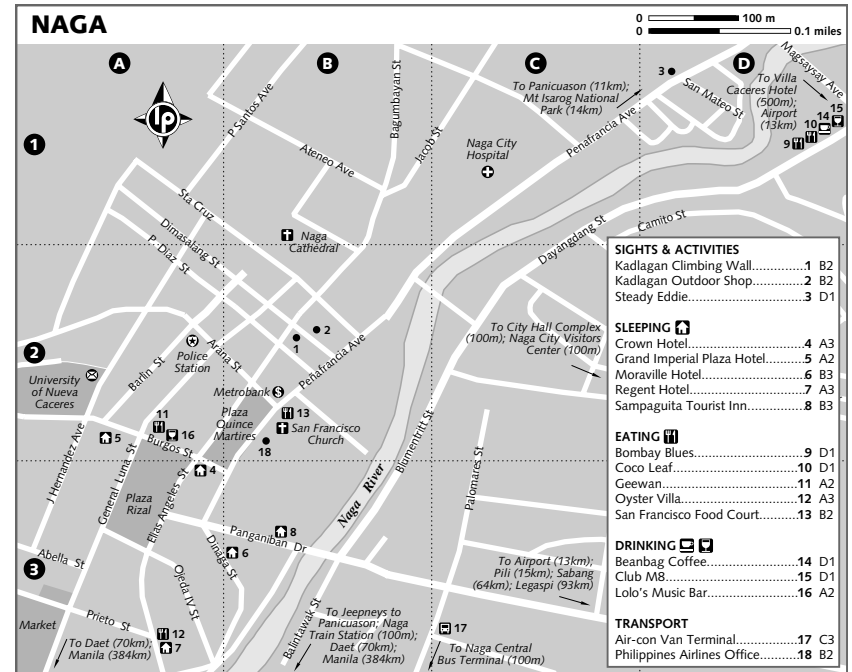
Naga, in Camarines Sur, is one of Luzon's hipper commercial centres. Its wide streets meander instead of sticking to a conventional grid pattern, while the use of *podiyak* – push tricycles – reigns in the tricycle madness just a little. University students abound, and many of them have sports like mountain biking and rock climbing on their résumés. An abundance of Western-style coffee shops and snazzy, upmarket eateries only enhance the cosmopolitan feel.

In September, thousands of devotees make a pilgrimage to Naga for the Peñafrancia Festival, in celebration of the Virgin of Peñafrancia, Bicol's patron saint. The town's population swells at this time and you need to book accommodation at least two months in advance.

Information

All the major banks are well represented. Naga is a university town, so Internet cafés are everywhere.

Downtown Post Office (University of Nueva Caceres)



Main Post Office (City Hall Complex)

Naga City Visitors Center (☎ 473 4432; www.naga.gov.ph/tourism; City Hall Complex; 𠂆 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Reasonably informative and has a decent map.

Activities

The range of outdoor pursuits available around Naga is one of Luzon's best-kept secrets. Activities centre mainly around Mt Isarog and the Caramoan Peninsula. There's also some good diving in the Ragay Gulf to the west.

For gear rental, guides and tips on hiking and climbing, **Kadlagan Outdoor Shop and Climbing Wall** (☎ 472 3305; kadlagan@yahoo.com; 17 Dimasalang St; 𠂆 store 9am-8pm, climbing wall 3-8pm) is the place to go. The company guides trips up Mt Isarog and occasionally takes large groups to the Caramoan Peninsula. Shop owner Jojo Villareal knows all the local rocks and routes and is usually here in the evenings.

Steady Eddie (☎ 811 7333; AMS Press Compound, Peñafrancia Ave; 𠂆 8am-7pm) is the only dive centre in the area. You can call a few days ahead and try to join one of its weekend dive expeditions to sites such as Pasacao, on the Ragay Gulf, and Catanduanes.

Sleeping

Crown Hotel (☎ 474 8305; www.crownhotelnaga.com; Burgos St; d from P1000; 𠂆 a) A tasteful renovation makes this old stand-by the best bang for the buck in Naga, with solid rooms, attractive common areas, a swanky restaurant overlooking Plaza Martinez and a popular jazz bar. Request a room off the busy street.

Grand Imperial Plaza Hotel (☎ 473 6534; giphotel@yahoo.com; Burgos St; d P790; 𠂆 a i) It doesn't quite live up to its grandiose name, but it does have big carpeted rooms, sanitary bathrooms and a courtyard restaurant with surprises like paella (P90) on the menu. Request a room around the quiet courtyard.

Sampaguita Tourist Inn (☎ 473 8896; Panganiban Dr; d with fan & shared bathroom P125, d with air-con, hot water & private bathroom P550) This is the best budget option in town. The cookie-cutter rooms won't excite you but they won't give you any major problems either.

Villa Caceres (☎ 811 6083; villacacereshotel@yahoo.com; Magsaysay Ave; s/d P950/1150; 𠂆 n a i s) It's a 10-minute ride out of the town centre, but the rooms have a warm feel and nice lighting, and it's chock full of services.

Also recommended:

Moraville Hotel (☎ 473 1247; fax 811 1685; Dinaga St; s with fan/air-con P360/510, d with air-con P610; 𠂆) Rooms are a bit worn but it may be the world's friendliest hotel.

Regent Hotel (☎ 472 2626; fax 811 1748; Elias Angeles St; s/d P1200/1500; 𠂆 i a) Business-class hotel has the goods, but service is sometimes surly.

Eating & Drinking

MAGSAYSAY AVE

The corner of Magsaysay Ave and Dayang-dang St is full of trendy bars, clubs, restaurants and coffee shops.

Coco Leaf (Magsaysay Ave; a) This excellent and affordable Asian fusion restaurant offers everything from tuna sashimi (P85) to *pad thai* (P95).

Bombay Blues (Magsaysay Ave; meals around P100; a) This cosy mom-and-pop restaurant, run by the affable Pinky, has good Indian food.

Beanbag Coffee (Magsaysay Ave; a) Does a great imitation of Seattle's Best, only much cheaper and with free wi-fi access.

Club M8 (Magsaysay Ave; 𠂆 7pm-4am; a) This disco sees dance-happy revellers carousing till the wee hours on weekends. Caters to a younger crowd. Dress to impress.

CENTRE

Oyster Villa (cnr Elias Angeles St & Prieto St; a) This big, bright, spotless Chinese eatery has a voluminous menu. A stir-fried crab dish with straw mushrooms, good for two, is P145.

Geewan (Burgos St; a) Of the several cheap fast-food joints near Plaza Rizal, this has the best local specialities, such as Bicol *expres* (see the boxed text, p190).

Lolo's Music Bar (3rd fl Traders Square Bldg, Burgos St; 𠂆 4pm-1am; a) This is a cool bar with plenty of room to breathe, and live music from 9pm. Caters to a more mature crowd than Club M8, but, like its rival, frowns on shorts and sandals.

San Francisco food court (Peñafrancia Ave) To keep it real with the local fare, head to this food court next to San Francisco Church and fill up for less than P40.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is in Pili, 14km south of Naga. **Philippine Airlines** (☎ 02-855 8888 in Manila, ☎ 473 2277 in Naga; Peñafrancia Ave) has four morning flights per week between Manila and Naga

(P2600, 45 minutes). Your hotel may provide airport shuttle service; if not, walk to the main road and snag a jeepney to Naga centre (P10).

BUS

All bus, jeepney and air-con van services use Naga's central bus terminal. Several lines make trips to Manila's Cubao station (air-con from P450, eight hours). **Isarog** (☎ 473 8804), **Peñafrancia** (☎ 811 1197), **RSL** (☎ 473 7518), **ECSI** (☎ 811 2512) and **Philtranco** (☎ 811 2541) have deluxe 29-seaters (from P650). Isarog's nearly fully reclining seats are the most comfortable. Most departures are around 8.30pm.

There are frequent air-con bus/minivan services to Daet (P75/127, 1½/2½ hours) and Legaspi (P100/P140, 2½/two hours). Avoid the 'ordinary' bus to Legaspi, which can take up to six hours. Transfer in Legaspi for Tabaco and Sorsogon. Air-con minivans also serve Tabaco (P145) and Sabang (P75). Jeepneys head to Panicuason (P20, 30 minutes, 18km) and Pili (P10).

TRAIN

The **Philippine National Railways** (PNR; ☎ 02-254 9772 in Manila) train is a comfortable, cheap way to travel to Manila, but it is slow as molasses. It leaves Manila's Pasay station at 6am, and departs **Naga station** (cnr PNR Rd & Balintawak St) at 9.05am (ordinary/air-con/recliner P223/265/302, 12½ hours).

AROUND NAGA

Mt Isarog National Park

Dominating Camarines Sur's landscape is Mt Isarog (1966m), Bicol's second-highest volcano, now dormant. From Panicuason (pan-ee-*kwa*-sone) a steep, half-hour walk along a dirt track leads to the entrance of **Mt Isarog National Park** (foreigner/citizen P56/10; 𠂆 8am-5pm). From the entrance, a path to the left leads to **Nabuntulan Falls**, about 1km away. To the right, a short walk leads down some very steep stone steps to **Malabsay Falls**, where you can swim with a view of Mt Isarog.

If you plan to hike any further, you must get a permit (three-day permit for foreigner/citizen P550/100) from the **Department of Environment & Natural Resources** (DENR; ☎ 811 3728; Panganiban Drive, Naga, near City Hall Complex).

You'll want a guide for the two-day return trek up Mt Isarog. Kadlagan Outdoor

Shop (opposite) in Naga has experienced guides (around P1000 per day for up to 10 persons), or the DENR can set you up with a cheaper, but English-challenged, guide from Panicuason. Trails are well maintained and there are camps with water sources along the way.

At Panicuason, **Mt Isarog Hot Springs** (P50; 𠂆 7am-6pm) has five natural pools (two hot and three cold). These offer a good way to relax after a trek in the park. The springs are 1.3km off the main road, just before the road to the national park.

To travel to Mt Isarog from Naga, take a jeepney to Panicuason. Note that the last jeepney back to Naga leaves Panicuason around 5pm.

Caramoan Peninsula

This lonely wedge of land about 50km northeast of Naga offers stunning coastal scenery marked by isolated white-sand beaches and jagged limestone cliffs reminiscent of northern Palawan.

You'll want to base yourself on the east edge of the peninsula near **Caramoan National Park**. Funky-looking islets like **Lahuy Island** and **Matukad Island** dot the coastline here. Many have beautiful white beaches, some open to the sea, others in protected coves with turquoise waters. The white-sand **Gota Beach** lies just 4km from Caramoan town (population 39,642).

This rarely visited area is begging to be explored by sea kayak, if only there were any to hire. You may be able to rent a *sibid-sibid* (small fishing boat) at Gota Beach and paddle from island to island. Bangka are more readily available. A full day of island-hopping in a seven-person bangka should cost about P1000. The guard at the entrance to the national park (admission P5), near Gota Beach, is a good source of information and can help arrange boats.

The peninsula is best enjoyed outdoors so consider camping on Gota Beach. You can rent tents from the municipal hall tourism office (P100) or Kadlagan Outdoor Shop (opposite).

There are a few hotels in Caramoan town, including the new **La Casa Roa** (☎ 811 5789; lacaaroa@yahoo.com; barangay Tawog; s/d P700/1200; a) Other options have air-con rooms in the P600 range and rooms with fans for around P350.

THE FIRE DOWN BELOW

There may be no more roundly vilified cuisine in all of Asia than Filipino food. Bicol, with its smorgasbord of fiery fish, pork and vegetable concoctions, is the country's answer to that criticism.

Bicolanos hardly have the Philippines' monopoly on coconuts, but for some reason they are the only ones who cook predominantly with coconut milk. Wise choice. Anything cooked in coconut milk is known as *ginataang*. Squid (*pusit*) cooked in coconut milk is thus *ginataang pusit* (and it's highly recommended). *Ginataang santol* (a pulpy fruit) and *ginataang* jackfruit are also tasty. The other key ingredient in Bicol cuisine is *sili* (hot chilli pepper). There are many varieties of *sili*, among them the tiny but potent *labuyo*, which you can order in bars mixed with tender, almond-shaped *pili* nuts.

Two dishes you'll definitely notice are 'Bicol *express*' and *pinangat*. The former is a fiery mish-mash of ground pork, *sili*, baby shrimps, onion, garlic and other spices cooked in coconut milk. *Pinangat* is green *gabi* (taro) leaves wrapped around small pieces of fish, shrimp and/or pork, and a chopped, leafy green vegetable known as *natong* (*laing*), which is also commonly served on its own as a side dish. Lastly, there's the surprisingly palatable *candingga* – diced pork liver and carrots sweetened and cooked in vinegar.

The odd thing about Bicol food is that you have to work a bit to find it. Most hotels and many restaurants stick to those all-too-familiar Filipino staples: *sinigang*, *pansit*, *pinakbet*, *sisig*, *lechon* and the ubiquitous Filipino breakfast. You have to poke around to find real Bicol food. Street-stall buffets, like the San Francisco food court in Naga, are good places to find it, though you may have trouble getting instruction on what is what. A few restaurants known for good Bicol food are mentioned in this chapter. Probably the best place to sample it is WayWay Restaurant in Legaspi (opposite). The buffet there is tasty and usually has most of the basics. The English-speaking staff can guide you through the various options. Don't be afraid to sample a few.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Getting to Caramoan town is a highlight of any visit to the peninsula. You'll get a great look at Mt Isarog on the overland leg of the journey, and beautiful views of the seductive coastline on the ocean leg.

From Naga, take an air-con minivan (P75, 1½ hours) or a jeepney (P60, two hours) to Sabang. From Sabang, four boats per day go to Guijalo (P100, two hours), the last leaving around 1pm. You can hire your own boat for P1200 if you negotiate well. From Guijalo, it's a 10-minute jeepney or tricycle ride to Caramoan town.

There's a very poor road from Sabang to Guijalo (35km) that requires a sturdy 4WD or mountain bike.

LEGASPI

☎ 052 / pop 157,010

This gritty provincial capital sits right at the foot of Mt Mayon (2462m), justifiably dubbed the world's most perfect volcano.

Orientation

Legaspi is divided into Albay District and Legaspi City. The provincial and city governments, the airport, and the fancier res-

taurants and hotels are all in Albay District. Legaspi City is a noisy, convoluted maze of street stalls, markets, girlie bars and exhaust-stained buildings. The bus terminal, most of the cheaper accommodation and the modern Pacific Mall are here. Hundreds of jeepneys per day connect the two districts (P7.50, 3.5km) along the National Highway.

Information

For Internet access in Legaspi City try JSK .com (Map p191; Magallanes St; per hr P20; h 8.30am-midnight). In Albay District you'll find the always-reliable Netopi@ (Map p193; GTS Bldg, Rizal St; per hr P32; h 9am-10pm).

There are plenty of ATMs around. **Metrobank** (Map p191; Rizal St, Legaspi City; h 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) cashes travellers cheques.

The Provincial Tourism Office (Map p193; ☎ 820 6314; http://tourism.albay.gov.ph; Albay Astrodome Complex, Capt F Aquende Dr) is friendly and has an excellent free map of the city.

Activities

Most hotels can set you up with vans and drivers, some of whom are also tour guides. The going rate for excursions within Albay Province is P2500, diesel included.

There's no shortage of adventure opportunities near Legaspi. Climbing Mt Mayon (p192), snorkelling with the whale sharks in Donsol (p194) and diving in the 'manta bowl', a new spot in Ticao Pass off Sorsogon, top the list.

Bicol Adventure and Tours (Map p193; ☎ 480 2266; bicoladventure@digitelone.com; V&O Bldg, Quezon Ave, Legaspi City; h 8am-5pm Mon-Fri & 8am-noon Sat) is the authority on spelunking, diving, island-hopping and hiking. A guide for a two-day Mayon hike costs P2600 for a maximum of three persons. If you want transportation, camping gear and porter thrown in, the package costs P4500. For other options see p192.

Sleeping

LEGASPI CITY

Legaspi Tourist Inn (Map p191; ☎ 480 6147; V&O Bldg, Quezon Ave; s/d with fan P450/510, with air-con P700/800; p) This modern place has clean and well-kept rooms with private bathrooms, quality TVs and lots of mirrors. It's the best moderately priced accommodation in town.

Dreams Inn & Cafe (Map p193; ☎ 480 0885; F Imperial St; s fan/air-con P225/450, d with air-con P550) The clean, basic rooms at this extra-value place come with the following options: TV, hot water, air-con, private bathroom and window. Pick what you want and adjust the price. Don't plan on throwing a party in the singles.

Also recommended:

Hotel La Trinidad (Map p191; ☎ 480 7469; hotel_latinidad@hotmail.com; Rizal St; s/d with hot shower from P920/1020; p a) Midrange option with large, surprisingly comfy rooms preserved intact from the 1970s.

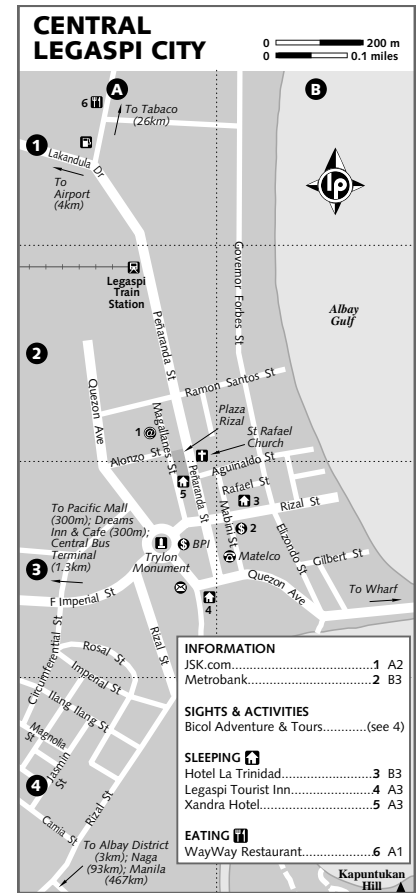
Xandra Hotel (Map p191; ☎ 821 7598; Peñaranda St & Aguinaldo St; s with fan & shower P150, s/d with air-con P600/800) Has a certain raw urban appeal, but no hot water.

ALBAY DISTRICT

There are two legitimately top-end hotels within walking distance of the airport.

Hotel Venezia (Map p193; ☎ 481 0877; www.hotelvenezia.ws; Renaissance Gardens, Washington Dr; d from P2200; p n a i s) Ritzier than Pepperland, with balconies with great views of Mt Mayon. It has tennis too; rates will surely go up.

Pepperland (Map p193; ☎ 481 8000; cnr Airport Rd & Washington Dr; d from P2550; p a i) Breakfast is on the (Mediterranean-style) house. It has more character than the Venezia.



Eating & Drinking

WayWay Restaurant (Map p191; Peñaranda St; dishes around P90; closed Sun) This restaurant 1km north of Legaspi City is the best place in Southeast Luzon to try coconut milk-cooked Bicol specialities (see opposite).

Small Talk (Map p193; cnr Doña Aurora St & National Hwy, Albay District; n a) This delightful eatery adds Bicol touches to its Italian fare. Try the *pinangat* or Bicol *express* pasta (P80).

There are several modern restaurants clustered next to the Provincial Capitol Building in Albay District. The best is a Mexican eatery called Chicken.

If it's booze you choose, head to the Pepperland hotel bar for live music or go shoot pool and hang out with the masses at Mingles

Smoke Haus (Map p193; National Highway btwn Albay & Legaspi City).

Shopping

The **Albay Pasalubong Center** (Map p193; ¼ 480 4697), right next to the Provincial Tourism Office, sells locally made bags, hats, placemats and other products made of abaca, one of the world's strongest fibres. Purchases help small-scale producers from rural areas outside Legaspi.

Satellite Market, next to the bus station, is another good place to buy such products. Be sure to haggle.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Philippine Airlines (PAL; ¼ 02-855 8888 in Manila, ¼ 245 5024 at Legaspi Airport) flies daily to and from Manila (P3350, 55 minutes).

BUS

Most buses to Manila depart around 6.30pm (air-con/deluxe from P600/900, 10½ hours), although there are a few day trips. **Cagsawa** (¼ 820 6598) has the nicest, most comfortable deluxe service, with **Isarog** (¼ 481 4744) a close second. **Peñafrancia** (¼ 820 0518) and **Raymond** (¼ 820 2693) are among the other options.

There are frequent minivans during daylight hours to and from Naga (P140, two hours), Sorsogon (P60, 1¼ hours), Tabaco (P25, 30 minutes) and Donsol (P60, one hour). Regular buses are cheaper but take 30% longer.

TRAIN

The inappropriately named **Bicol Express** (¼ 02-254 9772) from Manila terminates in Legaspi (air-con P375, 15 hours, daily from Manila at 6am and from Legaspi at 6.30am).

AROUND LEGASPI

Daraga Church

Set on a hill overlooking Daraga is the interesting baroque-style Daraga Church, constructed completely from volcanic rocks. From Legaspi take any Daraga-bound jeepney from the National Highway (P7.50).

Cagsawa Ruins

About 8km northwest of Legaspi, the remains (basically the belfry) of the sunken Cagsawa Church are a popular tourist attrac-

tion with a terrific view of Mt Mayon. In 1814, the 1200 people who took refuge in the church during Mt Mayon's violent eruption were buried alive.

This is no peaceful memorial; the site is bustling with ice-cream stands, souvenir hawkers and restaurants. Also here is the interesting **National Museum of the Philippines** (admission free; ¼ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-4pm Tue-Sat).

To get from Legaspi to Cagsawa, take any jeepney headed to Camalig, Guinobatan or Ligao (P10). Ask the driver to drop you off at the ruins, which are about 500m from the road.

Hoyop-Hoyopan Caves

Artefacts more than 2000 years old have been found in these easy-to-traverse caves east of Legaspi in **Cotmon**. The name means 'blow-blow', a reference to the eerie wind in the cave. To explore the caves you must have a guide. Frederic Atun can be found at the caves; he speaks good English and charges P100 for up to seven people for a 30-minute tour of Hoyop-Hoyopan. He also runs tours to the more challenging **Calabidongan Cave** (literally, Cave of the Bats), about 2.5km away.

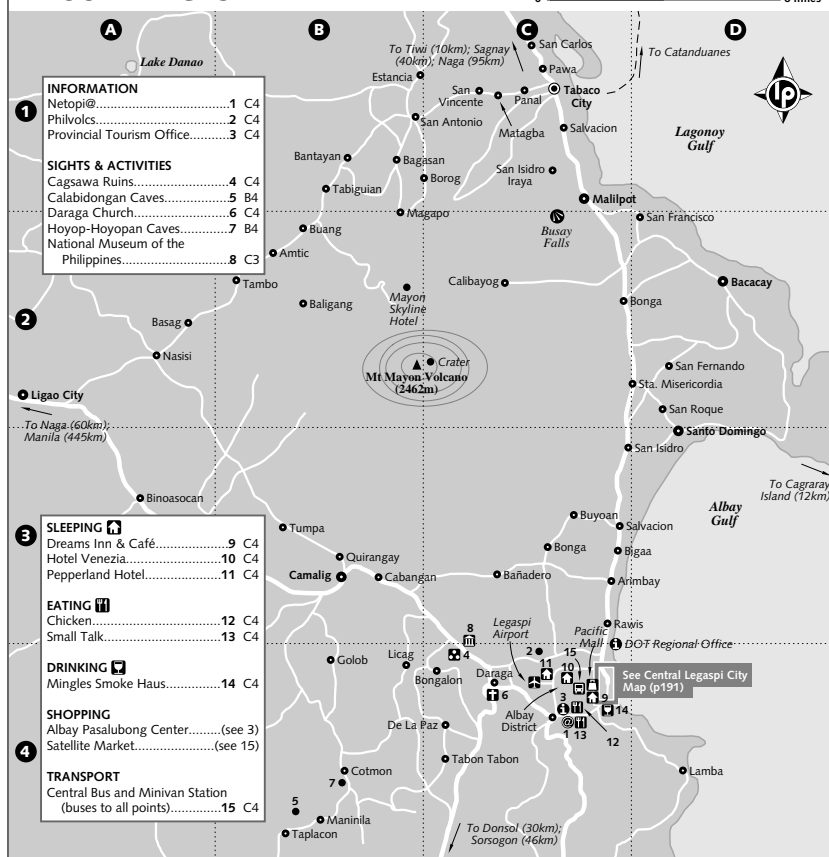
To get here, take any jeepney heading toward Camalig, Polangui, Guinobatan or Ligao and get off in Camalig, 14km north of Legaspi (P15). From Camalig, pick up a jeepney heading south toward Cotmon (P15, 8km).

Mt Mayon

One of the Philippines' most photographed sights, Mt Mayon (2462m) rises dramatically from the flat Albay terrain, and can be seen from as far away as Naga and Catanduanes. The volcano's name derives from the Bicol word *magayon*, meaning 'beauty', and it wholeheartedly deserves the moniker.

This is no sleeping beauty, however. One of the world's most dangerous volcanoes, it has erupted no less than 14 times since 1900, most recently in June 2001, when the lava flow 'miraculously' formed the shape of the Virgin Mary and the volcano's once perfectly symmetrical cone was cracked near the top. There were also eruptions in February and June 2000 but the last fatalities were in February 1993, when the eruptions continued for two months. A team of American volcanologists who were doing research on its slopes were among the 77 people killed.

AROUND LEGASPI



Mayon emits a constant plume of smoke and is carefully monitored by **Philvolcs** (¼ 824 2383; www.phivolcs.dost.gov.ph), located near the airport in Legaspi. The institute closes off an area of up to 8km around the volcano when there is a danger of eruption. In quieter times you can climb part of the way up the mountain. The climb is steep and involves a lot of scrambling over volcanic rocks. The sun can be relentless.

At the time of writing, the mountain had been holding steady at Alert Level 2 – 'increasing activity' – for about two years (Alert Level 5 means an eruption is imminent). Philvolcs does not recommend climbing above 1000m in Alert Level 2 conditions, although guides will take you

to 2000m. Go much higher than that and you'll be overwhelmed by poisonous gases. Call Philvolcs before attempting an assault on Mt Mayon. Note that guides are mandatory.

One popular excursion is to drive to the abandoned **Mayon Skyline Hotel** (810m) on the northwestern side of Mt Mayon. The view over the Pacific from here is spectacular on a clear day. You may be able to find freelance guides to lead you further up this side of the mountain for P1000 per day. The road up to the hotel is rough and there is no public transport, so you'll have to hire a van in Legaspi (return P2000, one hour) or Tabaco (return P1000, 30 minutes). The hotel is undergoing gradual transformation into

an observatory, though it's unclear when the telescopes will arrive.

It's safer to climb up the southeastern side of the mountain with a professional tour operator, such as Bicol Adventure and Tours (p191). The southeastern route starts from near barangay Buyoan, 15km north of Legaspi City. From there it's a two-hour climb to 'camp one' and another 2½ hours to 'camp two', at 1800m. At the time of this writing it was possible to ascend only another 200 vertical metres beyond camp two. You can start early and do the climb in one day or make it a two-day climb with an overnight stay at either camp. There is a fresh-water source at camp one where you can fill your water bottles.

The best time to climb is from February to April. From May to August it's unbearably hot; from September to January it's very wet.

TABACO

☎ 052 / pop 107,166

Tabaco, in the shadow of Mt Mayon, is the departure point for boats to Catanduanes.

Tabaco Gardenia Hotel (☎ 487 8019; Riosa St; r P950; p a) is the city's newest hotel, located near the market, with 30 solid, clean doubles. Choose between a quiet, windowless room and a noisy street-side room.

The service at **Carolyna Hotel** (☎ 830 0169; P1 San Roque; d from P650; p a) is basically non-existent and there's no hot water, but at least the rooms are OK.

Cagsawa, Amihan and Raymond Tours run buses to and from Cubao, Manila (air-con/deluxe from P650/700, 11 hours). Frequent buses, jeepneys and minivans go to and from Legaspi (from P25, 30 minutes). For information on ferries to Catanduanes, see p197.

DONSOL

☎ 056 / pop 39,995

Until the 'discovery' of whale sharks off the coast here in 1998, Donsol, about 45km southwest of Legaspi, was an obscure, sleepy fishing village in one of Sorsogon's more remote areas. In 1998 a local diver shot a video of the whale sharks and a newspaper carried a story about Donsol's gentle *butanding*. Since then Donsol has become one of the Philippines' most popular tourist locations.

It's truly an exhilarating experience swimming along with these huge blue-grey, silver-spotted creatures. You need to be a decent snorkeller and in relatively good shape to keep up with the sharks. In the peak months of February to May, the question isn't whether you will see a shark, but how many you will see. On a good day you'll see 15. In some years the sharks migrate here as early as November and stay until late June. Call Salvador Acha at the **Donsol Visitors Center** (☎ 0927 233 0364; barangay Dancalan; h 7.30am-5pm Jan-Jun, 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri Jul-Dec) before you visit to make sure the sharks are around.

Only snorkelling equipment is allowed; scuba diving is prohibited. There is a limited supply of snorkelling equipment available for rent (P300 per session) at the visitors centre, so it's safer to bring your own.

Before heading out to see the sharks, stop in at the visitors centre, 1.5km north of the Donsol River bridge, and pay your registration fee (citizen/foreigner P150/500). The visitors centre can arrange a boat (good for seven people), a spotter and a Butanding Interaction Officer (BIO) if you have not done so in advance through a tour operator in Legaspi or Sorsogon. The boat and spotter costs P3500; the BIO costs P700. Most boats now leave from the beach in front of the visitors centre. Be sure to tip the crew, especially if you've had a good day. It's not a bad idea to call and reserve a boat in advance, especially around Easter.

Sleeping

Woodland Farm Beach Resort (☎ 0921 969 9544; cottage with fan/air-con P800/1800; p) It's just north of the visitors centre and thus makes a convenient base for shark watching. This is a stylish place with tidy, comfortable duplex cottages, a restaurant and a narrow brown-sand beach.

Amor Farm Beach Resort (☎ 0917 823 3802; d with private/shared bathroom P700/450; p) Located right next to the visitors centre, this is a peaceful place, albeit not quite as well kept as Woodland.

Santiago Lodging House (☎ 0920 388 1218; cnr San Jose St & Tres Marias Drive; tr with fan & shared bathroom P300) Located in town, this is basically a home-stay with three good, clean rooms in a beat-up wooden house. You can use the kitchen.

Getting There & Away

There are direct air-con minivans to and from Legaspi every hour until about 4pm (P60, one hour). Jeepneys go via Pilar and take at least twice as long. If you are stranded past 4pm, make your way to Pilar via jeepney or private moped, and connect with more frequent minivans and buses there.

For Sorsogon, see right. Philtranco has one ordinary bus per day to and from Manila (P350, 11½ hours), and a couple of Manila-Pilar air-con buses to and from the ferry docks in Pilar (P650, 11 hours).

There are four fast-craft boats per day between Masbate and Pilar (see p344).

SORSOGON

☎ 056 / pop 92,512

The eponymous capital of Bicol's southernmost province lies in a beautiful area of endless beaches, natural springs and ricefields that sprawl beneath jungle-clad volcanoes like vast, bright-green runways. There's good trekking to be had on the province's highest volcano, Mt Bulusan.

Information

There is an **Equitable PCI Bank** (Rizal St) with an ATM, and there are several Internet cafés in town.

Activities

The energetic Cecilia Duran and her guides at Fernandos Hotel have all the information you need on hiking, mountain biking and diving. They can arrange rental of camping gear, mountain bikes, mopeds or cars, and provide guides for climbing Mt Bulusan or snorkelling with the whale sharks at Donsol. Dive trips are organised in conjunction with Bacon Beach Resort & Dive Center (p196).

Sleeping & Eating

Fernandos Hotel (☎ 211 1357; fernandohotel@hotmail.com; cnr N Pareja St & Rizal St; r with shared/private bathroom P695/2000; p a) The rooms here are spacious and have walls tastefully decorated with abaca and other indigenous fibres. The cheaper rooms, with shared bathrooms, are not a huge step down. It's in a peaceful spot and has a garden restaurant.

Villa Kasanggayahan (☎ 211 1275; Rizal St; d P950-1400; p n a) Has modern, nicely decorated rooms situated around a well-groomed garden and a babbling brook on a

quiet sidestreet off Rizal. The deluxe rooms are worth the splurge.

Mahogany Lodge (☎ 211 1370; Rizal St; r with fan/air-con P350/500) Most rooms at this budget option are old and dark, but there are also a few newer, pricier doubles (P1800) if you want to upgrade.

Balkon Bar & Restaurant (Rizal St; entrées from P75) Has tasty Bicol specialities and some Continental offerings.

Getting There & Away

Philtranco (☎ 211 1359) has bus services to and from Manila (ordinary/air-con/deluxe P400/700/1100, 14 hours), as does Peñfrancia. There are regular buses/minivans to Legaspi (P47/60, 1½ hours).

For Donsol, you have to take a jeepney to Putiao (P30, 45 minutes) and get on another jeepney to Donsol (P30, 45 minutes).

AROUND SORSOGON

Rizal Beach

☎ 056

This long strip of white beach near the town of Gubat is nicer and less busy than Bacon Beach, but its two main resorts are cut from the same, ageing cloth. **Veramaris Resort** (☎ 311 1824; veramaris@yahoo.com; d with TV & fan/air-con P870/1090; s) is the nicer of the two, if only because its beachfront rooms have private balconies. It also has a huge, airy restaurant. Next door, **Rizal Beach Resort** (☎ 311 1829; d with cold water P1050, ste with hot water P1420; a) has huge rooms but the mattresses are so old you might sink all the way to the bed base.

To get here, take a jeepney from Sorsogon to Gubat (P30, 25km), from where it's a 4km tricycle ride to Rizal (P25).

Barcelona

Seven kilometres south of Gubat you can climb the belfry of the Spanish-built **Barcelona Church** (1874) for a great view over the ocean. The **Barcelona Multipurpose Cooperative** (bmpci@yahoo.com; Poblacion Norte; h 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) sells a wide range of very reasonably priced boxes, placemats, sunhats and other products made of natural fibres. This is a cooperative of 300 weavers linked to the **International Federation for Alternative Trade** (www.ifat.org).

Bulusan Volcano National Park

About 16km southwest of Barcelona is **Bulusan Volcano National Park** (admission P8; h 7am-5.30pm).

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Bacon Beach Resort & Dive Center (% 0919 582 2732; baconbeach@telefonica.net; d from P5200; p a) This newcomer, 10km north of Sorsogon, assumes the title of nicest hotel in Bicol, with eight exquisite rooms on a narrow but scenic beach overlooking Albay Gulf and Rapu Rapu island. The rooms have king-sized beds with huge bamboo posts, DVD players, love seats and wooden floors that extend into the bathrooms. The lobby, loaded with huge day beds and other native furniture, is no less impressive. You'll pay for the privilege – but it's worth the splurge.

Just inside the park, **Bulusan Lake** is a popular picnic spot, and there's a walking trail around the lake that takes about one hour.

The climb up heavily forested Mt Bulusan (1560m), which last erupted in 1983, eventually opens up at a field from where there are superb views of the sparkling South China Sea and Pacific Ocean. The area's fickle weather can easily spoil the view, however. You can hike up and back down in eight hours if you're energetic, otherwise plan to camp at the summit crater.

The entrance to the park is near San Roque, about 10km west of Bulusan town. A guide is mandatory. You can hire a guide at Fernandos Hotel or ask the barangay captain in San Roque for assistance with finding a local guide. Bring gloves and wear long sleeves to fend off leeches if it has rained.

A successful conquest of Mt Bulusan deserves a soak in the **Palogtoc Falls** (admission P10). This idyllic grotto is accessible by a 1.5km walk from a trailhead off the main road between the park entrance and San Roque. It features a cold-water pool beside a shady river. Nearby, but not as good, is the **Masacrot Springs** (admission P15), where the peace is often broken by videoke.

The **Mateo Hot & Cold Springs Resort**, outside Irosin at the foot of Mt Bulusan, has hot and cold pools but they often get crowded and noisy.

SLEEPING

If you want to sleep close to the park without camping, your best option is **Villa Luisa**

Celeste (% 056-211 2991; d with fan/air-con P500/800; p s), a friendly bed-and-breakfast surrounded by gardens and rambutan trees, 2.5km north of the town of Bulusan. If you're desperate, the **Mateo Hot & Cold Springs Resort** has a couple of cheap, ramshackle huts.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to the park from Sorsogon, take a jeepney to Bulusan town (P25, 1½ hours) or Irosin (P25, one hour). It's 6km from Bulusan or 8km from Irosin to the park entrance. Travel by tricycle (about P75).

MATNOC

Matnog is a one-road town where you catch the ferry bound for Samar. Beautiful **Tikling Island**, 20 minutes from Matnog by bangka, has good snorkelling and a rare pink-sand beach.

If you miss the last ferry from Matnog there are a couple of ramshackle lodging houses with fan-cooled rooms where you can stay. A better option is to head 9km north of Matnog to the pretty white beach outside **Santa Magdalena** (P70 by tricycle), where **New Port Beach Resort** (% 0920 551 3561; d with fan/air-con P650/850) has simple and clean cottages.

Frequent ferries ply the route between Matnog and Allen, Samar (p349).

Philtranco has four buses per day to and from Manila (ordinary/air-con P663/937, 14 hours). Jeepneys make the run to and from Sorsogon (P50, 1½ hours).

CATANDUANES

A wet and rural island with its east coast open to the Pacific Ocean, Catanduanes is ringed by beautiful beaches, but rises abruptly to a mountainous, virtually impenetrable interior. This is southern Luzon's first line of defence against the *bagyo* (typhoons) that roll in from July to November. The heavy rains are eagerly absorbed by lush rainforests that have been mercifully preserved due to the island's isolation and sparse population.

Most foreign visitors to Catanduanes are surfers looking to ride the world-famous break, **Majestics**. The best waves are during the typhoon season, especially between August and October.

VIRAC

% 052 / pop 57,067

The capital of Catanduanes does not offer much for travellers, but it has some creature comforts and is a convenient base for day trips to nearby beaches.

There are a few Internet cafés in town and the **Equitable PCI Bank** (San Juan St) changes money and has an ATM.

Local guides **Eli Lafe** and **Bert Gianan** speak good English and can help out with car hire and setting itineraries. You can find them through the **Marem** or **Midtown** hotels. **Rakdell Inn** rents cars for about P2000 per day.

Sleeping & Eating

Rakdell Inn (% 811 0881; San Pedro St; s with cold water & fan/air-con P250/500, d with hot water & air-con from P750; p) Virac's latest and greatest offering has huge, immaculate doubles, big TVs, private balconies and a truly luxurious three-room executive suite for P2500. There's a spiffy roof-deck restaurant on the 4th floor.

Catanduanes Midtown Inn (% 811 0527; http://catmidinn.tripod.com; San José St; d with shared bathroom & fan/air-con P200/500, s/d with hot shower & air-con P700/900; p) This is a popular place with a pleasant coffee shop. Its large doubles have classical touches and parquet floors. Some have balconies.

Marem Pension House (% 811 1821; 136 Rizal Ave; d with fan & shared bathroom P175, d with air-con & private bathroom P700; p) This mazelike building, home to many an aquarium, has a nice range of options and an informal atmosphere.

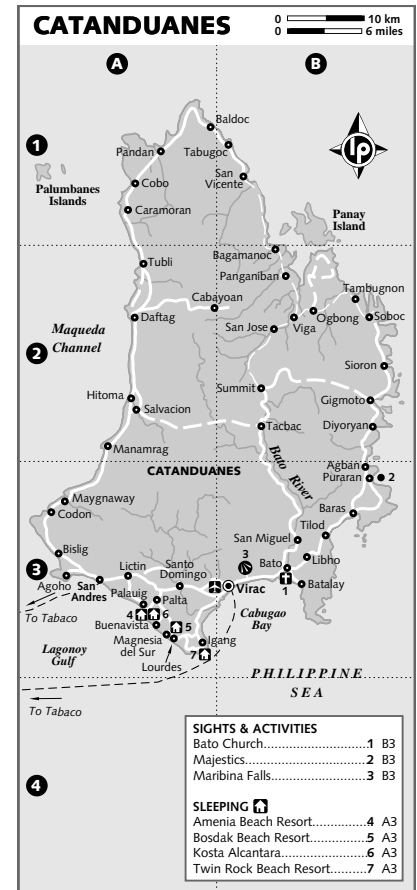
Getting There & Away

AIR

Asian Spirit (% 02-855 3333 in Manila, % 811 1056 in Virac; San Juan St) makes five weekly flights to Virac from Manila (P3080, 1¼ hours). The airport is 3.5km from town. The tricycle trip there will cost P5.

BOAT

Regina Shipping Lines (% 811 1707) has two ferries per day between Tabaco and San Andres, 17km west of Virac (ordinary/air-con P175/225, 2½ hours). The boats leave Tabaco at 5am and 7am then turn around to make the return journey. Jeepneys meet the ferry in San Andres and go to Virac (P15, 30 minutes).

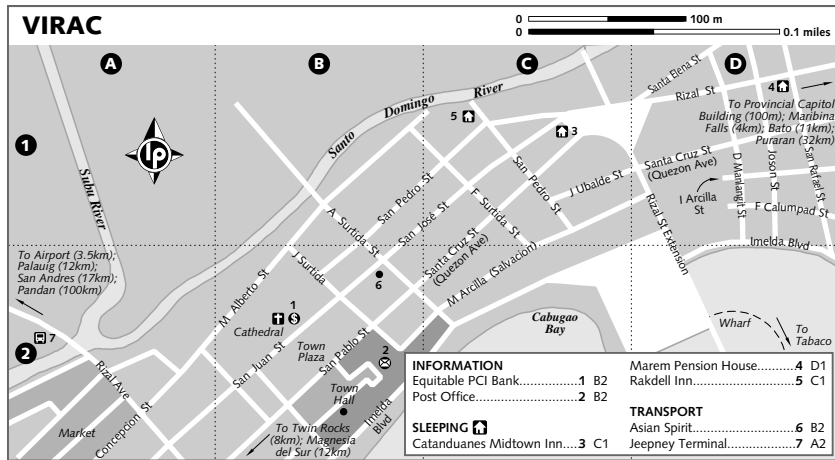


The other option is to take the **MV Eugenia**, a slower ferry from Tabaco to Virac (ordinary/air-con P175/225, four hours, two per day). All the options are car ferries.

AROUND VIRAC

% 052

The area southwest of Virac is dotted with bushy, humplike karst formations similar to Bohol's Chocolate Hills (p270). The coastline offers up white-sand coves and great views of Mt Mayon across the Lagonoy Gulf. The resorts here are shuttered up for most of the year, but you can still hang out at them. They include **Bosdak Beach Resort** near **Magnesia del Sur** and **Kosta Alcantara** near **Buenavista**.



The only resort still showing a semblance of a pulse is the sprawling **Twin Rock Beach Resort** (% 0921 664 0245; r with cold water & fan/air-con P800/1200, cottage with fan & shared/private bathroom P300/500), which looks out on the peculiar, lampshade-like twin rocks. However, the paucity of guests and the swimming pool full of sludge suggest this hotel may also be going the way of the dinosaur.

Amenia Beach Resort (% 811 2385; d with shared bathroom P800; ☐) in Palauig, 12km southwest of Virac, caters mainly to day-trippers but has a restaurant and three big, basic cottages on stilts, with private sand lots.

Heading 4km northeast from Virac you'll come to the popular **Maribina Falls** (r 6am-6pm), which drain into a refreshing pool, perfect for swimming. The falls are 200m off the highway.

About 7km northeast of the falls is the town of Bato, which has a marvellous, restored Spanish church on the Bato River.

Puraran

Northeast of Bato the paved road turns to dirt and, 20km on, leads to the stunning wide bay of Puraran, home to **Majestics**. This is an idyllic spot, with coconut trees swaying in the breeze, powdery white sand and a coral reef for snorkelling just offshore. There are two excellent, cheap resorts where surfers and nonsurfers alike often stay for weeks, basking in the casual ambience.

A reef break 200m offshore, **Majestics** is no beginner's wave. When it's working, it's per-

fect. But like most breaks on the country's Pacific coast, **Majestics** usually only works when there's a typhoon lurking offshore during the *habagat* (southwest monsoon). This is most likely to occur between August and October. The *amihan* (northeast monsoon) kicks up powerful onshore breezes from October to March, making conditions too choppy for all but the most die-hard surfers.

The two resorts in town, run by branches of the same family, rent short surfboards for P100 per day. Lessons are P100 per hour. Talk to Allan at Elena's **Majestics Beach Resort** for advice on alternative surf spots to check out when **Majestics** isn't happening.

SLEEPING & EATING

It's advisable to book ahead from July to October. Both resorts serve set-menu meals for under P100.

Elena's Majestics Beach Resort (% 0919558 1460; cottage P300) This friendly, family-run place is mellow in the extreme. They have simple, comfortable bamboo cottages with private porches and great ocean views. Guests can use the snorkelling equipment for free.

Puting Baybay Beach Resort (% 0926 710 8711; r P300) Like its neighbour it offers cute, basic cottages, plus a couple of new rooms with shared bathroom in the main building.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The easiest way to get here is to hire a van (see p197); it costs P1000 for a one-way trip from Virac to Puraran and takes one

hour. A tricycle costs half that but takes twice as long.

There's one daily jeepney from Virac to Gigmoto via Puraran (P40, two hours, 32km). It leaves around 10.30am. The trip in the other direction passes through Puraran around 7am. You can also take a regular bus or jeepney from Virac to Baras (P30, one hour, 26km) and hire a tricycle (P50) to Puraran. If you are staying a while in Puraran the resorts may pick you up at the airport.

WEST COAST

The road from Virac to Pandan is bumpy, beautiful and at times hair-raising as it follows the rocky coastline. It's a good way to see rural island life, with great views across Maqueda Channel. There is no commercial lodging in Pandan so you'll have to arrange a homestay through the barangay captain.

There are three daily buses to and from Pandan (P100, five hours). The last bus from Virac leaves at noon; the last bus from Pandan leaves at 9am.

MARINDUQUE

Marinduque is a sleepy little island province that comes alive every Easter for the quirky **Moriones Festival** (p201). The rest of the year the few tourists who come must content themselves with the beautiful scenery, which is anchored by the dormant Mt Malindig volcano (1157m) in the south.

Marinduque is a poor coconut-and-copra-producing province, but that does not stop its people from capturing that happy, laid-back, island vibe. A heart-shaped island bound by a scenic 120km paved ring road, it's begging to be explored by moped, but as of this writing there were no rentals available.

The island sparked international headlines in 1996 when the Canadian-Philippine company Marcopper spilled 20 million tons of toxic copper-mine tailings into the Boac River, poisoning it and ruining the livelihoods of hundreds. Ten years on, the case remains tied up in an international court while locals living near the river mouth continue to report health problems, according to an Oxfam report (www.oxfam.org.au/oxfamnews/september_2004/island_sun.html).

BOAC

% 042 / pop 48,504

An abundance of pot plants, and streets lined with attractive, dilapidated Spanish-era wooden houses give Marinduque's capital a touch of character. The beautiful cathedral, built in 1792 on the hill in the centre of town, and its attached convent, are the focal points.

Information

The PNB (Philippines National Bank) and Landbank on Gov Reyes St both change US dollars.

Mellec Computer Centre (Gov Reyes St; per hr P30; r 8am-9pm) is a reliable choice for Internet access.

The **Provincial Tourism Office** (% 332 1018; www.marinduque.gov.ph; r 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) is located in the Capitol Compound, 2km west of Boac town centre.

Activities

Gerry Jamilla and Jovin Lilles from the Provincial Tourism Office are the guys to talk to for information on trekking, scuba diving and caving in the area. You can call Jovin (% 0921 201 3252) outside tourist-office hours.

You don't need a guide for the five-hour hike up and down Mt Malindig, which follows a clearly marked trail from **Sih**, a barangay of Buenavista. Take a tricycle to **Sih** from Buenavista (P300 return), or a jeepney toward Malibago barangay in Torrijos (P30).

Most hotels can arrange a car with driver for trips around the scenic southern end of the island (about P1800 per day). A tricycle is another option; P750 plus fuel should do the trick.

Sleeping & Eating

Tahanan sa Isok (% 332 1231; fax 311 1402; 5 Canovas St; d with fan/air-con P400/800; ☐ n) Located on a quiet sidestreet just off Magsaysay St, this is easily the best value in town, with clean, simple rooms and a gorgeous garden restaurant. It runs a small book exchange.

Lucky 7 Pension House (% 332 2777; fax 332 2003; Gov D Reyes St; d with fan/air-con P250/750; ☐ n a) Nothing fancy here, just clean, basic air-con rooms. The fan-cooled rooms are a real bargain, albeit a loud one. The rooftop restaurant has a great view and fills up with inebriated videoke enthusiasts by night.



Kusina sa Plaza (Mercader St; dishes P35; 11:50am-8pm) This cheap buffet-style place opposite the museum serves unique Filipino specialties, and pasta dishes like baked macaroni.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Asian Spirit (% 02-855 3333 in Manila, 332 1121 in Boac; Boac Hotel) flies between Manila and Boac on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (P2600, 45 minutes), although this service is temporarily suspended from time to time. The airport is 12km south of Boac, on the way to Gasan.

BOAT

Blue Magic Ferries (% 042-710 4168) runs two speedy passenger boats per day between

Balanacan, 30 minutes north of Boac, and Lucena (P230, 1½ hours). For buses between Manila and Lucena, see p129. **Montenegro Shipping Lines** (% 373 7084) has car ferries that ply this route (ordinary/air-con P140/168, 2½ hours, four daily trips each way).

Two morning boats go from Marinduque to Pinamalayan on Mindoro (P100, 2½ hours). One leaves from Cawit and the other leaves from Gasan proper. Both return from Mindoro around 1pm.

Getting Around

There are air-con minivans to Boac from the ferry dock in Balanacan (P50, 25 minutes).

From Boac, jeepneys go south to Gasan (P17, 30 minutes) and Buenavista (P35, one

hour) via the Capitol Compound. Frequent jeepneys also head northeast to Mogpog (P9, 10 minutes), Balanacan (P17, 45 minutes), Santa Cruz (P35, one hour) and Torrijos (P70, two hours).

All transport leaves from around the central terminal area near the intersection of Nepomuceno and Magsaysay Sts.

GASAN

% 042 / pop 29,799

There is a rather motley selection of beach resorts that spans 17km from Boac to south of the town proper of Gasan. The coastline along this stretch has an abundance of pebbles and debris. The further south you go, the better the scenery, the wider the beaches, and the nicer the beach resorts. Take your own snorkelling equipment.

Sleeping & Eating

Katala Beach Resort and Restaurant (% 334 1079; www.members.tripod.com/katala.beach.resort; r with fan/air-con P700/1000; P) This German-run establishment 3km south of Gasan proper is perched on a wall overlooking a private pier and the Tres Reyes Islands beyond. The rooms are in good shape and you can enjoy the sound of waves lapping the shore as you watch the sunset from your private balcony or the restaurant, which has German sausages.

Sunset Beach Resort (% 342 1004; sun_setgarden@vasia.com; cottage with fan/air-con P530/730; P) Two kilometres north of Gasan proper, this slightly dishevelled giant occupies sprawling grounds and includes a couple of huge cottages on the beach. There's a very good

restaurant and a dilapidated tennis court that might serve up an occasional true bounce.

Club Marinduque (% 02-834 1431 in Manila; www.clubmarinduque.com; d P1080-1800; p n a s) A comfy bed, extra towels and lots of little shampoos are among the treats that await you at the fanciest resort in Marinduque, 6km south of Gasan proper. From the beach you can see both the Tres Reyes Islands and Mt Malindig.

3E's Love Bay (% 929 8857; d/q P1200/1500; p a) Its playful name belies the fact that it's hardly a honeymoon palace, but it's the closest passable resort in the immediate vicinity of Boac (it's only 7km south). It features a pastel-coloured block of large, clean rooms set around a well-manicured garden and outdoor dining area.

Blue Sea Resort (% 332 1334; d with fan/air-con P400/600; P) The duplex cottages at this resort, located 1km south of 3E's, are slightly tatty, but the spacious balconies and the low price make up for it.

BUENAVISTA

This town 15km south of Gasan has great views of the Tres Reyes Islands, which have the wonderful names of Melchor, Gaspar and Baltazar. You can hire a boat from a fisherman anywhere along the beach around here. It costs P600 to go to the closest island, Melchor, and P1500 to do a half-day of island hopping. Gaspar Island is a marine reserve and you can snorkel off the northern beach, although El Niño has taken its toll on the coral.

MORIONES MADNESS *Monique Choy*

During this fabulous Easter festival combining folk mysticism with Catholic pageantry, the streets of Marinduque's towns are overrun with *moriones* (Roman soldiers).

The Moriones Festival began in 1807 when Padre Dionisio Santiago, a Mogpog parish priest, organised a play based on the story of Longinus, one of the Roman centurions assigned to execute Christ. A drop of Christ's blood miraculously restored sight in Longinus' blind right eye during the crucifixion. Longinus instantly proclaimed his faith, whereupon he was chased around town, captured and summarily beheaded.

Today the play has evolved into a colourful re-enactment of those events, drawn out over the seven days of Holy Week. Each municipality in Marinduque holds its own festival, in which hundreds of *moriones* don centurion masks and costumes and arm themselves with wooden swords, spears and shields. The masks take months to prepare and are kept secret from even close friends and family so that the *moriones'* true identity is never known.

Throughout the week *moriones* take to the streets and run amok, engaging in sword fights, dances and sneaky pranks on bystanders. You have been warned!

Buenavista is where the beautiful coastal drive around Mt Malindig begins. You'll need to hire a private car or tricycle to make the trip (see p199).

A morning jeepney occasionally makes the pleasant drive over the mountains to Poctoy (P45, one hour). A more sensible plan to get to and from Poctoy is to hire a tricycle (P500, one hour). There are regular jeepneys from Buenavista to Boac (P40) via Gasan (P18).

SANTA CRUZ

There was simply no recovery from the devastating effects of the Marcopper mining disaster for Santa Cruz. Much of the town's workforce was instantly laid off; by now many of them have moved on to greener pastures. Today Santa Cruz is rapidly assuming the aura of a ghost town.

On the outskirts of Santa Cruz, beyond barangay Ipil, the privately owned **Bathala Caves** (admission P40; ↷ sunrise-sunset) are terrific. If you're prepared to clamber a bit, you can explore two or three of the eight main caves

in a couple of hours. There are thousands of bats and swifts, and several enormous rock pythons. Cool off afterwards in the natural pool behind the caretaker's house.

A guided tour costs P150. Take a torch (flashlight) and charter a tricycle for the bumpy 10km trip from Santa Cruz. A half-day charter costs P500.

There are regular jeepneys between Santa Cruz and Boac (P35, one hour). Jeepneys head south to Poctoy, a barangay of Torrijos (P35, one hour).

POCTOY

The whitest and longest beach in Marinduque is **White Beach** in Poctoy, where there are also views of Mt Malindig's conical snout.

Quiet **Jovita's Paradise Resort** (r with bathroom & fan/air-con P700/1200; a), just to the north of White Beach, is a peaceful spot with tidy rooms and a restaurant. Marilou and Hans Peter Ulrich have a homestay on a private beach just north of White Beach. **Rendezvous Cottages** (s/d with fan P200/300), on White Beach itself, has a few rickety cottages.