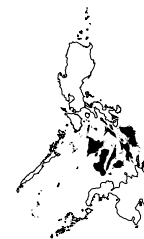


The Visayas



Several threshold events in the history of the nation occurred in the Visayas. Magellan landed off the Cebu coast in 1521, marking the Philippines' first contact with Europeans, and MacArthur fulfilled his vow to return to the country during WWII, landing near Tacloban on Leyte.

This is the part of the country that fits the clichés of the sun-soaked, gin-stained Edenic paradise. The beaches are white and palm fringed, the locals fish in the turquoise waters, and the heat is so enervating that all exertion is called into question.

You can hopscotch the region on a virtual armada of seagoing vessels, from humble bangka to modern ferries. You can travel from Cebu, the Philippines' raucous and cosmopolitan second city, to Boracay on the northwestern tip of Panay, the raucous and cosmopolitan beach resort. Numerous smaller, more subdued beaches can be found around the Cebu and Negros islands and on Panglao Island off Bohol, a worthy destination itself. Lesser travelled islands such as Siquior and Romblon offer more privacy and the chance to get into the lethargic flow, and for those wishing to stop time altogether there are the thousands of tiny islands unmarked on most maps, their names known only to locals.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soaking up the island rhythms of **White Beach** (p325) on Boracay
- Swimming alongside whale sharks in the waters around **Padre Burgos** (p359) in southern Leyte
- Visiting **Bohol** (p261) for diving, jungles, and tarsiers
- Checking out the magnoliaceous vistas from the mountain-biking trails on **Guimaras** (p306)
- Making an appointment with a healer on **Siquijor** (p294) if you're feeling under the weather
- Being one of the few to see wildlife on remote **Sibuyan Island** (p342)
- Going spelunking on **Samar** (p347), in one of Asia's longest cave systems
- Discovering postcard-perfect tropical retreats in remote **Sipalay** (p292), such as Punta Ballo and Sugar Beach
- Marooning yourself on tiny **Malapascua Island** (p249), with its white-sand beaches, laid-back resorts and great diving





Climate

Despite the fact that the Visayas extend so far in all cardinal directions, the water temperature is always pleasant no matter what the season, and the air temperature ranges from 25°C to 30°C year round. The area is generally less affected by the dozens of typhoons that sweep through the Philippines to the north. The wet season is usually from May to October and the dry season from November to April, with slight variations in different parts of the region. For example, rainfall in Leyte and on the west coast of Samar is more or less evenly distributed throughout the year, and typhoons strike southern Samar in November to December.

Getting There & Away

Cebu is the transport hub of the Visayas. It's possible to fly directly there without having to pass through Manila, and it is serviced by many international airlines with connections to major and minor Asian cities. Several domestic airlines fly directly from Manila to Cebu, Negros, Bohol, Leyte, Samar, Panay and Romblon, and in some cases to more than one city in each of these island provinces. Siquior is the only province at the moment without a direct connection.

It's also possible to reach many parts of the Visayas by boat from Manila or ports in Mindanao.

The only semipractical boat connection to the region from outside the Philippines is between Malaysia and Zamboanga.

Getting Around

A Spanish Armada-sized fleet services the waterways in the Visayas; if viewed from above by satellite photo, the waterways would probably look like a slow-moving German autobahn. The vessels range from seaworthy to 'there's no way that thing floats'. Cebu is the main hub, with boats bound for almost every destination (though not always directly and often not daily).

Iloilo City on Panay is probably second in terms of departures and accessibility to other islands in the region, followed by Tacloban on Bohol and Dumaguete on Negros.

The only significant dangers and annoyances you'll experience in the region are rapidly dwindling reserves of patience because of unreliable boat schedules and the anxiety provoked by the predeparture pro-

cedure of recording your name, nationality and age on a ledger so your remains can be identified in case of an accident.

CEBU

032 / pop 2.38 million

Cebu is the hub around which the Visayas revolves. It is the most densely populated island in the Philippines and is second only to Luzon in its strategic and economic importance to the country. Its language, Cebuano, is widely spoken throughout the Visayas and parts of Mindanao, and its capital, Cebu City, is a magnet for migrants from all over the region.

Heavily developed, particularly on its eastern coast, Cebu has a long, bare backbone of a central mountain range that has confined most of the population to the coastal fringe. Mining and logging have taken their toll on the forests, though with the right guide there are still a few opportunities for exploring mountains, caves and waterfalls.

The beaches at the northern tip of the island and on its southwest coast have the whitest sand and the most spectacular diving. To the north, the idyllic offshore islands of Bantayan and Malapascua are steadily increasing in popularity, and deservedly so. To the south, Moalboal's Panagsama Beach packs a concentrated dose of dive centres and budget hedonism.

Mactan Island, a short drive from Cebu City, may be little more than an overdeveloped mudflat, but divers and bird-watchers still flock to Olango, a reef-ringed outcrop just off its eastern coast.

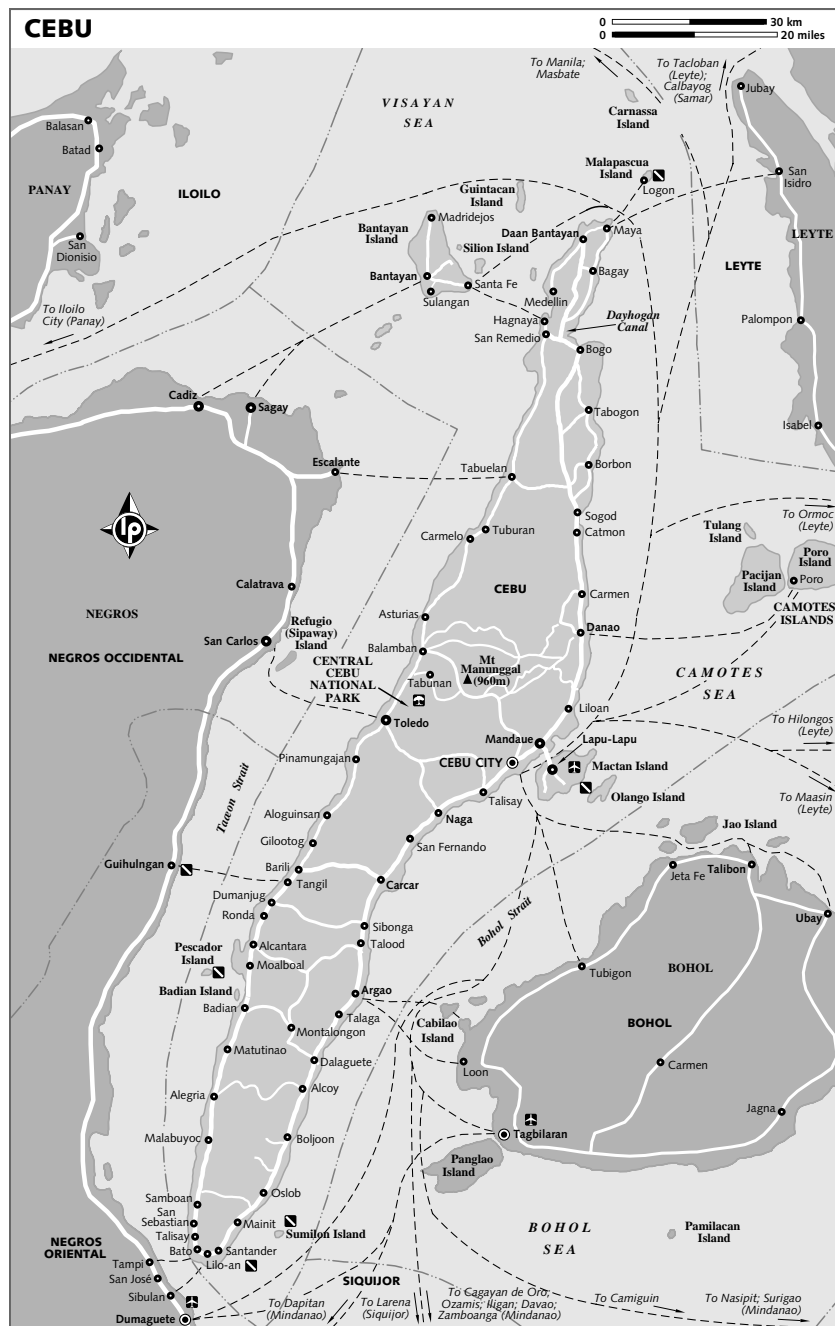
Cebu City has the nation's busiest port and its second-busiest airport, and is the gateway to the Visayas. If you happen to be travelling from Asia, it's an attractive alternative to entering the country at Manila.

CEBU CITY

032 / pop 718,821

As far as most visitors are concerned, Cebu City is Manila minus the mayhem. Its traffic is chaotic, but not insane. Its size and layout can actually be understood, rather than merely endured. And – sigh – hardly any of the taxi drivers here are employed by Satan.

With a vast seaport, an international airport, two giant shopping malls, a modern



business park and several universities, Cebu City has achieved metropolis status without coming to resemble the ninth circle of hell.

But before we get your hopes up, bear in mind that its virtues are comparative. With apologies to a few Peace Corps veterans and the like, if we were to draw a portrait of the average foreigner here, it would be of a self-averted, twice-divorced, chemically dependent middle-aged man with a much younger Filipina on his arm. Sound familiar?

Cebu City isn't Manila, but that doesn't make it a place we'd want to be spending our holiday.

History

When Ferdinand Magellan sailed into the Port of Cebu on 7 April 1521, an eyewitness account relates that he was already a latecomer: 'Many sailing vessels from Siam, China, and Arabia were docked in the port. The people ate from porcelain wares and used a lot of gold and jewellery...'

He may not have been the first visitor to Cebu, but Magellan brought with him something that nobody else had: missionary zeal. Even his death at the hands of warrior chief Lapu-Lapu on Mactan Island a few weeks later (see p242) would only afford the natives temporary respite against the incursions of the conquistadors. The arrival of avenging Spaniard Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565 delivered Cebu – and eventually the whole of the Philippines – to Spain and Catholicism. The founding in 1575 of Villa del Santisimo Nombre de Jesus (Village of the Most Holy Name of Jesus) marked Cebu City as the first Spanish settlement in the Philippines, predating Manila by seven years.

Orientation

In spite of the city's maritime beginnings, its centre has shifted decisively inland. Locals now refer to the newer precinct around Fuente Osmeña as 'uptown' and the older district around Colon St (the oldest street in the country) as 'downtown'. Uptown and downtown have such completely different characters as to almost seem different cities: basically downtown is older, dirtier, more impoverished and more vice-strewn than uptown. Longtime residents of Cebu City will admit to have never gone downtown, and will profess no desire to ever visit.

But it doesn't end there. In recent years the area northeast of uptown, around the Cebu Business Park and Ayala Center, has become like a new uptown, exerting a similar gravitational effect on hotels and businesses that Fuente Osmeña once did. It's greener and more open than Fuente Osmeña, has the best mall, the best business facilities and some of the best hotels, and isn't so blighted by girlie bars as Fuente Osmeña. If you like a bit of quiet, it's a good place to base yourself.

In the northern hills beyond the uptown area is the flash district of Lahug, where the Waterfront Hotel & Casino exerts a similar influence on its surrounds to the Ayala Center.

Cebu City has a long history of changing its street names, with many of the old names living on, either in the minds of taxi drivers or on street signs yet to be removed. If you find yourself squinting up at a street sign with black lettering on a yellow background, it's an old sign – and the name *may* have since changed. Up-to-date signs are those with white, or reflective, lettering on a bright green background.

There are also many streets, avenues, drives and boulevards using the same name, such as Osmeña, or Ramos – often all that differentiates them is a first name or initial (eg J Osmeña St, S Osmeña St).

MAPS

Decent enough tourist maps can be picked up free from the airport, the Department of Tourism office (p230) and from most hotels. For something a bit more in-depth, pick up an E-Z Cebu map (P110), with Cebu City, Mandaue, Mactan and Moalboal. It's sold at the National Bookstore (p230) and at some of the better hotels and travel agencies.

For nautical and topographical maps and charts, set a course for the **National Mapping & Resource Authority** (Namria; ☎ 412 1749; Room 301, 3rd fl, Osmeña Bldg, cnr Osmeña Blvd & Jakosalem St; 11 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri).

Information

A full list of consulates in Cebu City can be found in the free brochure *Your Guide to Cebu*, available from all tourist information outlets (p230).

The **Bureau of Immigration Office** (☎ 345 6442; cnr Burgos St & Mandaue Ave; 11 8-11am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) is behind the Mandaue Fire Station, opposite

the Mandaue Sports Complex. Mandaue is a satellite suburb of Cebu City; it lies on the other side of the bridge to Mactan Island, on the way to the airport. A taxi there from downtown will cost around P150. You can extend a 21-day visa to 59 days here for a whopping P2020 (this includes a *compulsory* express fee). You only need to produce your passport, and you should be out of there within an hour. For longer visa extensions, you will have to pay around P500 per month. See p445 for more details.

BOOKSHOPS

There are a number of outlets of the **National Bookstore**, including on Gen Maxilom Ave, at SM City and at Ayala Center. All stock local and international fiction and nonfiction, magazines, stationery and maps.

EMERGENCY

Cebu City Police Station Fuente (☎ 253 5636);

R Landon St (☎ 231 5802)

Task Force Turista (☎ 254 4023; 24hr)

INTERNET ACCESS

You won't have to walk far to find an Internet café, especially in the busier streets uptown and around the universities. You'll pay only P20 to P25 per hour in an air-con room on a fast PC with coffee, drinks and light snacks on offer; the branches of **Bo's Coffee Club** (p237) on Osmeña Blvd and in the Ayala Center offer free Internet with coffee. Many places are open overnight and most are open daily. Evenings tend to be full of young guys playing the latest multiplayer shoot-'em-ups, so it's best to go during the day.

Bubbles On Line (laundry P40 per kilo) Do Internet as you get your washing done; there are branches on F Ramos St and A Pond St. Laundry requires 24-hour turnaround.

Café Intelletto (☎ 254 1181; Mango Plaza, Gen Maxilom Ave) Great little café/book exchange where you can surf as you sup.

Dish (☎ 254 0567; Juana Osmeña St) Trendy little café (p237) offers free use of DSL ports for laptop-carrying customers.

St Patrick's Internet (St Patrick's Sq, R Aboitiz St; 9am-1am Mon-Sat, 3-11pm Sun)

MEDIA

The *Sun Star* newspaper lists what's going on around town, movie guides, property rentals, shipping schedules and classifieds. Sunday's paper is particularly informative. *Cebu Daily*

News is also OK. They can be bought from street vendors, and inside and outside malls. Newspapers often sell out by the afternoon.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Chong Hua Hospital (☎ 254 1461; M Cui St) The most recommended medical facility in Cebu City.

Myrle Lim-Peters (☎ 253 3151; Unit 12, Century Plaza Commercial Complex, J Osmeña St) If you're in need of dentistry, we've heard good things about Myrle Lim-Peters.

MONEY

There are no end of places where you can change money in Cebu City. The best banks are to be found around Fuente Osmeña and Ayala Center – HSBC is the pick of the bunch. Credit card-friendly ATMs abound (they're in all the malls) but the drawback is the transaction limit, which is usually in the order of P4000 to P5000 – except in the case of the following banks:

Chinabank (F Ramos St) Changes cash and travellers cheques. The ATM is open during bank hours and takes all major cards. There's a P20,000 transaction limit.

Citibank (Mindanao Ave, Cebu Business Park) Near Ayala Center. Changes cash and travellers cheques. The ATM is open 24 hours and takes all major cards. There's a P15,000 transaction limit.

Equitable PCI (cnr Gonzales & Borromeo Sts) Issues cash advances on major credit cards and Cirrus/Maestro. There's also a branch at SM City.

HSBC (Cardinal Rosales Ave, Cebu Business Park) Near the Ayala Center. Changes cash and travellers cheques. The ATM is open 24 hours and takes all major cards. The transaction limit is P30,000.

POST

The city's main post office is in the downtown area, near City Hall. Uptown there's a post office in the Capitol Building. Hole-in-the-wall sub-branches can be found at many of the universities around town.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Airport Tourist Information Desk (Mactan-Cebu International Airport) At the arrivals terminal; open 24 hours. Pick up a free copy of *Your Guide to Cebu*, with a map and useful phone numbers.

Department of Tourism (DOT; ☎ 254 2811; ground fl, LDM Bldg, Legazpi St) Free maps and pamphlets, and information on boat and bus schedules.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

In the foyer of the Diplomat Hotel (p235) you'll find Cebu branches of two reputable

CEBU CITY

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Bubbles On Line.....	2	B4
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Cebu City Police Station.....	4	B3
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Chong Hua Hospital.....	7	B3
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Persian Palate.....	(see 50)	
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agencies: **Uni-Orient Travel** (☎ 253 1866; 90 F Ramos St, uptown) and **Pan Pacific** (☎ 254 0343).

Sights

If you're staying uptown, a visit to Colon's principle attractions – Fort San Pedro, Magellan's Cross and the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño – is an ideal way to sample the chaos and seaminess of downtown before beating a hasty retreat.

BASILICA MINORE DEL SANTO NIÑO

This holiest of churches (Osmeña Blvd; admission free) is a real survivor. Built in 1565 and burnt down three times, it was rebuilt in its present form in 1737. Perhaps it owes its incendiary past to the perennial bonfire of candles in its courtyard, stoked by an endless procession of pilgrims and other worshippers. The object of their veneration is a Flemish image of the infant Jesus, sequestered in a chapel to the left of the altar. It dates back to Magellan's time and is said to be miraculous (which it probably had to be to survive all those fires). Every year, the image is the centrepiece of Cebu's largest annual event, the Sinulog festival (see opposite).

Don't forget to look up and admire the heavenly ceiling murals while you're here.

FORT SAN PEDRO

Built in 1565 by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, conqueror of the Philippines, **Fort San Pedro** (Osmeña Blvd; adult/child P20/12; 7am–10pm) has served as an army garrison, a rebel stronghold, a prison camp and the city zoo. These days, it's retired as a peaceful, walled garden and handsomely crumbling ruin. A perfect retreat from the chaos and madness of downtown Cebu, it also has public toilets.

MAGELLAN'S CROSS

Magellan's cross? Wouldn't you be if you'd sailed all the way from Europe only to die in a soggy heap on the island of Mactan? Ferdinand's Catholic legacy, a large wooden cross, is housed in a stone rotunda (built in 1841) across from Cebu City Hall. The crucifix on show here apparently contains a few splinters from a cross Magellan planted on the shores of Cebu in 1521. A painting on the ceiling of the rotunda shows Magellan erecting the cross (actually, the locals are doing all the work – Magellan's just standing around with his mates).

CARBON MARKET

No, it's not the Philippines' contribution to the Kyoto Treaty. Urban living in the raw, the **Carbon Market** (MC Briones St) is Cebu's oldest and biggest produce market – where racks of clothes and baskets snuggle cheek-by-jowl with stalls of fish, live chickens and drying intestines. Most jeepneys heading downtown go to Carbon (P5).

CASA GORORDO MUSEUM

Downtown, in a quieter residential area, the **Casa Gorordo Museum** (☎ 255 5630; 35 L Jaena St; adult/child & student P70/50; 7am–11.30am & 1–4pm Tue–Sun) is one of the hidden gems of Cebu City. Originally a private home, it was built in the 1850s and purchased by the Gorordos, one of Cebu's leading families. The lower part of the house has walls of Mactan coral stone. The stunning upper-storey living quarters are pure Philippine hardwood, held together not with nails but with wooden pegs. As well as having Spanish and native influences, the house incorporates principals of feng shui, owing to the Chinese ancestry of Gorordo matriarch Donna Telerofora (whose death portrait graces the hallway). Items on display include kitchen implements, antique photos and furniture. The price of admission includes a guided tour.

BUTTERFLY SANCTUARY

One of the first places Cebu residents will take visiting relatives is the **Butterfly Sanctuary** (☎ 261 6884; admission P100), west of the downtown area. It's hardly a place you'd expect butterflies to hang around, but hang around they do – from branches and leaves all over the garden of Julian Jumalon's home. You will receive a lecture and tour showing you butterflies in various stages of their lifecycle, and butterfly collections and artworks made from damaged butterfly wings – even a presidential portrait! The best time of day for viewing is the morning, and the best time of year is from June to February, when the butterflies are breeding. Ring first to make a booking.

To get there, catch a jeepney (P5) from N Bacalosa Ave, which turns into Cebu South Rd, and hop off at Macopa St (after the second pedestrian overpass). Walk up Macopa St, and take the first left after Basak Elementary School. The sanctuary is on the corner

THE CHINESE OF CEBU

Cebu City's history is written on its urban landscape. If you can read it, you'll find an intriguing tale of migrations, enclave-building, intermarriage and ethnic flight.

The Chinese have been an integral part of Cebu society since the late 16th century, when Chinese merchants settled in the baryo of Parian, around where Casa Gorordo stands today. Owing to their famed ability as merchants, many Cebuano Chinese grew rich. They married into the Spanish elite and their children, known as *mestizos* (meaning people of mixed blood), came to form a favoured caste. As the trade in cash crops grew in the 18th century, the *mestizos* established a monopoly. This was formalised in 1780 when the Chinese were expelled by the Spanish – at the urging of the *mestizos*.

After an 1839 decree rescinding their expulsion, many Chinese began to return to Cebu. By then Parian had by then become a residential district for wealthy *mestizos*, filled with the kind of houses of which Casa Gorordo is a surviving example. Though some Chinese (such as the founder of the Gorordo clan, Donna Telerofora) converted to Catholicism and married into *mestizo* and Spanish families, others established their own enclaves. Northwest of Fuente Osmeña and in Lahug you can still find a number of active Chinese temples, symbols of a prosperous and resilient community.

at the end of this street. A taxi will get you there from downtown for around P65.

TAOIST TEMPLE

Perched high in the northern hills overlooking the city, the **Taoist Temple** (7am–5pm) is a symbol of the city's large and prosperous ethnic Chinese population. It's not one for temple aficionados; the architecture is functional and austere by Chinese standards. Nevertheless the trip here, past the gated mansions of exclusive Beverly Hills, is a good excuse to see how Cebu's wealthier citizens live, and the views over the city are noteworthy. To get to the temple take a Lahug or Calunasan jeepney and ask to stop at the Taoist Temple or Beverly Hills (P5) – you've then got a short walk uphill. Alternatively, take a taxi from uptown for about P80.

WATERFRONT HOTEL & CASINO

If highrolling's your thing, then **Casino Filipino** (☎ 232 6888; www.waterfronthotels.net; 1 Salinas Dr) at the Waterfront Hotel is for you. If not, the place is still worth a look if only for the mechanical horse-racing machine, the fake night sky of the main gaming room, and the spellbinding ceiling mural in the foyer – a 50m-by-30m recreation of explorer Ferdinand Magellan's world map. For more details, see p236.

Playing satellites to the Waterfront are Cebu's premier international-style dining and entertainment centres, the Village and Crossroads (see p237).

TOPS LOOKOUT

Mt Busay makes a mighty backdrop for Cebu City, but the best view is from the mountain itself, which is where you'll find **Tops Lookout** (admission P100). Better known simply as 'Tops', this modernist, fortresslike viewing deck provides spectacular views, especially at sunrise or sunset. There are snack stalls up here, and beers sell for P40. Many Lahug jeepneys get within about 500m of the lookout (take one on Osmeña Blvd, north of Del Rosario – you may have to change at Cebu Plaza Hotel – and ask for a jeepney to Tops), from where it's a steep, winding road to the top. A taxi will take you there and back for around P800, and you will probably have to pay the driver's admission too.

Activities

If you've come to Cebu for a spot of diving, the nearest resorts are at Mactan Island. For details see p242. Otherwise, like most travellers, you'll want to get on the first convenient bus to Moalbalo or Malapascua. Other activities you can organise at these places include trekking, caving, canyoning and sailing.

Festivals & Events

Cebu's biggest annual festival draws pilgrims from around the Philippines. The **Sinulog**, or **Fiesta Senyor**, is the Feast of Santo Niño (the Christ Child). It is celebrated on the third Sunday of January and is marked by a colourful procession bearing the city's venerated image of Santo Niño (see opposite).

The word *sinulog* is a Visayan term for a dance that imitates the rhythm of the river. It originated as a pagan ritual, but after the Cebuanos' conversion to Christianity it morphed into a dance to honour the image of the Santo Niño.

As they are in Holy Week, many hotels are booked out at this time.

Sleeping

You certainly won't suffer from a lack of accommodation choices in Cebu City. Due to the pollution, crowds and poorer demographic of downtown Cebu, the better hotels (and restaurants) are located uptown, particularly around Ayala Center.

BUDGET

There are good deals to be had all over town, and transportation is so cheap that there's no need to put limits on where you stay; ie you don't have to stay downtown to save dough.

Downtown

If you're staying downtown, your priority should be to find a safe and quiet place.

Hotel de Mercedes (☎ 253 1105; hoteldemercedes@yahoo.com; 7 Pelaez St; s/d from P470/790; a) A good budget option, this well-run place feels insulated from the street by its spacious lobby. It has very large, almost cheerful rooms (with phone and hot water) and an attached Internet café (P20 per hour). The restaurant does an American breakfast for P126.

Century Hotel (☎ 255 1600; cnr Colon & Pelaez Sts; s/d from P440/560; a) Friendly, plain, tidy and tiled, and it feels pretty safe. Not bad for downtown.

Uptown

All rooms, unless otherwise noted, have cable TV and a private cold-water bathroom.

Kukuk's Nest Pension House (☎ 231 5180; 157 Gorordo Ave; d with fan/air-con P350/550) A tired old wooden building at the end of a long courtyard offering simple rooms with paper-thin walls and bamboo furnishings. There's a jungle-themed outdoor restobar at the front that tends to fill up at night with foreign males and prostitutes; hence noise and security are concerns. Mealtime offerings are very good: *calderata de cabrito* (goat in spicy sauce) goes for P125, and banana pancakes for P85. Lino, the resident artist

here, lost both his arms in a milling accident when he was 12. Despite this he can knock off terrifically accomplished, and reasonably priced, charcoal portraits. Ask for him at the bar.

Pensionne La Florentina (☎ 231 3318; 18 Acacia St; s/d P550/650; a) An attractive older-style building on a quiet street around the corner from Kukuk's, this family-run place is a great uptown budget option. Get an upstairs room facing the street, and you'll have nice views at great rates. The other plus is you're only a five-minute walk from Ayala Center.

C'est la Vie Pension (☎ 253 5266; J Osmeña St; d with fan P600) Excellent value. On a quiet street a stone's throw from the pleasant Sideline Garden Restaurant and the convenience of St Patrick's Sq, and far enough from the sleaze of Gen Maxilom Ave, 'Such is Life' has very large, comfortable rooms.

Shamrock Pension House (☎ 255 2999/00; fax 253 5239; Fuente Osmeña; d P550-900; a) Perfect for those who want cheap and charmless accommodation in the thick of uptown. There's hot water and the more expensive rooms have views of Fuente Osmeña Circle. Children under 12 are free.

Mayflower Pension House (☎ 255 8000; fax 255 2700; Villalon Dr; s/d with fan & shared bathroom P260/380, s/d with air-con & private bathroom P480/630) Near the Capitol Building, meaning not really close to anything, this rambling rabbit warren of a hotel has seemingly hundreds of neat little rooms. The fan rooms are the best value. A tricycle parking bay is right outside.

An easy walk from uptown or downtown, and situated on a quiet, leafy stretch of Junquera St, are two excellent budget hotels.

Teo-Fel Pension House (☎ 253 2482; 4 Junquera St; s/d from P400/600; a) Teo-Fel offers small-ish, aqua-coloured rooms with windows and rattan furnishings. For an extra P100 to P150, you'll get cable TV and hot water. On the ground floor is the little Café Felicidad, and there are PLDT (Philippine Long-Distance Telephone Company) phones in the sitting areas.

Cebu Regal Pension House (☎ 255 6758; 9a Junquera St; s/d from P385/550; a) Right across from Teo-Fel, this place is every bit as good value. Rooms are clean and freshly painted, and all have windows.

In a quiet backstreet north of Fuente Osmeña, **Jasmine Pension House** (☎ 253 3757; cnr DG Garcia & Jasmine Sts; s/d with cable TV from

P480/580; a) and its neighbour **Verbenia Pension House** (☎ 253 3430; fax 253 3430; 584-A DG Garcia St; s/d P410/500; a) have basic, tidy rooms. Jasmine's rooms are a little larger, while Verbenia offers cable TV for an extra P60.

MIDRANGE

For midrange and top-end hotels, it is worth asking about 'promotional rates', a reduction of up to 40%, which occurs for extended periods throughout the year, making even the more expensive hotels very reasonably priced. Many of these hotels also offer free accommodation to children under 12 (but stress that the children *must* be accompanied by their parents!). Unless otherwise noted, all rooms have air-con, hot-water bathroom and cable TV.

Uptown

Fuente Pension House (☎ 253 4133; 175 DJ Lorente St; s/tw from P700/800; a) Not a pension house, but actually an imposing multistorey hotel, this is the most popular midrange place in the uptown area – so book ahead. What makes it worthwhile are its central (yet quiet) location and its rooftop terrace bar where you can get tempura shrimp (P110) and a beer while enjoying a view of Cebu. The American breakfast is P100. Another bonus, which will suit late arrivals – check-out time is 24 hours after check-in.

La Casa Rosario (☎ 255 0525, 256 2225; 101 R Aboltiz St; d from P900; a) On a quiet street near Fuente Osmeña, this is a squeaky clean establishment with friendly service and large, brightly painted rooms at a good price. The upstairs rooms have small terraces, and the doubles have a large window as well.

Kiwi Lodge (☎ /fax 232 9550; kiwilodge@pacific.net.ph; 1060 G Tudtud St; r P790-980; a) Conveniently located on a quiet street within walking distance from both Ayala Center and SM City. Clean, light rooms are very good value, especially the deluxe (P945), which has a view. The restaurant-bar on the ground level is a popular hang-out for businessmen and expats – they come for the pool tables, 'fish and chips' and Sunday roasts.

Diplomat Hotel (☎ 253 0099; diplomathotel@yahoo.com; 90 F Ramos St; d P1000-1400; a) Accessed by a covered mall that leads to a 'prestige' lobby of marble and glass, the Diplomat Hotel is a quiet, safe choice. The staff are professional and at your service. Standard rooms

are well priced and spotlessly clean, with safe and minibar. Rooms in the swanky new wing are verging on top-end quality.

Cebu Grand Hotel (☎ 254 6331; www.cebugrandhotel.com; N Escario St; d P1400-2000; a s) East of the Capitol Site in a not-too-convenient location, this is nevertheless a very good hotel with spotless, comfortable rooms and great views. The cheaper rooms are excellent value. There's a small pool on the 7th floor, a gym, and a cosy bar off the marble foyer with videoke and live bands. Service is impeccable. Buffet breakfast is included.

West Gorordo Hotel (☎ 231 4347; wgorordo@skyinet.net; 110 Gorordo Ave; s/d P840/1560; a) A cloyingly nice hotel, with pink floral wallpaper in the halls and dowdy, tiled rooms with views. Rates include breakfast, and other meals can be taken at the popular Family Choice Restaurant next door, with Chinese-Filipino all-you-can-eat for P135.

Golden Peak (☎ 233 8111; www.goldenpeakhotel.com; cnr N Escario St & Gorordo Ave; r from P2000; a) A mixed bag. On a busy intersection, but conveniently close to Ayala Center. It has the usual midrange amenities plus buffet breakfast yet at prices nearing those of top-end establishments. We found some of the staff lacking in professionalism.

Dynasty Tourist Inn (☎ 253 7598; Jasmine St; d/tw P750/850; a) With Chinese décor to go with the name, Dynasty is not the friendliest place but it has well-priced rooms – some with good views. You'll find it at the western end of Jasmine St, where the road hits P Rodriguez St.

Eddie's Hotel (☎ 254 8570/76; clover8@pacific.net.ph; F Manalo St; r P1480-1880; a) Just near the girlie-bar precinct, which explains all the old blokes with young women in the lobby when we were there. Still, it could be a lot worse: staff are professional and the rooms are well kept and light-filled – the more expensive, the more spacious. The hotel's 24-hour Beverly Room Bar & Restaurant serves what is reputed to be Cebu's best steak (imported porterhouse, P860).

For people staying a month or more, the **Apartelle** (☎ 255 6385; N Escario St; studios/ste from P750/1100; a) has great deals on modestly appointed apartments, with discounts of up to 50% for the long-termers. The studios are big, the suites are enormous. All rooms have basic kitchen facilities and fridge, and for an extra P350 rooms have table and dresser.

Lahug

RDEL Pension House (Alderan Hotel: ☎ 234 0322, ☎ / fax 414 7087; Salinas Dr; d from P850; a s) Formerly called the Alderan, this is reasonably priced for what you get. The rooms range a lot in quality – some have carpet, TV and/or fridge – so if you're unhappy, ask to see other rooms. Tucked almost under the stairs is a small, neglected-looking pool.

TOP END

Unless otherwise noted, top-end hotel rooms will come with phone and minibar, safe, cable TV and all the other trimmings. It's worth asking for promotional rates; you may get a discount of up to 40%.

Uptown

Marriott Hotel (☎ 232 6100; www.marriott.com; Cardinal Rosales Ave, Cebu Business Park; s/d from US\$130/155; a s) Well located in some parkland behind the Ayala Center, near banks, shops and businesses. As you would expect, rooms are stylish and well-appointed, with most offering good views. Generous-sized suites offer all the comforts of home and there's broadband access. Packages may include buffet breakfast.

Cebu Midtown Hotel (☎ 253 9711; cmhsales@skynet.net; Fuente Osmeña; s/d from US\$75/85; a s) Right in the thick of it, above Robinson Plaza. The rooms facing the harbour have the best views. Judging by all the literature in the foyer, a typical preoccupation of guests here is arranging foreign visas. The hotel offers a 10% discount to Filipinos and foreigners with Filipino partners.

Lahug

Waterfront Hotel & Casino (☎ 232 6888; www.waterfronthotels.net; 1 Salinas Dr; d from US\$150; a s) Misleadingly named, as it is more than 2km from the water, and beloved of taxi drivers because of its big-tipping guests, the Waterfront is Asian highroller city. It appeals to those taken by the thought of a 24-hour casino, and countless food-and-beverage outlets, discos, gyms, piano bars etc. See also p233.

Eating

For the peckish, there's a generous serving of food stalls set up around town. The biggest stall of them all is Carbon Market (p232) – we suspect the name is a reference to the state of the barbecue they serve here. Perennial

favourites include flame-grilled chicken kebabs (P20), 'banana-Q' (grilled banana; two for P8), *bola bola* (meatballs; P8) and *buso* ('hanging rice' in woven pyramids; P3).

Cebu is also full of bakeshops, offering a reliable source of fresh bread rolls, cakes and buns. Self-caterers will also find supermarkets, including one in Mango Plaza.

Alas, for those hoping to find a culinary gem hidden down some quiet backstreet, in Cebu's version of urban flight most of the city's better eateries (and shops and bars) have gravitated to the malls, in some cases leaving only darkened traffic sewers where once there were viable shopping strips.

DOWNTOWN

While genuinely good restaurants are rare in Cebu City, they're virtually nonexistent in the downtown area. Fast-food joints and uninspiring Chinese and Filipino-style diners are the rule.

Our Place (cnr Pelaez & Sanciangko Sts; meals P150-250) Upstairs, Our Place is a favourite haunt of foreign blokes. It's a cosy, colourful, old-style place with wagon wheels on the windows, bumper stickers and licence plates on the walls, a well-stocked bar and a menu ranging from triple-decker pancakes (P65) to hearty steaks (P250).

Visayan Restaurant (Manallili St; dishes P70-150) Near Hotel Victoria de Cebu, it offers big portions of good Filipino and Chinese food in cleaner and more comfortable surroundings than you'll find nearby. Vegetarians should note: the bean-curd soup has meat in it, the fried rice has meat in it...

UPTOWN

Sideline Garden Restaurant (J Osmeña St; meals from P90) Set beneath a large pagoda in a pretty little park, Sideline is a delightfully ambient restobar with cheap beers (San Miguel P25) and decent Filipino food. A great place to sit in the afternoon and watch the world go by.

Joven's Grill (cnr Pres Osmeña Blvd & Jasmine St; buffet P120) One of Cebu's better all-you-can-eat buffets. Popular with families, and a good spread.

Café Intellecto (☎ 254 1181; Mango Plaza, Gen Maxilom Ave; meals P100-150) Great little café/book exchange where you can surf the Net. Pastas are a speciality. A favourite with students, menu items are named after the classics. (The *Divine Comedy* was a little oily.)

Dish (☎ 254 0567; J Osmeña St; meals P100-180; h 9am-midnight Mon-Sat) Next to Century Plaza, this is one of the new breed of slick, designer cafés. With smooth tunes and polished service, enjoy generous serves of pan-Asian meals, including pad thai (P85) and sensational coconut-currried prawns (P160).

Persian Palate (Ayala Center; meals P75-175; h 11am-3pm & 5.30-10.30pm Mon-Sat) A popular franchise dishing up generous helpings of reasonably authentic Indian and Middle Eastern food. It advertises spicy food, but even the 'hot' curries are quite mild. Its menu includes a rarity in Cebu City – a large vegetarian selection. There are branches at Mango Plaza and on Gen Maxilom Ave.

Bo's Coffee Club (F Ramos St; coffee P35-75, cakes P25-50) The Philippine version of Starbucks, even down to décor, logo and cookies. One of the only places you'll find good espressos, and also a typical American range. Popular with young Filipinos, this is a good air-con escape from the streets. Other locations include Omeña Blvd and Ayala Center.

Ayala Center (Cebu Business Park) is a shopping mall with a surprising array of decent food outlets. The most grown-up are in the **Food & Entertainment Area** (h 10am-1am Mon-Thu, 10am-3am Fri-Sun), in the north wing of the mall. Enter by the door 50m south of the corner of Mindanao Ave and Bohol St. Rubbing shoulders with a Time Zone video arcade and various bars you'll find *Tequila Joes* for truly excellent Mexican and margaritas (and a garden dining area), *Don Henrico's* for decent pizzas and pasta, *Hop Japs* for chic Asian fusion... the list goes on.

St Patrick's Square (R Aboliz St) is a conveniently placed outdoor mall with a couple of good eateries and an Internet café. **Bean Sprouts Oriental Café** (meals P140-200) has a decent selection of Chinese and vegetarian food that you can eat in or take away, and **Brown Up Café** is a Bo's/Starbucks-style espresso shop.

LAHUG

Golden Cowrie Native Restaurant (☎ 233 4243; Salinas Dr; meals from P115; h 11am-2pm & 6-10pm) This is a great place to try authentic native-style cuisine. The service is impeccable and the food, presented on a banana leaf, is simply delicious. Try the sizzling *bangus* (the Philippines' national fish) – we had two.

Mr A (☎ 232 5200; Lower Busay Heights; dishes from p200; h 11am-2am) Can be reached by follow-

ing the road to Tops Lookout (see p233). A favourite with the well-heeled patrons of the Waterfront, it features a terrace with a sweeping view of Cebu City that is arguably superior to Tops. Unlike the view, we found the Filipino/international food nothing to write home about. (If it's the view you crave, a quiet drink will serve the purpose.) It's 40 minutes by taxi, which will cost you around P400 including the wait – or you can include it in your Tops itinerary.

If Mr A wants more than you can pay, **Bungtod Grills & Bamboo House** (Lower Busay Heights; h 3pm-2am daily; meals P60-80) is another place en route to Tops. The views aren't as spectacular, but it sure is a lot cheaper.

For high-class, international-style dining you can't go past the two minimalls in the 'foothills' of the Waterfront Hotel. **Crossroads** (M Cuenco Ave) and the **Village** (Salinas Dr). A metered taxi from Fuente Osmeña will cost you P50 to P60.

Tenants at Crossroads include: **Mao's** for Chinese; **Olio** for seafood, steak and wine; and **Krau Thai** for mild (Filipino-ised) Thai. Meals are mostly at the pricier end: P200 for a standard main, P450 and above for seafood and steak.

The Village is a little downmarket in comparison to Crossroads. It features a range of schmick, look-alike restobars including **Yo! Latino** (meals P100-150), with a Spanish/Mexican menu and live bands every night.

Entertainment

Wineshop (51 Gorordo Ave) Cheery, welcoming and unpretentious, with a mixed crowd of Filipino and foreign clientele, this Spanish-owned place is hands down our favourite Cebu City hangout. There's no videoke or blaring sound system, just the convivial hum of conversation. The kicker is the wine selection, including an eminently drinkable Spanish house red that goes for just P60 a carafe. They also do reasonable set meals (P180).

Sun City (N Escario St) Cebu City has its share of universities, hence places like Sun City. Tarpaulin ceiling, white plastic tables and chairs, acoustic live sets, pool tables, reasonably priced beer (San Miguel P30) and, of course, students. It's diagonally opposite the Golden Peak.

Ratsky (☎ 234 2554; Ayala Center, Food & Entertainment Area; night-time admission P150) A smooth bar where hip young things head to at night for

a drink (San Miguel P70) and to hear live music. Pasta, sushi, burgers and oysters are on the menu. Enter by the door 50m south of the corner of Mindanao Ave and Bohol St. If Ratsky doesn't do it for you, there are other bars in Ayala. Dress code applies and the admission price entitles you to one free beer.

Lahug's food and entertainment mini-malls **Crossroads** (M Cuenco Ave) and the **Village** (Salinas Dr) have a number of restobars and live venues where you can dance and drink the night away. The most sophisticated is **Crossroads' Voodoo**, with relaxed black décor and a small stage that features DJs and/or live bands every night.

Shopping

Cebuanos certainly love their malls. You can eat, shop, bank, organise flights and party in these armour-guarded consumer magnets, and all in the comfort of air-con. Opening hours are typically 10am to 9pm.

Ayala Center (Cebu Business Park) A six-storey dome, it seems small in comparison to the more upmarket SM City. However, you'll still find most banks, airlines and tour companies represented here. There are also European and American label boutiques, restaurants (see p236), bars (see p237), health spas, cinemas, every fast-food chain imaginable, games halls and even a childcare centre, which makes you wonder if some people never leave this place.

Robinson's Plaza (Fuente Osmeña) A small-time shopping mall, but handy if you're uptown. It has a department store, supermarket, ATMs, ticketing agencies and a food court.

SM City (North Reclamation Area) The *pièce de résistance* of shopping malls. You can organise travel and banking, and cover all other necessities in a place big enough to have its own government and currency. You'll also find very helpful information booths here to help you navigate your way.

Other malls include **Century Plaza Commercial Complex**, **Colonnade Mall**, **Gaisano Metro**, **Gaisano South** and **Mango Plaza**.

Getting There & Away

AIR

If it suits your itinerary to fly in from Asia, arriving in Cebu City rather than Manila has its advantages. Cebu's **Mactan-Cebu International Airport** (MCIA; % 340 2486; www.mactan-cebuairport.com) is second only to Manila in

terms of air traffic, but way ahead in terms of user-friendliness. Note that the airport is actually on Mactan Island (p242), 15km east of Cebu City.

Within the Philippines, domestic airlines fly between Cebu and around a dozen destinations – including, of course, Manila.

Airport terminal fees are P100 (cash) for domestic flights and a hefty P550 for international flights.

The following domestic and international airlines have offices at MCIA:

Air Philippines (% 341 0930; www.airphil.com)
Asian Spirit (% 341 2550; www.asianspirit.com)
Cathay Pacific (% 340 3254; www.cathaypacific.com)
Cebu Pacific (% 340 7980; www.cebupacificair.com)
Malaysia Airlines (% 340 2978; www.malaysiaairlines.com)
Philippine Airlines (PAL; % 340 0191; www.philippineairlines.com)
Singapore Airlines (Silkair; % 340 0041; www.silkair.com.sg)
South East Asian Airlines (SEAIR; % 341 4879; www.flyseair.com)

It's a one-hour flight between Cebu and Manila. The route is service by **Air Philippines** (two flights daily each way), **Cebu Pacific** (nine flights daily each way) and **Philippine Airlines** (seven or eight flights daily each way, from 5am to 7.30pm).

Other domestic destinations include the following:

Bacolod Cebu Pacific, PAL (30 minutes, twice daily).
Cagayan de Oro Asian Spirit (one hour, three weekly).
Camiguin SEAIR (one hour, weekly).
Caticlan Asian Spirit, SEAIR (one hour, twice daily).
Davao Cebu Pacific, PAL (one hour, two to three times daily).
General Santos Air Philippines (one hour, daily).
Iloilo Cebu Pacific, PAL (40 minutes, twice daily).
Kalibo Cebu Pacific (40 minutes, three weekly).
Siargao SEAIR (one hour, weekly).
Zamboanga Air Philippines, Cebu Pacific (one hour, five weekly).

International destinations include **Hong Kong** (Cathay Pacific, daily), **Kuala Lumpur** (Malaysia Airlines, twice weekly), **Seoul** (PAL, eight weekly), **Singapore** (Silkair, daily) and **Tokyo** (PAL, five weekly).

BOAT

Cebu City's vast, multipiered port throngs with boats travelling around the Philippines and internationally. The bigger passenger-

ferry lines such as **SuperCat** and **OceanJet** run large, fast ferries to and from Cebu City every day of the year except Good Friday and New Year's Day.

All shipping information is vulnerable to change. The *Sun Star* newspaper publishes a schedule that is generally reliable, but it is always good to double-check your schedules directly with the shipping companies. Also confirm the pier from which your boat is departing, or you might be in for a last-minute scramble when you arrive at the port.

Ticket prices for passenger liners quoted in this section apply to the cheapest fare, usually known as 'economy' or 'budget'. The rule here, as always, is that you get what you pay for. More expensive categories available are usually 'tourist' and 'cabin' (air-con), which cost around 20% and 30% more, respectively – and are often well worth it if you plan to get some sleep. Most companies offer discounts to students (15%), disabled travellers (20%), senior citizens (20%) and minors (12 years and under; 50%).

You can purchase tickets for **SuperFerry**, **SuperCat** and **Cebu Ferries** at **Aboitiz Express** (260; % 233 7000), which has offices in **Robinson's Plaza**, **Ayala Center** and **SM City**.

Bookings for the above lines plus **Cokaliong**, **Aznar**, **Super Shuttle Ferry** and **Sulpicio** can be made at the **Travellers' Lounge** (% 232 0291; SM City, in car park left of entrance 3). Otherwise you can book your ticket directly at the shipping company's booking office, which in many cases will be at the port, usually at the pier from which its boat departs.

Cebu City passenger-ship companies and their details are as follows:

Carlos A Gotting Lines (% 232 9998; Gotting Private Wharf, Pier 7, FF Cruz, Mandaue)
Cebu Ferries (% 232 4229; www.cebufferies.com; Pier 4)
Cokaliong Shipping Lines (% 232 7211; www.cokaliongshipping.com; D S Osmeña Ave, North Reclamation Area) Boats leave from Pier 1.
EB Aznar Shipping (% 234 4624; EB Aznar Bldg, T Padilla St)
George & Peter Lines (% 254 5404; Pier 2)
Jadestar Shipping Lines (% 254 0263; Pier 3)
Lite Shipping Corporation (% 253 7776; cnr GL Lavilles St & MJ Cuenco Ave)
OceanJet (% 255 7560; www.oceanjet.net; Pier 1)
Palacio Shipping Lines (% 255 4538, 253 7700; cnr Mabini & Zulueta Sts) Boats depart Pier 1.
Roble Shipping Lines (% 255 5904; Pier 3)
Roly Shipping Lines (% 234 0827; Pier 3)

Sulpicio Lines (% 232 5361; www.sulpiciolines.com; Sulpicio Go St, Reclamation Area; booking office Pier 3)

Super Shuttle Ferry (book through Travellers' Lounge % 232 0291; SM City)

SuperCat (% 234 9600; www.supercat.com.ph; Pier 4)

SuperFerry (% 233 7000; www.superferry.com.ph; Pier 3)

Trans-Asia Shipping Lines (% 255 7899; www.transasiashipping.com; Trans-Asia Shipping Lines Bldg, cnr MJ Cuenco & Osmeña Blvd) Boats depart Pier 4.

VG Shipping Lines (% 416 6226; Pier 3)

Weesam Express (% 412 9562; www.weesamexpress.com; Pier 4)

BUS

The main bus lines servicing the Cebu area are **Ceres Bus Liner** (% 261 5008), **CBL Liner** (% 232 1850), **ABC Liner** (% 253 1668) and **Rough Riders** (% 233 5238).

The most popular destination outside Cebu City is the southern dive spot of **Moalboal**. The **Cebu South** bus station is a short taxi ride from downtown (around P30), otherwise take the **Basak-Colon**, **Jergello-Colon** or **Labangon-Colon-Pier** jeepney for P5. From here, there are buses leaving all day for **Argao** (P55, two hours), **Bato** and **Lilo-an** (via **Oslob**; P75, five hours), **Toledo** (P40, three hours) and **Moalboal** (via **Carcar**; P65, three hours).

If you're after a public bus north, the **Cebu North** bus station, servicing several bus lines, has rather inconveniently shifted out to **Mandaue**, a 15-minute, P75 taxi ride from uptown. A **Mabolo-Carbon** or **Mandaue-Cebu City** jeepney will take you there, and bring you back into town (P4). The station is on **Wireless St**, in the desolate **Reclamation Area**.

Rough Riders buses to **Maya**, the gateway town for boats to **Malapascua**, run from 6am to 6pm (P100, 4½ hours, every half hour).

At the north station you'll also find **Phil-Cebu Bus Lines** (usually called **CBL**) buses to **Hagnaya**, the gateway town to **Bantayan Island**. They leave up to seven times daily, from 7.30am to 5pm (P80, around three hours). Some other bus companies only go as far as **Bogo** (P60, 2½ hours), where you must take a tricycle to **Hagnaya** pier (P40, 20 minutes). The last boat departs **Hagnaya** for **Bantayan** at 6.30pm (for details see p249).

If you are heading to **Malapascua Island** and your accommodation is in uptown Cebu, you can jump on a bus at **Ayala Center**, get off at **Bogo** and catch a bus

CEBU FERRIES

Destination	Operator	Price (P)	Duration (hrs)	Frequency
Bantayan Is				
Santa Fe	Palacio Shipping	175	9	2/week
Bohol				
Tagbilaran	Cokaliong Shipping	165	5	1/day
	Lite Shipping	155	4	2/day
	OceanJet	480	1½	4/day
	Palacio Shipping	165	4	3/week
	Sulpicio	165	5	1/week
	SuperCat	525	1½	3/day
	Weesam Express	300	2	3/week
Talibon	VG Shipping	120	3½	2/day
Tubigon	Jadestar Shipping	100	2	2/day
	Lite Shipping	100	2	2/day
	OceanJet	300	1	6/day
	Roly Shipping	100	2	6/day
	Tubigon Shipping	100	2	4/day
Camotes Is				
Poro	EB Aznar Shipping	140	4	2/day (noon & 9pm)
Leyte				
Hilongos	OceanJet	500	2	2/day
Maasin	Cokaliong Shipping	305	6	4/week
Ormoc	Cebu Ferries	255	6	1/day
	Lite Shipping	250	6	1/day
	Roble Shipping	230	6	1/day
	Sulpicio	175	6	1/week
	SuperCat	625	2	3/day
	Super Shuttle Ferry	250	5	1/day
Luzon				
Manila	Sulpicio Lines	1520	19-21	5/week
	SuperFerry	1520	21	6/week
Masbate				
Masbate town	Trans-Asia Shipping	360	13	4/week

to Daan Bantayan (P30, one hour) and a hubel-hubel to Maya pier (P30, 20 minutes). The last regular service is usually around 5pm (for details see p253).

If you want to do some sightseeing along the coast, you can hop off on the way and wait for another bus to come. Waving one down from the highway is usually not a problem, although they'll often be standing room only.

For both northern and southern destinations, there are also air-con vans departing from the **White Gold Terminal** (☎ 232 7501; Pier 4, Reclamation Area). They have no schedules, but leave when the van is half to three-quarters full, so if you're the first seated, you may have to wait. Air-conditioned and

with fewer passengers, these are a faster, cushier way to get around. Rates are up to 30% higher than the bus.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Hire cars with drivers are parked directly outside the arrivals terminal; drivers hand tourists a card with the their registration and a fixed rate for trips between the airport and Cebu City (P275). If you pass these by, a pedestrian crossing leads to a flight of stairs which will take you to a taxi rank. Taxi drivers will generally charge you the 'fixed price' of P200 to any destination in Cebu City – very reasonable in light of the traffic and distance. Theoretically, a me-

Destination	Operator	Price (P)	Duration (hrs)	Frequency
Mindanao				
Cagayan de Oro	Cebu Ferries	455	10	5-6/week
	Sulpicio	450	8½	4/week
	Trans-Asia	450	10	3/week
Dapitan	George & Peter	465	12	5/week
Davao	Cebu Ferries	1350	34	1/week
	SuperFerry	1350	34	1/week
Iligan	Sulpicio	485	11	1/week
	Cebu Ferries	550	15	3/week
Nasipit (Butuan)	Cebu Ferries	350	11	3/week
	Carlos A Gothing	300	12	5/week
Ozamis	Cebu Ferries	495	11	4/week
	Carlos A Gothing	490	12	3/week
	Sulpicio	490	8	1/week
	Trans-Asia	490	12	3/week
Surigao	Cokaliong Shipping	450	10-13	1/day
	Sulpicio	450	14	1/week
	SuperFerry	440	8	1/week
Zamboanga	George & Peter	900	28	1/week
Negros				
Dumaguete	Cokaliong Shipping	440	6	1/day
	George & Peter	305	6	1/day
	OceanJet	645	2½	2/day
Panay				
Iloilo	Cokaliong Shipping	685	14	3/week
	Trans-Asia	650	16	1/day
Samar				
Calbayog	Palacio Shipping	270	10	4/week
	Trans-Asia	380	10	3/week
Siquijor				
Larena	OceanJet	750	4	2/day (via Tagbilaran)
	Palacio Shipping	255	7	2/week

tered trip would cost around P175, but few drivers will agree to this.

TO/FROM THE PIER

At first, arriving at Cebu City pier seems startlingly similar to arriving at the airport – a throng of taxi drivers all desperately hoping you won't want them to use their meters. If they try the 'fixed-fare' line on you, just wander across to the other side of the road to find a cabbie who will switch on the meter – the *real* (ie metered) rate into central Cebu City is P40 to P50.

CAR

Unlike Manila, Cebu is a place where do-it-yourself driving is feasible, though it's

neither cheap nor common. Local car-hire companies generally charge around P2500 for 24 hours (no petrol included), with special deals for longer periods.

More common is to get a car with a driver, all petrol included. It's about P1000 for the first three hours, then around P250 per succeeding hour. Cheaper still is striking a deal directly with a taxi driver (see p242).

Most hotels can arrange car hire for you, or you can book one yourself. **Avis Rent-A-Car** (☎ 231 0941) and **Thrifty Car Rental** (☎ 341 0364) both have desks at the airport.

JEEPNEY

Cebu City has no local buses, so jeepneys and taxis pretty much rule the road. As

in Manila, most jeepneys have a set route, and this is displayed in the front window and along the side. You'll pay P5 to travel up to 5km within the city, and the longer journeys shouldn't cost more than P10. If in doubt, locals are always very helpful and well informed on these matters.

One important thing to remember with jeepneys – they travel a circular route, so don't expect to take the same jeepney back the way you came. Also, if a jeepney has just passed a destination written on the side, it will have to do the full circuit before returning – a long way to get to a place that may only be a 10-minute walk.

TAXI

All in all, Cebuano taxi drivers are a gentler breed than their Manila counterparts. Unless a big ship has just docked, or it's serious festival time, catching a taxi in Cebu City couldn't be easier. Flagfall is P30 and then P2.5 for each additional 300m. Most drivers really will stick to the metered price for anything other than the airport or out-of-town destinations. And before you suspect your driver of taking the long way around, remember there's a huge number of one-way streets here, especially in the downtown area.

Around the uptown and downtown areas, P30 to P50 is a typical, fair fare. To reach fringe areas such as Lahug it can cost up to P80. If you want to see all the sights, touring in a taxi for a day is a perfectly sensible way to do it – and it's definitely cheaper than hiring your own car. The usual negotiated price is around P1000 for a day.

For many out-of-town destinations, taxis will fix a price that may seem way above what the meter would give. This is to cover petrol and the return drive for which the driver may not get a fare. So it often makes more sense to ask your driver to wait and negotiate a return fare – it may be no dearer than a one-way trip.

AROUND CEBU CITY

Mactan Island

☎ 032 / pop 217,019

If you're flying into Cebu City, nearby Mactan is where you'll actually land. Connected to Cebu City by the Mandaue–Mactan Bridge (the 'old bridge') and Marcelo B Fernan (the 'new bridge'), this little island can certainly claim to have it all. Whether you want it all is

another matter. There's an oil depot, a string of ritzy beach resorts, an export-processing zone, several guitar factories and, of course, an international airport. Mactan's chief assets are its airport and the fact that it's only a taxi drive from Cebu City. Its towns are charmless and its beaches are less-than-average by Philippine standards.

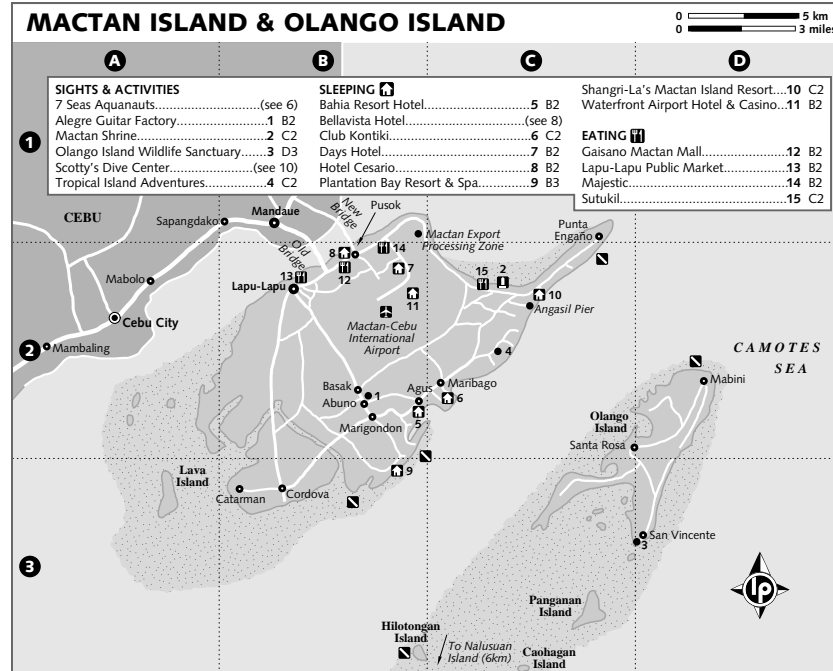
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Mactan is the improbable site of one of the defining moments of the Philippines. It was here, on 27 April 1521, that Ferdinand Magellan made the fatal mistake of underestimating the fighting spirit of Chief Lapu-Lapu. As the standard-bearer for Spain, Magellan had managed to curry the favour of all the most powerful chiefs of the region, with the single exception of Lapu-Lapu. So with 60 of his best soldiers, Magellan sailed to the island to teach him a lesson in gunboat diplomacy. But Lapu-Lapu and his men defended their island with unimagined ferocity, and Magellan was soon back on his boat – fatally wounded by a spear to his head and a poisoned arrow to his leg. This event is commemorated at the Mactan Shrine on a stone plinth bearing the date that Magellan was felled. Next to it is a statue of a ripped and pumped Lapu-Lapu, looking a bit like a fantasy action figure. Almost 500 years later, foreigners are still falling victim to Mactan, only these days it's their budgets that cop the beating.

Mactan's real attraction lies beneath the surface, in the reefs around it and nearby Olango Island (p244). Alas, great swathes of coral have been destroyed by a lethal combination of typhoons, crown-of-thorns starfish and dynamite fishing. To protect against the latter, a couple of marine reserves are maintained off Nalusuan and Hilotongan Islands, with their upkeep being paid for by dive fees (P100 per diver).

For info on diving around Mactan – and further afield – contact Tropical Island Adventures (☎ 340 1845; Buyong Beach, Maribago; www.cebudive.com), 7 Seas Aquanauts (☎ 495 2471; www.kontikidivers.com.ph; Club Kon Tiki) or Scotty's Dive Center (☎ 231 5060; http://divescotty.com; Shangri-La's Mactan Island Resort).

Mactan is as famous for its handmade guitars as for its diving. For a peek at a guitar factory, ask a tricycle driver to take you to Alegre (☎ 340 4492; 11am–6pm Mon–Sat). It is



one of several factories in Abuno, the 'guitar town' in the centre of Mactan. Alegre guitars range from the P2000 decoration 'cheapie' to the P60,000 'export quality', made from a German Spruce soundboard and a Brazilian Rosewood side and back.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are two distinct sides to Mactan's accommodation options – east and west, with nothing in between.

West Coast

The west (or more properly northwest) coast of Mactan is where you'll find Mactan-Cebu International Airport, the two bridges to the mainland, and Mactan's main metropolis of Lapu-Lapu – a long, ugly stretch of road flanked by malls and Japanese restaurants. You might consider staying here if you have an early-morning flight. All places require advance bookings.

Hotel Cesario (☎ 340 0211; www.hotelcesario.com; ML Quezon Hwy; d from P850) Offers budget rooms with a great perk – you get free use of the sauna and pool at their sister hotel, the Bel-

lavista. With breakfast for one and airport transfers included, this is one of the better deals on the island.

Bellavista Hotel (☎ 340 7821; www.thebellavistahotel.com; IML Quezon Hwy; d from P2000; s) The upmarket version of the Cesario next door. As rooftop bar, restaurant and health club are offered to the poorer neighbours, the extra dough is just getting you a swankier room. Filipino and international meals in the restaurant range from P120 to P200.

Days Hotel (☎ /fax 341 0476; www.dayshotel.ph; s/d from US\$45/55) A cookie-cutter hotel at the end of a prohibitively long driveway, Days offers reasonable value for those wishing to wake up next to the airport. Rooms are large and well appointed, and for an extra P1500 you get a spa. Airport transfers, continental breakfast and a daily newspaper are included.

Waterfront Airport Hotel and Casino (☎ 340 4888; www.waterfronthotels.net; Airport Rd; d from US\$165) The sister hotel of the Waterfront Hotel in Lahug, Cebu City, offers similar exclusivity at a similar price.

Majestic (☎ 340 9714; Marina Mall; dinner around P250, lunch buffet P150; 11am–10pm, buffet 11am–2pm)

A favourite with locals who come for the 'live' seafood and Chinese cuisine. Even if Sizzling Live Eel with Black Beans (P160 per 100g) is not your fancy, the buffet, featuring salads and seafood, is still great value.

Gaisano Mactan Mall has the usual Jollibee and KFC joints. Head west along G Y de la Serna St for the town centre and the vast Lapu-Lapu Public Market.

East Coast

A dozen or so beach resorts have staked out Mactan's eastern coast. All have their own restaurants and diving facilities, and most provide free airport transfers. Only the less expensive places take walk-in guests. The more exclusive resorts are prohibitively difficult to get out of, let alone get into. They are walled in, effectively cutting off the beach to casual strollers, and guards watch over the front gates. Once inside, you could be in any tropical resort, anywhere. We've listed only the stand-outs: for a complete list, consult your travel agent.

Club Kon Tiki (% 495 2471; www.kontikidiversers.com.ph; Maribago Beach; d with fan/air-con P680/900) Owned and operated by 7 Seas Aquanauts, Club Kon Tiki is the best budget option on Mactan, and has great dive facilities. Spartan rooms with fibro walls feel slightly neglected, but there is hot water, a nice bar with sea views and a house beach for snorkelling.

Bahia Resort Hotel (% 495 2352; d from P1200, P75 per extra person, up to 3 extra; a s) In the cheap-and-cheerful category, it offers fusty motel-style rooms (with hot-water bathroom) on rambling grounds. There's no beach, but by way of compensation there is a private lagoon and three swimming pools.

Plantation Bay Resort & Spa (% 340 5900/86, 1800 1888 7788; www.plantationbay.com; Marigandon; d from US\$175) This spectacularly designed private paradise is sited on a 3.5-hectare artificial saltwater lagoon, big enough to house living coral ponds, waterfalls, beaches and a floating restaurant. You'll need to make use of the hotel's 24-hour golf-cart service to get around the vast grounds, where the options for indulgence range from fishing to volleyball to archery lessons.

Shangri-La's Mactan Island Resort (% 231 0288; www.shangri-la.com; d from US\$220, presidential suite US\$1900; s) A vast holiday camp for honeymooners, conferencers, package tourists and the super-rich, this is the last word in self-

contained, luxury resort living. Enticements include a 350m private beach cove, six-hole golf course, multilevel swimming pool, shopping arcade, and the famous grande buffet.

Sutukil (Manna STK; % 340 6448; Mactan Shrine; seafood at market price; h 11am-10pm) This place offers the freshest seafood on the island in quaint waterfront surroundings. At the entrance, a market stall offers you the day's catch; you choose what you'd like and how you'd like it, then take a seat and wait for your meal to arrive. The cooking fee ranges from P180 to P300. *Lapu-lapu* (grouper) goes for P380 per kilo, and live/dead lobster for P1200/2500 per kilo.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Jepneys run all day to Cebu City from Lapu-Lapu (P10). The going rate by taxi from Cebu City to Lapu-Lapu or the airport is P200 – to the eastern beach resorts you'll pay around P300. Be prepared for a slow crawl through heavy traffic.

See p238 for information about flights to and from Mactan Island.

Lapu-Lapu proper (eg ML Quezon Hwy) is serviced by jeepneys; a typical trip costs P5. Local taxis run the length and breadth of the island.

Olango Island

% 032 / pop 3450

The story of Olango Island is a familiar one in the Philippines: a fragile and diverse ecosystem under very enormous pressure from human predation. Combining salt-flats, mangroves and coral reefs, it would be an ecotourism dream – except that it is facing an uphill battle for its existence.

Much of the reef on the western side of Olango was buried by a typhoon in 1993. Dynamite and cyanide fishing never gave it a chance to regenerate. The eastern side of the reef is in a better state, although currents make it dangerous for inexperienced divers.

Included in the province of Olango Island is the marine sanctuary off neighbouring Hilotongan Island (% 0916 944 7941, 496 0020; admission P50). Around the outskirts of the sanctuary the reefs are endangered by fishing fleets, with their dynamite, cyanide and – more recently – chlorine. However, the sanctuary itself is now well protected, thanks in part to money collected from a diving fee of P100 per person. Note that you

cannot visit Hilotongan directly without a ticket. These are available at the Municipal Hall in Cordova on Mactan Island and at most accredited dive centres.

South of Hilotongan, the private resort island of Nalusuan has arguably the best-preserved coral in the Olango Reef. Those not staying at the island's resort (below) are charged P100 to dive Nalusuan's reef, which goes towards its ongoing conservation. Dive centres on Mactan can arrange trips.

The **Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary** (% 0920 554 2848; San Vicente, Bas Coral, Olango Island; admission P100) takes in 1030 hectares of sandflats and mangroves on Olango's southern shores. This is a vital refuelling depot for around 50,000 birds of 47 species (including the endangered Chinese egret *Egretta eulophotes* and Asiatic dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*) on the east-Asian migratory route to Australia. The birds, who prefer Olango to neighbouring islands because of the abundant food and ideal nesting sites, arrive in late September and leave in early March, but the best times for twitchers is between November and February. Tragically, you may also encounter organised hunting parties, which are imperilling shorebird populations.

SLEEPING

Wildlife Sanctuary Office (% 0920 554 2848; San Vicente) Tents and sleeping bags (P100 each) are available for rent here. Guests will have to bring their own food and water.

Nalusuan Island Resort & Marine Sanctuary (% 492 4388; www.nalusuanisland.com; cottage from US\$35) On a tiny island in the southern reaches of the Olango Reef, a private marine sanctuary has achieved the miraculous and preserved a stunning coral outcrop. This wonderfully relaxed island resort has seven native-style cottages on stilts, each furnished with a fan, bathtub and freshwater shower. There is an open-air restaurant specialising in freshly (and responsibly) caught fish, and activities include island-hopping, diving and kayaking. The resort can arrange airport transfers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most resorts on Mactan will organise a day trip to Olango for you, or you can make your own way from Angasil pier, just south of the Shangri-La resort. Boats bound for Santa Rosa (P12, 30 minutes) depart hourly from

6am to 6pm. From Santa Rosa, a tricycle to the bird sanctuary should cost around P20, although tourists are often charged more.

Toledo

% 032 / pop 141,174

The port city of Toledo, due west of Cebu City, presents a cheap and quick way to travel between Cebu and San Carlos, Negros. Once home to one of Asia's copper-mining giants, and currently home to a massive coal and oil power plant, this nondescript little city has little to offer the traveller. Its choice of food and accommodation is extremely limited, but with frequent ferry services no-one should be forced to stay the night.

SLEEPING & EATING

So you got stuck in Toledo. How did you manage that? Anyway, shelter is at hand at **Aleu's Lodge** (% 322 5672; Poloyapoy St; r with fan & shared bathroom P250, r with air-con, cable TV & private bathroom P600), which is above a general store in a relatively quiet neighbourhood. It has small, shabby budget rooms, and slightly better standard rooms. It is about 1.5km from the pier (P6 by tricycle).

There's no shortage of bakeries and fruit stalls next to the pier.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Three passenger services ply the Toledo-San Carlos route. There are two fastcraft: the **MV Weesam** (% 412 9562), with five daily services from 7am to 5pm (P150, 35 minutes); and **New Danilo Lines** (% 322 6387), with three services from 7.30am to 6pm (P100, 45 minutes). The last fastcraft from San Carlos leave at 3pm and 3.30pm, respectively. The car ferry **MV Lite 2** (% 322 6387) has three services at 7.30am, 1pm and 6pm (P75, 1½ hours) – the last service from San Carlos departs at 3.30pm.

Buses run every hour or so over the rough mountain road between Cebu South bus station and the Toledo bus terminal (P40, 2¾ hours). The first bus heads off around 5am, the last at around 4pm. From the terminal it's a P5 tricycle ride to the pier.

If you're headed to Moalboal, your choices are to catch a v-hire (a local van/minibus) from the bus terminal or to charter a taxi. The trip takes at least two hours and will cost you around P1200 – and after you've experienced the roads you'll know why.

NORTH OF CEBU CITY

Cebu's northeast has the most heavily developed coastline on the island. The biggest metropolises are Danao, one of Cebu's bigger cities, and Bogo, the main market town in northern Cebu. With their mountain backdrop, the towns and cities along the highway present some impressive vistas. But other than that, most offer little incentive to get off the bus.

The remote, tropical idylls of Malapascua and Bantayan, off the northern tip of Cebu, are another matter entirely. These two islands have been enticing visitors for years with glorious white-sand beaches, superb diving (off Malapascua) and their laid-back, island lifestyles. The question is how much longer they will remain laid-back and remote (by which we mean challenging to get to), and when 'progress' will catch them up.

For buses heading north, see p239.

Danao

☎ 032 / pop 98,781

When approached by sea, Danao shows its best profile. Its centrepiece, directly opposite the pier and visible far out to sea, is one of the finest church buildings in Cebu. The gracious, coral-stone St Tomas de Villanueva Church was built in 1755 and restored from near ruin in 1981. The austere beautiful marble interior, with its high, white, vaulted ceiling, is well worth a look.

The town backs onto a scenic mountain range which includes the Danasan Plateau, one of the few places on the island from where you can view both sides of the channel. A hubel-hubel will take you on the 40km journey (P200) or you can take the jeepney (P30), but make sure you don't miss the last jeepney returning in the afternoon.

Between the church and the mountains, there's not a lot else to see.

SLEEPING & EATING

You really only want to stay in Danao if it's getting too late to move on.

Elsalvador Beach Resort (☎ 200 4494; National Hwy; d with cold/hot water from P850/950, d with air-con & hot water from P1050; Ⓢ) On the main road at the southern end of town, this is the best place to stay. Motel-style rooms are comfy enough, but the main attraction is the large grounds with two pools (big and little) and a fake white-sand beach. The Jollibee of

beach resorts, it is incredibly popular with family groups.

Intosan Resort (☎ 200 3476; r from P900; Ⓢ) If Elsalvador is full, Intosan is a short tricycle ride from town (P5). Basic rooms are good value, with double bed, cable TV, hot water and a small balcony.

Bread and supplies can be bought at the old market on Rizal St, two blocks up from, and parallel to, the highway. In the same street, you'll also find a number of shabby **guesthouses** (standard r around P250).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses running between Cebu City and the far north pass through the city of Danao (P30, 50 minutes).

Pumpboats leave all morning from the Danao port (in front of the church) for various townships on the Camotes Islands (for details, see p258).

Sogod

☎ 032 / pop 27,432

The gently curving coastline of Sogod is about 70km north of Cebu City. It's a quiet town with attractive beaches where the fishing boats pull in. On the southern outskirts of town you'll find the **Vima Beach Resort**, which rents out picnic shelters (P30) along a pleasant, palm-shaded stretch of white sand.

About 5km north of Sogod is the 5-star **Alegre Beach Resort** (☎ 231 1198; www.alegrebeachresort.com; cabins from US\$270) – the place that put Sogod on the international tourist map. Alegre is high-end and high security. If you manage to get inside, the leafy grounds include a huge swimming pool, a dive centre, a library, a putting green and a tennis court. The resort fronts a spectacular, private beach cove with a house reef.

Buses pass through Sogod from Cebu City (P35, 1½ to two hours) throughout the day.

Bogo

☎ 032 / pop 63,869

The road north from Sogod heads inland through lush mountains before returning to the sea to meet up with the market town of Bogo.

INFORMATION

If you're heading north, this is your last chance to do your banking. North of the

plaza, on P Rodriguez St (past the Jollibee), there is a **Metrobank** with an ATM. This is also your last chance to check your email at a reasonable price: **Cool Zone Internet** (Gl Morente; per hr P30), west of the plaza, has a broadband connection.

SLEEPING

Bogo Pension House (☎ 434 8469; Pandan Heights; d P700; a Ⓢ) On a residential street a five-minute trip from the bus terminal (P10 by tricycle), this quiet and unassuming business hotel has cheerful rooms, a swimming pool and spa, bar and restaurant.

Nailon Beach Resort (☎ 253 1097; r from P1250; a Ⓢ) Just to the east of Bogo proper, this friendly, native-style place sits at the end of a prominent point and has comfy rooms with balcony, cable TV and hot-water bathroom. Nailon is a 10-minute tricycle ride from the bus terminal (P15).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A bus from Cebu City to Bogo will cost you P60 and take 2½ to three hours.

If you're making the dash for Malapascua, you are about 1½ hours from Maya, where the last boat for the island leaves around 6pm (for details, see p253). Catch a bus to Daan Bantayan (P30, one hour) and a hubel-hubel to Maya pier (P30, 20 minutes).

For Hagnaya – gateway to Bantayan Island – you must take a tricycle (P40, 20 minutes). The last boat from Hagnaya leaves at 6.30pm (for details, see p249).

Daan Bantayan & Maya

☎ 032 / pop 69,336

About 130km north of Cebu City, in the thick of sugarcane country, you'll reach the drab town of Daan Bantayan. This is where the bus terminates. From Daan Bantayan, it's a 20-minute hubel-hubel ride (P30) to Maya, along a bad road.

If you are heading to Malapascua and miss the last boat, you can stay at **Abba Family Lodge** (☎ 437 2525; d with fan & shared bathroom P350), 100m from the Maya pier. It's homely enough, even if it does get a lot of noise from the street. If the Abba Family don't do it for you, there are more salubrious digs a little out of town at **Monsanto Resort** (Azryth Garden Resort; ☎ 437 0103; s/tw with fan P300/450, s/tw with air-con from P500/900; Ⓢ). A rambling timber building set in farmland, it has a salt-water swim-

ming pool, pool table and a pretty average kitchen. Take the east road at the T-junction 1km back from the pier. A hubel-hubel from Maya proper will cost you P20.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

As well as boats to Malapascua (see p253), there are pumpboat services to San Isidro, Leyte (P100, three hours, 10am daily) and Esperanza, Masbate (P200, 2½ hours, 10.30am Monday, Wednesday and Saturday).

At the time of writing, there were plans to build a car-ferry pier at Maya. When and if this will happen we don't know.

Bantayan Island

☎ 032 / pop 68,125

People come to the relaxed, bucolic little town of Santa Fe, on the southern coast of Bantayan Island, for its exquisite white-sand beaches and low-key resorts. For 51 weeks of the year, the town is a sleepy retreat, where the worst that can happen is that you're caught in a brownout without a torch.

And then there's Holy Week...

About 10km west of Santa Fe (P10 by tricycle or jeepney) is Bantayan Island's busy administrative centre, **Bantayan town**. The town centres on a large plaza, close to which is a market, a pier (from where the boats for Negros leave) and the care-worn, coral-stone **Peter & Paul Church** – which every Easter is the focus of religious processions that attracts the faithful from all over the Philippines. The tourist influx is so great that people sleep on the beaches, locals rent out their houses, and hotel prices double and treble.

INFORMATION

There is an **Aboitiz ticket office** and an **Internet café** (r 8am-noon & 2-8pm Mon-Fri, 1-6pm Sat; per hr P30) on the highway in the Santa Fe town centre.

Make sure you bring enough money to last, as there are no ATMs and nowhere on the island to change money.

ACTIVITIES

There is no decent snorkelling around Bantayan Island, although you can charter a boat to **Virgin Island** (P700 for four people), which has coral outcrops. Most resorts rent snorkel sets for around P200 a day.

In addition to sleeping and reading, a popular activity is exploring Bantayan's

quiet, shady roads. Most resorts can organise a bicycle for P150 per day, or a motorcycle from P250.

SLEEPING

The resorts of Santa Fe are strung along the beach, north and south of the pier (which is a little north of the town proper). We've ordered our listings from north to south.

St Bernard Beach Resort (☎ 0917 963 6162; www.bantayan.dk; s with shared bathroom P350, cottage with private bathroom P500-900, family cottage P1200) On a narrow lot in the middle of Ocoy village, about 1km north of Santa Fe pier, St Bernard has wonderfully eccentric, circular thatched-roofed cottages with polished wood, throw rugs and lace curtains. There's not much of a beach and the roosters are pretty close for comfort, but it will appeal to those looking for something 'genuine' and homely. The view across to Hilantaga-an Island is superb.

Joy Beach Resort (☎ 438 5340; cottage with private bathroom P500) A little out of town, this is the Robinson Crusoe option. Four very simple and rudimentary cottages and a rickety treehouse are right smack on a lovely stretch of beach. It's owned by a delightful elderly couple who'll make you feel very welcome.

Hoyohoy Villas (☎ 438 9223; www.hoyohoyvillas.com; apartments P5000-6000; a) Six rice granary-inspired stilt houses combine traditional design principals, a Japanese aesthetic, antique furnishings and modern comforts. This place was only getting off the ground when we were researching (a pool was still

in the works) but when it does it will be Bantayan's premier resort. The location could be better – the beach feels a little close to the pier – but the upside is it's only a five-minute walk to the White Sands restaurant. The room tariff includes breakfast.

Marlin Beach Resort (☎ 438 9093, 0917 364 7027; www.marlin-bantayan.com; r with fan/air-con P1300/2200) On the town outskirts, Marlin has a terrific location, a great stretch of sand and luxe rooms, but lacks real character. Air-con rooms have cable TV and a seawall balcony.

Kota Beach (☎ 419 6135; kota@cebu.i-next.com; r with fan/air-con P700/1000, cottages with fan/air-con P1200/2000; a) This is a mixed bag. Rooms – as opposed to cottages – are in a drab, viewless multistorey block. Cottages are plain but well kept: the front row have air-con and beach views, while the back row are set in a lush, green garden. The restaurant serves reasonable Filipino dishes from P120.

Budyong Beach Resort (☎ 438 5700; www.budyong.com; cottages with fan/air-con P700/1300) Occupying a prime location right on the beach in town, Budyong has pleasant nipa huts (with bathrooms) under palm trees on the sand, with balconies facing the water. It's very popular with local tourists and groups, so be sure to book ahead.

Yoonnek Beach Resort (☎ 438 9124; d from P1200; a) Next to Budyong, this flash newcomer has two blocks of motel-like rooms with cold-water bathrooms, and balconies that face the opposite block rather than the beach.

Sugar Beach Resort (cottage with bathroom & fan P650) Basic beach shacks in the shade, set back from the beach on a vast allotment. There is no restaurant, but the woman minding the huts will cook up your meals for a fee.

Otong Cave Resort (☎ 438 0165; cottage with fan/air-con P1450/2900; nonguests admission P50; a s) A semi-exclusive resort, with a guard on the gate and a high perimeter fence. The crowd-puller here is Otong Cave, a small subterranean cave with freshwater bathing. Standard cottages vary in size, but all are well appointed and have a hot-water bathroom. The air-con rooms have sea views. The ambience is slightly diminished by a rubbish heap in clear view of the restaurant.

Fairview Resort (☎ 0919 612 8459; r with shared bathroom P200, cottage with fan/air-con P400/600; s) Known by locals as Far View because it sits inland, on a hill, in the southern fringes of town, this is not a place for beach lovers or

the gregarious. The value proposition here is great views, cheap, super-sized rooms and free use of a motorbike. A tricycle from the pier will cost around P50.

EATING

Most of Santa Fe's restaurants, with the notable exception of White Sands (see the boxed text, right), are in the town centre.

Balikbayan Restaurant (A Batobalunos St; meals from P120; h 9am-late) Probably the best food in the town centre at the best prices, Balikbayan has a good range of salads, pasta and pizza, and cosy booths for dining.

Marisquera O' Portuguese Bar & Restaurant (meals P150-250; h 10am-late) On the main street opposite Blue Ice, this is a cheery restobar decked out with Christmas lights and flags. Unfortunately the food does not quite live up to the ambience.

Blue Ice (meals from P180; h 9am-late) Main street's other restobar, Scandinavian-owned Blue Ice has decent seafood and a pleasant, shaded courtyard for drinking.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For buses from Cebu City to Hagnaya, see p239.

An overnight ferry between Cebu City and Santa Fe departs at 9pm two nights a week from both towns (P175, nine hours). Schedules change so ring ahead for dates. Contact **Palacio Shipping Lines** (☎ 255 4538, 253 7700; cnr Mabini & Zulueta Sts; boats depart Cebu City at Pier 1) in Cebu City.

Island Shipping ferries depart Hagnaya for Santa Fe six times daily (P100, one hour, 6.30am to 6.30pm). Aznar Fastcraft has three daily crossings (P130, 30 minutes, 8.30am, 11am and 3.30pm).

The last boat from Santa Fe to Hagnaya departs at 3.30pm.

From Bantayan town, a ferry bound for Cadiz on Negros departs every second morning at 10am (P150, four hours). On alternate mornings, a smaller pumpboat sails for Sagay on Negros (P150, two hours). Purchase tickets from **Island Shipping** (☎ 352 5103, h 7am-5pm) to the right of the Town Hall in Bantayan town, just before the pier.

Malapascua Island

☎ 032 / pop 3000

This little island off Cebu's northern tip has been growing steadily more famous

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

White Sands (breakfast & lunch from P200, dinner from P500; h 7.30am-2pm & 6-11pm) About 250m north of the pier, in a native-style bamboo lot on the beach, is a dining experience straight out of the imagination. The curious story of how a world-class bistro got washed up in a remote corner of the Philippines is something you'll have to ask its owner. But somehow, every day, French *bon vivant* Robert manages to conjure up an à la carte miracle that can include, among other things: scallops, prawns, crabs, lobster, marlin, grouper, French pastries, crepes, wood-fired pizza, handmade pasta, freshly baked bread, fine wines and espresso coffee. Perhaps the best thing is not to ask how it got there, but just enjoy. There is only one proviso: don't mind the wait – great food takes time.

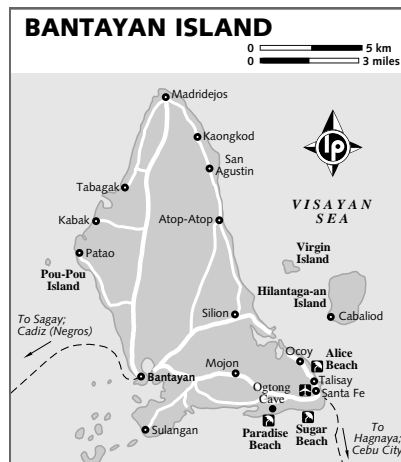
over the years for its long, white beaches, great food and low-key approach to tourism. There are, or were at the time of writing, no cars or paved roads on the island, only a network of walking tracks. The tracks wind past such humble attractions as the waterside town cemetery, with its sun-bleached graves, the lighthouse on the island's northwest, and the 12m-high lookout up near Los Bamboos, which some brave/foolhardy souls treat as a cliff jump.

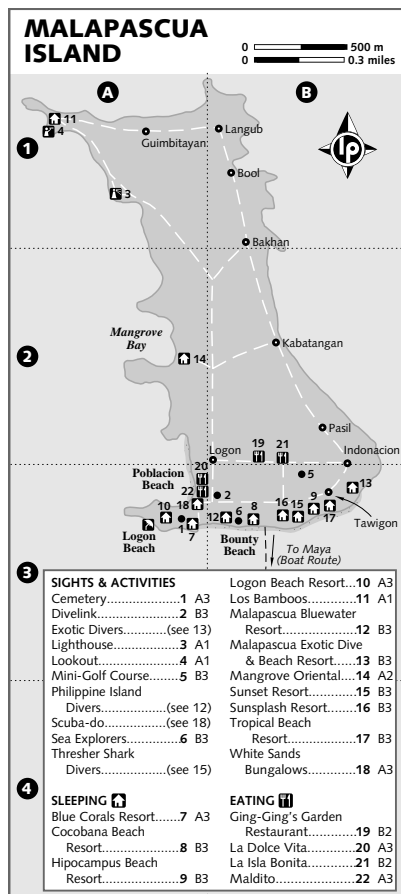
Divers are spoilt with three wreck dives, the marine sanctuary of Gato Island – a famous sea-snake breeding ground – and almost daily appearances of the otherwise rarely sighted thresher shark off Monad Shoal.

The simple villages of Malapascua blend seamlessly with the resorts and are a big factor in the island's charm. The people of the towns are almost invariably friendly and welcoming. A popular pastime among visitors is to head down to the basketball court in the main town of Logon, to take part in one of the frequent, informal tournaments that blend local and foreign talent.

It would seem that Malapascua offers everything that the discerning beach bum could wish for. But of course nothing is ever that simple.

The marine environment, including Gato Island, faces the usual challenges of this region – first and foremost, dynamite fishing.





Despite protestations from local government that they are on top of the problem, divers report that on many dives they can still hear the sound of blasting. To combat the problem at Gato Island, local dive centres successfully lobbied the government to implement full-time patrols of the marine sanctuary. These patrols are paid for by a fee levied on divers of P100 per dive.

The preservation of the island environment is another matter. Ironically, where the dive centres have continually accused local government of not doing enough to halt destruction of the corals, when it comes to preserving the beaches, it's the government's turn to put the heat on local business (see the boxed text, opposite).

ORIENTATION

There are two main beaches on Malapascua: both are located at the southern end of the island, on the southern and western flanks of the main town of Logon, and both have beautiful, long stretches of white sand. Bounty Beach is where the majority of resorts and dive centres are located; Poblacion Beach has only one resort and a couple of restobars. A couple of resorts occupy the rocky coves between the two beaches. The lack of roads and transport has hitherto kept the northern half of the island remote and relatively untouristed.

INFORMATION

At the time of research, the island's electricity was supplied by a diesel-powered generator. It operated from 5.30pm to 11.30pm (sometimes later), although some resorts, such as Cocobana, Blue Corals, Malapascua Bluewater Resort and Malapascua Exotic Island Dive Resort, had their own (noisy) generators.

Landline telephones – as opposed to mobiles – only operated when the generator was on.

Maldito's and Malapascua Exotic Island Dive Resort have slow and unreliable Internet (per hr P70).

ACTIVITIES

About 200m behind Sunsplash Resort in the middle of Logon village is a minigolf course (P100; h 9am-8pm) and bar.

Diving

The most popular dive off Malapascua is Monad Shoal; here you can see the thresher sharks. The plateau where the sharks congregate is at 25m depth, 15 minutes by pumpboat from Bounty Beach, and the best time for sightings is early morning. Be warned though, visibility can sometimes be poor and sightings are not guaranteed.

Dynamiting has mainly destroyed the closer reefs, but macro-photographers will love the area around Gato Island, a marine sanctuary and sea snake breeding ground (from February to September). There are also three wreck dives in the area.

There are a handful of dive centres on the island, most offering standard rates – one dive US\$20, equipment rental US\$5 and open-water diving certificate US\$300.

STORM OF CONTROVERSY: MALAPASCUA REMADE

A perfect storm – make that a typhoon – of business, development and politics is sweeping over Malapascua. The tiny island, which until recently was literally not even on the (municipal) map, has been attracting the attention of some big players – and change is in the wind.

Two of the main curbs to development on Malapascua have always been its costly and inadequate power supply, and the lack of potable water. In 2005, a private consortium specialising in rural electrification and water supply tabled a plan that might have seen both issues redressed by early 2006. Among other things, it would have made possible an international standard of accommodation previously unknown to Malapascua. Rumour had it that a big, five-star Korean resort was in the wings. As we went to print, though, the electrification consortium's plans were scuppered by local politicians. For the conceivable future, noisy generators and brackish water are to remain a fact of life in Malapascua.

Another obstacle to Malapascua being labelled 'the new Boracay' – the holy grail of Philippines tourism – is its transport infrastructure, or lack of it. The local government is planning to address the problem in a couple of ways. The first of these is that Malapascua is set to get its first pier. Currently the only service to the island is by way of small pumpboats that get dragged up onto the sand, meaning that visitors frequently must wade ashore. The new pier would enable ferries and even fastcraft to service the island, with no inconvenience and the potential to greatly increase tourist volume.

In tandem with the new pier, a 4m-wide paved road is proposed for the length of the island. However, for the road to be built a path must be cleared. In 2005, the mayor tried to achieve this through the enforcement of a 'salvage zone', a 30m no-go zone that's measured from the high tide mark. Any buildings that were found to be occupying the zone after October 2005 were threatened with demolition. Practically every beach-front business in Malapascua was affected. Not a single owner was offered compensation. In the lead-up to the October 2005 deadline, some businesses began to wind down, others were put up for sale. Many had not had their business permits renewed and all were facing an uncertain future. October came and went: the demolitions failed to occur, but the uncertainty dragged on.

It's supposed to be about protecting the beach, but where people are crying foul is that one of the few commercial properties not to be affected is the mayor's, and she's in charge of enforcing the zone. No-one should be surprised, though – it's not unusual in the Philippines for business and politics to intersect like this.

The die has been cast. How it will all work out remains to be seen, though as partisans of independent travel, history gives us little cause to be optimistic. Along with the thresher shark and the sea snake, the Malapascuan *Beachus bumus* may well be the next species to see its habitat wiped out.

A few of the bigger, more established dive centres are **Sea Explorers** (www.sea-explorers.com; ☎ Cebu City 234 0248, Malapascua 0919 447 9030), **Philippine Island Divers** (☎ 0917 320 1940; www.boholdivers.com) and **Exotic Divers** (Malapascua Exotic Island Dive Resort). There is plenty of scope to shop around once you're on the island. Further options include **Divelink** (☎ 0927 247 0723; www.divelinkcebu.com), **Scuba-do** (☎ 0927 318 7471; White Sands Bungalows) and **Thresher Shark Divers** (☎ 0927 612 3359; www.malapascua-diving.com).

Island Hopping

It's easy to organise boat trips around the islands. If you inquire among the fishermen

at Tawigon village, for about P400 you can charter a boat for a half day to take you around Malapascua.

Charter boats can take you to nearby **Carnassa** (one hour) and **Calangaman** (two hours) islands, starting from P2000 for full-day hire. Local identity 'Captain' Geoff organises island day trips (P500 per person) that include a barbecue lunch, two drinks and snorkelling. He can usually be found around White Sands or Cocobana rustling up patrons. Carnassa is said to be the more special of the two islands. If you have any doubts about the weather think twice about heading out to Calangaman, as it can be a rough trip.

SLEEPING

Business drops right off during the low season, and rates usually dip around 50%. Unless otherwise stated, all rooms have fan and private cold-water bathroom.

If the salvage zone (see the boxed text, p251) ever comes into effect, all beachfront businesses will be forced to demolish the front portion of their premises: the front row of cottages, the beachfront dining area and so on. As we went to print, with the zone yet to come into effect, the various owners were considering their options: some were planning to soldier on, some were considering quitting the island. A number of businesses may well have closed by the time you read this. The only thing for certain is continued uncertainty.

Logon Beach Resort (☎ 0920 553 9847; huts P1000) In a secluded location high on a rocky point overlooking a private cove, this is an ideal honeymooners' resort. Balconied huts face the sunset and have wonderful views. To get to the resort, find the beach in front of White Sands, turn left and follow the signs to Logon Beach Resort that take you up the hill.

Blue Corals Resort (☎ 0927 494 7161; d P1500) An ugly slab of concrete laid over the famous old rock lookout at the western end of Bounty Beach. It's a tiled monster with bright flashing lights that is completely out of sympathy with its surroundings, but it does have large rooms with 180-degree views over the water. It could be a foretaste of things to come.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

White Sands Bungalows (☎ 0927 318 7471; www.filippinerne.dk; s/d huts P400/500) The sole resort on the quiet strip of sand that is Poblacion Beach, White Sands in many ways represents what we like best about Malapascua, and what it stands to lose by ruthless development. It consists of 10 simple nipa huts with trees at the back and beach at the front. Presided over by gregarious Danish owner Kurt ('I never meant to make a resort!'), it has that beach campfire ambience that just makes you want to sit up all night swapping yarns. As we went to print, White Sands' huts were directly in line with the proposed new road, and there was a For Sale sign out the front.

Malapascua Bluewater Resort (☎ 0927 490 9011, 437 1053; janetmalapascua@hotmail.com; r with fan P1000, cottage with air-con P2500) Situated in a large lot stretching a long way back, Bluewater Resort has stale-smelling cottages on the beach and generator-infused cheaper rooms out the back. It has 24-hour electricity.

Cocobana Beach Resort (☎ 0927 391 3900; www.cocobana.ch; garden cottage d P1000-1300, beach cottage d P1550) Right smack in the middle of Bounty Beach, Malapascua's original (and still biggest) resort runs like a well-oiled machine. It has comfy cottages, 24-hour electricity, a bar and a decent restaurant. Breakfast is included with the room. Accommodation-dive packages are available through Sea Explorers (p250).

Hippocampus Beach Resort (formerly Loida's Beach Club; ☎ 437 1030, 0927 800 8940; www.hippocampus-online.com; r/cottage P800) Hippocampus has a rather crowded conglomeration of cottages just off the beach as well as 2nd-storey rooms. Out the front is a little bar with a lovely pergola that's a perfect place for watching the boats come in.

Malapascua Exotic Dive & Beach Resort (☎ 437 0983, 0916 394 5881; www.malapascua.net; r with fan & shared bathroom P1200, r with air-con & private bathroom from P2400) Located on the quiet easterly beach, Exotic is very much a self-contained resort, and as luxurious as it gets on Malapascua. It houses the oldest and probably the best dive centre on the island (with Malapascua's only technical diving facilities), a beachfront restobar and a 24-hour generator. Accommodation-dive packages are available.

Mangrove Oriental (☎ 0916 218 5534; travel@malapascuaisland.com; cottage with fan P1500, cottage with air-con & hot water P2800) A handful of luxurious, Mediterranean-style cottages spaced out on a lovely terraced hillside. The hillside is planted with a lush, tropical garden and affords good views over the water. On one side of the property is a modest beach, on the other is a tiny lagoon of mangrove trees. The kitchen does full-course set dinners for around P400; breakfast is included with the room. Signposts for this secluded resort are at the northern end of Logon village, from where it's about 10 minutes' walk.

Los Bamboos (☎ Cebu City 253 2937; www.los-bamboos.com; cottage from P900) Set apart from the rest of the island community – some find it a bit isolated – this simple, cheerful, largely bamboo resort is on a promontory on the north-

ern tip of the island. Transfer from Cebu City is P7000 (maximum seven people).

First and foremost a restobar, **Sunsplash Resort** (☎ 0927 274 1756; www.sunsplash.info; d with fan/air-con P2000/2500) is also into the hotel business. Comfy, Spanish mission-style rooms are back from the beach and are a bit pricey as such, but are not a bad option if you like your comforts and happen to be hard up for accommodation. Rooms have TV and hot water.

The no-frills options **Tropical Beach Resort** (☎ 0918 774 2686; cottage P600) and **Sunset Resort** (☎ 0919 322 9102; cottage P700) both have a scattering of plain cottages on Bounty Beach that are favoured by Cebuano families on vacation.

EATING & DRINKING

La Isla Bonita (meals P180-250, wine by the glass P75; 11 8am-2pm & 6-11pm) We were saddened to hear, before we went to print, of the untimely death of manager Uwe. But we are heartened to know that his legacy lives on, with the food here still rated the best on the island. In the humble surroundings of Logon village, suave little La Isla Bonita serves up a range of fresh, quality ingredients cooked in a variety of styles, but always with care. Check out the menu board during the day and order meals ahead of time.

Ging-Ging's Garden Restaurant (meals P60-90) Set in a pretty garden in Logon village, Ging-Ging's offers the very best economy dining on the island. The pancakes (P40) are some of the best we've had. For dinners, book meals ahead so that fresh ingredients can be bought.

Maldito (☎ 425 2274) Management announced its temporary closure in 2005, but with its powerful backers few doubt that Maldito's will return in some form after Malapascua gets its makeover. In its current incarnation, it is a loungey, tropical-style restobar the size of a barn that sticks to the tried-and-true formula of pizza, beer and shooters, loud music, sports telecasts, pool tables and skimpily dressed bar staff.

Sunplash Resort (☎ 0927 274 1756; meals P180-250; 11 7am-late) Difficult to categorise because it also has rooms, Sunsplash is nevertheless a restobar first, resort second. The bar, with its pool table, film nights, comely staff and 'drink for your country' league table, vies with Maldito as the island's favourite

nightspot, but it's the food – particularly the flavoursome Mexican selection – that keeps most patrons coming back.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are plans to build a pier in Malapascua on the point to the south of White Sands. There are also plans to build a new pier at Maya to accommodate car ferries. Ground breaking for both was supposed to begin in late 2005, but by early 2006 had not yet commenced.

For now, the only transport to the island is via pumpboat from Maya (P40 plus P5 per kilo of luggage, 30 minutes). The boat leaves whenever it's full, which is usually, but not always, hourly. To avoid a long wait you can hire a boat for a one-way trip at any time of the day (P700) – and if you arrive after 5pm, chances are you'll have to do this. If the tide is low at Maya, the larger pumpboats can't dock, and must ferry passengers to and from shore using smaller craft (P20).

To travel between Malapascua and Bantayan, you have to hire a pumpboat and pay 'special ride' rates of around P2000.

Tabuelan

☎ 032 / pop 5680

Isolated Tabuelan (*ta-boi-lan*), on Cebu's northwest coast, is a small town with a stunning natural harbour, some fish farms and not much else. This is where you disembark from the ferry from Escalante, Negros. Sailings from Tabuelan to Escalante (P120, 2½ hours) are at 8am and 3.30pm, daily; sailings from Escalante to Tabuelan are at 11am and midnight. Buses to Cebu (via Sogod; P50, four hours) are about 500m up the road from the pier (around P10 by tricycle).

SOUTH OF CEBU CITY

For divers, the southwest coast of Cebu is the place to be. From Moalboal, Cebu's premier dive spot, all the way to Lilo-an there is a clearly visible, vertical drop-off 30m out from the shore. The road follows the coast all the way, and the scenery is some of the best in Cebu, with the dark blue band of the coastal drop-off and the jagged, green mountains of Negros always in view.

Down towards Lilo-an and Bato you'll pay a premium for food and supplies, as the nearest major supply point in this part of the world is Dumaguete, Negros.

On the east coast the diving ceases to be an attraction, although the road takes you through a handful of pretty, Spanish-era towns and Mediterranean-looking scenes of hills dipping into the sea.

For buses heading south, see p239.

Argao

☎ 032 / pop 61,010

Such incongruous attractions as Spanish colonial-era buildings and the endangered wrinkle-lipped bat make Argao a little special, but it's the brown-sand beaches of Kawit, Mahawak and Lawis that draw most of the guests.

Bamboo Paradise Beach Resort (☎ 367 7271; info@bamboo-philippines.de; s/d P600/950, apt P1000-1100; a) Behind an unprepossessing façade on the highway you'll find this friendly place run by expat couple Irene and Günther. Inside is a pleasant courtyard with garden furniture, potted plants, throw rugs and sea views. Homely rooms have private bathroom. German dishes such as bratwurst with sauerkraut cost around P150. Lawis beach, with reasonable swimming, is only 200m from here.

If you're in town for a few hours, drop into **Alex Cafe** (JP Rizal St), 100m south of the church in the town centre. Specialising in torte and *tsokolate* (hot chocolate), it has a quaint, bohemian ambience. The torte (P20) is a regional speciality: cooked in a brick oven, its chief ingredients are sugar, pork lard and egg yolks. As they say of lead paint: delicious but deadly!

Argao is about 65km from Cebu City, and plenty of Ceres Bus Liner and other buses stop here (non-air-con P55, two hours) on the way to Bato (P60, 1½ hours), on Cebu's southern tip.

Lite Shipping boats go from Argao to Loon (P50, two hours), on Bohol, two or three times daily. The last service is around 3pm. From the town proper, catch a Ceres bus to the port (P10), which is about 8km north of Argao.

Sumilon Island

☎ 032

The waters around the tiny desert island of Sumilon are slowly recuperating from years of dynamite fishing. The southern half of the island now contains a marine sanctuary. Visitors are charged a P10 entrance fee and there is a further fee of P150 for diving,

The dive centres in Lilo-an (see below) can arrange trips here.

The northern half of the island is occupied by a luxury resort. The **Sumilon Blue Water Island Resort** (☎ 232 5411; bluwater@mozcom.com; s/d with full board P4000/6600; a s) opened for business in May 2005. The resort's half of the island features two white-sand beaches – one big, one small – a lagoon and a house reef. Its 12 rooms have Japanese touches, such as sliding screen doors, combined with tasteful tropical detailing and five-star comforts. Shared balconies have sea views. Dining is international standard.

Casual visitors should note that the resort charges a P500 entrance fee for nonguests – day-trippers and divers alike – which entitles you to a set lunch (not to be sneezed at) and free use of resort facilities including bicycles and snorkelling gear.

The Sumilon Blue Water Island Resort pier is 3km north of Mainit. There are signs by the road to tell you when you're approaching it. A pumpboat makes frequent service trips between the resort and the pier. The crossing takes about 20 minutes and there is no charge for the ride, but don't get too excited – if you are not a guest you will still have to pay the P500 entrance fee. The resort can also be approached from Dumaguete, on Negros.

Lilo-an

☎ 032 / pop 9261

Lilo-an is a nondescript little town with wonderful views across the strait to Negros. In the waters off nearby Lilo-an Point, manta rays are regular visitors between February and June.

Accommodation is limited to two very contrasting dive resorts in the village of Santander, a P10 tricycle ride from the Lilo-an bus terminal (P50 from Bato). If you're alighting from the boat from Negros, turn left and stick to the coast – the resorts are a five-minute walk away.

Cebu Lilo-an Beach Resort (☎ 0919 796 8682; d with fan/air-con P800/1000) Informal's one word for it. Shambolic is another. We never worked out who was the manager, but once we caught the vibe (and located the fridge where they keep the beer) we felt more at home. They were asking US\$15 to prepare dinner but we nipped that in the bud by eating at Marine Village. Dive trips are offered by the resort,

which works with a dive centre in Dumaguete, **Scuba Ventures** (☎ 0917 314 3402).

Marine Village (☎ 480 9040; yoko@marinevillage.net; r with fan & shared bathroom US\$10, r with air-con & private bathroom from US\$40) Take your shoes off at Marine Village, a smooth-running, jump-to-attention Japanese (but, they assured us, not *exclusively* Japanese) resort that is as organised as Cebu Lilo-an Resort is disorganised. And, oh, the food, the food... The lunch buffet was only P350. Local dive trips start at US\$44 (two dives) including equipment. Accommodation must be booked in advance.

Pumpboats depart Santander pier for Sibulan on Negros (P40, 40 minutes, hourly 6am to 6pm). Ceres Liner and Sunrays buses run all day to Cebu (P110, six hours) and to Moalboal (P42, two hours).

Bato

☎ 032 / pop 6319

Bato is notable only for having the main port in southern Cebu. Fastrcraft sail between Bato and Tampi, on Negros (P47, 20 minutes) every hour or so, from 5.30am to 7.30pm daily. Buses bound for Cebu City (P76, four hours) meet the boats from Negros. Buses to Moalboal take about two hours (P42).

Samboan

☎ 032 / pop 16,659

Halfway between Samboan and Bato, and so close to Negros you feel you can touch it, **Fantasy Beach Resort** (☎ 479 4191, 0919 439 3013; dalahikan@yahoo.fr; d with shared/private bathroom P1200/1500; s) is a well-run, Spanish mission-style resort set high on a hill overlooking the sea. It has landscaped grounds with steps that lead down to a small private beach. Rooms are large and cheerful. Buffet meals cost around P300. You can *snorkel* on the house reef (no charge), take a free trip to nearby *waterfalls*, or arrange a *dolphin-watching tour* in Bais, Negros (P4500, maximum seven people). Frequent Ceres Liner buses runs through here on the way to Moalboal (P36, 1½ hours) and Bato (P10, 20 minutes).

Moalboal

☎ 032 / pop 23,402

Diving, drinking and dining (in that order) top the list of activities in the dive colony of Moalboal (hard to pronounce – try mo-all-bo-all). About 90km from Cebu City, Moalboal proper is on the main road – the part

that tourists mean when they say 'Moalboal' is actually Panagsama Beach, a resort village a short, bumpy tricycle ride west of town (day/night P30/60).

Panagsama doesn't actually have a beach, as such. Both typhoon damage and poor coastal development have led to all the sand being washed away. To make matters worse, many resorts have built walls jutting out to sea, making it impossible to walk beside the water. Most of the resorts are on the water's edge, with their rear balconies over the sea and their front entrances facing a path that runs the length of the village. The resorts provide captivating views of the volcanic plateaus of Negros across the Tañon Strait.

A few kilometres north of Panagsama Beach lies *White Beach*. Unlike Panagsama, White Beach actually *has* a beach – and not a bad one at that. Popular with locals, it is subject to the usual flux of domestic tourist spots: relatively quiet during the week, overflowing on weekends and holidays. If you want to see a true Philippine beach party, drop by on any given Sunday. There is only one resort worth the name here, otherwise this is beach-shack and barbecue territory. White Beach is an outrageously expensive (P150) 20-minute tricycle ride from Panagsama; or a P40 tricycle ride from Moalboal.

INFORMATION

Hotline Internet Café has a fast connection and charges P50 per hour.

SIGHTS

The 20m-high *Kawasan Falls* lies about 20km south of Moalboal, inland from Badian. Take a bus (P20) to Badian market and a tricycle (P20) from there to the start of the trail. From the trailhead to the falls it's a pleasant half-hour walk along the banks of a river. If you're feeling adventurous, rent a mountain bike instead from Planet Action (P300 per day; for details see p256). Note that some readers report being charged a P30 'parking fee' by locals at the falls trailhead.

For something a bit more sedate, unwind at the *orchid farm* (admission P30) just out of Moalboal (tricycle from Moalboal proper P30).

ACTIVITIES

Diving

The average price of a dive is US\$20 to US\$25. An open-water certificate is around

USS\$300. The snorkelling over the drop-off, about 30m out, is excellent, and most resorts rent out snorkelling sets for around P200 per day.

An often-choppy, 3km boat ride from Moalboal's Tongo Point diving spot, tiny Pescador Island offers some of Cebu's most spectacular diving. With generally excellent visibility and depths of around 50m, the island's waters are usually teeming with fish – no dive trip around here is complete without a plunge at Pescador. Snorkelling is possible too; the best spot is said to be on the island's southern side. There is a reef-conservation fee of P100 to dive at Savedra Reef and Pescador.

Most of the dive centres on Moalboal are affiliated with resorts. Top-quality dive/accommodation packages can be had through **Savedra Dive Centre** (www.savedra.com; Savedra Beach Resort), **Sea Explorers** (www.sea-explorers.com; Love's Lodge) and **Visaya Divers** (Quo Vadis Beach Resort). A couple of dive centres that are unaffiliated are **Blue Abyss Dive Shop** (☎ 474 0031; www.blueabyssdiving.com) and **Neptune Diving** (☎ 474 0087; www.neptunediving.com).

Other Activities

For active travellers who need a break from diving, visit **Johan at Planet Action** (☎ 474 0068; www.action-philippines.com). He offers some of the most exhilarating adventure tours in the Visayas. Trips cater for beginners through to advanced actioneers and include all equipment and meals. Some favourite trips are: canyoning – rappelling down 30m waterfalls; horse riding – view Bohol, Negros and Leyte from 1000m-high mountain trails; caving; and river climbing. Johan also extends his adventure range into Negros, including: a two-day 'hard' hike to active volcano Mt Kanlaon (all-inclusive USS\$125 per person); and a two-day hike to beautiful Lake Danao – one of the crater lakes of Twin Lakes (USS\$125).

SLEEPING

Panagsama Beach

The accommodation on Panagsama Beach ranges from budget to midrange. The bigger resorts all have dive centres on site that may be contacted through the resort.

Quo Vadis Beach Resort (☎ 474 0020, 0919 825 6412; www.moalboal.com; tw with fan & cold-water bathroom P750, tw with air-con & hot-water bathroom P2000; ☎) Probably the best midrange option, Quo Vadis is

situated on a large lot with great beach access. Spacious and well-appointed twin rooms and cottages have queen-sized beds and rattan furnishings. Top-of-the-range rooms have sea views. On site is the Asian-European Arista Restaurant (meals around P250) and dive centre Visaya Divers.

Love's Lodge (☎ 474 0140, 0920 867 4795; www.sea-explorers.com; r with fan/air-con P1000/1400) Excellent positioning on the quiet southern end of the beach. Motel-style standard rooms have hot-water bathroom and windows – larger deluxe rooms have air-con. Breakfast is included with all rooms. The small restaurant has well-priced food (meals around P150), including Mexican, and wonderful views over the water. This place is affiliated with Sea Explorers dive centre.

Savedra Beach Resort (☎ 474 0014; beachresort@savedra.com; r P1400; ☎) Bright and cheery, Spanish mission-style rooms all have starched linen, fridge, coffee facilities, hot-water bathrooms and private balconies over the water. It's affiliated with Savedra Dive Centre.

Coral's Palm Court (☎ 474 0103, 0919 594 6227; r P400-1000) Unreconstructed backpacker digs proudly running since 1987, Coral's is a true remnant of the late-era hippy trail. It has a handful of small, viewless rooms for P400 and two sought-after seaview rooms for P800 with cold-water bathroom, and P1000 for hot water and kitchenette. Plain, white rooms are a bit rough around the edges but there's no going past the lovely beachfront balcony with its prime views. There are generous discounts for longer stays.

Sunshine Pension House (☎ 474 0049; sunshinepension@yahoo.com; cottages & d with cold-/hot-water bathroom P500/600; ☎) On the other side of the road from the beach, Sunshine is a big resort-style place with large, excellent-value rooms and cottages. The restaurant specialises in Swiss food (meals P150 to P200).

Mollie's Place (☎ 0917 254 7060; molliesplace@skyinet.net; r with fan/air-con P500/1000) Fronted by a relaxed little bar, Mollie's has cheap, liveable fan rooms and slightly better air-con rooms in a run-down concrete complex. They can arrange dive packages through Savedra Dive Centre at Savedra Beach Resort.

Pacita's Resort (☎ 474 0182; cottage with fan P300, r with air-con P1500) Occupying a huge beachfront lot in the middle of Panagsama Beach, Pacita's is a sprawling concrete eyesore though which you must pass to get to

the southern end of the beach. You can get a lot better value than the seaview air-con rooms, but they don't come any cheaper than the Spartan fan cottages out the back.

Marina Beach Club Resort (☎ /fax 474 0047; r with fan from P400, r & cottage with air-con from P1300) In a compound back from the beach, Marina has cheap huts with fan and cold-water bathroom and pricier ones with air-con. Big, plain, tiled rooms with hot water, fridge and coffee facilities start at P1300. Affiliated with Japanese dive centre Submaldive.

Sumisid Lodge (☎ Cebu City 346 9629, Panagsama Beach 346 9629; r with fan & shared bathroom US\$40, r with air-con & private bathroom US\$56) Prices include full board (three meals). A cosy, homely place with native-style rooms, all with views. Air-con rooms front the lobby, so can get noisy. It's affiliated with Sequest Dive Centre (www.seaquestdivecenter.com), one of the better – and pricier – dive centres.

Eve's Kiosk (☎ /fax 0918 773 3730; cottage P500, r with fan & cold-water bathroom P1000, r with air-con & hot-water bathroom 1500; ☎) Away from the beach, Eve's Kiosk can't be missed for its position on a noisy corner and the car park/village square out the front. Rooms are small and plain, and the token pool is very small. Next door is the affiliated Nelson's Diving School (☎ 0917 276 7969).

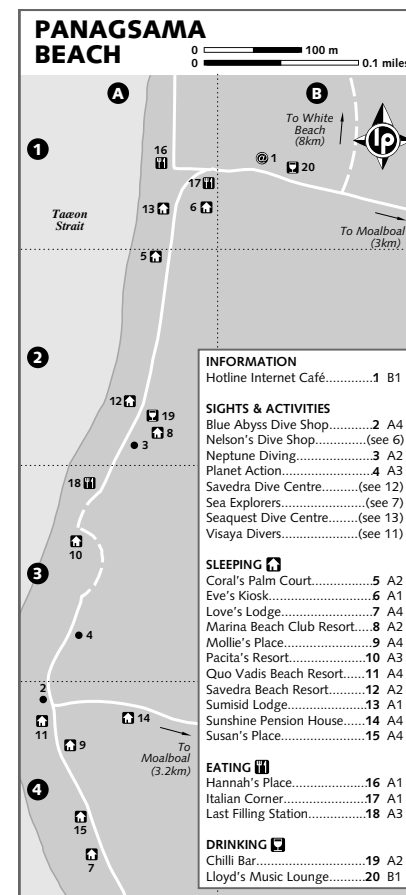
One to look out for is the eponymous **Susan's Place** (☎ 0920 629 4488). Owned by a charismatic Australian-Filipina, Susan's was under construction at the time of research but was due to open in 2006. It could have some bargain rooms at the better end of the beach.

White Beach

Asian-Belgian Resort & Dive Centre (☎ 0917 744 7603; www.asian-belgian-resort.com; d P600) This quiet, family-run resort has great views, good food (meals around P200) and pleasant, native-style rooms with cold-water bathrooms. The dive centre has a very good-value open-water diving course (US\$250) with an experienced instructor.

EATING & DRINKING

Most places to stay have restaurants, although there are plenty of other eateries worth a look, and most are open for all meals. At Panagsama beach, **Hannah's Place** (meals from P250) has the finest seaside terrace in Moalboal and easily the best seafood. Last



Filling Station (meals from P150; ⌚ 6.30am-10pm) is famous for its breakfasts – the muesli with fruit and creamy, natural yoghurt (P100) is the perfect balance-restorer after a *lechon* (spit-roasted pig) overdose. **Italian Corner** (pizza from P250; ⌚ dinner only) does good, traditional Italian pizzas.

There's a drinking spot to suit most tastes in Panagsama Beach, so do what the locals do and bar hop till you find something you like. Lively drinking holes include Mollie's Place, Lloyd's Music Lounge and the Chilli Bar.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses for Moalboal leave Cebu South bus station on the hour throughout the day (P65, three hours). To get from Moalboal

to Bato by the Ceres Liner bus (P42, two hours), wait by the main road in town and be prepared for standing room only. Most resorts can organise van hire for Cebu or Bato (P1500 to P2000).

CAMOTES ISLANDS

☎ 032 / pop 82,528

Only two hours by pumpboat from Cebu, the Camotes offer an authentic island life that many adventurous tourists crave. The group's two main islands, Poro and Pacijan (the latter is also referred to as San Francisco), are connected by a mangrove-fringed land bridge that enables visitors to explore the two by motorcycle, the main mode of transport here. Visitors rarely make it to the third island, Ponson, which looks to Leyte rather than Cebu as its main link to the world.

There are only a few places to stay on the islands, and besides local shops and markets, visitors must rely on these places for a basic menu. There are also several resorts that offer 'mushroom cottages' (a thatched-roof shelter) for a small fee.

Fishing, agriculture and domestic tourism are the major livelihoods on the Camotes. As transport and communication are poor, few international visitors make this very worthwhile stop. The few who do will be welcomed warmly by the locals.

Information

There is an **information desk** (☎ 0920 796 8173) and a **post office** at the Municipal Hall in Poro town. Turn left as you leave the pier and it's about 200m down the road.

Activities

There is good wall diving around Tulang Island, just north of Pacijan (see opposite). At the time of research, local authorities were also attempting to create marine sanctuaries in the reefs north and south of Poro Island, near Esperanza and Tudela. There are no dive centres in the Camotes, so you must bring your own gear or come as part of an organised trip.

Getting There & Away

Two ferries a day depart Cebu City for Poro town (P140, four hours, noon and 9pm).

Danao, Cebu, is the main port for boats bound for the Camotes. From Danao, there are two daily pumpboat services for Poro town, and two each for Consuelo and San Francisco on Pacijan Island. To and from the islands, typically the first service leaves around 6am, and the second around 10am to noon (P120, two hours).

For information on getting to Ponson Island, see p260.

Getting Around

The main means of travelling the mostly dirt roads of the Camotes is motorcycle. Most hubel-hubel riders will happily take you and up to three other passengers (though we don't advise this!) to any destination you want on the islands. Prices are negotiable, but trips of 5km will cost around P40, up to 10km will cost P100 and over that (eg Poro town to Santiago) will cost around P150. Alternatively you can rent a motorbike at your resort for around P500 per day. Jeepney services are timed to meet the boats at outlying ports, such as Consuelo.

PACIJAN ISLAND

☎ 032 / pop 41,327

Pacijan has the only white-sand beaches on the Camotes, and is where most of the places to stay are located.

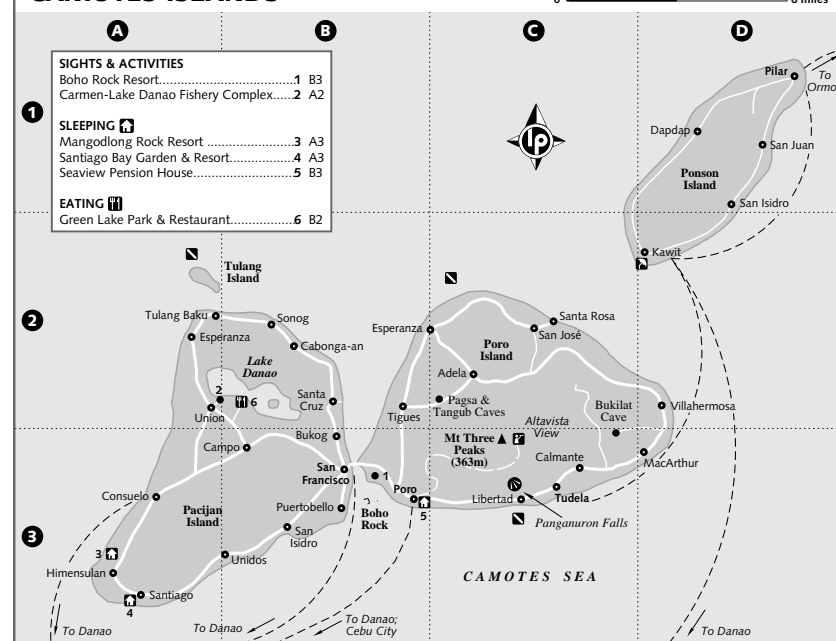
San Francisco

'San Fran', the main town on Pacijan Island, stands at one end of the long land bridge and mangrove forest that runs all the way across to Poro Island. San Fran has a lively market (to the left after the causeway, on the bay), a church, a giant basketball complex, a pretty little town square and plenty of colourful murals. Motorcycles and their riders can be hired for trips around the island, or across to Poro Island, from around the town square.

Lake Danao & Danao Fisheries

The Carmen-Lake Danao Fishery Complex is on the southern bank of Lake Danao, behind the town of Union (oon-yon). The fishery performs research on tilapia, an edible freshwater fish. The fish are farmed in floating pens by the lake's edge, where there are nice views to be had. Union is a 20-minute ride from San Francisco.

CAMOTES ISLANDS



Esperanza

Esperanza is Pacijan's second-largest town and has a main street lined with yellow-painted pot plants. The town runs along a white-sand beach strewn with fishing boats. Like most towns in the Camotes, Esperanza has a school, a church, shops and a basketball court. The road north from Esperanza takes you up to Tulang Baku where you can ask a fisherman to take you out to Tulang Island (P50 return).

A delightful detour, if you have your own bike, is the beachfront south of Esperanza, where a narrow dirt road passes through a string of little fishing villages and past peaceful coves with perfect white-sand beaches.

Esperanza is about half an hour from San Fran by motorbike.

Sleeping & Eating

Santiago Bay Garden & Resort (☎ 345 8599, 420 3385, 0915 815 3849; Santiago; d with fan & shared bathroom P500, d with air-con & private bathroom P1000) Occupying a prime spot beside the best beach in the Camotes, Santiago has a cheerful, family atmosphere with lots of locals and music.

Basic rooms are on a hillside overlooking a vast, crescent-shaped bay with a white beach. The water in the bay is very shallow, and tides are consequently massive – easily 80m to 100m from high to low. The resort is fronted by a terraced restaurant (meals around P150) with wonderful views.

Mangodlong Rock Resort (☎ Cebu 420 3385, 032 345 8599; d P1800; a s) Sister resort to Santiago Bay, Mangodlong Rock Resort seems to appeal to honeymooners and conference-goers. It occupies a postcard-perfect, private cove with a small beach and good snorkelling. Mangodlong comprises deluxe, native-style rooms, a thatched-roof bar and restaurant, and cute mushroom cottages that have been built on the rocky outcrops at the water's edge. Depending on your taste in entertainment, you may find it is best avoided on weekends, when the videoke unit is in full session.

On the road southeast of Union, follow the signs to the Green Lake Park & Restaurant (meals P40-80; 11 6am-late). It's a friendly place with nice views of the lake and good Filipino food.

PORO ISLAND

☎ 032 / pop 29,317

Poro is the lesser of the two main islands. It lacks the beaches of Pacijan and there's nowhere really to stay or eat, though if you have an off-road bike its forested hills have the better touring.

Poro Town

Visitors arriving in Camotes from Cebu City will land at the unassuming little port of Poro, and be greeted by an onslaught of hubel-hubel riders. And if it's accommodation you seek, your first ride should be to Pacijan Island.

SLEEPING & EATING

There's no point staying in Poro town unless you have to. If you have to, about 100m west (left) of the pier, the humble Seaview Pension House (☎ 0926 973 8189; tw P250) has basic, mosquito-infested rooms sharing a cold-water bathroom. The friendly woman owner will cook your meals from ingredients you purchase for around P50 (there's a small market next to the pier).

Altavista View & Mt Three Peaks

Due north of the Poro town pier, a bumpy 5km road takes you up to the lookout area known as Altavista View (admission P3). The serene plateau has a 'comfort room', a small treehouse and three other open cottages that you can sit in for P15 to P25. Whether you choose the rental options or the free benches, the views you will receive – Pacijan's Lake Danao and Tulang Island to the west, and Leyte to the north – are quite marvellous. The three fairly tiddly peaks nearby – Mt Three Peaks – that make up the Camotes' highest region are Elijan, Kaban-Kaban and Kantomaro.

Bukilat Cave

Beside a rough dirt road about 6km inland from Tudela, is the well-hidden Bukilat Cave (admission P3). The road you want heads north from Tudela, then east, passing the Calmante Elementary School about 4km along. A sign for the cave pops up once you're almost there. The entrance fee is payable at the nearby waiting shed or shop. One inky-black corner is apparently the start of a long passage through which an underground stream flows. If you're up for the swim, it can be

explored properly providing you can rustle up a guide and some torches (flashlights).

Just west of Tudela, a 1km walking trail inland takes you to Panganuron Falls, which tend to dry up in high summer (from March to May).

Pugsa & Tangub Caves

Little known and seldom visited, these large caves high in the hills are approached by a steep, extremely rugged trail from Tigues village. Only for serious caving enthusiasts.

Boho Rock Resort

On the southwestern tip of Poro Island, this 'resort' (admission P3) is an absolute gem of a swimming spot. You can see it from the Poro town pier, but to reach it by land you head about 2km west of Poro town on the main road, until you see the turn-off to the resort. The entrance path takes you past the Camotes Electric Cooperative, and then down to a rocky islet that's been turned into a stunning aquatic playground with a diving platform. There is good snorkelling among the rocks. A mushroom cottage can be rented for P15 (four hours).

PONSON ISLAND

☎ 032 / pop 11,884

The charm in visiting a place as remote as Ponson is the attention you'll get, which varies from warmly effusive to wryly amused. What it tells you is that very, very few travellers make it this far.

Ponson Island is accessible from Ormoc (Leyte) and from Danao (Cebu).

There are two main towns on Ponson: Pilar and Kawit. Kawit is the more picturesque of the two, with a lovely long, white-sand beach. There is no established place to stay in either town, although you can make enquiries about homestays at the respective barangay (village or community) halls.

To the northerly town of Pilar there are three weekly services from Danao (P120, 3½ hours, departs Monday, Wednesday, Friday at noon) that also stop at the southern town of Kawit (2½ hours). A Sunday service from Danao goes direct to Pilar (P120, 2½ hours, departs 7.30am).

There is a daily pumpboat service departing 1pm from Tudela, Poro Island, to Kawit (P30, 45 minutes), Pilar (P50, 1½ hours) and Ormoc (P120, three hours).

BOHOL

☎ 038

In most tourism brochures a bug-eyed tarsier clinging to a tree superimposed on a background of the Chocolate Hills is shorthand for the island of Bohol; it seems white sandy beaches are too common to warrant inclusion. While this distinctive pairing draws the domestic crowds, it's the lush jungle interior, rice terraces and offshore islands, most prominently Panglao Island and its great diving, which truly captures the imagination of travellers; a tour of the towns will reveal some of the country's best examples of colonial Spanish churches, many of which are made from coral stone. Bohol is also known for its *ube* or *ubi* (yams), the bright-purple sweet potatoes that give *halu-halò* (various fruit and vegetable preserves served in shaved ice and milk), the national dessert, its distinctive colour and flavour.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are several daily flights from both Manila and Cebu to Tagbilaran airport and back again (see p263).

BOAT

Tagbilaran is Bohol's main port – other ports include Tubigon, Jagna, Ubay, Talibon and Jeta Fe. There are umpteen ways to get here from Cebu City (see p238) as well as connections to Manila, Leyte, Mindanao, Siquijor and Negros. Look under individual Getting There & Away entries in this section for information on boat travel between Bohol and other destinations in the Philippines.

TAGBILARAN

☎ 038 / pop 90,000

Crossing the street in the port capital of Tagbilaran (the name is derived from two words meaning 'to hide from the Moros') is like playing a real-life version of the video-arcade game *Frogger*. A fleet of tricycles, sometimes hard to see amid fog from their exhaust fumes, can at least definitely be heard! Nevertheless if your interests are divided between the watery and land-based kind, then this commercial city is a practical place to base yourself. In the heart of town, have a look at the huge St Joseph the Worker Cathedral, also

known more simply as Tagbilaran Cathedral. It was built in 1767, burnt to the ground in 1798 and rebuilt and enlarged in 1855.

Orientation

Carlos P Garcia Ave (known by locals as CPG or CP Garcia) is the main drag, but all the streets from Plaza Rizal in the south to Maria Clara St in the north are chock full of traffic. The Bohol Quality Mall is the commercial and geographic centre of activity while the much larger Island City Mall is in the 'suburbs' to the northeast. The long shorefront along the Tagbilaran Strait has little appeal.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 166; San Jose St)

INTERNET ACCESS

There are at least a half-a-dozen cafés in the area around the Bohol Quality Mall; most charge around P20 per hour.

CenterNet Computers (cnr Carlos P Garcia Ave & J Borja St; 9am-late Mon-Sat)

Internet Cathedral (MH del Pilar St; 9am-midnight)

Slash Cybercafé (Lesage St; 8am-midnight)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Governor Celestino Gallares Memorial Hospital (☎ 411 3324; Miguel Parras St)

Ramiro Community Hospital (☎ 411 3515; 63 Gallares St)

MONEY

Most major banks have branches here with ATMs.

BPI (Bank of the Philippine Islands; cnr Carlos P Garcia Ave & G Visarra St)

Metrobank (Carlos P Garcia Ave)

PNB (Philippine National Bank; San Jose St)

POST

Main post office (J Torralba St) Opposite the city hall.

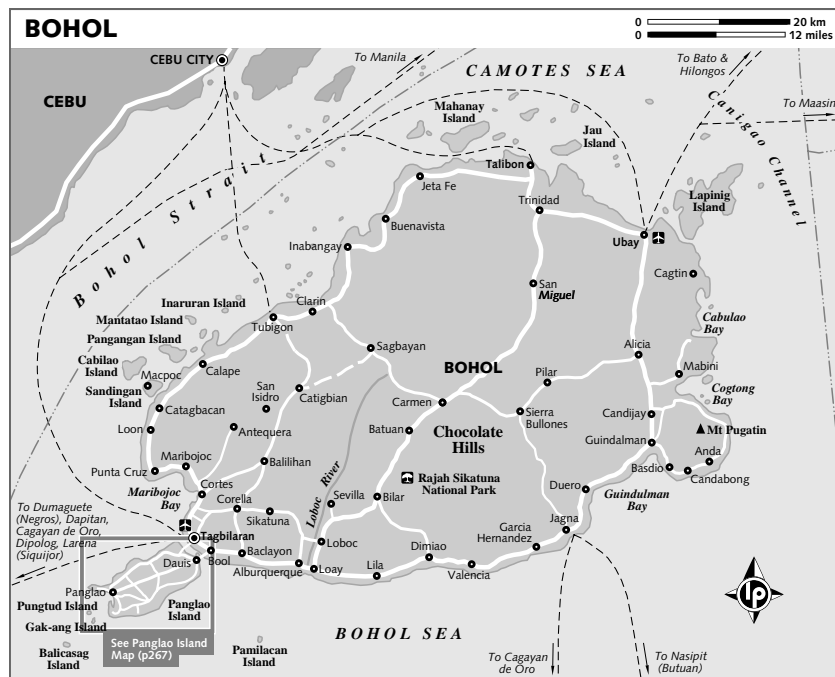
TOURIST INFORMATION

City Tourism Information & Assistance Centre

(☎ 235 5497; www.tagbilaran.gov.ph; cnr CP Garcia Ave & H Grupo St; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) On the southwest corner of Agora Market. Staff can assist with accommodation and transport inquiries and bookings.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Tarsier Tours & Travel (☎ 411 3615; Carlos P Garcia Ave) On the ground floor of the Metro Centre Hotel.



Tours

If you are interested in experiencing a slice of Boholano life, as well as helping out the locals, contact **Process-Bohol** (☎ 501 7742; www.processbohol.org; 111-A Espuelas Extension), a nonprofit community-run organisation that arranges homestays, demonstrations and tours.

Festivals & Events

Bohol Fiesta (Apr-May) Tagbilaran is the headquarters of this giant festival celebrating St Joseph. The town's own fiesta kicks off the proceedings on 1 May, with lead-ups from 22 April.

Sandugo Festival (Jul) This festival, held in the first week of July celebrates the March 1565 blood compact (see p272). It is followed by a string of other festivals (such as an arts and culture festival and an agricultural fair) that have turned the whole of July into party month.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Everglory Lodge & Restaurant (☎ 411 4969; cnr C Gallares & Maria Clara Sts; r with fan/air-con P350/600) The high rise–like Everglory is a short walk from the wharf. Rooms are clean but the furniture is old. While all have bathrooms,

the toilets are seat-free and street noise can be an issue. The wharf-facing rooms and the 4th-floor restaurant have good views.

Nisa Travellers Inn (☎ 411 3731; Carlos P Garcia Ave; s/d with fan & shared bathroom P200/300, r with air-con & private bathroom P600) Nisa is popular because of its central location and cheap rates, however the fan rooms are nothing more than bare cells and the air-con rooms are only slightly more appealing. The vibe is friendly and familiar and there's a spacious and clean balcony area and restaurant. Look for the entrance up a flight of stairs.

MIDRANGE

Via Bohol Tourist Inn (☎ 411 5334; Graham Ave; r from P800; a) A modern hotel close to the ferry terminal with spick-and-span tiled rooms and bathrooms that are especially nice. Fancy TVs are in each room, some with videoke.

Villa Alzhun Tourist Inn & Restaurant (☎ 411 3893; 162 VP Inting St, Mansana Seaside; r from P900; a s) An old-style villa 2km south of town overlooking the Tagbilaran Strait. Wood-floored rooms are heavy on the chintz but are well kept and have nice sunset views.

Tours, transfers, spa, restaurant, bar and karaoke are available.

Hotel La Roca (☎ 411 3796/3179; Graham Ave; d from P1000; a s) The longstanding La Roca at the quiet, northern end of town has large and light rooms with big windows and a mix of wicker and wood furniture. The restaurant and pool area out back are especially nice when lit up at night. The hotel attracts banquets, conferences and seminars.

Taver's Pension House (☎ 411 4896/3983; Remolador St; s/d from P600/750; a i) While staff at this pension house are businesslike and professional, rooms resemble the cabins on many ferries – which isn't necessarily a bad thing; it's just that despite little touches of class like pink curtains and plastic flowers, rooms are fairly basic. Each room has a bathroom with hot water and cable TV. There's an Internet café (open 8am to midnight) on the 1st floor.

Chriscent Ville Pension House (☎ 411 4029/3070; fax 235 4266; C Gallares St; s/d from P750/850; a) Located in the heart of the city (which means quiet is sacrificed for convenience) Chriscent Ville has tiled rooms that are generally clean, though some are beginning to show wear and tear. All have hot-water bathrooms and cable TV, and staff will assist with ticketing, tours and transfers. There's a restaurant and bar on the 4th floor.

TOP END

If you are going to shell out a few extra bucks you might as well be on the beach in a nicer setting but, if you have to be in the city...

Bohol Tropics Resort (☎ 411 3510/14; www.bohol-tropics.com; Graham Ave; r P1450-2450; s a) Although it's the closest seaside resort to the city, there's no beachfront and the standard rooms are surprisingly basic and ill-kempt for a resort with luxurious pretensions. The newer rooms are much nicer and more expensive, with modern amenities and sea-view balconies. There are three swimming pools, three restaurants, and dive facilities.

Metro Centre Hotel (☎ 411 2599; www.metro-centrehotel.com; Carlos P Garcia Ave; r from P1250-6000; a i s) While the tasteful rooms at this ritzy eight-storey hotel are more luxurious and the service more attentive than at Bohol Tropics, the fact that it is in the heart of town on the corner of MH del Pilar St means it attracts more business types than vacation-

ers. Breakfast is included and there's a spa and gym, disco, a business centre, 24-hour coffee shop and room service from Asiatika (see below). Wi-Fi Internet is available.

Eating

Garden Café (☎ 411 3756; JS Torralba St; meals P60-150) This place with a country-and-western theme – cowboy hats, John Wayne posters, mounted antelope heads, wagon-wheel chandeliers and country music – next to the Tagbilaran Cathedral employs deaf wait staff and serves up juicy steaks from Australia and New Zealand. Chilli, pizza and other Americana meals can be dialled into the kitchen from the tableside phones.

Odysseus Steak Haus & Restaurant (☎ 235 6364; Maria Clara St; sandwiches P125; 11am-9pm Mon-Sat) The first place on Maria Clara St after the wharf, Odysseus, a small family-run restaurant, is a good choice to while away the time with a shake or dessert while waiting for a ferry. Alternatively, try a full-course meal of Filipino or European food including burgers (P125) and steaks (P340).

Asiatika (☎ 411 2599; Carlos P Garcia Ave; dishes P150; 11am-2pm & 6pm-midnight) With its white tablecloths and uniformed waiters, this restaurant on the 2nd floor of the Metro Centre Hotel qualifies as fancy in Tagbilaran. It has a large menu of Japanese, Chinese and Thai dishes.

JJ's Dimsum Restaurant (☎ 411 3306; Carlos P Garcia Ave; dishes P80) JJ's gets busy, especially at lunchtime, serving up inexpensive Chinese fare. Fish, tofu and noodles are available in group portions. JJ's Mandarin Royal, Dimsum's more upmarket cousin, is near the K&C Wharf.

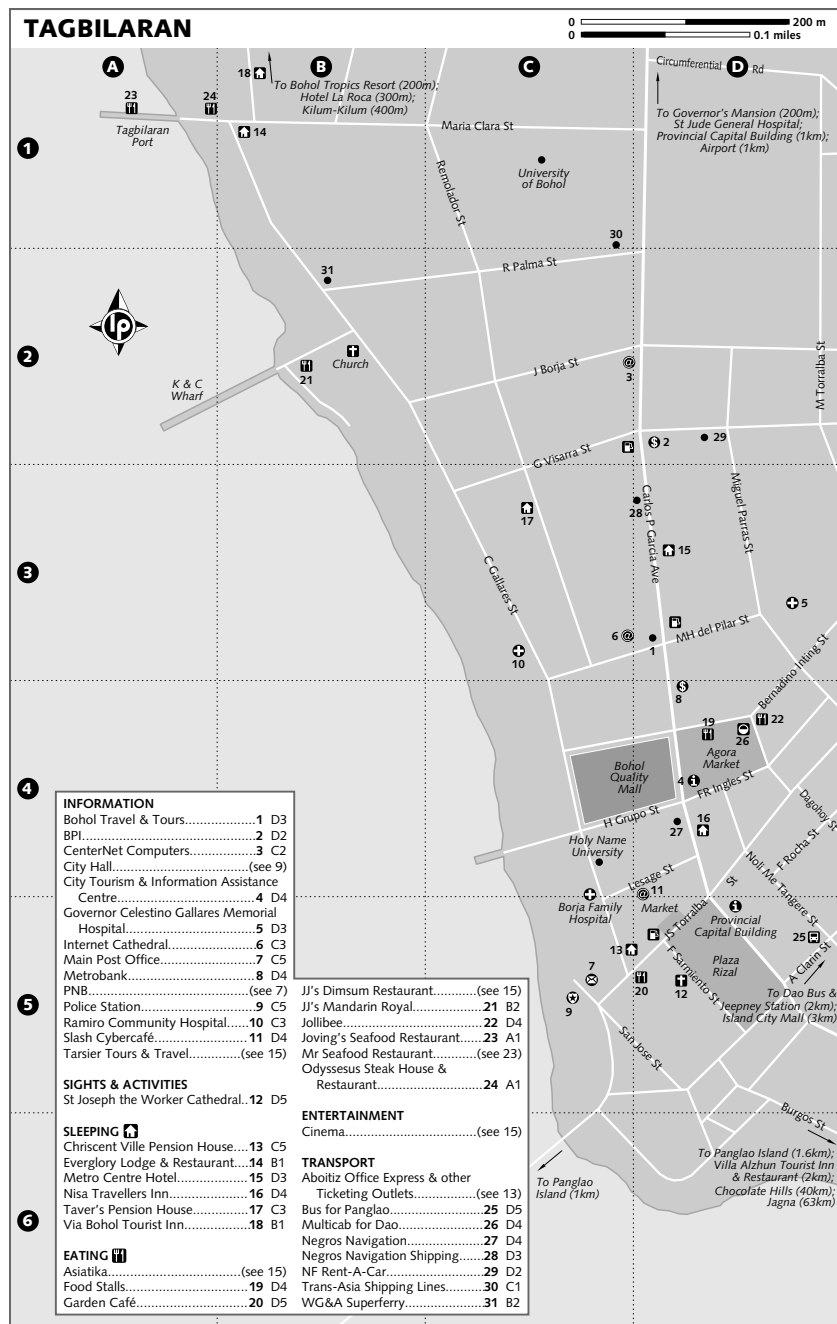
Joving's Seafood Restaurant and next-door **Mr Seafood Restaurant** (main wharf; meals P100-150; 11am-9pm) catch what little breeze there is, perched over the water teetering on wooden stilts. Their menus include Filipino-style seafood and other tasty meat dishes.

There's a Jollibee and other fast food in or around the Bohol Quality Mall in town, as well as fast-food restaurants at the Island City Mall a few kilometres to the northeast. For late-night cheap eats, go to the row of food stalls (Bernadino Inting St) near the market.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The ticketing offices are at the airport, a few kilometres north of the city centre. There



are also several travel agencies in town and most of the hotels can help with bookings.

Philippine Airlines (% 411 3102) and **Cebu Pacific** (% 411 5701) each have two flights daily between Manila and Tagbilaran (one hour).

BOAT

There is a P11 terminal fee for departing Tagbilaran.

Aboitiz, WG&A Superferry and other ticketing outlets are on C Gallares St. Negros Navigation has two offices on Carlos P Garcia Ave, and Trans-Asia Shipping Lines is on R Palma St.

Cebu

Between Kinswell, Ocean Jet and Weesam there are around eight fast-boat trips between Tagbilaran and Cebu (P500, 1½ to two hours) from 6.30am to 6pm. Several slower and larger crafts also service the route daily.

Manila

Negros Navigation and SuperFerry sail between Tagbilaran and Manila twice a week (tourist class around P1600, 28 hours).

Mindanao

The quickest water route to Mindanao is the Ocean Jet morning boat to Dapitan via Larena (P730, four hours).

Trans-Asia has a boat leaving at 7pm every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for Cagayan de Oro; Cebu Ferries departs Saturday at midnight for the same destination (both around P600, nine hours).

SuperFerry has a boat to Dipolog early Sunday morning (P750, nine hours).

Negros

Ocean Jet leaves for Dumaguete (P520, 1½ hours) daily at 9.30am. SuperFerry sails to Dumaguete (P520, three hours) early in the morning every Wednesday and Sunday.

Siquijor

Ocean Jet has a morning and evening boat daily to Larena (P550, three hours). Super Shuttle Ferry has a 6pm departure to Lazi (P550, three hours) every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

BUS

Tagbilaran's primary road-transport hub for buses and jeepneys is the Dao Bus &

Jeepney Station (% 235 4377) beside the large Island City Mall, a P25 tricycle ride or P40 taxi northeast of town. You can also take a multicab (small jeepney) from the northeast corner of the Agora Market (opposite Jollibee) for P5.

Daily buses leave from the station for destinations all over Bohol – see individual Getting There & Away sections later in this chapter. For Panglao Island, buses cost P4 to Dauis (4km) and P11 to Panglao town (18km). To avoid the trip out to Dao, the Panglao bus can be hailed down from A Clarin St (on the corner of Noli Me Tangere St, behind the PNB). Buses travelling further than 40km start their service at 3am and leave almost hourly until 5pm. Local buses start at 5am and travel approximately every 20 minutes until around 6pm.

If the bus is not fully loaded by the time it departs from the terminal, expect a slow crawl through the city in the search for more passengers.

CAR & TAXI

Hotels in Tagbilaran can organise hire cars with drivers, particularly for trips to the Chocolate Hills (p270). A day-long island tour (from 6am to 6pm) skirting the entire coastline, and allowing for many small stopovers, will cost around P3000 for a car and driver, more for a van. Half a day will cost P2000. Call MJ Rent A Car (% 411 5756), NF Rent-A-Car (Tropical Horizon: % 411 4568) or Lugod Rent-a-Car (% 411 2044/2682).

Many of the city's surrounding attractions are a short drive away on good roads, and most taxis which go by their meters (within 30km of Tagbilaran) are a good alternative. You can either pick a taxi off the street or call Varescon (% 411 2548).

PANGLAO ISLAND

% 038

Panglao Island is generally associated with Alona Beach, a congested strip of resorts and dive centres on the far west side. While Alona doesn't necessarily afford much sunbathing privacy, it's a logical choice for those who demand tropical drinks at beach-side bars after diving.

There are several other pricey resorts scattered along the coastal strip surrounding this mostly flat island, which is separated from Bohol by a narrow channel.

A good way to get around Panglao is by motorbike – either get yourself a driver or rent one off the street for around P500 per day. Pumpboats can be rented off the shores to take you to nearby islands for around P2500 for half a day of island-hopping or dolphin and whale watching.

Fiesta time in Panglao town is in late August. In Dauis, it's in mid-August.

Information

There are no ATMs on Panglao. Many of the resorts can offer cash back with your credit card, but they affix an exorbitant surcharge. It's best to cash up in Tagbilaran before arrival.

There's a full-service tourist centre (☎ 502 9100) where the paved road meets the beach road. It develops film, has an Internet café, changes dollars and travellers cheques, provides transport information and sells souvenirs, and beach clothes and paraphernalia.

Activities

Diving is what draws tourists to Panglao. Apart from revelling in underwater paradises of Balicasag Island (p269) and Pamilacan Island (p269), just south of Alona Beach, divers also use Panglao as a base from which to reach Cabilao (p269) to the north. You can probably score the best deal by combining accommodation with diving. The average prices are: one dive US\$20, equipment rental US\$5, open-water diving certificate US\$300, snorkel-equipment hire US\$6.

Alona Divers (☎ 502 9043; www.nautilus-diving.com; Tierra Azul)

Atlantis Dive Centre (Alona Pyramid Resort)

Genesis Divers (☎ 502 9056; www.genesisdivers.com; Peter's House)

Philippine Islands Divers (☎ 0917 320 1990; www.phildivers.com)

Pro Safari (☎ 0926 598 5553; www.prosafari.com)

Scuba World Inc (☎ 502 9450; www.scubaworld.com.ph)

Sea Explorers (www.sea-explorers.com; Alona Tropical)

Sea Quest Divers (Oasis Resort)

Snorkellers can experience the refreshingly cold waters of **Hinagdanan Cave** (admission P10) at Bingag, on the island's northern coast, with its mixture of fresh and salt water; definitely worth a visit for its stalactite and stalagmite formations.

Sleeping

ALONA BEACH

Just about all the beachside resorts either have dive centres or are closely affiliated with one, and most have restaurants and bars. The resorts are so closely packed together that shopping around for food or diving deals is no problem, though it's hard to keep track of names since many have 'Alona' somewhere in the title. Most resorts have cold-water bathrooms. A few of the hotels listed line the road running parallel to, and behind, the beach east of the tourist centre.

Budget

Peter's House (☎ /fax 502 9056, 0918 770 8434; www.genesisdivers.com; r for divers/nondivers P300/400) A nipa-hut complex with a friendly and laid-back communal vibe, Peter's appeals especially to divers on a budget and long-term visitors. A few rooms, especially the top-floor attic, are airy and have nice views. All rooms share a well-kept cold-water bathroom. It's affiliated with Genesis Divers.

Alonville Beach Resort (☎ 411 3254; d with shared bathroom P200, nipa huts P500) A good budget deal. Rooms are small and rundown, and noise from the good restaurant and bar scene might keep you awake, but you won't find a place much cheaper or closer to the action.

Alona Pyramid Resort (☎ 502 9058; fax 502 9090; nipa huts P350) Has two-storey huts with two double beds. It's affiliated with Atlantis Dive Centre and the popular Safety Stop Bar.

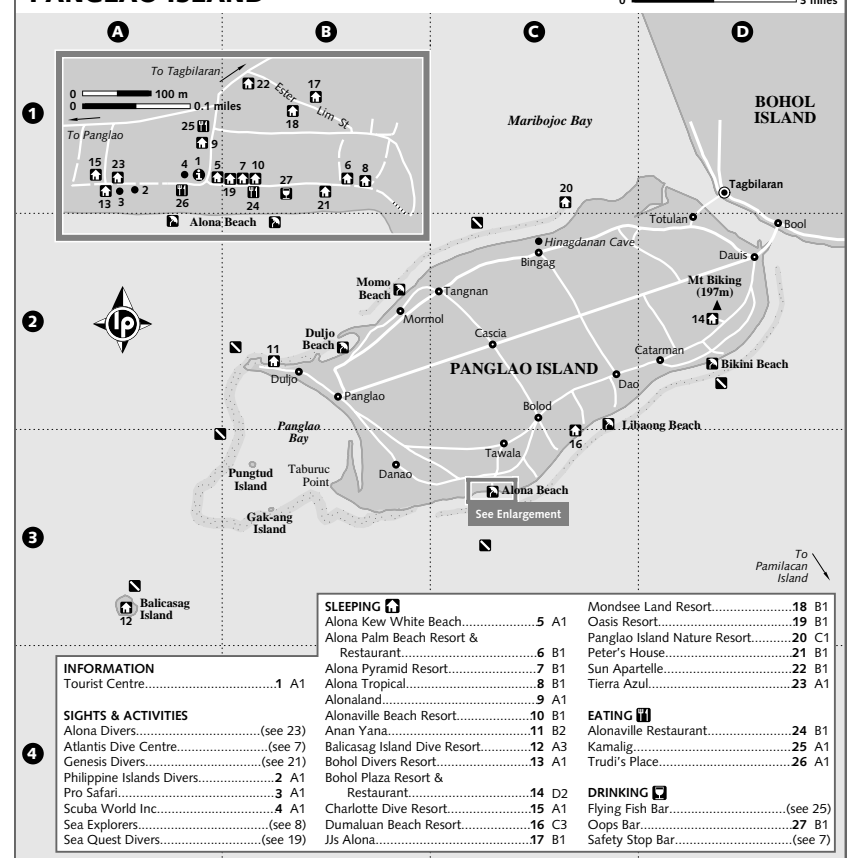
Alonaland (☎ 502 9007, 0917 304 0211; fax 502 9007; nipa huts & cottages P350-800; a) A better budget option for those who can cope with a 50m walk to the beach (through Alona Tropical). Accommodation ranges from basic nipa huts to cottages with air-con and kitchen facilities.

Midrange

Alona Tropical (☎ 502 9031; r with fan/air-con from P800/1800; s) At the quieter eastern end of the beach, this is a good choice if you want something a cut above budget accommodation. It also has a popular restaurant with lunch and dinner buffets for P450. It's affiliated with Sea Explorers dive centre.

Alona Kew White Beach (☎ 502 9042/27; www.alonakew.com; s/d with fan P1285/1420, s/d with air-con P2100/2225) A prominent hotel, the first one you approach from the access road. Alona Kew has a range of accommodation from

PANGLAO ISLAND



small, basic rooms in a thatched bamboo and concrete building, to larger stand-alone cottages, to beachfront rooms with balconies. An open-air restaurant serves up large portions of seafood and Filipino standards – slowly; at dinnertime there's often live music to ease the wait.

Bohol Divers Resort (☎ /fax 502 9047; r with fan/air-con from P800/1000; s) This popular resort is set just off the beach around a nice freshwater swimming pool. There's a wide range of accommodation from inexpensive nipa huts to pricier concrete villas. There's a pleasant open-air restaurant and tennis courts.

Charlotte Dive Resort (☎ 502 9155, 0910 641 6779; r from P1500; a) Anchoring the northern end of the beach is this white two-storey build-

ing with several cavernous, airy rooms with balconies and large, tiled bathrooms. Caters to Korean divers.

Tierra Azul (☎ 502 9065, ☎ /fax 500 0694; r with fan/air-con P600/1000) Has large, clean, midrange rooms on the western end of the beach, away from the bar scene. The restaurant doesn't serve evening meals, but has a lovely view and the home-style management is very friendly. Attached is Alona Divers.

Mondsee Land Resort (☎ 502 9006; alonamer@yahoo.com; Ester Lim St; r US\$30; a s) If the beachfront places are booked or you're just after peace and quiet, Mondsee boasts a pleasant little pool with coffee and drinks bar and large rooms with private bathrooms. A more expensive room has an outdoor kitchen.

JJs Alona (☎ 502 9129; Ester Lim St; r P1200; a) A two-storey home away from the beach, JJs has clean tiled rooms overlooking a small, tranquil garden.

Top End

Oasis Resort (☎ 502 9083; www.seaquestdivecenter.net; s/d with fan US\$40/60, s/d with air-con US\$50/75; i s) Your privacy is guaranteed at this aptly named resort, tucked away in a grove of palm trees just up from the beach. Several warmly decorated native bungalows and a restaurant with a few creative selections surround a nice pool. It's connected to Sea Quest Divers.

Alona Palm Beach Resort & Restaurant (☎ 502 9141; www.alonapalmbeach.com; r US\$136; a s) A stand of palm trees guard the entrance to the Palm Beach, on the strip's southern end. Though it's the swankiest and most expensive of the bunch on Alona, it isn't ostentatious about its status. Sunny oversized modern villas with private verandas surround the pool and grounds. The restaurant has a rich Euro menu (mains around P350).

Sun Apartelle (☎ 502 9063; www.sunapartelle.de; Ester Lim St; apartments from US\$60; a i s) An attractive yellow villa, Sun Apartelle's rooms are, not surprisingly, apartment-like and good for long-term stays. Each has a full-service kitchen and living room, though the furniture is a little chintzy. There's also a pool set in a grotto, and a sunny restaurant.

AROUND THE ISLAND

Anan Yana (☎ 502 8101; www.ananyana.com; Duljo Beach; r US\$144; a s) At remote Duljo Beach, Anan Yana has stylish Filipino rooms on 3km of white, sandy beach. Tasteful, Asian-minimalist décor and architecture, a serene setting and no phone or TV make this the best romantic getaway. Swimming pool, diving and a good, Italian-influenced restaurant add to the luxury.

Panglao Island Nature Resort (☎ 411 2599; www.panglaoisland.com; Bingag; r from US\$117; a s) One of the more beautifully integrated resorts on the island, the thatched cottages at the Nature Resort are surrounded by leafy gardens, and the beachfront cottages have magnificent ocean views. All have wooden floors, bamboo furniture and private verandas. A pool and Jacuzzi front the beach and there's an open pavilion restaurant serving European and Filipino dishes; wi-fi Internet is available.

Dumaluan Beach Resort (☎ 502 9081/92; Bolod; huts from P595, r with air-con from P1500; a s) A good option if you want to avoid the hype of Alona without paying big bucks. A large range of accommodation meets the needs of most visitors, and swimming pool, spa, diving and a good restaurant are available to all. Its only neighbour is Bohol Beach Club.

Bohol Plaza Resort & Restaurant (☎ 500 0882/1019; www.boholplazaresort.com; Dayo Hill, Dauis; r from P1300; a s) If the beach isn't your thing, this imposing fortresslike resort a few hundred metres up a mountain offers tiled, spacious rooms with hot-water bathroom and great views. Watch the Tagbilaran lights come on across the river from the mountaintop restaurant.

Eating & Drinking

Most of the resorts and hotels have restaurants and bars along the beach.

Trudi's Place (meals P120) A lovely, open bar-restaurant where you can dine on the beach and enjoy very good cheap food.

Kamalig (meals P175; 11 4pm-midnight Mon-Sat) On the road that runs up between Alona Kew and Sunshine Travel. People come here for good Italian food.

Flying Fish Bar, Safety Stop Bar and Oops Bar have live music and drinking.

Getting There & Around

Panglao Island Transport Services Cooperative (☎ 502 9460, 0920 746 9401) basically refers to the group of car and van drivers that hang out in front of the tourist centre on Alona Beach. Prices are generally non-negotiable, though bargaining is worth a try during the low season. A full-day Chocolate Hills tour costs P2500. The following are one-way costs from Panglao for one to three persons: Tagbilaran P450; Jagna P2500; Loboc P2200; Loon P1800; and Corella P1500.

For buses from Tagbilaran, see p263. The simplest way to reach Alona is to hire a tricycle from anywhere in Tagbilaran (P175, 30 to 45 minutes). Taxis from Tagbilaran are more comfortable and quicker and cost around P250 to P300. Transport to resorts not on Alona Beach will command slightly higher fares. There are often jeepneys or minibuses hanging around after dropping off passengers in Alona. You may be able to commandeering one of these for around P200 for a quick trip back to Tagbilaran.

Broken down jeepneys and buses ply the same route (P12) but stop frequently and their departures are hard to predict.

BALICASAG ISLAND

☎ 038

One of the premier diving spots in the Philippines, Balicasag, about 6km southwest of Panglao, is ringed by a pristine reef that has been declared a marine sanctuary. It drops away to impressive submarine cliffs as deep as 50m. Soft and hard corals can be found around the cliffs, as can trevally, barracuda, wrasse and the occasional white-tip shark.

Balicasag Island Dive Resort (☎ 502 6001, in Manila 32-812 1984; ptabidr@bohol-online.com; cottages from P1400) has large cottages with fan, bathroom and veranda in duplex nipas. It has friendly staff, a good restaurant and a coral-sand island all to itself.

Balicasag is a 45-minute boat ride from Alona Beach – ring ahead for the resort to arrange your pick-up. If visiting for the day, a return boat trip from Panglao will cost around P800.

PAMILACAN ISLAND

☎ 038

The tiny island of Pamilacan, about 23km east of Balicasag, is cetacean central; home to whales and dolphins. Since the 1992 ban on capturing these creatures, Pamilacanans, descendants of three generations of whalers, have had to find other ways to earn a living. Many locals are willing to take you out to see them – there are 12 species known to visit these waters – but the best group to go with is the community-based **Pamilacan Island Dolphin & Whale Watching Tours** (☎ 540 9279, 0919 730 6108 for Jojo Baritua; http://whales.bohol.ph; Baclayon public market; per person P1250), which uses old converted whaling boats and local crews. The trip includes a full day on the water and transfers from Baclayon (on Bohol) or Panglao; boats hold four to six people. The best time for spotting whales is from February to July; dolphins are fairly common year-round.

There is no snorkelling gear on the island so you'll have to rent gear from a Panglao dive centre.

Sleeping

There are several sets of nipa huts offered on Pamilacan, all providing basic meals (it's best if vegetarians notify in advance).

Junior and Nemesia Pingkihan (☎ 0919 419 4684) can arrange a bed in a small cottage with three meals a day for around P650 and can organise dolphin tours for around P2500 per boat.

Nita's Nipa Huts (☎ 0918 824 9447; r per person P400) The cheapest and most well established. Huts range from double to family sized – the double with views on the water's edge is the best positioned. All have fan and shared bathroom. Nita can organise a night-time squid-fishing trip for visitors and arrange a pick-up from Panglao for P1000/2000, which is good for four/10 people.

Another option are the huts at **Osite's** (☎ 0918 591 7171; per person P500).

Getting There & Away

There are regular boats between Pamilacan and Baclayon (P30) or a private boat can be arranged for P300. Boats from Alona Beach will take you to Pamilacan for P1000.

CABILAO ISLAND

☎ 038

Like Balicasag and Pamilacan Islands to the south, the island of Cabilao in the waters off Loon (low-on) is an impressively rich dive site, with two community-run marine sanctuaries (diving fee P50). Cabilao's waters are home to seven species of shark and are full of micro-life, including the high-profile pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*), which at only 8mm long may be easier to spot in a diving magazine than in the wild, where it's camouflaged among the surrounding red coral.

The celebrity seahorse is found on the house reef, but there is diving, for beginners to advanced, all around the island. The island's top reef is off the northwestern point, near the lighthouse. Highly regarded **Sea Explorers** (☎ 0917 454 5897; www.sea-explorers.com) has one of its six Visayan dive centres on Cabilao.

In addition to diving, a feature of Cabilao Island is its church, which has what is claimed to be the country's biggest stone staircase.

Sleeping

Cabilao Beach Club (☎ 0917 454 5897; www.cabilao.com; r with fan P1200) The German and Swiss-managed Cabilao Beach Club on the north-eastern tip of the island has simple and clean concrete and thatched cottages with

tilled modern bathrooms. The restaurant has therapeutic sea views.

Polaris Resort (☎ 505 4118, 0918 903 7187; www.polaris-dive.com; r with fan P600-800, r with air-con P1200; Ⓢ) Accommodation at the Polaris ranges from simple treehouses to more modern concrete cottages, though all are sparsely furnished. More expensive rooms have hot water. All guests can take advantage of the full service dive facility, boat trips, and the excellent restaurant serving European, Asian and vegetarian meals (P80 to P130). The boat-shaped cocktail bar is the place for lounging.

La Estrella (☎ 505 4114, 0918 904 4859; www.laestrella.ph; nipa huts P500-1200) Several basic bungalows, some A-frame, with cold-water bathrooms and electricity from 6pm to midnight, dot this small compound. Bicycles and motorbikes are available for rent. Sea Explorers Dive Centre is only a few minutes' walk away.

For real budget travellers, Sea Explorers also offers pretty run-down cottages and rooms (d with fan & cold-water bathroom from P250).

Getting There & Away

Loon is 27km from Tagbilaran (bus or jeepney P16). To get to Cabilao Island, you must head several kilometres north from Loon to Macpoc (a good 20 minutes on a bumpy road). You can get there by bus or jeepney (P8) or motorbike (P40). From Macpoc, it's a 15-minute pumpboat ride (P10 – but you'll have to wait until the boat is full or else pay for the empty seats) to the closest port (Talisig) on Cabilao. A tricycle or motorbike will cost P15 to the resorts. A boat from Macpoc directly to the resorts will cost around P350. From either Panglao or Mactan Islands, it can take two to three hours.

For boats to Loon and Cabilao Island from Cebu Island, see p254.

BOHOL INTERIOR

☎ 038

Chocolate Hills

Undoubtedly someone high up in the Philippine tourism bureau has decided that the Chocolate Hills – a sea of grassy humps stretching as far as the horizon, a match for the mesmerising beauty of Vietnam's Halong Bay – are one of the premier tourist attractions in the entire country. In TV commercials, radio jingles and posters and banners, the Chocolate Hills, often with a cute

and cuddly tarsier in the forefront, receive as much attention as the country's beautiful beaches. In reality, unless they're seen in optimum viewing conditions – a hazy dusk or dawn – they may be a letdown after the hype, and appear like a series of hilly hazards on a golf course. The hills, which get their name from the lawnlike vegetation which roasts to chocolate brown in the dry season (December to May), have become a near-ubiquitous icon for Bohol. Romantics might want to believe the legend that they are the solidified teardrops of a lovelorn giant. Scientists on the other hand say that the 1268 near-identical hills, with sizes ranging from 40m to 120m, are the result of the uplifting of ancient coral-reef deposits, followed by erosion and weathering. At any time of year, you can take fun motorbike tours (P200) along winding roads to the main viewing sites, as well as to the lesser-known spots such as the **Eight Sisters Hilllocks**.

At the Chocolate Hills drop-off point (on the main road, at the base of the Chocolate Hills Complex hill), you'll find motorbikes available to whisk you up the hill (P10 one way), where the views are compromised by kiosks selling kitschy souvenirs. Of course, you can also walk up the hill (20 to 30 minutes). The same bikers will take you to and from Carmen for P15 (one way).

The nearby town of Carmen is home to Fatima Hills. Pilgrims climb the steps up to the **Our Lady of Fatima** statue here every year on 13 May.

SLEEPING & EATING

Chocolate Hills Complex (☎ 0912 856 1559; r with fan/air-con from P350/600) This is the only option if you want to sleep among the hills themselves. Unfortunately, the solid concrete structure does nothing but detract from the beauty of the setting. Higher-priced accommodation has hot water, air-con and double beds, but lacks views of the very sight that visitors have come to see.

The restaurant looks like a cafeteria and has unadorned standard Filipino sandwiches and dishes (P25 to P100).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses for Carmen (4km north of the Chocolate Hills) leave from the Tagbilaran bus depot hourly (P53, two hours). From Carmen there are also buses to and from Tali-

bon (P50, two hours) and Tubigon (P40, 1½ hours).

Most hotels in Tagbilaran (p262) can organise a hire car to take you to and from the Chocolate Hills. The average price for a standard air-con sedan with driver is P1500. Tours can also be arranged from Panglao Island.

Loboc

Floating restaurants blasting Frank Sinatra tunes and other oldies cruise a stretch of the Loboc River north of the town of the same name. However even this incongruous soundtrack can't diminish the appeal of Loboc, poking out from the jungle underbrush, and home to the **San Pedro Church** (c 1608), the second oldest on Bohol. Cruises take you upriver to the **Tontonan Falls** and the Visayas' oldest hydroelectric plant. Along the banks of the Loboc there are several souvenir shops and illegally run tarsier cages, where loads of visitors queue for snapshots with the cuddly creatures. You'll be doing the entire species a favour if you reserve your viewing for the **Tarsier Visitors Centre** (right).

In late May to June, Loboc hosts the **Bali-bong Kingkling Festival**, which honours Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Nuts Huts (☎ 0920 846 1559; www.nutshuts.com; dm P250, nipa huts with bathroom P450-600) is a truly unique place ensconced in the jungle on the edge of the Loboc River 3km north of Loboc town. An exception in the Philippines, Nuts Huts is completely integrated into the environment to the point that the 16 separate cottages are difficult to spot from the river. All have balconies, sweeping views and the occasional eight-legged roommate. The friendly Belgian couple who run the place offer excellent travel advice and great food – lots of vegetarian and Euro-Asian delights (meals P40 to P130) served up in the wonderful dining room/lounge area a few hundred steps up from the cottages. Make use of guided and/or mapped hikes, mountain bikes, volleyball, motorbike hire (per day P500) and river cruises, or simply lounge in the hammocks and warm, communal vibe.

If you're coming by bus, jeepney, taxi or tricycle, ask to be let off at Nuts Huts (there's a big sign on the left of the main road), about 4km after Loboc on the way to Carmen. From there, it's 750m, around

a 10-minute walk (you'll need a torch after dark, and it's strenuous with heavy luggage) along a rutted dirt path. You can also catch a Sarimanok pumpboat from the Loboc river wharf up the Loboc River (per person P50, minimum two) to the resort. Other companies and boats often try to charge more.

Loboc is about 24km from Tagbilaran (jeepney or bus P14, taxi about P400). A motorbike can take you from Tagbilaran pier for around P400 to P500.

Tarsier Visitors Centre

What's cute, creepy and looks like the illegitimate offspring of an ill advised drunken one-night stand between a Gremlin and ET? Look no further than the Philippine tarsier (*Tarsius syrichta*) and the **Tarsier Visitors Centre** (☎ 0912 516 3375, 0919 874 1120; requested donation P20; 11 8am-4pm), located beyond the attractive jungle-fringed town of Corella, near the village of Sikatuna. This simultaneously crazy and cuddly-looking little primate can fit in the palm of your hand yet leap five metres; rotate its head almost 360 degrees; move its ears in the direction of sound; and it has huge imploring eyes, 150 times bigger than a human's in relation to its body size. The tarsier is not only one of the world's smallest primates and the oldest surviving member of the primate group at 45 million years young, it is also an endangered species. The main threats to its survival are habitat destruction, introduced species, hunting and the pet trade. While also found in Samar, Leyte and parts of Mindanao, the province which is doing the most to promote awareness of the tarsier and attempting to ensure its survival – and also the most likely place visitors are going to see one of these guys – is Bohol. If you want to know more, contact the **Philippine Tarsier Foundation** (PTFI; tarsier@mozcom.com), which is dedicated to conservation and research.

The visitors centre includes information boards and audiovisual displays, a captive breeding programme, a wildlife sanctuary and hiking trail. The breeding areas are off limits, but a small patch of forest beside the centre allows for guided walks and discreet ogling of several mature tarsiers. This is a much more sustainable and humane way to appreciate the tarsier than to pet the caged animals run by tourist-orientated operations in nearby Loboc.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Corella is about 10km from Tagbilaran, and jeepneys and buses head back and forth all day (P10, 30 minutes) but tricycles to the centre itself can be scarce. There are a few jeepneys to Corella from Loboc in the morning.

To get to the Tarsier Visitors Centre directly from Tagbilaran, a taxi will cost around P200 for a return trip (20 minutes one way). It's also possible to arrange a trip from Panglao Island (p268).

Bilar & Rajah Sikatuna National Park

Bilar is popular for **Logarita Spring** (admission P5; 7 Sat–Thu), a public swimming hole overlooking rice fields. The town, about 40km east of Tagbilaran (P25 by bus), holds its annual fiesta in mid-May.

About 500m past the Bilar town hall on the right-hand side is the turn-off for Logarita Spring and the poorly maintained **Rajah Sikatuna National Park** (RSNP; admission P100), an immense 9000 hectares of native molave forest and grasslands, kilometres of haphazardly marked trails, more than 100 caves, and a dubious camping area (per person P20). Its neglect is unfortunate, especially because it's potentially prime bird-watching territory and home to tarsiers, flying lemurs, civet cats, monitor lizards and monkeys. The crew at nearby Nuts Huts (p271) may be able to suggest walks.

Sagbayan Peak

Even though the panorama of identical mounds rising amid rice fields and coconut groves from the **Sagbayan Peak viewpoint complex** (admission P10) doesn't rival the views around Chocolate Hills, you can see all the way to the ocean to the north and the drive there itself is worth the cost of admission. This is the place for those who like their nature with a side helping of 3m-high replicas of dinosaurs and cartoon characters (Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny and the like), and loud disco music. Public transport is available from Carmen to Sagbayan, which is near one of the poorer municipalities on the island.

Antequera

Just out of Antequera (ahn-tee-care-a), about 20km from Tagbilaran (bus or jeepney P11), are **Mag-aso** and **Inabacan Falls**, the largest falls on the island, as well as some of Bohol's

best caves. Cave guides can be tracked down in Antequera itself, or in Tagbilaran.

The town has its annual **fiesta** in early October, but comes alive every Sunday, when basket weavers from nearby hills bring their woven creations to market; aim to get to Antequera by 7am or 8am to avoid the rush.

Albuquerque

This small coastal town is well known for its magnificent church and belfry, built in 1886. There are also several waterfalls on the edge of town. Fiesta time is early May. Albuquerque is about 12km from Tagbilaran (bus or jeepney P10).

Baclayon

About 6km from Tagbilaran (bus or jeepney P8), Baclayon was founded by a pair of Spanish Jesuit priests in 1595. **Baclayon Church**, the country's oldest built from stone, was built a year later. The town's fiesta is in early December, and boats go from here to nearby Pamilacan Island for P30, or Pamilican Island Dolphin & Whale Watching Tours can pick you up for their tours from here (see p269).

Bool

At Bool (bo-oll), about 3km east of Tagbilaran, you'll find a monument to a blood-compact mateship ritual known as *sanduguan* (literally 'one blood'). This is where, on 16 March 1565, Spanish conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi and Boholano chieftain Rajah Sikatuna downed a cup of each other's blood in one of the first symbolic gestures of Western-Eastern accord in the Philippines.

BOHOL'S COASTAL ROAD

☎ 038

Tubigon

The ramshackle fishing town of Tubigon (to-bee-gon), in the middle of Bohol's lush northwestern coast, is well served by daily fastcraft to and from Cebu City. There's not a lot on offer here for travellers, although it is a handy access point for cutting across Bohol if you're in a hurry to see the Chocolate Hills.

Tinangnan Beach Resort & Lodging House (☎ 237 2267; r with fan & shared bathroom P200-250) is set upon stilts and has a rickety bamboo floor. It's among the intertidal mangroves, a

five-minute tricycle ride (P5) north from the central bus and market area. It also has a restaurant serving basic seafood meals (P50).

Tubigon Shipping has frequent departures for Cebu from 6am to 6pm (P120, two hours). Kinswell Shipping leaves once daily.

Buses from Tubigon's market area (near the pier) run all day on the way to Tagbilaran (P31, 1½ hours) via towns such as Calape (P7, 15 minutes) and Loon (P16, 45 minutes). If you're heading straight for the Chocolate Hills from Tubigon, buses inland leave regularly for Carmen (P40, 1½ hours).

Buenavista

Buenavista has a friendly and picturesque market on a mangrove inlet. From here, or at the river crossing 3km south on the main road, you can buy the local delicacy – urchin gonads. In many countries, including Japan and the USA, top dollar is paid for a treat of 'nads. But for you – they're going cheap at P50 for a 375mL bottle.

For something even more special, you can go on a **Cambuhat Village Ecotour**, a cruise up the mangrove-lined Daet River from Buenavista to the village of Cambuhat where you'll see an oyster farm and raffia weaving, and enjoy a delicious seafood lunch. The tour takes six hours, costs P650 (less for group bookings) and includes transfers from Tagbilaran. Call **Segundo Aparece** (☎ 0919 296 3513) for more information, or contact **Bohol Travel & Tours** (☎ 411 3840; Sarabia-Co-Torralla Bldg; Carlos P Garcia St) in Tagbilaran.

Talibon

pop 54,000

Talibon, on the north coast, is one of Bohol's busiest centres. Its long pier has regular boats to and from Cebu, as well as to Jau (how) Island nearby (P5), however there's no accommodation on Jau. All transport leaves from the market on the main street before the wharf.

Sea View Lodge (☎ 515 0154; s/d with fan P75/150, r with air-con P500), on the main street, is probably the best accommodation in town. It's not well signposted – the entrance is to the right of, and behind, Chelsea's bakery. **Petong's Place** (7 6am–6pm; meals P30), a couple of doors up from Sea View Lodge, has cheap and decent seafood meals.

See p238 for boats to and from Cebu. From Tagbilaran (P80, four hours), the

Chocolate Hills is almost exactly at the half-way point (P50, two hours). There are also regular buses to Tubigon (P50, two hours).

Ubay

pop 60,000

At the opposite end of Bohol to Tagbilaran, remote, overgrown Ubay is the island's largest metropolis after the capital. It has a lively market on the sea, just near the wharf, selling everything from woven goods to ice cream. There are plenty of cheap Filipino eateries on the water's edge. Ubay offers uncharted tourism territory around nearby **Lapinig Island**. No official accommodation exists, but organising homestays through the village captain is possible.

J&N Shipping has boats to Cebu (P100, six hours, twice daily). Daily boats also run each morning to Maasin, Bato and Hilonos on Leyte (all around P100, three hours). Buses run between Ubay and Talibon, and Ubay and Jagna.

Guindalman, Anda, Candijay & Jagna

Though the coastal road from Guindalman to Candijay is almost completely sealed, it's still in bad shape, making this remote mountainous headland out of the way for most tourists. At Guindalman, there are healthy coral reefs good for snorkelling or diving.

Anda is a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town situated on a stretch of sandy beach. As the surrounding hilly land is unsuitable for rice, corn is the staple food and you'll see copious quantities growing and drying on the roadside.

On the top of the headland at Candijay, ask at the mayor's office for a tour of the mangrove bamboo boardwalk. There are 32 species of mangrove here and a thriving ecosystem full of mud crabs, oysters and birds.

Jagna (hahg-na) is a largish fishing village on Bohol's southern coast, about 63km east of Tagbilaran. It has vaguely sandy beaches and a colourful flower-filled market. Jagna's fiesta kicks off on 29 September.

SLEEPING

If you venture out to this part of Bohol the best choice of accommodation is to be found around Anda and Guindalman.

Coco White Beach Resort (☎ 0921 602 0702; www.cocowhite-beach.com; Basdio, Guindalman; bungalows with fan from P1500) This Swiss-operated, landscaped

complex has nipa huts and larger brick and thatched-bamboo cottages, suitable for families or groups, with large bamboo beds and modern bathrooms. A bar and restaurant set on a cliff overlook a narrow beach. There's a diving facility on the grounds.

Flower Beach Resort (☎ 0918 579 6166; www.flower-beach.com; r from P2200; a i) A German-owned resort set on a beautiful white sandy beach good for snorkelling. The concrete and thatched-bamboo rooms have clean, tiled floors and wooden furniture. There's a full-service dive centre which takes advantage of the 14km offshore reef.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Cebu Ferries has boats between Jagna and Cagayan de Oro on Wednesday and Sunday (P250, four hours), and between Jagna and Butuan at midnight Sundays (Nasipit port; P280, five hours), on Mindanao. A slower, cheaper alternative is the once-a-week Sulpicio boats for Nasipit (P211, seven hours) and Cagayan de Oro (P175, five hours).

Buses travel daily to and from Tagbilaran (P37, one hour), Anda (P20, 1½ hours), Ubay (P35, 2½ hours) and many other coastal towns. They leave and arrive outside the Jagna church.

NEGROS

pop 3.26 million

The diverse, ruggedly beautiful island of Negros is a place we'd unhesitatingly recommend to any traveller. Wedged between Panay and Cebu, it's treated by too many as a mere stepping stone. Surprisingly few stop to refuel in the charming (yes, you heard right) campus town of Dumaguete, or to enjoy its surrounding dive resorts. Word is only now spreading about the stunning beach havens around Sipalay, on the remote southwest coast. And very few foreigners make it as far as the forested hill stations of Mt Kanlaon, or the 'living museums' of Silay. Which is all rather strange because, wherever you look, you'll find plenty on Negros to make you want to linger.

For more than a century, Negros was famed as the 'sugar bowl' of the Philippines. From the 1850s, the majority of arable land was turned over to sugarcane plantations. In both the cities and the smaller towns,

many historic buildings still stand testament to the fortunes made by the sugar barons. The 'Sugarlandia' phenomenon is still very evident in the north of the country, where convoys of trucks loaded with cane rumble endlessly down the highway, through a sea of silver-green cane fields.

Like any monocrop economy, though, Negros is exposed to the vicissitudes of a fickle market. When prices for sugar plummeted in the 1980s, Negros's stocks sank with it. The haciendas fell into disrepair and thousands were forced out of work. Today, Negros is increasingly looking to tourism, among other industries, to revive its fortunes.

The island is divided into two provinces lying either side of a central mountain range: Negros Oriental (the capital is Dumaguete) is to the east, and Negros Occidental (the capital is Bacolod) is to the west. Apart from English, the Visayan dialects of Ilonggo (spoken by around 80% of people), Cebuano and Hiligaynon dominate.

Getting There & Away

Bacolod and Dumaguete airports are serviced by flights from Manila and Cebu City. See p278 and p285 for details.

Negros's busiest ports are Bacolod and Dumaguete, but a number of smaller towns are also accessible by boat. Major connections include ports on Cebu, Bohol, Mindanao, Panay and Siquijor. See the individual destination sections for information on boat services.

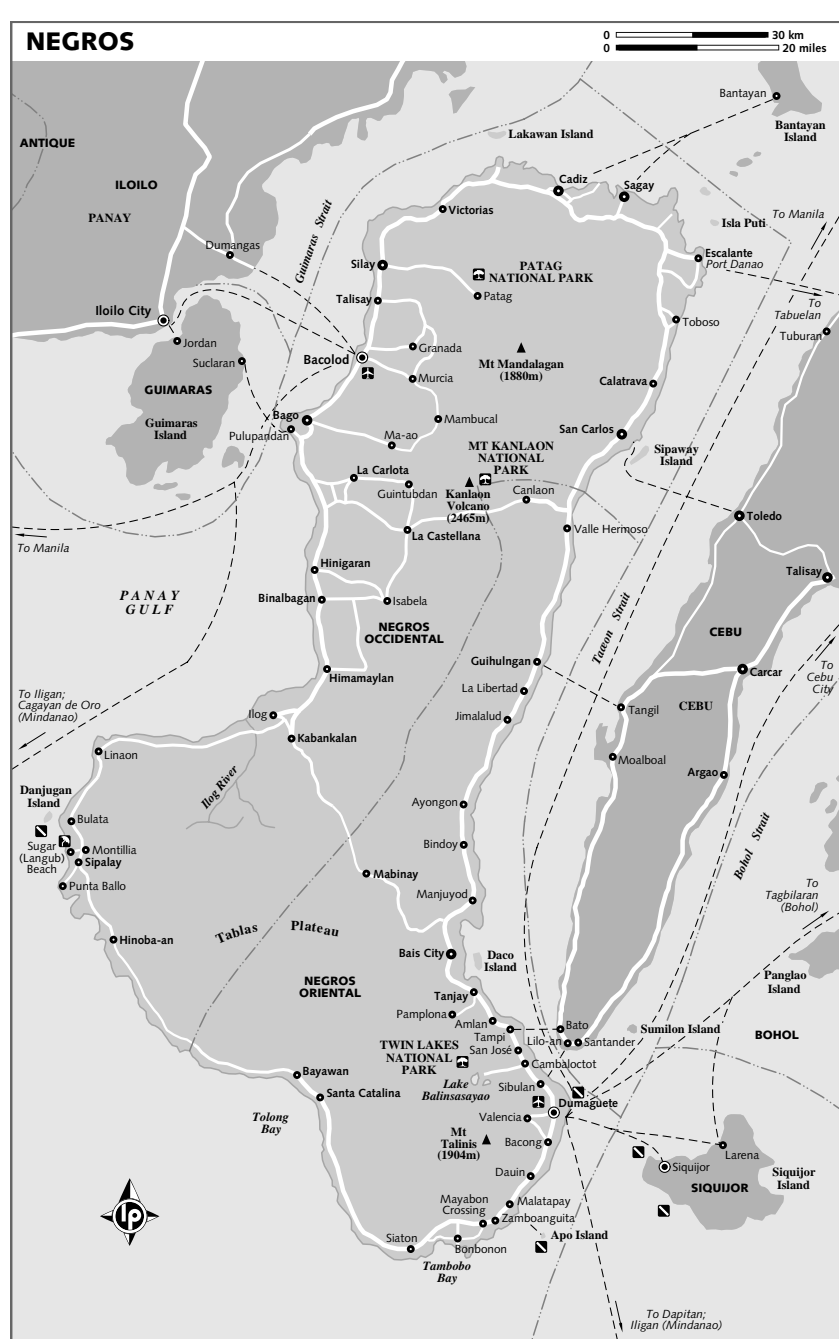
NEGROS ORIENTAL

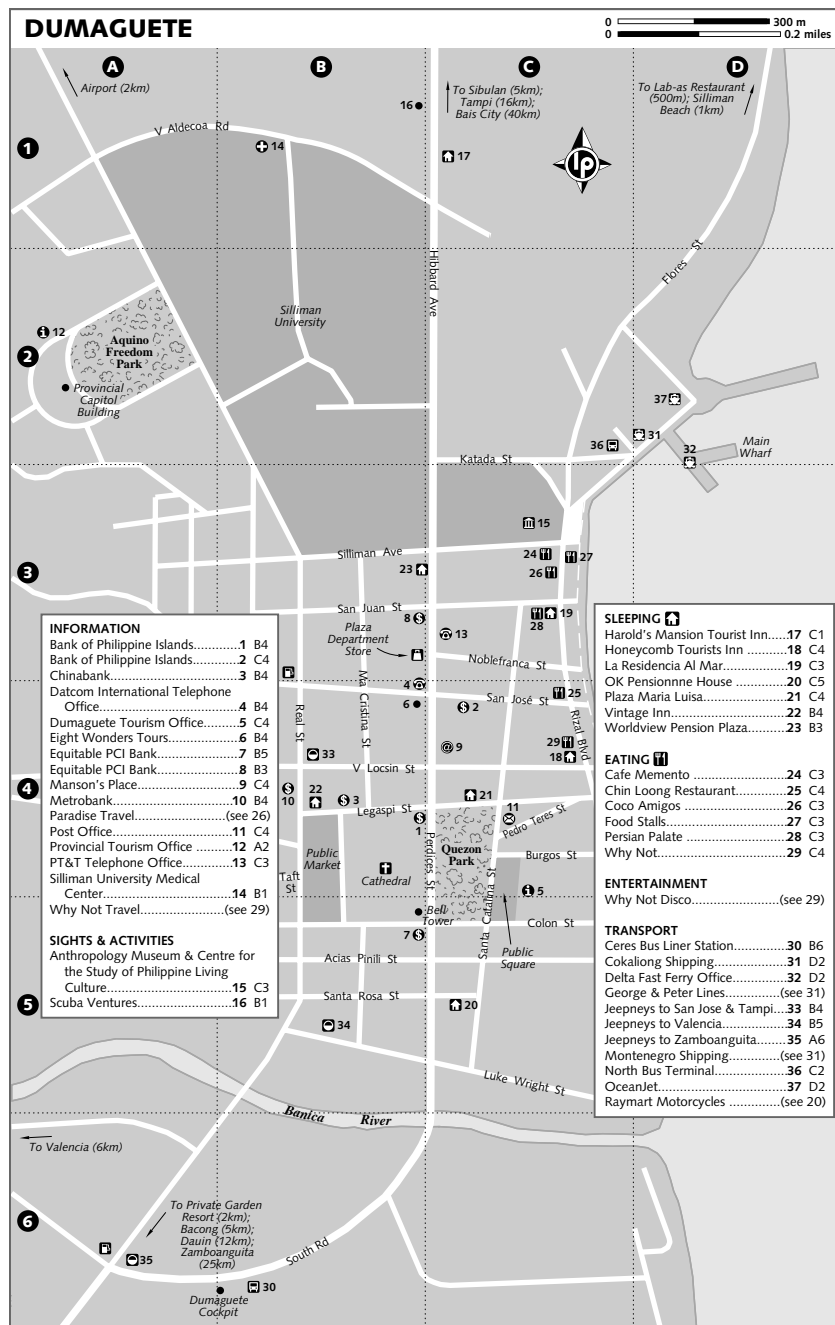
There are good roads and virtually nonstop bus services around the coast, so visiting the myriad resorts and natural attractions of Negros Oriental is as simple and pleasurable as helping yourself to a buffet. From the picturesque provincial capital of Dumaguete, everything is within easy reach.

Dumaguete

☎ 035 / pop 102,300

If you were beginning to develop an aversion to regional centres, you're in for a pleasant surprise with Dumaguete. It's a nice place. Seriously. Everyone raves about the Rizal Blvd promenade, and it's true there's something genuinely charming about this harbourfront 'quarter mile': the faux-antique gas lamps; the grassy median strip. But





there are other things to like about Dumaguete: it's big but it feels small, and it's less congested, less polluted and – being a university town – far more hip and urbane than your average provincial capital.

That said, there's not actually a lot to do here and, after a couple meals and a night or two on the town, most travellers will want to move on.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

As you'd expect from a university city, there is no shortage of Internet cafés. The cheaper ones charge P20 to P25 per hour.

Manson's Place (Perdices St; per hr P30; 11 8am-midnight) Charlie don't surf? Oh yes he does! Spotless as a Jollibee, with fast machines, cheap Filipino food (from P50) and espresso coffee.

Why Not (Rizal Blvd; per hr P50; 11 8am-2am) Expensive, but the only place where you can have mango daiquiris brought to you while you browse.

Medical Services

Silliman University Medical Centre (% 225 0841; V Aldecoa Rd)

Money

There are several banks in town with ATMs. **Bank of Philippine Islands** (BPI; Perdices St) There's also a branch on San José St.

Chinabank (Legaspi St)

Equitable PCI Bank (Perdices St)

Metrobank (Real St)

Post

Post office (cnr Santa Catalina & Pedro Teres Sts) The main post office is near Quezon Park.

Telephone

Datcom telephone office (Perdices St) Next to Jollibee.

PT&T telephone office (Perdices St)

Tourist Information

Dumaguete Tourism Office (% 225 0549; City Hall, Santa Catalina St; 11 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) The office has a few pamphlets that it can dole out.

Provincial Tourism Office (% 225 1825) Information about Negros Oriental. Located behind the Provincial Capitol Building.

Travel Agencies

Dumaguete has no shortage of travel agents. **Eight Wonders Tours** (% 422 9787; basement, Lee Super Plaza, Perdices St)

Paradise Travel (% 422 9820; Rizal Blvd)

Why Not Travel (% 225 9028; Rizal Blvd)

SIGHTS

The Anthropology Museum & Centre for the Study of Philippine Living Culture (admission free; 11 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) has displays including artefacts from Siquijor and ancient Chinese bits-and-pieces dug up on a variety of Philippine islands. It's in the central campus area. Enter from Hibbard Ave, the extension of Perdices St, and head past the Silliman Cafeteria to the old building with the staircase at the front.

Other things to see within Dumaguete itself include the coral-stone **Bell Tower** (cnr Perdices & Colon Sts), built 1754 to 1776, and the large and lively **public market** on Real St.

What the locals and tourists spend most of their time doing is strolling along the 780m-long promenade on Rizal Blvd, a scenic walk by day and the centre of the town's nightlife.

ACTIVITIES

Local travel agencies (left) can organise a host of full-day or half-day tours, including the Wednesday Malatapay market, dolphin watching, Twin Lakes and Mt Kanlaon.

Even though the out-of-town resorts offer a more ambient place to stay and dive, if you are short on time drop into **Scuba Ventures** (% 0917 314 3402; Hibbard Ave), where PADI staff instructor Snoopy can arrange diving on any of the surrounding reefs, including Apo Island (from P3000).

SLEEPING

Most would agree that the place to be is Rizal Blvd, or as close to it as you can get.

Budget

Budget rooms have private cold-water bathroom unless otherwise noted.

Vintage Inn (% 225 1076, 422 9106; Legaspi St; s/d with fan P220/330, with air-con & hot water from P330/495) Opposite the market, this is an excellent budget option. It has basic, clean rooms, is a short walk from Rizal Blvd, and feels safe and well set up.

OK Pensionne House (% 225 5925; Santa Rosa St; d with fan/air-con from P275/440) A little out of the way, this place is just what it says it is: OK. It has an enormous variety of rooms – the more expensive (P550 and up) are a big step up

from the cheapies in terms of quality. There's an attached Internet café (P20 per hour).

Private Garden Resort (☎ 225 0658; www.privategardenresort.com; Noreco Rd, Mangnao; d with fan & shared bathroom P400, r with hot-water bathroom, cable TV & fan/air-con P650/900) **Something different.** This laid-back expat refuge has scuba instruction in a variety of languages (open-water diving certificate USS\$330), motorbike rental (P250 to P800 per day), pool tables and table tennis. Or you can just lounge on the porch with the rest. They claim to have the best burgers and Mexican in town (from P150). It's near the coast, though not on the beach, out of the hullabaloo of the city. Head 3km south from town and turn left at the Shell service station (P7 by tricycle).

Harold's Mansion Tourist Inn (☎ 225 8000; haroldsmansion@yahoo.com; 205 Hibbard Ave; s/d with fan P300/385, with air-con, hot water & cable TV P495/605) Looks less like a mansion and more like a giant pink cake. It's a 10-minute walk from the main shopping area, but it does have very clean, well-priced rooms and free airport pick-up.

Midrange

Midrange rooms have private hot-water bathroom, air-con and cable TV, and rates include breakfast.

La Residencia al Mar (☎ 225 7100; lresidencia_ygh@yahoo.com; Rizal Blvd; s/d from P1150/1265; a) A cosy and tastefully renovated Spanish villa with an unbeatable position. The building has all original timbers and fittings. Rooms come with all the mod-cons and the dearer rooms have balconies and great water views. Don Atilano restaurant is on the ground floor.

Honeycomb Tourists Inn (☎ 225 1181/2; Rizal Blvd; s/d from P580/900; a) Like La Residencia al Mar, this is a renovated Spanish villa. Though not as plush, it still has spotless rooms – the ones with views are superb value. The drawback is noise from Honeycomb's own Café Medina downstairs and Why Not next door.

Plaza Maria Luisa (☎ 225 3267; plazamar@mozcom.com; Legaspi St; s/d from P700/900; a) Overlooking the attractive Quezon Park, this very well-located business hotel is often full. Staff are polite and very helpful, though the fawn and mint-green colour scheme looks like it was inspired by an ice cream. There is a good travel agency within the hotel.

Worldview Pension Plaza (☎ 225 4110; Perdices St; s/d from P550/750; a) A business hotel on busy Perdices St. Rooms are plain with all the mod-cons, and the staff is professional. The room tariff includes a Filipino breakfast.

EATING

Chin Loong Restaurant (☎ 422 6933, 225 4491; cnr San José St & Rizal Blvd; meals from P80) Offers big, cheap servings of tasty Filipino-Chinese food, and great service. Try the 'special dinner' if you're hungry – bird's-nest soup, fried rice, chop suey, two mains and a soft drink (P135).

Why Not (☎ 225 4488; Rizal Blvd; meals around P220; h 6am-2am) It's a one-stop-shop at Why Not. Hands down the most popular day-and-night haunt for tourists and expats, it includes a Swiss deli, diner, bar, pool hall, Internet café and disco.

Coco Amigos (☎ 226 1207; Rizal Blvd; meals from P150) Coco's combination of a harbourfront location, festive colour scheme and tame Mexican food has seen it rival Why Not for popularity with foreign clientele. It has a good vegetarian selection.

Cafe Memento (Silliman Ave; espresso from P25) A humble, bohemian café serving coffee and light meals. Outside tables have glimpses of the harbour.

Persian Palace (☎ 422 8165; San Juan St; meals P90-180; h 11am-11pm) People in need of a veggie fix flock to this Indian/Middle Eastern chain restaurant.

An unpromising stretch of road brings you to a surprisingly upscale string of seafood restaurants overlooking the harbour, including **Lab-as Seafood Restaurant** (☎ 225 3536; Flores St; meals around P250).

One of the cheapest food options is the nightly food stalls at the top end of Rizal Blvd, which serve tempura fish and squid-balls with sweet chilli sauce (P3 per stick).

ENTERTAINMENT

Everyone heads for **Why Not disco** (Rizal Blvd; entry P70; h 9pm-late), which warms up around 10pm when the uni students start to pour in, closely followed by the expats. It has a dance floor, lounge area and pool tables.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Air Philippines has two flights daily from Dumaguete to Manila (one hour). Cebu Pacific does the same flight once daily.

Boat

At the pier, you'll find the offices of **OceanJet** (☎ 226 1085), **Delta Fast Ferry** (☎ 420 1111), **Cokaliong Shipping** (☎ 225 3588), **George & Peter Lines** (☎ 225 2345) and **Montenegro Shipping** (☎ 422 3632).

The SuperCat fastcraft suspended all services from Dumaguete in 2005. There were plans to recommence services some time in 2006.

Cokaliong Shipping, OceanJet and George & Peter Lines all service the Cebu City–Dumaguete route. See the Cebu Ferries table, p238.

The quickest, cheapest way to get to Cebu Island – particularly Moalboal – from Dumaguete is via the Negros port of Tampi, 45 minutes from Dumaguete by bus (P15), where boats go to and from Bato on Cebu (P47, 20 minutes) all day.

SuperFerry (☎ 225 0734) has a weekly service to Bacolod, Negros Occidental (P180, 10 to 12 hours) and Iligan, Mindanao (P560, six hours). It also has three services a week to Manila (P1405, 36 hours).

OceanJet has a daily fastcraft service to Tagbilaran, Bohol (P520, 1½ hours).

George & Peter Lines has a daily morning boat to Dapitan, Mindanao (P130, four hours). Cokaliong goes to Dapitan most mornings (P185, 3½ hours).

Delta Fast Ferry travels to Siquijor town (P150, one hour) four times daily.

Montenegro sails to Larena (P140, 2½ hours) daily.

Bus & Jeepney

The **Ceres Bus Liner terminal** (South Rd) is a short tricycle ride from town (P5). It services routes both north and south, including Zamboanguita (P25, 30 minutes) and Bais City (P40, one hour).

There is a smaller bus terminal next to the pier that does short hauls north, including Bais City (P30, 1¼ hours), Tampi (P15, 45 minutes) and Cambolotot (for Twin Lakes; P15, 30 minutes). There is also a jeepney stand on the corner of Real St and V Locsin St that services the same routes.

For buses between Dumaguete and Bacolod, see p286.

GETTING AROUND

A tricycle into town from Dumaguete airport costs around P8. There are tricycles

everywhere and they charge P5 for trips around town – being a tourist, however, you should settle the price clearly before you take off. For slightly longer trips, you might want to offer P8 to P10.

Raymart Motorcycles (☎ 247 4114, 0910 247 4114; Santa Rosa St) rents out motorcycles for around P450 per day.

Twin Lakes National Park

About 20km northwest of Dumaguete, the twin crater lakes of Balinsasayao and Danao offer some of the most scenic hiking in the Visayas. The area is virgin forest and full of wildlife, from monkeys to rare orchids. It's also the traditional home of the indigenous Bukidnon people. If you want information on the park, or to arrange a guide, inquire at the municipal building on the highway in the centre of Sibulan. Tour groups in Dumaguete run trips to Twin Lakes (p277), as does Planet Action (p256).

The entry point for the 15km track to Twin Lakes is at Cambalotot on the coastal road. A hubel-hubel to the lake from here will cost P150. To get to Cambalotot from Dumaguete, catch one of several daily buses from the north bus terminal (P15) or a jeepney from Real St.

Bais City

☎ 035 / pop 68,115

About 40km north of Dumaguete, Bais is one of the country's top spots for **dolphin and whale watching**. More species of cetacean (including killer whales) have been seen in Tañon Strait's waters, separating Negros and Cebu, than anywhere else in the Visayas.

While whale sightings are not to be depended upon, especially outside of their March-to-October migration season, spinner dolphins are quite common throughout the year. **Bais City tourism office** (☎ 541 5161; city plaza) can organise a boat – P2500 for a 15-seater boat, P3000 for a 20-seater – as can most resorts.

If you don't have the time or money for a boat, there is a **whale-watching wharf** located at Barangay Capistuhan (P20 by tricycle from the plaza).

If the whales are a no-show, Plan B is a 7km-long sandbar stuck out in the middle of the sea that boats can take you to frolic on.

Plan C is **bird-watching**. The bay is home to several mangrove-fringed islands making

up a bird sanctuary, and the city's residents have built a network of raised walkways through the mangrove forests from which you can view the birds.

One of the finest hotels in Negros is the historical **La Planta Hotel** (% 541 5755, % /fax 541 5756; Mabini St; d P850-1050; a s). This 1910 landmark has large, bright, luxury twins and doubles with air-con, hot water, telephone and cable TV. The hotel has a wonderfully antique international restaurant (meals P75 to P150) – take the time to study the photos and memorabilia around the walls while you wait for your food.

Guihulngan

% 035 / pop 10,273

It's a long trip to little Guihulngan (gee-ool-nyan). By bus it's three hours from Dumaguete (P100) or 4½ hours from Bacolod (P155). Or you can take the ferry from remote Tangil, on the west coast of Cebu (P50, 1½ hours, five services daily). However you get here, if you're in the market for simple – make that Spartan – accommodation and dirt-cheap diving, you've come to the right place.

Run by Aussie 'Mr Keith', **Dive Negros** (% 0915 255 3663; www.divenegros.com; nipa hut with shared bathroom P150) is about 15 minutes past the township, on the National Hwy. It is a plain concrete compound with a breakwater and dive centre, and is within easy reach of some prime dive sites in the Tañon Strait, including **Hilaitan marine sanctuary**. Fun dives go for US\$16, and an open-water course for US\$200.

Valencia

% 035 / pop 24,365

If you head 6km southeast from Dumaguete along a tree-lined road you'll find yourself at the foot of **Mt Talinis** (which means 'pointed'). The mountain's twin peaks are also evocatively known as **Cuernos de Negros** (Horns of Negros). Valencia is a clean and leafy town with a large, grassed central square. About 2km from the town centre, in a baryo called **Tejeros** (te-heh-ro) is **Banica Valley**, a richly forested area ideal for swimming, hiking and overnight stays.

Four kilometres from Valencia are the glorious, 30m **Casaroro Falls** (admission P10), which are most refreshing after the climb down the 335 steps to get to them. The best

way to get to the falls – other than walking – is to hire a hubel-hubel from the market to take you to the steps (P100). Be warned, though, the last few hundred metres of the ride are extremely rough and treacherous.

SLEEPING & EATING

Forest Camp (% 423 4017, % /fax 225 2991; www.geocities.com/campforest; huts P1000; s) With **Mt Talinis** towering overhead and set on a choice stretch of river, **Forrest Camp** has three landscaped pools and one natural one. The stylish native-style huts have fan and private cold-water bathroom, and Filipino food, including delicious 'native chicken' (P150), is available at a small restaurant. There's also a **camping ground** (P150 per person) and guided treks to **Casaroro Falls** (P200, 1½ hours return) and to **Lake Nailig** (P600, six to seven hours), near the top of **Mt Talinis**, where there is a cottage available with floor mats (P50 per person).

For nonguests, swimming and sightseeing at **Forest Camp** costs P60/20 per adult/child.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Jeepneys run all day between Dumaguete and Valencia (P9, 15 minutes). You can hire a hubel-hubel from Valencia to **Banica Valley** or **Forest Camp** for about P20.

Dauin

% 035 / pop 5867

Dauin (da-win) is the largest of the southern towns and the administrative guardian of the beautiful divers' haven of **Apo** (opposite). There is a pleasant brown-sand beach and good snorkelling over the drop-off about 20m out from shore. About 1km south of **Dauin** is the **Marine Reserve of Masaplod Norte**.

This is a town that takes its diving very seriously.

SLEEPING & EATING

All the places to stay in **Dauin** are upper-midrange dive resorts: air-con, cable TV, hot water, breakfasts, an international restaurant, airport transfers and free shuttles to **Dumaguete** are all pretty much standard. Check out their websites for accommodation-and-dive packages.

Pura Vida Beach & Dive Resort (% 425 2284; s US\$31-45, d US\$36-50; a s) Affiliated with the Philippines-wide dive company **Sea**

Explorers (www.sea-explorers.com), this is a top-quality dive resort and health spa.

Atlantis Dive Resort (% 424 0578; www.atlantis-hotel.com; s/d from US\$45/55; a s) The sister resort of the luxurious **Atlantis Beach Resort** in **Puerto Galera**, this keeps to the same high standards. It has particularly lush gardens and a world-class kitchen (meals P250 and up).

El Dorado Beach Resort (% 425 2274; www.eldorado-beachresort.com; r US\$26-82; a s) Stock-standard dive resort on a deep lot with comfortable, Spanish mission-style rooms.

Malatapay

% 035

Malatapay is best known by tourists for its huge and lively market, where every Wednesday morning villagers, fishermen and **Bukidnon** tribespeople can be found loudly bartering their goods and feasting on *lechon*.

Malatapay is also known for being the departure point for **Apo Island**. Charter boats for **Apo** (P1000, 30 minutes, maximum five people) leave from the beach in front of the market.

Sick of dive resorts? Low-key, friendly **Malatapay Beach Resort** (% 426 1087, 0918 640 9467; www.negrosbeach.com; cottages from P650) has a great little brown-sand beach, and that's where the emphasis is – although they *do* do diving as well (**Apo** dive trips without/with equipment P2200/2700). The cheaper of the comfy cottages share a cold-water bathroom with another cottage, while the beachside ones have a private cold-water bathroom. The food (meals around P150) is fresh and tasty all day long.

Apo Island

% 035 / pop 684

Rugged and volcanic, the little 72-hectare island of **Apo** is fast becoming known for having some of the best diving in the Philippines. And if that's not enough for you, there are also some gorgeous white-sand beaches and great short walks. The island's **fiesta** is held 4 to 5 April.

The **Apo Island Marine Reserve & Fish Sanctuary** (part of the **Negros Oriental Marine Conservation Park**), a 15,000-sq-m protected area in the southeastern corner, is one of the most successful and best-run marine reserves in the Philippines. It con-

tains a vital marine breeding ground and is a favourite site among divers. A diving/snorkelling entrance fee of P200/100 goes towards maintenance of the sanctuary.

SLEEPING & EATING

Liberty's (% 0921 331 6325, 0920 238 5704; www.apoisland.com; dm P300, r P800-1600) Perched high above the beach and village, this is the place that most divers head for. **Paul's Diving** offers top instruction (open-water course US\$315), which is one attraction, but the friendly, laid-back atmosphere and wide range of well-designed rooms with excellent views are equally as memorable. The food (pizza and pasta around P220) is as excellent and varied. Ring ahead for transfers from **Malatapay** (P200), and **Dumaguete** (P500).

Apo Island Beach Resort (% 035-422 9820 in Dumaguete; paradise@glinesx.com.ph; dm P400, r/cottages from P1200/1800) Claims the best white sandy beach and completes the package with a quiet resort atmosphere. Stylish Spanish mission rooms and cottages have fan and private cold-water bathroom. The simple menu has good Filipino food with some international additions (P120 to P200). Dive guiding (but no instruction) is offered. The phone number above is for **Paradise Travel** in **Dumaguete**; all bookings are through this agency.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Apo Island is about 25km south of **Dumaguete**. The departure point is from **Malatapay Beach**, where you must charter a boat (P1000, 30 minutes, maximum five people). Try to go with a group so you can split the fare.

Bonbonon

% 035

Southwest of **Malatapay**, and accessed by a 9km dirt road and 108 steps (we counted), humble little **Kookoo's Nest Beach Cottages** (% 0919 695 8085; www.kookoosnest.com.ph; huts with shared/private bathroom from P350/450) vies as the most isolated resort in **Negros**. It is run by an entertaining English couple, **Jamie** and **Nikki**, and situated on a tiny white-sand cove, with four simple bamboo huts perched above the water's edge. The restaurant and dive centre are equally simple and idyllic. Activities include day trips to **Apo Island** (P1500, maximum four people) and diving (with equipment US\$20).

It's P150 to get here from Zamboanguita by hubel-hubel, or management will pick you up from Mayabon Crossing on the highway for P400.

NEGROS OCCIDENTAL

The chief attractions of the Occident are the resorts on the flanks of Mt Kanlaon, the 'living museums' of Silay, and the stunning, white-sand retreats around Sipalay. The north of the province is the heartland of Negros' sugar-growing industry.

Bacolod

☎ 034 / pop 429,076

With an airport, a sea port and a host of bus and jeepney terminals, Bacolod is little more than a transport hub to most travellers. But if you have the time, it does have a couple of sights you can see inside of a day.

ORIENTATION

The main road through town is busy Lacson St, off which you'll find numerous hotels, shopping plazas and restaurants, as well as jeepneys to ferry you up and down town.

Like many cities, Bacolod has not one but several centres. Downtown is centred on the city plaza, which is surrounded by shops, malls and a market, and guarded by the stately San Sebastian Cathedral. The dividing line between downtown and uptown is Burgos St. Uptown is home to the Provincial Capitol, and Bacolod's better shops, restaurants and hotels.

A bar and Internet café zone has sprung up between the University of St La Salle and 21st St. Near the airport, about 3km from downtown Bacolod, is a casino and nightlife zone called Goldenfield Commercial Complex.

INFORMATION

There's a **tourist information office** (☎ 435 1001; San Juan St) opposite the public plaza which has a few brochures. Other tourism-related queries can be taken to the **Negros Occidental Tourism Center** (☎ 433 2515; Provincial Capitol Bldg).

The **PNB main branch** (Lacson St) and **Landbank main branch** (Gatuslao St) have ATMs (transaction limit P20,000 and P30,000, respectively) and can change foreign currencies.

The **post office** (Gatuslao St) is near the intersection with Burgos St. The **police station** (San Juan St) is opposite the City Plaza.

There are some small **bookshops** (La Salle Ave) opposite University St La Salle.

Wherever you are in town, Internet cafés are never far away, especially if you're near the university area. For bar and pool tables thrown in, visit the cafés on the east side of 21st St; see p285. Rates are P20 to P25 per hour.

SIGHTS

In spite of a dire economic climate, Bacolod is home to two of the more impressive not-for-profit enterprises in the Visayas – a testament to drive and civic-mindedness of the Negrenese. They are to be found in the streets surrounding the neoclassical **Provincial Capitol Building**, which has a forecourt that features modern sculptures and a large fish pond.

The lovingly curated **Negros Museum** (☎ 434 5552; Gatuslao St; adult/child P40/20; 11 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) houses displays that focus on the island's rich history, from Spanish missions to cane plantations and revolution. Dominating the main exhibition hall are the sugar-hauling *Iron Dinosaur* steam engine and a *lorcha*, a traditional boat, which is laden with a cargo of historical artefacts. The museum also has a small art gallery and café.

A zoo with a difference, the **Biodiversity Conservation Center** (☎ /fax 433 9234; www.nfeci.org; South Capitol Rd; entry by donation; 11 9am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) is a 'wildlife rescue and captive breeding centre' that seeks to preserve endangered animals endemic to Negros. Run by the Negros Forests & Ecological Foundation and staffed by volunteers, it houses about 15 different species, including deer, wildcats and birds of prey. Now that only 3% of the island's original forest-cover remains, this could well be one of the most precious pieces of land in the Philippines.

ACTIVITIES

Volcano enthusiasts wishing to trek in nearby Mt Kanlaon National Park (p287) must apply in Bacolod for permits. The **Office of the Park Superintendent** (☎ /fax 433 3813; off Gatuslao St) is located behind the Department of Environment & Natural Resources (DENR), across the road from the Negros Museum.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

On the weekend nearest to 19 October each year, the city goes joyfully crazy with the **MassKara Festival** ('masskara' means 'many

faces'), with participants wearing elaborate smiley masks and dancing in the streets.

SLEEPING

If you want to be close to the swankiest bars and restaurants, and as far from the dust and grime as you can get, the place to stay is uptown. On the other hand, downtown is a lot livelier (during the day at least) and does have its share of good accommodation.

Budget

Unless otherwise mentioned, all rooms have a private cold-water bathroom.

Pension Bacolod (☎ 433 3377; fax 434 7055; 11th St; s/d with fan & shared bathroom P145/205, with fan & private bathroom P210/270, with air-con & private bathroom P370/460) On refreshingly quiet and peaceful 11th St, this well-run place offers excellent value for money with 76 reasonably sized, well-kept rooms. Little wonder that it's often fully booked.

Jacqueline's Pension Apartelle (☎ 709 8587; 13th St; d with fan/air-con from P250/450) If your preference is to stay uptown and Pension Bacolod is full, gloomy Jacqueline's has fairly shabby rooms on a residential street nearby.

Las Rocas Hotel (☎ 431 7288; Gatuslao St; s/d with fan P185/295, s/d with air-con P350/500) Accessed from the street by a flight of wooden stairs, the quaintly charming Las Rocas Hotel is a friendly, family-run place with reasonably clean, good-value rooms.

Check Inn (☎ 432 3755; Pension Arcard, Luzuriaga St; s/d P600/750; a) This modest downtown chain hotel offers affordable comforts and free use of a gym.

Bascon Hotel (☎ 435 4071; Gonzaga St; s/d from P350/450) A grimy part of town but a clinically spotless, bottom-range business hotel. Rooms have cable TV and hot water.

Midrange

All midrange hotels have hot-water bathroom, air-con, cable TV and telephone as standard, as well as room service and reasonable on-site restaurants. Although generally geared to business travellers, they're a good deal for all tourists.

Royal Am Rei (☎ 433 8881/84; fax 433 0222; 13th St; r from P1000; a) The best thing going for the Royal Am Rei is its quiet, uptown location. Designed like a minimall with rooms facing into a central atrium, it has rooms that are tarted up with lace and chiffon.

Bacolod Pension Plaza (☎ 433 4547; fax 433 2203; Cuadra St; r P550-890; a) Has comfy rooms and a handy downtown location. It lacks the executive slick of other midrangers but the 4th-floor 'budget saver' room is excellent value.

Hotel Alhambra (☎ 433 4021/23; cnr Loocsin & Gato Sts; r from P795; a) More character than your average business hotel. Alhambra may be a touch old-world in appearance, but it's still run to modern standards.

King's Hotel (☎ 434 4500/4600; fax 433 0576; Gatuslao St; d P630-1200; a) Has smallish rooms that are otherwise reasonable value for a central location.

Top End

L'Fisher Hotel (☎ 433 3731/39; lfisher@globelines.com.ph; cnr 14th & Lacson Sts; s/d from P2500/3000; s) In the heart of uptown, this is Bacolod's most ritzy hotel – all things being relative. Rooms are 'plush motel', with all the usual trappings. The hotel's 24-hour Café Marinero looks out over a small swimming pool.

Bacolod Convention Plaza Hotel (☎ 434 4551; bcphotel@mozcom.com; cnr Magsaysay Ave & Lacson St; s/d from P2000/2400; s) On the airport side of town, about five minutes' drive from the Goldenfield Complex, it has a huge lobby (with an ATM) reminiscent of an arrivals terminal, as well as an international restaurant, tennis courts and two swimming pools on a big lawn. Slightly careworn rooms are really only midrange quality.

EATING

If you are still excited by barbecue chicken when you reach Bacolod, you're in luck – the night-time streets are full of it.

El Camino (San Sebastian St; meals P50-75; 11 7am-midnight) A chain of hawker-style restaurants, and a favourite with locals. It's a noisy, busy, open-air, barbecue-o-rama. The second branch is on the corner of Burgos and Gatuslao Sts.

Plaza Mart Food Court (Araneta St, near City Plaza; 11 8am-7pm) A busy place dishing out all varieties of meals, shakes and cakes all day.

Business Inn restaurant (☎ 433 8877; dishes P100-200; 28 Lacson St; 11 24hr) There's a dire shortage of good restaurants in the downtown area, but Business Inn comes to the rescue. Good-value Filipino and Western meals – including American breakfasts (P175), pancakes (P50) and a decent salad range (P60 to P120) – are served in a stylish brasserie in the foyer.



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Inaka Japanese Restaurant & Sushi Bar (☎ 434 4045; cnr 21st & Lacson Sts; meals P120-300; 10am-2pm & 5.30-10pm Tue-Sun) The smaller and more intimate of Bacolod's two Japanese offerings, Inaka has excellent food and is well worth the extra pesos. It's right in the heart of the bar district of 21st St. The mixed tempura bento box is excellent value at P120.

Kaisei Japanese Restaurant (☎ 434 7787; cnr 10th & Lacson Sts; set menus P100-200, meals P160-220; 11am-2pm & 6-9.30pm) A popular, hangar-sized Japanese eatery, it has well-priced set menus and very good à la carte.

Opposite Mayfair Plaza, on Lacson St, you'll find **Bo's Coffee Shop** for espresso and cakes, and **KraU Thai Restaurant** (☎ 434 7991; meals around P150), a fancy chain restaurant with what we'd characterise as 'Thai-inspired' dishes.

ENTERTAINMENT

The area from 21st St to La Salle Ave is a university precinct; the streets are full of Internet cafés, cheap eateries and humble little bars.

21 Bar (cnr 21st & Lacson Sts) A hardy perennial in the ever-changing 21st St scene. It's one of more stylish and adult bars in the university district, though San Migs are still reasonable value at P35. There are DJs most nights and live music on weekends.

Bars on and around 21st St go in and out of business faster than anyone can keep up. We suggest you simply jump out at the corner of 21st and Lacson Sts and see what takes your fancy. Lively venues when we were there included **Reptiles** and **Maravia**, in the blocks east of Lacson St Bar, and **Draft sports bar** (with live sports telecasts), 50m west of the corner of Lacson and 21st Sts, around the corner from 21 Bar.

At the other end of town, the seedy **Goldenfield Commercial Complex** is aimed at a more mature – make that *older* – crowd. Apart from the Casino Filipino, there are several restaurants, pool halls, discos and a 10-pin bowling centre. If Vegas is sequined Elvis, then Goldenfield is a very poor impersonator of sequined Elvis: the videoke area. It's a P60 taxi ride from the Capitol area.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air
Philippine Airlines (PAL) and Cebu Pacific fly to Cebu City (30 minutes) twice daily.

Cebu Pacific, Air Philippines and PAL have several flights daily to Manila (one hour).

Boat

The Reclamation Port is a P10 tricycle ride from the City Plaza and services nationwide operators **SuperCat** (☎ 434 2350/1; www.supercat.com.ph) and **SuperFerry** (☎ 435 4965; www.superferry.com.ph) and Negros-Panay specialists **MV Weesam Express** (☎ 433 9125), **Jomaila Shipping** (☎ 434 2542) and **Millennium Shipping** (☎ 433 9360).

For SuperFerry and SuperCat tickets, look out for Aboitiz (also called 2Go) ticketing offices, which are scattered around the city.

Banago Wharf – P20 by jeepney or P120 by cab – and services **Negros Navigation** (☎ 441 0652/3; www.negrosnavigation.ph).

The most popular route from Negros to Panay is Bacolod-Iloilo. Smooth and efficient SuperCat fastcraft run four times daily to Iloilo (P240, one hour), from 6am to 3.30pm. Fastcraft **MV Weesam** sails four times daily (P250, one hour), Millennium

Shipping sails twice daily (P110, three hours), and Jomalia Shipping sails twice daily to Dumangas (P80, 1½ hours), a little north of Iloilo. Negros Navigation has three weekly ferry services to Iloilo (P115, two hours).

SuperFerry has a weekly service to Dumaguete (P180, 10 to 12 hours).

From Bacolod to Mindanao, there are services to Ozamis, Iligan and Cagayan de Oro. Ozamis is served by Negros Navigation (P1465, 21 hours, one a week), as is Iligan (P1505, 16½ hours, one a week). Cagayan de Oro is served by SuperFerry (P1505, 16½ hours, four weekly).

SuperFerry has five services a week to Manila (P1685, 19 hours). Negros Navigation has a daily service to Manila (P1685, 19 hours).

Bus & Jeepney

The main bus company is Ceres Bus Liner. For destinations north of Bacolod (and Cebu) phone the north terminal (☎ 434 2387); for destinations south of Bacolod (including San Carlos) phone the south terminal (☎ 433 4993). The stations for other bus lines are opposite both Ceres terminals. Air-con buses are about 30% dearer.

The shortest trip between Bacolod and Dumaguete (P184, five to six hours) is via Mabinay – buses leave every 30 minutes all day. Ceres Bus Liner also runs trips to Cebu City, with a ferry leg between San Carlos and Toledo (P300, 11 hours).

A plethora of bus lines travel the coastal route between Bacolod and San Carlos (P150, four hours), stopping or terminating at towns along the way, including Cadiz (P45, 1½ hours) and Sagay (P60, two hours), which have boat services to Bantayan Island. South-bound bus stops include La Carlota (P32, one hour), Ilog (P65, 2½ hours) and Sipalay (P145, 4½ hours).

Many jeepneys service the short-haul routes. Jeepneys for La Carlota (P25, 1¼ hours) depart from the SDL Terminal in Libertad St. Jeepneys for Ma-ao (P20, 30 minutes) and Mambucal (P20, 45 minutes) are stationed behind the market between Libertad St and Lizares Ave.

GETTING AROUND

A taxi from the airport to the city centre shouldn't cost more than P60. You can also catch a jeepney marked 'Libertad' (P20).

Note that a new airport for Bacolod was under construction at the time of research. It will be located 15km from Bacolod, just east of Silay, and should open in 2008.

A taxi between downtown Bacolod and the Goldenfield Commercial Complex should cost around P50.

To get to the city centre by jeepney from the north or south bus terminal take a 'Shopping' jeepney to Lacson St (P5); from there, you can catch a north-south jeepney marked 'Bata' to your hotel (around P5).

Around Bacolod

On the highway, 3km south of the small city of Bago, is the pirate-themed Jewel's Restaurant (☎ 034-461 1422; most fish per 100g from P100). A seafood and recreational compound popular with families and business groups, this place has a 1-hectare lagoon brimming with paddle boats and tilapia (P30 per 100g). At the entrance, you can pay P10 for a fishing rod and worms. If all else fails, there's a plush, convention centre-style restaurant serving seafood from huge aquariums. Jeepneys and buses pass here on the way to and from Bacolod (P12, 45 minutes).

Near here is a turn-off that takes you 4km (jeepney P5) to the tiny town of Pulupandan. From Pulupandan pier, three daily services depart between 8.30am to noon bound for Suclaran on Guimaras (P40, 40 minutes).

La Carlota

☎ 034 / pop 56,408

La Carlota lies about 45km south of Bacolod, at the base of Mt Kanlaon. The city is famous for fiestas, and is well known among nature lovers as an alternative to Mambucal as a starting point for hikes into Mt Kanlaon National Park (opposite).

La Carlota's annual *Kabankalan Sinulog* is a wild street party held on the second Sunday in January. Dancers are daubed in black in imitation of the island's Negrito people, and a feast is held in honour of the child Jesus. On the Sunday nearest 1 May, the city holds its annual *Pasalamat Festival*, or *Festival of Light*. A fun-filled, three-day thanksgiving ritual to honour the year's harvest, it has a Mardi Gras atmosphere, with dazzling native costumes and huge parade floats.

The imposing, fortress-style *Church of Our Lady of Peace*, in the town centre, is one of the country's best examples of Romanesque

architecture. Another attraction is the La Carlota Sugar Central sugar mill. For the latest information about visiting the mill, contact the Bacolod tourism office (☎ 433 2515).

In La Carlota you'll find only basic, cheerless accommodation. If you need a place for the night, ask a tricycle driver to take you to CT Comfort Inn (☎ 460 2690; tw with shared bathroom P400), behind the market. Otherwise, head for one of the resorts in the foothills of Mt Kanlaon (right).

Jeepneys marked 'La Carlota' head off from Bacolod (P25, 1¼ hour) throughout the day, as do buses (P32, one hour). Jeepneys to Guintubdan, in Mt Kanlaon National Park, depart from in front of the market (P20, 45 minutes).

Mt Kanlaon National Park

With its dense forest and volcanic crowning glory, the 25,000-hectare Mt Kanlaon National Park is popular with hikers and bird-watchers. The park's central highlands are rich in wildlife, including the perilously rare bleeding-heart pigeon and Philippine spotted deer, and several species of orchid.

Because of the risks involved, hiking to the summit of the active volcano is a necessarily complicated business.

INFORMATION

No permits are needed to visit any of the resorts in the mountain's foothills. However if you wish to hike up the volcano, you *must* obtain a permit (P300) from the Bacolod-based Office of the Park Superintendent (☎ /fax 034-433 3813; off Gatuslao St). This is for your own safety, as well as for preservation of the park environment. Only a limited number of hikers are permitted to visit the park each year and the Park Superintendent manages the waiting list. You will need to give at least a month's notice to ensure you get a place. The climbing season is March to May and October to December.

Trekking to the summit takes from one to two days, return. There are three entrance stations to the summit: Murcia, Guintubdan and Canlaon. The first is said to be the most scenic. Trekkers wanting to walk to the summit will need to organise a guide (P500 per day, maximum nine trekkers per guide) with the Park Superintendent or with the Guintubdan resorts. Porters cost an additional P500 per day. For a slicker package

with all equipment and food included, contact Planet Action (see p256).

The Park Superintendent sometimes evacuates the mountain and enforces a clearance zone around its base if its daily monitoring suggests any threat of volcanic eruption.

SLEEPING & EATING

The resorts of Mt Kanlaon are scattered around its eastern flanks.

Guintubdan

High on the slopes of Mt Kanlaon, the wonderfully cool, ferny barangay of Guintubdan is home to numerous rooster farms (so much for the serenity) and two resorts owned by La Carlota and Bago cities, respectively. Both are a 45-minute jeepney ride from La Carlota (P20). From either resort, guides can take you on excellent day-trips to any of the seven nearby waterfalls (P100). Entrance fees for casual visitors are P20/10 per adult/child.

Guintubdan Visitor's Center (☎ La Carlota mayor's office 460 2459; r from P400, camping for 6-person tent P150) This impressive stone building has basic clean rooms with cold-water bathroom, and a communal area with magnificent views. You'll have to bring your own food and use the kitchen, or the staff can cook 'native chicken' for P350, good for four.

Raphael Salas Nature Park (☎ 0927 276 927; dm P100, r with private bathroom P500) A mere 200m up the road from Guintubdan Visitor's Center, Raphael Salas offers more of the same. The accommodation is a little more Spartan but the views are a little better, so take your pick. Full board – breakfast, lunch and dinner – goes for P400 per day.

Ma-ao

The forested hillsides around Ma-ao contain two lush mountain resorts. To get to them, catch a jeepney to Ma-ao from Bago (P15, 45 minutes) or from Bacolod (P30, 1½ hours). From Ma-ao, take a tricycle to either Buenos Aires Mountain Resort or Kipot Twin Falls (P150, 30 minutes), or you can take a taxi direct from Bacolod (P500, 1½ hours).

Buenos Aires Mountain Resort (☎ 461 0540/0164; bago@lasaltech.com; dm P100, cottages from P300, r with air-con P1000; a s) Built in the 1930s, this gorgeous mountain resort situated by a river is famous for having housed President Quezon when he hid from the Japanese

during WWII. There is a restaurant on site (meals around P100). It's best visited on weekdays, when you can enjoy the quiet of the forest surrounds.

Kipot Summer Resort (‰ mayor's office Bago City 461 0164; bago@lasalatech.com; cottage P300) More humble and secluded than the neighbouring Buenos Aires resort, Kipot – which takes its name from the nearby Kipot Twin Falls – has four simple, native-style cottages. Be sure to book ahead and bring your own food.

Mambucal

Easily reached from Bacolod by jeepney (P20, 45 minutes), the popular resort village of Mambucal makes for a diverting day trip out of town. The entrance fee for casual visitors is P30/10 per adult/child.

Mambucal Mountain Resort (‰ 433 8887, 703 0009, 710 0344; cottage P1000, r P600; ☞) Mambucal resort is a 24-hectare pleasure park popular with family groups: hence it's not a place for peace and quiet. It has sulphur springs, short trails, a flying fox, an artificial lagoon and swimming pools. Accommodation is a choice between family cottages that, judging from the people lounging on their verandas, sleep up to 20 at a time, and a slightly lower-density tourist lodge. On-site restaurant stalls sell tasty barbecued meals for around P100.

Silay

‰ 034 / pop 107,722

On the face of it, Silay, about 14km north of Bacolod, is just another grimy, hard-scrabble town. Who would suspect that it once wore the appellation 'the Paris of Negros'? Such are the fortunes of sugar.

Silay first tasted sweet success when a French resident planted sugarcane in the 1850s, and its pier swiftly became an international port of call. Silay's golden age was between 1880 and 1930, when its 31 recognised 'ancestral homes' were built. The haciendas of Silay were bastions of refinement and privilege, and in the early 1900s the town became *the* place for European musicians and artists to hang out. But it wasn't to last. The combination of growth in nearby Bacolod, damage wrought in WWII, and the development of the sugar industry overseas resulted in a decline in Silay's cultural and industrial activity.

INFORMATION

The staff at Silay's **tourist office** (‰ 495 5145/0061; fax 495 0587; Green House, Plaridel St; 11 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) are extremely helpful. There are PNB and BPI banks in town: **BPI** (cnr J Pitong Ledesma St & National Rd) **PNB** (National Rd)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

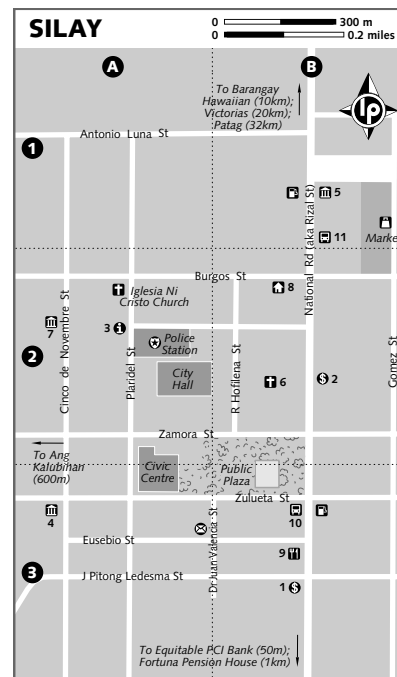
Silay's past has been preserved in the form of three grand ancestral homes, providing a glimpse of vanished splendour. Two are run as museums, and one is still occupied.

Built in 1908, **Bernardino Jalandoni Ancestral House** (‰ 495 5093; National Rd; adult/child P30/20; 11 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is affectionately known as 'The Pink House'. Apart from the paint job, the building is said to be virtually unchanged from the days when it was home to the Jalandoni family. On display are Japanese government banknotes from the days of occupation, a 1907 Steinway piano and dozens of Ken and Barbie dolls in various historical costumes. The furniture and *objets d'art* on the 2nd floor are the best preserved and most tastefully displayed of the historical items in the two museums.

Also known as the Victor Gaston Ancestral Home, **Balay Negrenese Museum** (‰ 495 4916; Cinco de Noviembre St; adult/child P30/10; 11 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a beautiful house built of balayong hardwood in 1901. Victor's father, Yves Leopold Germain Gaston, is credited with being the first to cultivate sugarcane commercially in the region. The house has been painstakingly restored, and furnished with period pieces donated by locals. The bevelled-glass windows and Chinese-carved lattice work are original.

The stately **Hofileña Ancestral Home** (‰ 495 4561; Cinco de Noviembre St; visits by appointment with owner) contains one of the Philippines' finest art collections, as well as antiques belonging to one of Silay's principal families, the Hofileña family. The house is now owned by the charismatic and loquacious Ramon Hofileña, a tireless preserver of Negros' cultural heritage. If you book ahead, Ramon will proudly show you around his house, including his collection of paintings by seminal Filipino artists.

For almost 30 years, Ramon has run the **Annual Cultural Tour Of Negros Occidental** (tours around P400). The three one-day tours are scheduled in December, and take in attrac-



tions from the nearby region, including the famous Church of St Joseph the Worker at the Victorias Milling Company (see p290).

On the main road through town, the silver-domed Church of San Diego was designed by an Italian called Verasconi. It was built in Romanesque style in 1925 and is topped by a crucifix that, when lit at night, is visible far out to sea.

No visit to Silay would be complete without sampling the delicacies of El Ideal Bakery (right).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Charter-day anniversary (5-12 Jun) A week-long fiesta.

San Diego Fiesta (6-13 Nov) Includes a colourful street-dance competition.

SLEEPING & EATING

Fortuna Pension House (‰ 495 3981; fortuna_pension@eudoraimail.com; r P400-1000) One of the 31 recognised ancestral houses, it has been converted, with minimal alteration, to accommodate guests. This stately wooden home set in farmlands offers a glimpse of

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hacienda living, but with a friendly homely feel. There's a range of accommodation, from simple rooms to entire floors, but most have a hot-water bathroom. Breakfast is the only meal available (P180). Fortuna is less than a kilometre south of the city – turn left at José Locsin, pass the José Locsin Provincial Hospital and follow the signs. A tricycle will cost P10.

Baldevia Pension House (‰ 495 0272/5140; bph@babysky.net.ph; National Rd; r with fan P350, r with air-con P600-1200) Conveniently positioned off the main drag, just near the bus and jeepney terminals. It has comfortable, tiled rooms with spotless hot-water bathrooms. Fan rooms are often booked up. Attached to the hotel is the Food Stuff café, which does a good toasted sandwich (P50 to P80).

Ang Kalubihan (mains P50-80; 11 3-10pm) This is a breezy outdoor eatery under a stand of coconut palms. On a warm clear night it's a great place for a barbecue and a beer.

El Ideal Bakery (National Rd; 11 7am-6.30pm) Just south of the public plaza, in one of the less prepossessing ancestral houses, is the home and birthplace of many of the delicacies for which Silay has become famous. The bakery was set up in 1935, during Silay's heyday, to provide snacks for the wealthy gamblers who couldn't drag themselves away from the table. Some of the bakery's famous creations include *lumpia ubod* (spring rolls filled with pork, shrimp and the juicy tip of the coconut palm) and *piaya* (flat bread sprinkled with brown sugar and sesame seeds). Our favourites were the *guapple*

RAMON HOFILEÑA

There could be few more handsome or artistically gifted families in the Philippines than that of Ramon Hofileña. The photos of his eight brothers and sisters, which grace the antique, ivory-keyed piano in his waiting room, show performance shots of classical musicians, singers, actors and dancers, and even a *fin de siècle* beauty queen. Ramon will waste no time listing their accomplishments, or indeed his own, but the list is so impressive one can hardly begrudge him reciting it.

But don't be fooled into thinking this family is a mere theatre troupe. The Hofileña roll-call also counts revolutionaries, shipping magnates and one of the original Silay sugar barons – Ramon's father Manuel Severino. When you speak with the irrepressible Ramon, 75, in his graceful ancestral home, you begin to appreciate what a cultural flowering the golden age of sugar was for Silay.

Though an artist and writer himself, Ramon's greatest achievements have been in preserving and promoting the works of others. As he tells it, when he returned to Silay from New York in the 1970s, he found it so down-at-heel and neglected that it set him on a life-long path of restoration and heritage protection, beginning with but not limited to his own home, the first in Silay to be opened to the public.

Arguably just as impressive as his preservation of Silay's heritage, though, has been his work in collecting and publicising Filipino art. His rotating private collection, which he will gladly show you, is a who's who of Filipino painter laureates. It includes paintings by Juan Luna, Jose Rizal, and a number of works by the late Conrado Judith, an impoverished, self-taught genius who was 'discovered' by Ramon and whose vivid and perfectly realised paintings would not look out of place in any major metropolitan gallery.

Anyone may visit Ramon, his house and his private collection by appointment (see p288).

(large guava) pies and the egg pies (P20 each). Delicious.

For cheaper imitations, go to the public market between 6.30am and 7.30am Monday to Saturday, and you'll see people bartering their baked goods with each other before heading off to sell them in Bacolod and neighbouring areas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Both buses and jeepneys travel between Silay and Bacolod (P11, 30 minutes). In Silay, all buses and jeepneys heading north and south stop along Rizal St. From Silay, there are buses all day stopping at the coastal towns towards San Carlos (P90, three hours).

Around Silay

The sugar plantations that surround Silay have their own colourful histories. To visit any of the plantations or Patag National Park, you'll need to arrange a tour through the Silay tourist office (p288).

The **Hawaiian Philippine Sugar Company** (☎ 034-495 2085; 7-8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Apr) is only a 15-minute ride by jeepney (P7) north of Silay. Tours may include watch-

ing the harvesting process (November to April), locomotive-riding (P1500 for any number, book in advance), handcart riding (P8 public, P150 private; 45 minutes) and even a homestay (P300 per person).

There's also historic paraphernalia on display at the huge **Victorias Milling Company** (Vicmico; ☎ 034-399 3002; admission P15; 7-11am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Fri), in the town of Victorias, north of Silay. Victorias was the world's biggest mill during the '60s and '70s and is the site of the **Church of St Joseph the Worker**, which features a claustrophobically dense liturgical mural by Alfonso Ossorio, a contemporary of Jackson Pollock. Jeepneys run all day to Victorias from Silay (P20, 45 minutes). No shorts, sandals or cameras are allowed at Victorias.

Patag National Park, about 32km east of Silay (P30 by jeepney, one hour), was the site of a horrendous battle during WWII. These days, great hikes are possible from Patag village into the national park, with several waterfall visits along the way. The Silay tourism office can organise a guide (P150 a day) and a homestay (P300). The only other accommodation is in the old **Patag Hospital building** (P150). Even if you wish to

go it alone, you will require a permit from the Silay tourist office (see p288).

Cadiz

☎ 034 / pop 141,954

About 65km from Bacolod, Cadiz (*cah-dis*) is a rough-and-ready fishing port and exit point for all that Negros sugar. The city's annual **Ati-Atihan Festival**, in honour of patron saint Santo Niño, is held on the weekend nearest 26 January.

There is good accommodation at **Hotel Cadiz** (☎ 493 1785; Villena St; d with fan & cold-water bathroom P530, d with cable TV & hot-water bathroom P600). It has large, well-kept rooms, a restaurant (meals around P100) and even tennis courts!

A ferry departs every second day for Bantayan town (P150, four hours) on Bantayan Island. Buses run from Cadiz to Bacolod (P45, 1½ hours), and to Escalante (P35, 45 minutes), San Carlos (P50, 1½ hours) and Dumaguete (P180, six hours). There are also regular jeepneys to Sagay (P18, 30 minutes).

Sagay

☎ 034 / pop 129,765

Sagay City is a combination of Old Sagay, on the coast, and New Sagay, on the National Hwy – it's P10 by jeepney between the two.

The **tourist office** (☎ 488 0101; City Hall, New Sagay) can help organise trips to Carbin Reef and accommodation in town.

Sagay is the proud guardian of the 32,000-hectare **Sagay Marine Reserve**, established in 1999 to protect one of the only areas on Negros still teeming with marine life. The sanctuary is centred on Carbin Reef, about 15km northeast of Old Sagay (45 minutes by pumpboat). Also here is **Maca Reef**, where flocks of migratory birds are a common sight. To organise a boat, ask at the tourist office or at the pier. A small boat will cost P1000 (maximum 14 people). Diving is discouraged due to the shallowness of the reef, but snorkelling is possible – if you can rustle up the equipment.

Belonging to the municipal government, **Balay Kauswagan** (☎ 488 0101; fax 488 0187; municipal hall; dm P150, tw with air-con & private bathroom P500; ☹) is a characterless convention centre with OK rooms and a swimming pool but no restaurant.

There is a pumpboat every second day to Bantayan town, Bantayan Island (P150,

2½ hours). Jeepneys run regularly to Cadiz (P18, 30 minutes) and to Escalante (P15, 30 minutes). There are also buses running at regular quarter-hour to half-hour intervals in both directions.

Escalante & Around

☎ 034 / pop 79,098

Like neighbouring Sagay, Escalante is a city of two parts – with Old Escalante on the coast and New Escalante on the highway. City Hall, the town plaza, the bus terminal and Equitable PCI bank are all in New Escalante; Danao Port, from where the boats to Cebu leave, is in Old Escalante. A tricycle between the two will cost around P20 (15 minutes).

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 454 0324; City Hall, New Escalante) can assist with accommodation and activities.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The hills around Escalante abound with caves – more than 50 at last count – many of which were used by the Japanese as hide-outs in WWII. The tourist office can organise guides (around P500 per day).

In Old Escalante, two minutes past the turnoff to Port Danao, are the ruins of Escalante's old church, **St Francis of Assisi Parish**. Built of coral stone by the Spanish in 1850, its roof was destroyed by a typhoon in the 1960s. However by this time the city's wealth and political focus had shifted to New Danao, and the will to repair the church was lacking, which is why it exists as a stately ruin today. If you have the time, drop in on parish priest Father Harry and enjoy a cold drink with him in the rectory's lovely, shaded garden.

The little **Isla Puti** (Enchanted Isle) is a 20-minute pumpboat ride from Escalante (also approachable from Vito Port, Old Sagay), and has some attractive white-sand beaches. Boats (P600, 20 minutes, good for 10 people) can be organised at Barcelona pier or through the city's tourist office.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Escalante celebrates two major festivals: one on 30 May, when the town celebrates its patron, St Cruz, with a colourful street party; and the other, on 20 September, to remember the massacre of 20 sugarcane workers by soldiers during an industrial dispute.

SLEEPING & EATING

Rodeway Inn (☎ 454 0176; National Hwy, New Escalante; d with fan & shared bathroom P250, d with air-con & private bathroom P660) Opposite the pretty town plaza, the Rodeway is a friendly and efficient family-run operation with comfortable and secure accommodation. The restaurant can do you dinner and breakfast for around P80.

There is accommodation on Isla Puti at **Jomabo Island Paradise Beach Resort** (☎ 454 0090; www.jomabo.com; camping per tent P150, r & cottages P1200-2800), which also has a restaurant, tennis court and water-sports facilities. The resort has no food; you must bring your own and cook on-site.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A ferry departs for Tabuelan on Cebu twice daily (P120, 2½ hours, 11am and midnight) from Old Escalante's Port Danao. Escalante is on the bus route between Dumaguete (P170, five hours) and Bacolod (P70, 2½ hours).

San Carlos

☎ 034 / pop 118,259

San Carlos is the main port city connecting Negros to Cebu. Ferries run daily between San Carlos and Toledo, on Cebu's west coast. The place is not overflowing with charm, but it's fine for an overnight stay.

Cyberprint Internet café (S Carmono St; per hr P20), on a street off the plaza, is cool and quiet and has a fast connection. There's a Metrobank and an Equitable PCI Bank on the main drag, which runs in a straight line from the pier.

The city is famed for its annual Pintaflores Festival, held from 3 to 5 November. This particularly frenetic street festival harks back to the days when Filipinos would welcome foreign visitors by dancing en masse.

Sipaway Island is a white-sand and coral outcrop about 4km off the coast of San Carlos. About 7km long and about 1.5km wide, the island has a couple of basic stores, a free public swimming pool and some good walking trails. Regular pumpboats head for the island (P20, 20 minutes) from near the main pier in San Carlos. **Whispering Palms Island Resort** (☎ 0916 651 6159; www.whispering-palms.com; r with fan/air-con from P1000/1500) on Sipaway Island has a fairly characterless collection of apartment-style rooms, a Filipino restaurant and the usual assortment of beachside diversions.

Skyland Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 312 5589; Broce St; tw with fan/air-con P370/570; a), halfway between the pier and the bus terminal, has spotless rooms and decent food (meals around P120).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For boats to Toledo, see p245.

There are regular all-day buses from San Carlos' bus station (1km from the pier; P5 by tricycle) to Dumaguete (P150, four hours) and to Bacolod via Silay (P115, 3½ hours). To La Carlota, first catch a bus to the mountain town of Canlaon (P30, 45 minutes), and from that terminal catch another across the tablelands of Mt Kanlaon to La Carlota (P65, 2¾ hours); the views are spectacular.

Sipalay & Around

☎ 034 / pop 62,063

About 200km from both Bacolod and Dumaguete, the remote seaside town of Sipalay (si-pah-lie) is surrounded by spectacular white-sand beaches, secluded coves, scattered islets, dive reefs and waters teeming with marlin, trevally and tuna.

The premier attraction here has to be the slice of paradise called **Sugar Beach** (Langub to the locals) – though keen divers may prefer the dedicated dive resorts of Punta Ballo.

The diving around Sipalay is some of the best in Negros. It's particularly suited to inexperienced or learner divers. At last count there were well over 30 dive sites in the area, including three wrecks (one from WWII). The resorts in Sugar Beach and Punta Ballo either have on-site dive centres or can arrange trips through an affiliated dive centre. Prices are fairly standard: one dive is US\$20, equipment rental starts from US\$5, an open-water certificate is US\$300.

Boats for exploring the marine idylls of nearby **Maricalum Bay** and **Tinagong Dagat** can be hired (around P500) through the **Sipalay Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 0926 433 7318; cnr Rodrigo G Chua Blvd & Alejano St; h high season 8am-5pm daily, low season 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), just back from Poblacion Beach.

Regular buses run between Sipalay and Bacolod (P145, 4½ hours). On the rough road between Sipalay and Dumaguete, buses terminate at Hinoba-an (first transfer) then Bayawan (second transfer) before finally continuing on to Dumaguete (total trip P160, six to seven hours including transfers).

SIPALAY PROPER

The sprawling town of Sipalay services surrounding farming communities and the fishermen whose boats pull up on its vast, white-sand beach (Poblacion Beach). Around sunrise it's not uncommon to see the fishermen unloading 40kg-plus tuna here.

The main street of Sipalay proper is Alvarez St, which runs east-west. At the far (western) end of Alvarez St are the market, the bus stop and Poblacion Beach. Running the length of Poblacion Beach (ie north-south) is Rodrigo G Chua Blvd.

Sipalay's annual **Sacred Heart of Jesus Fiesta** is held in late December.

Driftwood City Restaurant (☎ 0919 813 1426; Rodrigo G Chua Blvd, Poblacion Beach; pizza & pasta P100-150; h 8am-late) is affiliated with Driftwood Village Resort in Sugar Beach (p294), and serves up tasty Italian treats by the sea. It also organises the boat service from Poblacion to Sugar Beach (P200, maximum 10 people) – call ahead to book.

PUNTA BALLO

The barangay of Punta Ballo is on a promontory 6km southwest of Sipalay proper. The turn-off for Punta Ballo is at the town plaza, on the left as you come into town. A long, bumpy ride by hubel-hubel (P100) leads you to the resorts, which all look out to sea. The pretty white-sand beach here is 200m long and backed by wooded hills. The trouble is, it's also shallow and weedy, and prone to very low tides, so it's not great for swimming.

Around the headland to the south, **Campanones Bay** is a spectacular, steep-sided natural harbour with – as yet – no resorts or accommodation.

The resorts can charter boats for trips into Sipalay proper (P400 return, maximum 10 people) and can organise a car to pick you up from town (around P200) if you book ahead.

Sleeping & Eating

Artistic Diving Beach Resort (☎ 0919 409 5594; www.artisticdiving.com; d with fan/air-con P850/1050)

The original and still the best. Artistic has large, comfortable row cottages (with private balconies and hot-water bathrooms) set in well-tended garden by the beach. Meals (from P200) are very good, with plenty of greens and veggies. The resort has the longest-running dive centre in Sipalay,

charging standard rates, and a 22m outrigger equipped for dive safaris (from US\$500 for five nights) that can also do short trips into town (P400 return).

Easy Diving Beach Resort (☎ 0954 407 716; www.sipalay.com; d P1500; a) Artistic's near neighbour is trying to carve out a niche for itself by going for a more upmarket crowd, with a swish, native-style terrace bar and air-con (and hot water) in all rooms. It has a well set-up dive centre with rates slightly on the high side (open-water course US\$320).

Nataasan Beach Resort (☎ 0919 365 7863; www.nataasan.com; s/d with fan from P1200/1400, with air-con P1700/1900) Perched high on the point at the northern end of the beach, what Nataasan lacks in beach-level access it makes up for with superb views. Sea-view cabins are definitely worth the extra. Buildings are plush native style, with all-modern amenities. There is no dive centre here (though dive trips can be arranged through Artistic Diving) – just good food and great hospitality.

SUGAR BEACH

Ever dreamt of being a castaway, but with a few comforts and some friends to keep you company (à la *Gilligan's Island*)? Well, Sugar Beach is a dream come true. With just a handful of eclectic, home-spun resorts, a beach that really *does* rival Boracay's, and a western orientation that makes every sunset one to remember, Sugar Beach has to be the Philippines' best-kept secret.

Sugar (aka Langub) Beach is just north of Sipalay proper, beside the village of Lauhang. To get there by land, you must get off the bus at the village of Montilla, 3km before Sipalay. Otherwise you can continue into Sipalay and organise a boat to pick you up from in front of Driftwood City Restaurant on Poblacion Beach (left).

It takes a bit of doing, but the overland option is a wonderful way to put you in the mood for tropical seclusion. Get off the bus at Montilla; from there catch a tricycle to Lauhang (P50, 4km), which will take you past rice paddies ploughed by water buffalo and over a bridge through a mangrove swamp. At Lauhang, you must cross a tidal river – a small paddle boat will cost around P5 per person. On the other side of the river, skirt the village and walk around the point till you get to the long, fantastically white stretch of sand that is Sugar Beach.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Takatuka Lodge & Dive Resort (☎ 0920 230 9174; www.takatuka-lodge.com; d with fan/air-con P550/750, family cottage with kitchen & air-con P1100) With only four rooms plus the family cottage (an additional P200 to use the stove), it pays to book ahead. Words fail to describe the riotous, colour-saturated, eclectic, skewed-angled aesthetic of Takatuka lodge. If the brothers Kalitta ever decide to sell up, they are guaranteed a bright career in interior design. The food (meals around P180) is almost as eclectic as the rooms, with loads of rich and spicy, vegetable-laden dishes on offer. To top it off, the owners are great hosts and a lot of fun.

At the time of research, there was talk of a road being built direct from the highway to Sugar Beach that would eliminate the need for the river crossing.

The beach itself is about 300m long with a wide expanse of sand that slopes at a perfect gradient into the sea – and not a rock or weed in sight, so that it's ideal for swimming.

All the resorts can offer diving either through their own dive centres or through an affiliated dive centre.

Sleeping & Eating

Bermuda Resort (☎ 0920 529 2583; d P800, nipa 'tepee' P350) Rooms are not as wacky as those at Takatuka, but they're still eccentric by any normal standard. Bermuda offers a German menu (meals P200 to P250), a satellite TV in the restaurant, billiards and videoke.

Driftwood Village Resort (☎ 0920 252 9474; d with shared/private bathroom P400/600, q P1200) Breezy, native-style Driftwood Village corners the market in castaway chic, with comfortable nipa huts and a pleasant common area with mezzanine, satellite TV, billiard table and library. The trained staff was taught cookery by a Thai chef (dishes around P200).

Rounding out the resorts on Sugar Beach are African-themed **Sulu Sunset Beach Resort** (☎ 0919 716 7182; small hut P450, bungalow P700) and the very plain and modest **Langub Beach Garden Resort** (☎ 0910 289 4393; d with fan/air-con P800/1200).

BULATA & DANJUGAN ISLAND

Twenty kilometres north of Sipalay lies the little town of Bulata. Turn off here and a

long dirt track will lead you to **Punta Bulata White Beach Resort** (☎ /fax 433 5160; http://punta.bulata.tripod.com; r with air-con from P1000, tent with air-con from P800; a). It was undergoing renovations at the time of research, but locals said there were plans to make this secluded resort a health spa. The resort did have a range of comfortable, air-conditioned accommodation, from tents to cabins, and a nice white-sand beach. All we can say was that when we saw it, it was dead quiet, and staff seemed unsure how to deal with a drop-in visitor. Perhaps book ahead to ensure a welcoming reception.

Three kilometres due west of Bulata, privately owned Danjugan Island is strictly off limits to tourists. Managed as a nature reserve by a Bacolod consortium, with support from Coral Cay, a British NGO, the 42-hectare island has six lagoons, a primary limestone rainforest and mangroves. It is home to more than nine species of bat and 58 species of bird, including the endangered white-breasted eagle and the grey-headed fishing eagle. People with an ecological interest in the island should contact the **Philippine Reef & Rainforest Conservation Foundation** (☎ 441 1658; Bulata barangay hall).

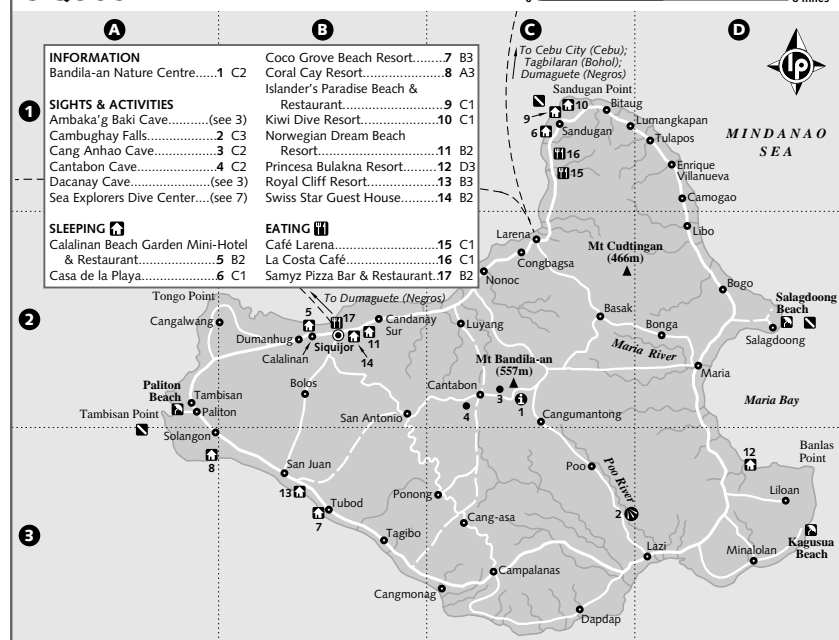
SQUIJOR

☎ 035 / pop 81,600

The Spaniards called it *Isla del Fuego* (Island of Fire) because of the soft glow generated by the island's abundant firefly population. To Filipinos, Siquior (see-kee-hor) has an aura of mystery and magic; its mountainous interior is home to a number of *mangkukulam* (healers) who practise not with spooky incantations but with smelly herbs and soothing oils. This little island, the smallest of the four Central Visayas provinces, is dotted with laid-back beach resorts. A sealed 72km coastal road circumnavigates the island, affording unobstructed ocean vistas and an opportunity to pause and take in truly low-key village life.

Once a part of Bohol and then Negros Oriental, Siquior didn't become an independent province until 1971, although economically and politically it still seems like a little sister to its larger neighbours. This seems unlikely to change as long as

SQUIJOR



Siquijorenos continue to migrate to Cebu, Manila or abroad seeking work. Larena is Siquior's main port and Siquior town its capital.

While it is less renowned than other Visayas locations, there are good dive sites, mostly off the west coast of the island, including Paliton Beach (three submarine caves), Salgadoong Beach (plenty of coral, and the odd mako shark), Sandungan and Tongo Point (colourful reefs). Nearby Apo Island (see p281) has a range of excellent dive sites, and there's a 30m wreck, a Japanese hospital boat, near the Larena pier.

During the crazy Holy Week celebrations, local healers and revellers put the 'Mystique Island' on the festival map with the Lenten Festival of Herbal Preparation; plus May is a month of almost nonstop fiesta.

Getting There & Away

There is no airport on Siquior. The island is connected by boat to Cebu City (Cebu), Tagbilaran (Bohol), Dumaguete (Negros) and Plaridel and Iligan on Mindanao. The majority of the ferries use the port at Larena,

however Dumaguete and some Cebu-bound boats depart from Siquior town.

Ocean Jet (☎ Larena 0919 744 2648) boats have two daily trips (5.50am and 4pm) from Larena to Cebu (P750, five hours) and Tagbilaran (P550, three hours).

Delta Fast Ferry operates a service between Siquior town and Dumaguete (P140, 45 minutes) four times a day starting at 7am; the last trip is at 5.30pm. Montenegro Lines has twice daily trips between Larena and Dumaguete.

Getting Around

A great way to explore the island is by bike or motorcycle. Compared with most other roadways in the Philippines, the 72km coastal ring road is practically devoid of traffic – and shade – so you can take your finger off the horn and afford to take in the view without fear of rear ending the vehicle in front of you. With leisurely stops along the way, by car, motorcycle or tricycle, a circular trip around the island takes the best part of an entire day. Resorts generally charge around P1000 per jeep (for three

people) for guided day trips around the island, and P500 for a motorbike tour; rental motorbikes are P300 to P500 per day, and rental mountain bikes P250 per day. From the central market area of major towns, you can organise a hubel-hubel tour (P300 to P400 for an afternoon). The road passes through the island's main towns and settlements; some glorious stretches of beach, especially on the east coast; and several spurs that provide access to the interior.

If you are relying on jeepneys to get around, get started early, as many jeepneys stop for the day at around 3pm, unless a late boat arrives in Larena. Jeepneys travel around the coastal road from Larena to Lazi (P15) via Maria (P10) and via Siquijor town (P8). They also do the Larena–Maria leg via Basak.

You can also hire bangkas to journey between Larena and Siquior town (P150, 45 minutes) for excellent views of the coastline.

LARENA

☎ 035 / pop 11,860

Besides food stalls and several karaoke bars, the port town of Larena offers little besides being the main point of entry for travellers to Siquior.

Information

There's a post office here, and Internet access at **Infomate Cyber Café** (☎ 9am–5pm; per hr P40). Emailing is offered from some of the resorts at costly rates.

The Allied Bank in Larena will change your travellers cheques. You're better off going to Optimum at Belciña Pawn Shop on the main drag, which will change cash or cheques at bank rates. Some of the neighbouring shops will exchange currency at a lower rate.

Sleeping

LARENA

The only reason to stay in Larena proper is if all beach resorts are full.

Luisa & Son's Lodge (s/d P150/200) If proximity to the pier is a must then you can't do better than Luisa & Son's, though peace and quiet is hard to come by in the no-frills rooms with fan on the 2nd floor, with noise not only from the port but from your neighbours in the cell to either side of you. There's a shared bathroom.

SANDUGAN BEACH & AROUND

Three resorts share Sandugan beach, 6km north of Larena. Although the beach isn't quite as wide or white as some of the others (especially on the east coast), Sandugan is the most popular tourist destination. A tricycle or jeepney from the pier will cost P10 to P30, but a 'special trip', at night for example, will cost around P100. Kiwi Dive Resort is the only full-service dive centre in the area.

Kiwi Dive Resort (☎ 424 0534, 0917 361 5997; www.kiwidiveresort.com/kiwi; r with fan P490, cottage P790; j) It's a lovely walk down a trellis-covered pathway from the simple and clean hillside rooms to the beach, sitting area and small bar with satellite TV. There's also a large wooden cottage with big private porch at this welcoming resort and dive centre. Motorbikes, mountain bikes, jeeps and kayaks are available for hire, as well as maps, guidance and general travel advice. Even the fan rooms have a few pleasant but rare touches such as reading lamps and complimentary coffee and tea. Free pick-up from the pier can be organised.

Casa de la Playa (☎ 377 2291, 0918 546 4709; www.siquijorcasa.com; r P800, cottages P1000–1450; a) The Mediterranean-style beachside cottage is charming, as are several other of the individually designed rooms in the lush hilltop garden. On offer are healing massages and yoga, plus less meditative mountain-bike and motorbike rentals. The restaurant specialises in vegetarian food.

Islander's Paradise Beach & Restaurant (☎ 0919 590 7516; www.islandersparadisebeach.com; cottages P200–550) This laid-back resort has several basic stand-alone nipa huts set in a grass lawn next to the beach with porches and hammocks for lounging. Local seafood is served.

Eating

La Costa Café (☎ 377 2311; dishes P70) Not far from Café Larena, La Costa has indoor dining and a more pleasant outdoor garden festooned with lights. Large menu with seafood and Filipino standards.

Café Larena (☎ 377 2245; dishes P70) A large open-air pavilion on the road from Larena to the resorts at Sandugan, serving standard Filipino dishes such as pork *adobo* (pork marinated in vinegar and garlic, and stewed until tender) and beef curry. While the furniture is cheap plastic, the sunset views over the water are priceless.

SQUIJOR TOWN

☎ 035 / pop 21,200

Only about 8km from the main port town of Larena, Siquijor town, the pleasant little capital of Siquijor, has a lively market selling fresh fish and the usual selection of small shops. A short walk from the pier, the town's coral-stone church was built in 1783, and dedicated to St Francis of Assisi. You can climb the fortress-like bell tower, up a creaky spiral staircase, for a bird's eye glimpse of the town.

Information

Siquior Provincial Tourism Office (☎ 344 2088; Provincial Capital Bldg) has loads of brochures but little up-to-date information.

Access the Internet at **Siquijor Infomate Cybercafé** (Legaspi St; ☎ 9am–5pm; per hr P40).

Sleeping & Eating

Norwegian Dream Beach Resort (☎ 480 9095, 0916 520 3504; www.thenorwegiandream.com; s/d with shared bathroom P600/800, cottages P1200) A bunch of tall palm trees provide minimal shade on the sparsely landscaped grounds of this resort, where the 2nd-floor rooms in the large main building are more utilitarian than dreamlike. More charming are the four stand-alone wood cottages that sleep four and look like miniature homes. All of the buildings are set back from the beach.

Swiss Stars Guest House (☎ 480 5583, 0918 478 0912; National Hwy; r with fan/air-con from P280/420; j) Close to Siquior town, there are several large, comfortable rooms with stone floors and satellite TV at Swiss Stars, which is hidden in a lush garden behind the charming little roadside restaurant (open 7am to 11.30pm); the restaurant does good pizza (P50).

Calalanan Beach Garden Mini-Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 0912 515 0370; r with toilet & fan P300, r with fan & cold-water bathroom P400–600) Just 1km from Siquijor town, it has pokey little rooms in a beachside villa. The place is run by Nicolaas, a hefty Dutch bloke who dishes up equally hefty American breakfasts, beef curries, homemade bread and other hearty dishes (P60 to P120).

Samyz Pizza Bar & Restaurant (☎ 344 2129; Mabini St; pizza P50; a) A fully fledged restaurant with uniformed waitresses and cable TV, Samyz is a refuge with a wide-ranging menu, even if the cheese on the pizza seems suspiciously unnatural. The entrance is poorly marked; it's on the 2nd floor.

BANDILA-AN NATURE CENTRE & THE CAVES

Sitting atop Siquijor's highest peak at 557m is the Bandila-an Nature Centre, the start of a walk past natural springs, fluttering butterflies, birds and an enormous variety of floral species. Almost 10km from Siquijor, it's a slow climb up the mountain road full of switchbacks, peering down into jungle ravines. At 6km, you'll pass San Antonio, centre of the ceremonies at Holy Week and home to many of the healers; to see one, ask a local to accompany you. There's no fixed price for their services, which commonly involves a brief diagnostic examination and a smoky mix of herbs and curative oils.

The nature centre itself is really nothing more than a desk and chair in an otherwise empty concrete room in the mountain village of Cantabon. Within a few kilometres of the office are a series of caves including **Cang Anhao, Ambaka'g Baki, Dacanay Cave** and **Cantabon Cave**; the latter is the most convenient and well known of the bunch. It's easy to find a guide who can supply torches (a must) and safety helmets (an extra precaution). Tours should cost around P300 (includes equipment and park fee). Expect to get dirty and wet navigating your way through narrow, vertical climbs, waist-deep water, and high humidity. Venture as far inside Cantabon as you'd like, keeping in mind that you have to retrace your steps to exit.

The best road to Bandila-an Nature Centre and Cantabon from the main ring road heads up from Siquijor town from beside the Siquijor Central Elementary School. A rougher route (OK on motorbike) can be taken from San Juan.

PALITON BEACH

About 1km from the main road (take the turn-off at the little church in Paliton village, near the island's westernmost point), along a dirt track, is this stunning white-sand beach. The water is clear as glass and there are wonderful views of Apo Island. Following the dirt track in, you first pass a small beach with about a dozen tall palm trees. You'll find the main beach a little further on.

SAN JUAN

☎ 035

The little town of San Juan is blessed with its own natural spring swimming pool. The main

road takes a scenic dog-leg around the pool, set in a landscaped enclosure known as Calipay's Spring Park. Divers should head to **Sea Explorers** (☎ 481 5007; www.sea-explorers.com; 1 dive US\$20, equipment rental US\$5) based at the Coco Grove Beach Resort.

Sleeping & Eating

Royal Cliff Resort (☎ 481 5038; www.royal-cliff-resort.de.tf; r from P750) A low-key resort between San Juan and Tubod, Royal Cliff has five small, homey cottages with big porches and quaint furniture. It's set in a garden overlooking the water and has a tiny beach (during low tide). There are several hang-out spots on the grounds with hammocks and chairs, and a restaurant as well.

Coral Cay Resort (☎ 481 5024, 0919 269 1269; www.coralcayresort.com; r with fan P750, cottages from P1250; a s) Coral Cay is on a lovely stretch of beach at Solangon, about 3km from San Juan. The charming wood-floored rooms, set in a garden with coconut trees and orchids, have bamboo and pebble walls and a sliding panel separating the bedroom and terrace. Cheaper rooms in the low-slung building towards the back of the property are functional. There are jeepney tours, a small thatched-roof open-air gym, mountain-bike rental, pool tables, plus a well-stocked bamboo bar and a restaurant fronting the beach. The restaurant serves fresh fish (from P150), big breakfasts (P120) and imported wines.

Coco Grove Beach Resort (☎ 481 5008; cocogrove@glinesnx.com.ph; r from P1375; a s) This resort at Tubod about 3km southeast of San Juan has several cottages set back from the beach. Each is made from wood and bamboo, furnished in wicker and has a small private terrace overlooking the leafy landscaped property. There's a restaurant and bar directly on the beach. Even the cheapest rooms have polished wooden floors, air-con, minibar, private veranda and a marble bathroom with hot water.

LAZI & AROUND

☎ 035 / pop 18,300

The quiet southeastern town of Lazi is bisected by the island's only major river, the Poo (po-oh). The town is home to the stylishly timeworn, coral-stone **San Antonio de Padua Church**, built in 1857. Over the road is the oldest convent in the Philippines, a

magnificent timber villa, creaky with age and eerily serene.

Just out of Lazi, turn right at the Caltex service station, and amble up several kilometres to the refreshing **Cambughay Falls** on the Poo River. Above the falls, there's a parking bay on your left for your jeep (P10) or motorbike (P5). Steps just across the road will take you down to this popular swimming spot. Don't leave valuables unattended as there have been a few reports of theft.

Between the towns of Lazi and Maria, **Kagusua beach** is reached via the pretty village of Minalolan – look for the turn-off for the barangay of Nabutay and travel past the old limestone mine. A good road leads from the village down to Kagusua, where steep concrete steps take you down to a string of beautiful, secluded coves.

Between Kagusua and Salagdoong is the large horseshoe-shaped Maria Bay where you'll find **Princesa Bulakna Resort** (☎ 0921 770 2273, in Dumaguete 035-225 1036; www.princesabulakna.com; s/d P800/1500; a). In addition to having very nice bamboo and concrete cottages with satellite TV overlooking the beach, it rents tents (P300) that can be pitched on the well-landscaped property. There's a nice restaurant with indoor/outdoor seating and all the privacy you could want.

SALAGDOONG & TALINGTING

Billed as the island's most picturesque beach, Salagdoong, a few kilometres past Maria, has pristine, white-sand coves and a rocky outcrop with a pagoda. There are several picnic shelters (P30 to P50) and barbecues for hire (P150) as well as a kiosk.

The bumpy old turn-off road to Salagdoong is almost 2km long, and winds its way through a stand of molave trees.

The sleepy town of Talingting has a beautiful, sweeping boulevard skirting the beach and some magnificent old trees.

PANAY

Even though Panay is a microcosm of everything the Visayas has to offer, the long white-sand beach at Boracay is all that many visitors to the region, or for that matter the country, ever see. The rest of the region keeps a low tourism profile, which helps explain the appeal of tropical Guimaras –

just a short commute from the pleasant and lively regional capital of Iloilo City. Panay's little-explored interior is ringed by a rugged coastline to the south and west and a more domesticated one, dotted with impressive Spanish churches, to the north and east. Adventure sports (particularly mountain biking, trekking, kayaking and rock climbing) can be arranged out of Iloilo City.

The amazing Ati-Atihan Festival (p322), held in Kalibo in January, is the most famous fiesta of its kind in the Philippines. Much of Panay's festive tradition can be traced back to its indigenous tribal groups, namely the Ati and Ata. There are communities of both groups on the mainland. For information about anthropologically minded tours of these tribal areas see Panay Adventures Tours, p300.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Apart from the main airport in Iloilo City, there's a string of domestic airports along Panay's north coast whisking people to and from Boracay. These are in the towns of Caticlan, Kalibo and Roxas. Connections are to Manila, Cebu City, Davao on Mindanao and Puerto Princesa on Palawan. See the Iloilo City, Caticlan, Kalibo and Roxas sections for more information on air transport.

BOAT

Iloilo City has links to Negros, Cebu, Luzon, Mindanao and Palawan. Other ports service the popular routes to Manila and Cebu City. Roxas offers a connection with Masbate, Kalibo with Sibuyan and Romblon Islands, and Caticlan with Tablas, Caribao and occasionally Sibuyan Island and, of course, Boracay. Other smaller ports are San José, Estancia, Culasi and Jordan and Suclaran on Guimaras.

See the individual Getting There & Away entries for more information.

ILOILO CITY

☎ 033 / pop 365,820

Iloilo (ee-lo-ee-lo) City, the hub of Panay once known as the Queen City of the South, is the most cosmopolitan city in the Visayas after Cebu. It has a compact, walkable downtown, a relatively vibrant nightlife and music scene fuelled by the student population, and an excellent choice of accommodation

and restaurants. It's a logical base for combining a trip to Boracay with Guimaras (p306), which is only a short hop away. 'Downtown' Iloilo City is surrounded by three old suburbs: Molo, Jaro and La Paz (la-pass).

History

Iloilo City, the last capital of the Spanish empire in Asia, was surrendered to the Filipino Revolutionary Army in 1898 after Manila had already fallen to invading American forces. The seat of government was temporarily transferred here, as the city's deep-water port had already made it an important centre of trade and commerce with Europe. Only a week later a 3000-strong American force shelled and took the city, thus marking the official beginning of the war of independence against the USA.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police department (☎ 337 5511; General Luna St)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are all over town, and the going rate is around P30 per hour. There are cafés in all the shopping malls, and some hotels have business centres with Internet access. **Netopia** (Robinson's Place; 11 9am-9pm) has rows and rows of computers.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Iloilo Doctor's Hospital (☎ 337 7702; West Ave)
St Paul's Hospital (☎ 337 2741; General Luna St)

MONEY

Many of Iloilo City's banks, most of which have ATMs, are huddled around the central area along Iznart St. You can also find banks in or around the main shopping malls – SM City, SM Robinson's Mall and the Atrium. **BPI** (Iznart St) There are also two branches on General Luna St and one in Amigo Plaza.

Equitable PCI Bank (Ledesma St) There are two other branches on Iznart St and another two on Quezon St.

Metrobank (Quezon St) There's another branch on General Luna St.

PNB (cnr General Luna & Valeria Sts)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Department of Tourism (☎ 335 0245, 337 5411; deptour6@mozcom.com; Capitol Grounds, Bonifacio Dr; 11 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) A large office next to the Museo Iloilo. Good resource for transport info and free maps.

Sights

The large **Museo Iloilo** (Bonifacio Dr; adult/child P15/5; 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat) has some interesting permanent displays, including prehistoric relics of Panay, treasure plucked from sunken ships, and jewellery unearthed from Spanish burial sites. There's usually a temporary exhibition of some sort.

Just west of the city centre is the area known as **Molo**. Once a separate town, it's now more or less part of Iloilo City proper, but it retains its independence with a large, central plaza. Overlooking the plaza is **St Anne's Church**, a 19th-century, Gothic renaissance, coral-stone structure with tall, twin spires and a domed roof. Molo is a P5.50 jeepney ride from downtown Iloilo.

North of Iloilo proper, over the Forbes Bridge (Bonifacio Dr) are the suburbs of **La Paz** and **Jaro**. Both are home to a number of ancestral houses and impressive churches. Well worth a visit is **Jaro's Belfry Plaza**, a P5.50 jeepney ride from downtown (look for jeepneys marked 'Jaro CPU' or 'Jaro Liko'). The plaza is dominated by the **Belfry Tower**, a lonely, old figure standing high and handsome on the edge of the square.

Across the road is the huge **Jaro Metropolitan Cathedral**, the seat of the Catholic diocese in the western Visayas. Climb the cathedral's front steps and you'll come face to face with the Shrine to the Divine Infant and Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, which is neon-lit at night. An annual feast and fiesta (see right) is held here in honour of the church's patron saint, Señora de la Candelaria.

Activities

Iloilo has a welcoming community of adventurers ready and willing to take you **scuba diving**, **rock climbing**, **mountaineering**, **mountain biking**, **kayaking** and **caving**. Some of the possibilities on offer are: climbing Mt Madja-as, rock climbing and caving in Bulabog Puti-An National Park, and scuba diving and mountain biking around Guimaras.

Tours around Iloilo, Guimaras and Panay can be arranged for all tastes and budgets through **Panay Adventures Tours** (0918 778 4364, 0916 716 3748; panay_adventures@yahoo.com.ph), run by Daisy and Reuel Yanson. Daisy, an anthropologist and amateur historian, specialises in eco-cultural tours to various tribal groups around Panay and Guimaras including the Aetas and Bukidnon. Both Daisy and Reuel,

keen mountain bikers, are passionate about Panay and cater to more energetic itineraries. An out-of-town day in the van with Daisy's fascinating narrative costs P3000, petrol included. They also offer cheaper car tours and customised camping trips.

If you drop by the **Tribu Outdoor Shop & Climbing Gym** (0337 1961; 9am-8pm) on the ground floor of the Amigo Plaza (a shopping mall and hotel), you'll see posted notices of up-and-coming caving, trekking and kayaking trips – there's usually one a month. Ask **Jemy** or **Roni** (092 0257 0644, 092 628 3345) for info on bargain-basement day trips (P180 per day). Rates include guide and transport fees.

Far East Scuba Institute Inc (0337 5687; Rm 109, John B Lacson Colleges Foundation, MH del Pilar St, Molo) offers diving trips (per person per day P3000) to Nogas Island off the southern coast of Antique province.

If your muscles have had a bruising or if you just need a respite from the heat, check out **Spa Riviera** (0509 0209; 2nd fl, Jabez Bldg) on General Luna St. A shiatsu massage costs P350.

Festivals & Events

Dinagyang Festival (Jan) Celebrating Santo Niño (Child Jesus) with outrageous costumes and dances, this three-day mardi-gras-style party takes place in the fourth week of January.

Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria (Feast of Our Lady of Candles; 2 Feb) As much a religious ritual as it is a good old-fashioned street party, this event includes the blessing of all sorts of candles, and a spangly procession headed by the year's Jaro fiesta queen.

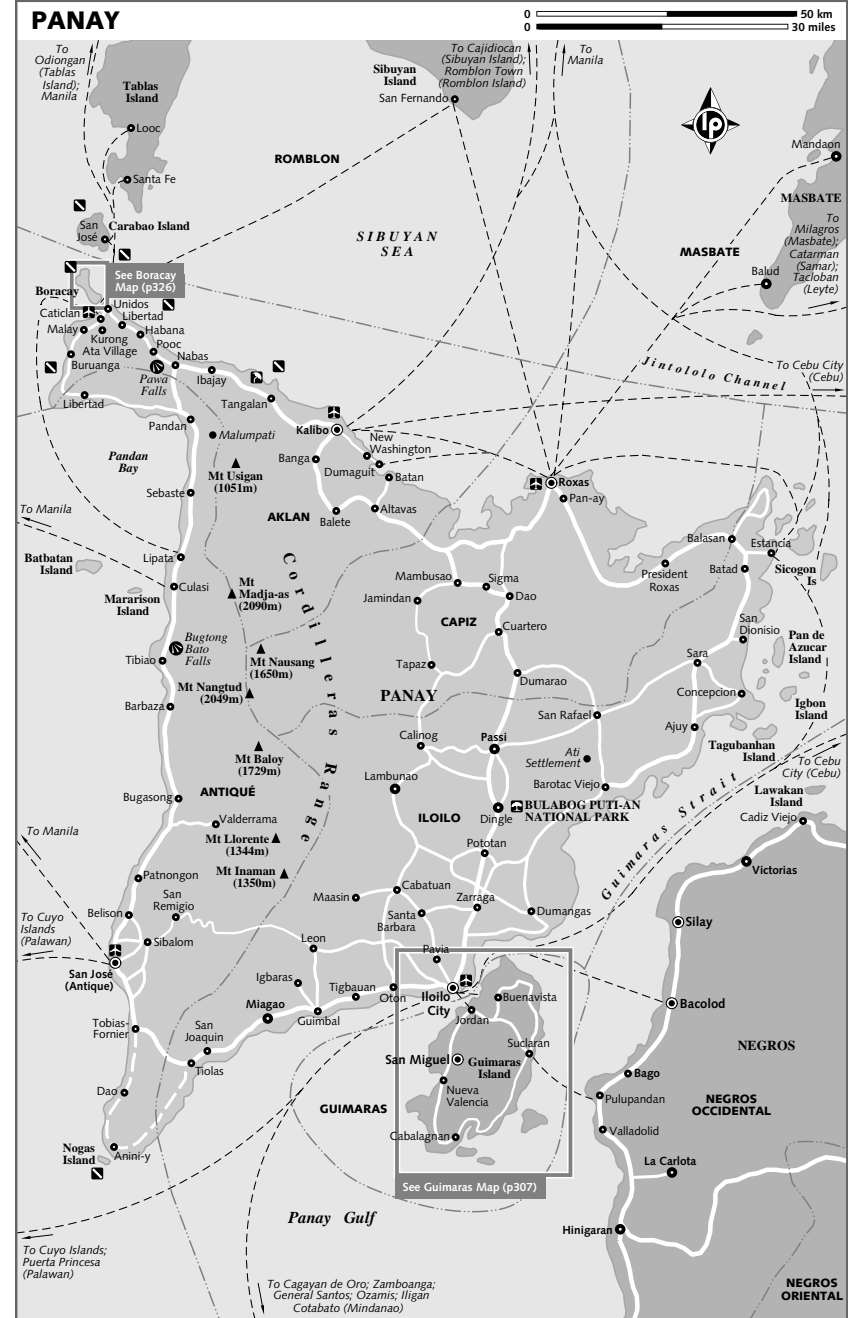
Paraw Regatta (late Feb-early Mar) A race from Iloilo City over to Guimaras in traditional sailing outriggers called *paraw*. Dating back to the 16th century, this is a high-speed version of the trip supposedly taken by Panay's ancient Malay settlers on their journey to the island from Borneo. It's held in late February or early March depending on the weather.

Spanish-Filipino Friendship Day (Jun) Celebrated the last week of June for the first time in 2005 in an attempt to revitalise relations between the two countries.

Several outer suburbs and towns around Iloilo City proper hold annual **kalabaw** (water buffalo) races. One such event is held in early May in Pavia, 5km north of Iloilo City.

Sleeping

There's a surfeit of good-value accommodation in Iloilo; much of it is conveniently





located on General Luna St between Forbes Bridge and Diversion Rd.

BUDGET

Highway 21 Pension House (☎ 335 1839; General Luna St; s/d P500/700) This is more a hotel than a pension house, with small, efficiently designed rooms that are kept immaculate. The professional staff will help store baggage if you want to spend a few nights in Guimaras or further afield. It's next to the Barceló Serabia Manor Hotel complex.

Pensione del Carmen (☎ 338 1626; General Luna St; s/d P600/650; a) Feel less like a tourist at this large family home overlooking the river. Each of the several rooms are individually decorated; though room three on the

river side is especially spacious and homey. There's a large communal guest balcony, and guests can make use of Carmen's kitchen.

Charter House Pension House (☎ 508 1853; s/d P450/700; a) Tucked in the back of the Barceló Serabia Manor Hotel complex and owned by the same family, Charter House has large rooms surrounding a sunny courtyard and garden. The furnishings are beginning to age and TVs are small and channel challenged.

City Corporate Inn (☎ 509 8388; cci_iloilo@yahoo.com; cnr Rizal & Guanco Sts; s/d P595/695; a) A victim of mistaken identity – it's neither corporate nor innlike – this hotel has a bright, cheerful lobby and small well-kept rooms. Across from the University of Iloilo and within walking distance of the port.

INFORMATION

BPI	1	C3
BPI	2	C3
BPI	3	B3
BPI	(see 39)	
Department of Tourism	4	C3
Equitable PCI Bank	5	C3
Equitable PCI Bank	6	B3
Equitable PCI Bank	7	B3
Equitable PCI Bank	8	C3
Equitable PCI Bank	9	C3
Far East Scuba Institute	10	A3
Metrobank	11	B3
Metrobank	(see 35)	
Netopia	(see 45)	
PNB	12	B3
Police	13	B3
St Paul's Hospital	14	B3

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Belfry Plaza	15	B1
Museo Iloilo	16	C3
Spa Riviera	17	B3
Tribu Outdoor Shop & Climbing Gym	(see 39)	

SLEEPING

Barceló Serabia Manor Hotel	18	A3
Charter House Pension House	(see 18)	

City Corporate Inn	19	C4
Eon Centennial Plaza Hotel	20	B4
Four Seasons Hotel	21	B3
Highway 21 Pension House	22	A3
Iloilo Business Hotel	23	A2
Iloilo Grand Hotel	24	C4
Iloilo Midtown Hotel	25	C3
Pensione del Carmen	26	B3
Residence Hotel	27	B3

EATING

Al Dente	(see 18)	
As Mixx Restaurant	(see 45)	
Butot Balat	28	A3
Café Tijuana	29	A3
Calzada Grill	30	A2
Coffee Break	31	B3
Jalandoni Seafood Stalls	32	A1
Jollibee	(see 44)	
Kim's Bob	(see 45)	
Krua Thai	(see 36)	
Marina	33	A3
Nes & Tat's Manokan & Seafoods	34	A1
Ocean City Seafood & Restaurant	35	A3
Summer House	(see 25)	
Taza	36	A2

DRINKING

Club Verz	(see 37)	
Flow Bar	(see 37)	
O2	37	A2
Pier 16	38	A2

SHOPPING

Amigo Plaza	39	C3
Atrium Shopping Mall	40	C3
Gaisano City Shopping Mall	41	B2
Marymart Mall	42	B3
SM City	43	A1
SM Mall	44	B3
SM Robinson's Mall	45	B4

TRANSPORT

Boats to Bacolod	46	C3
Boats to Buenavista Wharf (Guimaras)	47	D4
Boats to Jordan (Guimaras)	48	C4
Boats to Jordan (Guimaras)	49	C4
Ceres Bus Terminal	50	B4
Jeepneys to Miag-ao & San Joaquin	51	B3
Negros Navigation	(see 46)	
Sulpicio Lines	52	D4
Trans-Asia Shipping	53	D4
WG&A SuperFerry	(see 46)	

Residence Hotel (☎ 338 1091; General Luna St; s/d P600/790; a) The glass-and-concrete façade of this hotel isn't exactly residential looking, but the river-view rooms with cable TV and wooden floors are good value. There's a riverfront restaurant.

MIDRANGE

Iloilo Grand Hotel (☎ 335 1801; ilgrandhotel@globelines.com.ph; Iznart St; s/d P865/980) A newcomer to the Iloilo hotel scene, the Grand is in the centre of the old business district, near the port for Bacolod and Guimaras. Gleaming marble seems to be everywhere and the immaculate rooms are modern and comfortable even if the less expensive ones suffer from a lack of natural light.

Eon Centennial Plaza Hotel (☎ 337 2277; centennial.plaza1@skynet.net; Jalandoni St; s/d P1090/1250; a) Though it's not the most centrally located hotel, it is on a relatively quiet block and little perks such as complimentary breakfast, free newspapers and coffee and tea add to the Eon's appeal. Some of the large, carpeted rooms have good views, and it has three restaurants.

Iloilo Midtown Hotel (☎ 336 6888; midtownhotel@iloilo.worldtelphil.com; 888 Yulo St; s/d P732/854; a) The lobby of this tall, centrally located hotel shares ground floor space with the Summer House restaurant. Noise is an issue in

rooms fronting the street though these also get the best light. All have modern amenities and are well kept.

Four-Season Hotel (☎ 336 1070; www.four-seasonhotel.com; cnr Delgado & Fuente Sts; s/d from P850/950; a) This is a friendly, centrally located hotel with standard, modern rooms. The 1st-floor café serves all-you-can-eat breakfast (P88).

Iloilo Business Hotel (☎ 321 3769; fax 321 3769; Benigno Aquino Ave; s/d P1250/1500; a) Upper-floor rooms here have good views in this, the newest hotel and one of the tallest buildings in the city, part of the Smallville bar and restaurant complex. It's a well-managed and professionally run place, if a bit antiseptic.

TOP END

Hotel del Rio (☎ 335 1171; hdelrio@iloilo.net; MH Del Pilar St; s P1430-1870, d P1680-2120; a s) At the slightly ageing grand dame of Iloilo, the room furnishings are a little dated but comfortable. Behind the main building complex is one of the nicer outdoor spots on the river, with a pool, bar, live music nightly and Ohana, a good Japanese restaurant.

Barceló Serabia Manor Hotel (☎ 335 1021; www.barcelo.com; General Luna St; s/d from P1600/2100; a s) Part convention centre, part minicity, this large complex has a gym, hair salon, swimming pool, business and travel centre and the excellent Al Dente restaurant,

plus Thai and Japanese restaurants down the driveway towards the rear. Rooms are large and have all modern amenities.

Eating

Outside of Cebu, Iloilo has the best and most diverse dining in the Visayas. Seafood lovers can chow down on beachside all-you-can-eat buffets in Arevelo to the west of the centre. Diversion Rd has become the restaurant strip – between the river and SM City mall – especially with the addition of the Smallville complex, which itself houses half-a-dozen restaurants. To get there, catch a Leganes or Santa Barbara jeepney from General Luna St (P5.50). In addition, most of the midrange and top-end hotels have at least one restaurant.

INTERNATIONAL & FILIPINO

Pepe Thai (☎ 321 2735; Diversion Rd; dishes P80; 10am-late Mon-Sat) Fabulous and creative authentic Thai cuisine in an open-air tree-house. Peppy Thai, at the northern end of Diversion Rd (in the suburb of Jaro) looks humble from the street but the Thai-trained chef and co-owner whips up a constantly changing small array of dishes such as fried 'paper' squid and spicy coriander noodles.

Al Dente (☎ 336 7813; Barceló Sarabia Manor Hotel, General Luna St; dishes P120-340; 11am-midnight Sun-Thu, 11am-2am Fri & Sat) Pauline, a New York-trained chef, runs this classy Italian bistro with big-city panache and a connoisseur's

attention to detail. The Italian and European dishes such as deep-fried squid, tagliatelle and pizzas (P150) are large and tasty. On Wednesdays (lunch and dinner), all-you-can-eat meals are great value (P150).

Café Tijuana (☎ 508 4114; General Luna St; dishes P50) A Mexican restaurant that hits the standard design clichés – sombreros, cacti etc – and has a large, attractive outdoor dining area in the back. Besides excellent tacos (P43) and burritos (P45), Tijuana's menu has burgers, seafood and Filipino dishes. Wash it all down with a tequila or mango margarita.

Krua Thai (☎ 321 3784; Smallville Complex, Diversion Rd; mains P130) A beautifully and tastefully designed Thai restaurant in the Smallville complex with uniformed waiters, traditional Thai art and teak walls. Most importantly, it serves excellent food including crispy fish with mango salad (P180).

Taza (☎ 508 7413; Smallville Complex, Diversion Rd; mains P120; 8am-midnight Mon-Thu & Sun, 7am-2am Fri & Sat) A hip, modern Italian bistro with outdoor seating serving pastas (P120), panini sandwiches (P120) and specials such as stuffed chicken schnitzel and Spanish chorizo.

As Mixx Restaurant (☎ 337 0471; SM Robinson's Mall; mains P60) The mix (extra 'x' is silent) refers to the combo of Mediterranean and Asian cuisines, while the décor is all hip and modern. For 10% more you can eat in the small, separate air-con room.

Kim's Bob (☎ 337 7959; Robinson's Place; dishes from P150) A Korean grocery-cum-restaurant with a few tables and a few aisles of groceries. Bulgogi (P200) and pot stew with *kimchi* (fermented vegetable; P170) are especially good.

Summer House (Iloilo Midtown Hotel; dishes P140) Lucite tables, plastic chairs and speedy service lend this popular Chinese and Filipino eatery a fast-food air, however the portions are large and the food quite good. Located on the ground floor of the Iloilo Midtown Hotel.

Calzada Grill (Diversion Rd; set meals P40-70; 11pm-3am) A popular place for Filipino food, live music and 24-hour pool tables.

Coffee Break (General Luna St; 12-24hr) An inexpensive Starbucks imitator with all the perks, such as a magazine and newspaper rack, frappuccino-like drinks, and sandwiches, but with better music.

SEAFOOD

The motto for these restaurants is 'live is better than fresh'.

Breakthrough Restaurant (Arevelo; fish meals around P100; 11.30am-9pm) An open-air, beachside restaurant near the Villa Regatta in Arevelo. The menu is there for you to see: fish, lobster, crab, oysters etc, all on display. Point, sit, wait and – finally – eat.

Ocean City Seafood & Restaurant (☎ 336 0118; General Luna St; dishes P100) The air-con side of this popular restaurant is large and plain and the other side frequently has cheesy live pop music, but the seafood is fresh and tasty. It also has some speciality dishes such as Peking duck (P600 for half) and pan-fried pigeon (P200 a piece).

Nes & Tat's Manokan & Seafoods (☎ 321 2571, 509 3112; Diversion Rd; meals P55-100), **Butot Balat** (☎ 321 3752; Diversion Rd; mains P125) and **Marina** (☎ 320 1230; Diversion Rd; meals P35-150) are three deservedly popular point-and-eat-restaurants with breezy open-air dining.

Jalandoni Seafood Stalls (Diversion Rd; meals P25-100) is a row of street stalls selling good, cheap, barbecued seafood including prawns for P120 per kilogram.

Drinking & Entertainment

Iloilo is second only to Cebu in the Visayas in terms of having a vibrant and active nightlife and music scene. Fuelled by a significant university population, bands perform nightly at many of the popular bars while most rock late into the night on weekends. The Smallville complex on Diversion Rd has several happening bars that attract a fashionable crowd.

Pier 16 (☎ 321 3475; 11pm-2am) A club, bar and restaurant in one. It has a large open-air patio where big music acts from Manila or Cebu sometimes perform. There's a big screen for nightly movies and good food including crispy chicken (P65) and squid (P100).

O2 (11.5pm-3am), which has live music nightly, **Club Verz** (11.5pm-3am), which parties with a DJ, and **Flow Bar** (☎ 6pm-3am) are all in the Smallville complex.

Shopping

The main shopping centre in town is the sparkling new downtown SM Robinson's Mall. The older flagship SM City (Diversion Rd; 11.5am-8pm) has movie theatres as well; there are two other SM branches around town. Gaisanos City, Atrium and Marymart round out the shopping-mall roster.

Getting There & Away

All of the shopping plazas have ticketing offices open 9am to 8pm daily.

AIR

Airline offices at Iloilo's Mandurriao airport (☎ 320 8048), 8km northwest of downtown, include **Cebu Pacific** (☎ 320 6889), **PAL** (☎ 320 3030/3131/7151) and **Air Philippines** (☎ 320 8048/49/52). Taxis to the airport cost P100; jeepneys cost P10.

Cebu Pacific and PAL fly between Cebu City and Iloilo City once or twice daily (30 minutes).

Cebu Pacific, PAL and Air Philippines have several flights daily between Manila and Iloilo (one hour).

Cebu Pacific flies daily from Iloilo City to Davao (two hours) via Cebu City in the early morning. Air Philippines and PAL fly the same route several times a week.

PAL flies from Iloilo to Puerto Princesa (one hour) and back four times per week.

BOAT

Negros Navigation and WG&A Superferry have offices at the dock where Bacolod boats leave. Trans-Asia Shipping is based at the Foreign Pier. Sulpicio Lines is on Muelle Loney St.

Cebu & Negros

See p238 and p285 for information on boat services between Iloilo City and Cebu City, and Iloilo City and Bacolod.

Guimaras

There are plenty of daily ferries and pump-boats between Iloilo City and Guimaras' main ports of Buenavista Wharf and Jordan. See p317 for more information.

Luzon

Negros Navigation goes to Manila most days (P1695, 20 hours). Sulpicio leaves for Manila twice a week (P895, 20 hours, or via Estancia 30 hours). WG&A SuperFerry has boats to Manila three days a week (P1245, seven hours).

Mindanao

Negros Navigation has a once-weekly boat to Cagayan de Oro (P1260, 14 hours); to Zamboanga (P765, 17 hours), which continues on to General Santos (P1270, 33

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Villa Regatta (☎ 338 9715; Sto Niño Sur, Arevelo; buffet P190) Owned and operated by Pauline of Al Dente, Villa Regatta, the newest addition to the Arevelo beachfront seafood scene, serves up about the most spectacular Friday night all-you-can-eat buffet in the archipelago. Excuse the hyperbole, since this author inevitably has not eaten everywhere, but after several trips to the buffet, and gorging on creatively done crab, lobster, shrimp, mussels, squid and so on, he made this pronouncement to his fellow diners and he will stick to it. Other nights of the week, the gluttony is toned down. Seating is in a large nipa pavilion or directly on the beach. Get here by Calumpang jeepney (P5) or by taxi (P50).

hours); and to Ozamis (P1215, 14 hours), which continues on to Iligan (P1215, 20 hours).

Sulpicio goes to Zamboanga/General Santos four afternoons a week (P548/930, 13 to 16 hours), and to Cotabato (via Zamboanga; P780, 48 hours) once a week.

SuperFerry has a once-weekly trip to General Santos (P1200, 24 hours); to Davao (P1200, 34 hours); to Cagayan de Oro (P1190, 13 hours); to Iligan (P1145, 14 hours); and to Ozamis (P1145, 18 hours).

Palawan

Milagrosa J-Shipping (% 335 0955) has a boat twice a week for Cuyo Islands (P220, 12 hours) that continues on to Puerta Princesa (tourist class P855, 38 hours) before returning to Iloilo City.

BUS

The main destination outside Iloilo City is Caticlan (as a launching pad to Boracay). Buses and vans run continually all morning to Caticlan (nonair-con/air-con P112/123, 5½ hours), slowing down or stopping service around 1pm. Other destinations include Kalibo (P68, four hours), Roxas (P47, three hours), and Estancia (P52, 3½ hours). These are serviced by a variety of bus lines, including Ceres Bus Liner (% 321 2491/2371, 337 0456), with buses starting before dawn and running every 30 minutes until around 4pm. Air-con buses are up to 30% more expensive.

Ceres buses also ply the recently instituted nautical highway route between Iloilo and Cubao, Manila. There are three early-morning trips daily (nonair-con/air-con P1035/1305, 17 hours, hourly 3am to 5am). Two legs of this route involve ferry transport.

Also servicing the route to Caticlan (and several other major destinations) are privately operated (and usually air-con) L-300 minibuses that, when full, head off along standard bus and jeepney routes for around 25% above the usual bus fare. Drivers tout for passengers at most of the main bus stations. Direct trips to Caticlan (P130) or Kalibo (P100) from Iloilo City can cut down travelling time by about half an hour, and are a more cushy way to travel. There are jeepneys running all day every day to towns west of Iloilo; they may terminate in these places, or simply drop you off and keep going.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is about 4km northwest of the town centre behind SM City mall, and a taxi there costs about P100.

CAR

Hire-car companies usually provide drivers for a similar price to cars without drivers. Rates within the city's limits for hire cars are around P500 for the first three hours then P150 for succeeding hours; and for air-con vans, P850 for the first three hours then P200 per hour. Companies include Sarabia Manor Hotel (% 335 1021) and Lexus Rent-A-Car (% 335 1171). Panay Adventures Tours (p300) has comparable rates, with optional tour-guiding thrown in.

JEEPNEY

The ever-reliable jeepney offers a great way to explore Iloilo. For the standard P5.50 around-town rate, jeepneys marked 'La Paz', 'Jaro' and 'Liko' will take you north of central Iloilo; and 'Molo' and 'Arevalo' will take you west. For a little more you can get to Guimbal (P7.50), Tigbauan (P9), Miagao (P15) and San Joaquin (P20).

GUIMARAS

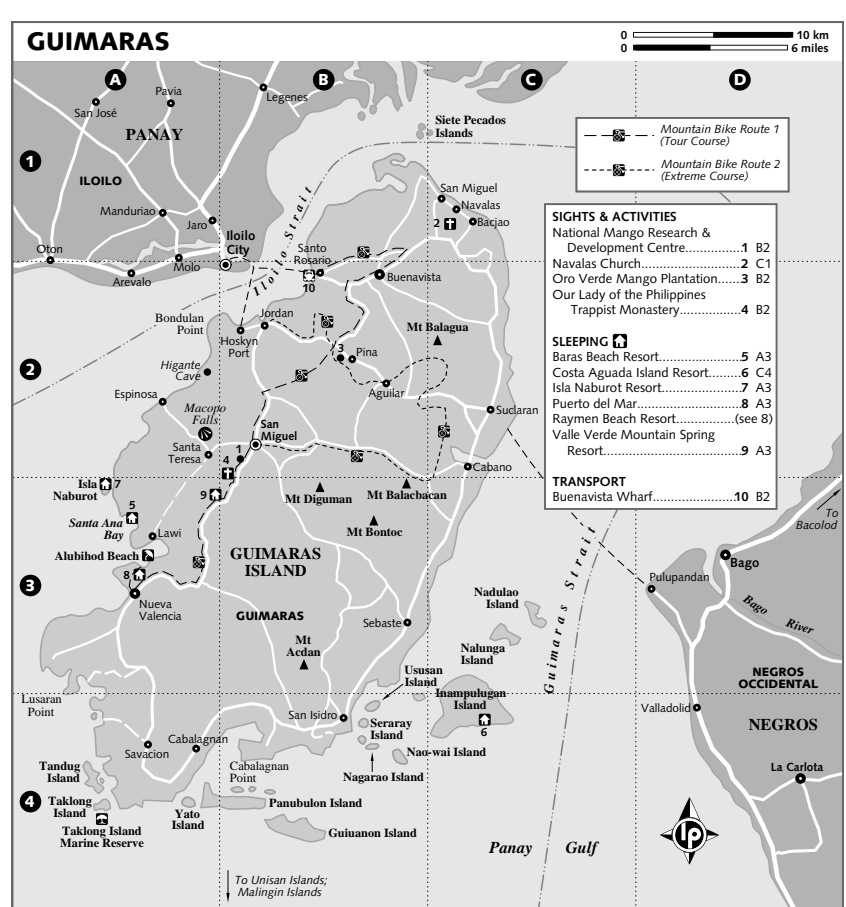
% 033 / pop 141,500

Just a short boat ride from urban Iloilo and Panay, Guimaras is an example of what a divide of only a few kilometres of water can mean in terms of development. But this gulf, both physical and mental, only heightens Guimaras' allure. Its reputation rests squarely on the renown of its sweet mangoes, but it attracts visitors because of its winding scenic roads (perfect for biking), beaches, the coastal area around Alubihod Beach in Santa Ana Bay and Baras Beach in Lawi Bay, and opportunities for island-hopping to the south and east.

San Miguel, the island's laid-back capital, is not much more than a wide, main street. It has a ticketing office, bakeries and other eateries, though like the rest of the island it was Internet-free at the time of research.

Information

The helpful **tourist office** (% 503 0328; www.guimaras.gov.ph; h 7.30am-5pm) at Hoskyn Port in Jordan (hoar-daan) is worth a stop even just as a refuge to keep the dozens of tricycle drivers at



bay while sorting out plans. Transport rates for all island destinations are posted here.

Ask at Hoskyn Port for Richard Caro (% 0914 501 537), an enterprising and knowledgeable tricycle driver and guide.

Sights

The time-ravaged Navallas Church is about 7km from Buenavista on the northern end of the island. Built in the 17th century, the limestone church is fronted by some beautiful, big trees and a squat, roofless belltower. Head towards the water, and you'll reach the summer retreat of the wealthy Lopez family, known as Roca Encantada (Enchanted Rock). From here you can often hire pumpboats to explore an uninhabited cluster of

seven islands to the north, known as Siete Pecados, or the 'Islands of Seven Sins'. It's a P300 tricycle ride to the area from Jordan.

To see Guimaras' famous mangoes up close, try Oro Verde mango plantation (% /fax 0912 520 0354), near Buenavista. Over 50,000 trees (some over 100 years old) are grown on the plantation, a busy place come harvest time in April and May (see p308). Contact the plantation to make an appointment to visit.

Just outside San Miguel on the road to Lawi, you'll find the 270-hectare National Mango Research & Development Centre (% 237 0912; h 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), of interest only to mangophiles; information is available on mango varieties, current research projects and mango-product processes.

Our Lady of the Philippines Trappist Monastery, on the main road south of San Miguel, is the only men's monastery in the Philippines under the Cistercian order. This well-kept complex, founded in 1972, includes a turreted accommodation-and-seminar building, a modern church with blindingly well-polished tiles that seems slightly out of place here, and some prime farmland. There's accommodation here – see below. You can get here from San Miguel by jeepney (P6) or tricycle (P70).

Activities

Several resorts in Guimaras rent out OK mountain bikes (around P300 per day), but for a better bike, and trail guides, contact Panay Adventures Tours (p300).

A nearly 30-hectare plot of forested land on the way from Hoskyn Port to Alubihod Beach, **Guimaras Adventure Park** (☎ 0916 821 9023; paintball per day per person P150) offers paintball, target shooting, horse riding and rappelling, at least until the trees mature. Ask for Vince Corpus. It's a P60 tricycle ride from Jordan.

Macopo Falls (picnic shelters per day P50, day-trip admission P10), 1.5km from San Miguel (look for the hand-painted sign that says 'Farm Tourism'; P15 by tricycle from San Miguel), offers hiking, swimming and great views all in one spot, though water is scarce during the dry season. At the bottom of a steep precarious hill trail among young mahoganies is a refreshing pool beneath the falls; the falls themselves snake through pristine, rocky terrain high above.

Festivals & Events

Ang Pagtaltal Sa Guimaras (late Mar/Apr) This festival draws big crowds to Jordan every Good Friday to watch the re-enactment of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Unlike re-enactments in other parts of the country, the Guimaras presentation usually sees an amateur 'Christ' roped rather than nailed to his cross.

Manggahan Sa Guimaras fiesta (Mango Festival; May) The island's much admired mangoes are honoured just after harvest time each year on the lawns in front of the Provincial Capital Building in San Miguel.

Sleeping & Eating

INLAND

Valle Verde Mountain Spring Resort (☎ 0918 730 3446; s/d 400/500; Ⓢ) Halfway between San Miguel and Lawi, on one of the island's highest points, this resort peers over the

valley rainforest and nearby reefs of Lawi Bay. Steep steps lead down to a few basic but large wood and nipa cottages and further down to a spring-fed swimming pool (nonguests P30). There's electricity in the late afternoon, and meals can be prepared with prior notice (around P50 a meal). Take a jeepney from Jordan (P10) or San Miguel (P5) if you don't mind the 500m walk to the resort, or go by tricycle (P100 from Jordan). Mountain bikes (P500 per day) and motorbikes (P500 per day) can be organised.

Our Lady of the Philippines Trappist Monastery (☎ 0917 240 0329, 0912 520 1538; r incl meals with fan/air-con P350/500; Ⓜ) Rooms are available for reverent guests, but you'll have to book in advance. Both men and women are welcome.

ALUBIHOD BEACH

Puerto del Mar (☎ 336 5457/1710; r with fan/air-con P700/900; Ⓜ) Follow the path around a steep hill near Alubihod Beach to this resort of cliff-perched nipa huts on a private cove with a miniature beach. Rooms have private bathrooms and balconies and, above all, privacy. Admission for nonguests is P20.

Raymen Beach Resort (☎ 0918 520 7271; r with fan/air-con from P500/900) Alubihod Beach is essentially the Raymen resort, for better or worse. This small compound of concrete buildings with basic tiled rooms gets crowded and noisy with picnickers on weekends. There's a restaurant with Filipino food (mains P50 to P100).

OFFSHORE ISLANDS

Isla Naburot Resort (☎ 321 1654; r from P1500) If you find Guimaras too cosmopolitan head to this tiny island off the west coast. The resort, sheltered in a pretty little cove, is made from natural materials including pebbles, shells, tree trunks and the discarded parts of other houses. The furnishings are antique, and the stone and wooden cottages are rustically comfortable; some rooms have private balconies. There's another separate house on a cliff and a restaurant on the beach. Reservations are required. Take a boat directly from Iloilo City (P3000) or from Lawi on Guimaras (P400). The resort has an office in San Miguel next to the Pasabalung Centre.

Costa Aguada Island Resort (☎ Manila 02-890 5333; www.costa.com.ph; r from P1750; Ⓢ) This resort

(Continued on page 317)

(Continued from page 308)

on Inampulugan, a large island off the south-east coast of Guimaras, is less rustic – rooms have intercoms – but an equally good place to feel a little like Robinson Crusoe, albeit a Crusoe with the option of departing by helicopter (one of the amenities is a helipad). The spacious bamboo and nipa cottages are attractive and the good open-air restaurant serves fresh seafood. Activities other than exploring the beautiful natural surroundings include taking a dip in the freshwater swimming pool, horse riding and tennis. To get there take a pumpboat from San Isidro or Sabang on Guimaras or Bacolod on Negros.

Getting There & Away

There are pumpboats and ferries between Iloilo City and Jordan (Hoskyn Port) from around 5am to 6pm (P7.50, 15 minutes, departures every 15 minutes). They leave Iloilo at Ortiz boat station, at the southern end of Ortiz St (take a Mandurriao jeepney, P5.50). Small ferries service the same route (P7.50, 30 minutes) every hour.

Pumpboats to Buenavista wharf (west of Buenavista town) leave from Iloilo's Parola boat station, on Muelle Loney St (P8.50, 20 minutes).

A hired pumpboat from between Iloilo City and Guimaras (P1500 per boat) can be organised from any of the ports.

Pumpboats run daily between the west-coast Negros town of Pulupandan and the northeastern Guimaras town of Suclaran (P40, one hour). L-300 vans run from San Miguel to Cabano from where it's a short tricycle ride to Suclaran.

Getting Around

Tricycles roam all over Guimaras, on very good roads, and cost around P150 per hour or P900 a day. This price easily includes waiting time at the various places of interest. Tricycles from Jordan to the resorts at Alubihod Beach are P200 while slower jeepneys are a more economical P20. Multicab vans are also available (P300).

The average short-trip jeepney price between the main towns is P10 (eg from Jordan to San Miguel). Pumpboats are also available for hire at port towns and many beaches. The average price per boat is about P300 for the first hour then P100 per succeeding hour.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Baras Beach Resort (☎ 0917 241 1422, 0917 940 1501; www.baras.willig-web.com; cottages from P700) Watching the sun set over the rocky islets that dot the bay from your private bamboo balcony, you begin to think you must be a millionaire to be able to afford such a privileged existence. It's an understatement to say that the 10 spacious wooden cottages with nipa roofs and cold-water bathrooms are good value at this warm, family-run operation. The kitchen cooks up inspired meals with Indonesian and Malaysian flavour (buffet dinner P250).

A small, sandy beach, a bar, pool tables and table tennis round out the fun. You can rent snorkelling gear (per day P200), one of the large fleet of boats (per hour with crew P250 to P450) and good fishing gear (per day P150). Use of the dinghies is free.

Arrange to be picked up by the resort's 18m pumpboat from Iloilo (per boat P1500, one hour) or make your own way to Alubihod Beach and then hire a pumpboat to the resort (per boat P300, 10 minutes) – or, with considerable more difficulty, hike from Lawi along a very rough track to Sitio Buringut, from where (if you're lucky) you can hire a local to paddle you the remaining way to the resort.

BULABOG PUTI-AN NATIONAL PARK

About 33km north of Iloilo, this 854-hectare park is home to monkeys, wild chickens, native orchids, 18 species of bat and the endangered bleeding-heart pigeon. When you arrive at the base, you'll be asked to log in and give a donation, and on the weekends you'll have to show a permit. These are free for anyone who makes the trek by private vehicle to the faraway DENR office in Barotac Viejo. A better alternative is to visit the park from Monday to Friday, or contact Panay Adventures Tours (p300) to organise a permit.

There are about 35 caves within the park, eight of which are within 3km of the park base. One was used by the Filipino Revolutionary as a hideout from the Spaniards – just ask someone at the base to guide you. Some of the best rock climbing routes in the Philippines have been set up in the park by local enthusiasts. More advanced climbers

can enjoy 50m routes and can even help peg new ones if they wish. Beginners are also encouraged to come along for a lesson. Contact Tribu Outdoor Shop & Climbing Gym (p300) for more details.

Visitors can stay in the empty cottage (P250) at the base or pitch a tent among the mahoganies. There's nearby swimming (P7) and plenty of drinking water, but you'll have to bring your own food. The guys at the base sell soft drinks and will cook for you.

Buses and jeepneys run between Iloilo and the town of Dingle (ding-leh) until late afternoon (P25, 45 minutes). From Dingle, it's a P10 tricycle ride to the park base and an extra P5 to the rock-climbing area.

SOUTHWEST COAST

☞ 033

Panay's southwest coast is dotted with small towns and low-key resorts. The brown-sand beaches are generally unspectacular, but if you like checking out old Spanish churches, or are after a quiet getaway, there are plenty of choices.

Tigbauan

Only 22km from Iloilo City, the small town of Tigbauan (tig-bow-an) is an unassuming place centred on the baroque-fronted Tigbauan Church, the site of the country's first Jesuit school for boys, established in 1592.

Guimbal & Around

Guimbal (*gim*-bal with a hard 'g') is 29km from Iloilo. It has one of the prettiest town plazas in the region, and on the western side of this plaza is the mighty sandstone landmark known as the Guimbal Roman Catholic Church. Down by the water, you will find several incredibly solid, creeper-covered 17th-century *bantayan* (watchtowers) squeezed in among the houses along the waterfront, built by the Spanish for keeping out marauding Moro (Muslim) pirates.

From Guimbal, you can take a jeepney to Igaras (P10, 15 minutes) and ask someone to set you on the 30-minute walk to Nadsadjan Waterfall, a 15m-high torrent with a deep swimming hole at the base.

Shamrock Beach Resort (☞ 508 8561; r with fan/air-con P450/850; a), right on the water just west of Guimbal proper, offers big, clean hotel-style cottages with private cold-water bathroom and breezy restaurant.

Racso's Woodland (☞ 315 5003; racsos@iloilo.net; r from P900; s) is a large property with a miniature bird and fish zoo; more humane accommodation with private hot-water bathrooms is available for guests and there's a huge pool and a poolside restaurant.

Miagao

The town of Miagao (mee-yag-ow) occupies a hill 40km from Iloilo City. Taking pride of place at the top of this hill is the imposing **Miagao Church** (officially known as Santo Tomas de Villanueva), one of four Philippine churches to have made Unesco's World Heritage list. Built between 1787 and 1797, the church served as a fortress against Muslim raiders and over the years was damaged by fighting, fire and earthquakes; it was finally restored to its rococo glory in 1962. Its bas-relief façade depicts St Christopher strolling through a tropical forest with baby Jesus.

On the west side of town is the Visayan campus of the University of the Philippines, which explains the presence of a good number of students.

There are plenty of destinations for day trips from Miagao including **Sinuhutan Cave**, **Danao Lake**, interesting rock formations and cool fern forests, all of which surround the town of La Consolacion, a jeepney ride from Miagao (P20, 45 minutes). **Bugsukan Falls** and **Tabay Falls** can be reached by Bacold-Delije Rd jeepney (P20, one hour) and then by foot (one hour).

Accommodation in town isn't great – you may have to make do with **Villa Marina Beach Resort** (r from P350; a), near the university. Double rooms are small and basic, but have air-con and private cold-water bathrooms.

Tiolas & Around

The pretty little town of Tiolas, 60km from Iloilo, is where the coast road forks. The main road – to San José (Antique) – heads inland through some spectacular mountain country and rice terracing, while a rough, mostly unsealed road follows the rugged coast to the remote town of Anini-y, on Panay's southwestern tip. **San Bernadino Mountain Resort & Restaurant** (☞ 0917 497 3806; r P400; a s) about 10km from Tiolas at the top of a steep hill, just before the Iloilo–Antique border offers well-kept rooms, a restaurant (meals P70 to P120) and gardens, all with views over the nearby valley.

The bumpy coastal road south of Tiolas to Anini-y meanders along past pebbly, palm-lined beaches, waters dotted with fisher folk and views back to the mountainous coast. There are several almost identical resorts, all with basic huts with fan and cold-water bathroom, positioned close to the water. Shady picnic shelters are also available for rent along these beaches.

The resorts don't have restaurants so you'll have to bring your own food or if you give sufficient warning they can probably organise meals. The first in line from Tiolas, and a fine choice if you decide to look no further, is **Basang Basa Beach Resort** (☞ 0917 252 3754; cottages P500-1000), followed 2km south by **Tobog Beach Resort** (cottages P600-1000).

Anini-y & Nogas Island

About 80km from Iloilo, Anini-y (ah-nee-nee) is a lonely little place with sulphur hot springs in the town itself, and **Nogas Island**, a marine sanctuary and one of Panay's best and most pristine coral reefs, just offshore.

For diving, contact **Real Adventures** or **Far East Scuba Institute Inc** in Iloilo City (see p300).

SAN JOSÉ (ANTIQUE)

☞ 036 / pop 48,300

On the west coast where the mountains meet the sea, about 96km from Iloilo, this largish port town is one of several places in the Philippines called San José, so most people refer to it as San José Antique (an-tee-kay). There's not much to draw travellers, but it's a convenient stop if you're circumnavigating the island. Opposite the town's central plaza there's an Equitable PCI Bank with an ATM, and an Internet café (h 8am-9pm Mon-Fri; per hr P25) is next to the Jollibee.

Centillon Pension House (☞ 540 9403; r P300), **Adelaide Pension House** (☞ 540 7162; r P300) and **Marina Lodge** (☞ 0919 539 8606; r with fan/air-con P250/600; a) all offer no-frills accommodation.

Easily the best non-Jollibee choice in town, **Regina's Restaurant** (☞ 540 9528; meals P40-250; a) is a clean, modern restaurant serving seafood, sandwiches, steaks and Chinese, Filipino and Indonesian dishes. Pancakes (P45) and continental breakfasts are available. Down the street is **D'Reyeses Batchoy & Restaurant & Pizza House** (sandwiches P22-50, pizzas P55), a low-key, airy restaurant opposite the city plaza.

Getting There & Away

Asian Spirit flies on Monday, Wednesday and Friday between San José and Manila (one hour).

Ceres Bus Liner buses (and other companies) leave every 30 minutes for Iloilo City (P70, 2½ hours). Much more comfortable air-con vans ply same route (P100, two hours).

The town's pier serves **MBRS Shipping Lines** (☞ 0919 286 4712), which sails to Manila three times a week (P710, 17 hours), and to the Cuyo Islands (Palawan) once a week (P190, four hours). Buy your tickets at the Trade Town Building in the public market.

TIBIAO & AROUND

Near the town of Tibiao, north of San José, the mighty Tibiao River has plenty of white water and some excellent kayaking spots. There's no commercial accommodation in Tibiao, but the municipal tourist office in the centre of town can organise homestays.

Bugtong Bato Falls (admission P10) is a 6km walk from Tibiao. Head off from the main road near the municipal tourist office. Altogether there are seven levels of waterfalls sprawled across a steep, 14km stretch of river. The first and second falls are the only safe swimming areas – falling rocks elsewhere make exploring too dangerous. The second waterfall is reached via a rope.

If travelling from Caticlan, get a jeepney to Crossing Nabas (P20, 30 minutes), and another towards Tibiao (P45, three hours). There are buses every 30 minutes leaving San José for Libertad via Tibiao (P26, two hours).

ROXAS (CAPIZ)

☞ 036 / pop 126,350

The capital of Capiz province and the commercial capital of northern Panay, Roxas (*raw*-hahs) claims to be the 'seafood capital of the Philippines' (a boast supported by the fact that it ships out tons of processed sea critters daily, rather than by what's consumed at its restaurants). Unfortunately none of these titles translates into a pleasant experience, and you'll be assaulted by the smells and sounds of hundreds of motorised tricycles, making Roxas worthwhile only as an alternative transport hub to Kalibo; it has two nearby ports, an airport and convenient road links with Iloilo City and Caticlan.

The home town of the Commonwealth's first president, Manuel Roxas, the city's central business district is based around the Metropolitan Cathedral and belfry on Rizal St, which is on the banks of the Panay River. Almost all of the accommodation and the mall are to the north or the river while the bus and van terminals are to the south.

Information

There are several Internet cafés around town including **Sub 8** (☎ 8am-midnight; per hr P20), which has branches just down the street from Plaza Central Inn and in Gaisano Mall.

There are banks with ATMs all over including a **PNB** (Magellan St) near the cathedral, a **Metrobank** (Burgos St) and an **Equitable PCI** (Roxas Ave).

On the northern bank of the Panay River just over the bridge is the **tourism office** (☎ 621 5316; ☎ 8am-5pm). Ask to speak with **Rodolfo Maestro Jr.**

Sights & Activities

Near the cathedral is **Ang Panublion** (Roxas City Museum; Arnaldo St; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sat). Originally built as a water-storage tank, this 1910 heritage building nowadays houses an assortment of period furniture, local artefacts and a shell collection.

Baybay Beach, around 3km north of downtown Roxas, towards Culasi Port, is a popular 7km-long, brown-sand beach lined with eateries and picnic shelters. This is the best place to pick up fresh and cheap seafood, which can also be bought at the city's wet market at Teodoro Arcenas Trade Centre.

The largest bell in Asia is found in a church in the town of Pan-ay, a 20-minute ride from Roxas. The beautiful **Pan-ay Bell**, made entirely of coins during the Spanish period, is more than 2m tall. To get there, take a tricycle (P25), or a Pan-ay jeepney from Banica St (P10, 20 minutes).

Festivals & Events

Roxas' **Sinadya Fiesta** is a raucous, colourful, four-day event held in early December. It culminates in the celebration of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.

Sleeping

Roxas President's Inn (☎ 621 0208; presinn@i-rox.net.ph; cnr Rizal & Lopez Jaena Sts; r from P950; Ⓐ) A mix of old-world charm and modern ameni-

ties, the President is the best place to stay in Roxas. Each stylishly furnished room has timber floors, quiet air-con and cable TV, and the wrought iron railings are a nice touch. Rates include breakfast at the ground-floor restaurant, which specialises in local dishes (eg sizzling squid; P140).

La Hacienda Hotel (☎ 621 5129; Arnaldo Blvd; r from P1597; Ⓐ Ⓢ) Two-storey Mediterranean-style La Hacienda, next to Gaisano Mall, looks abandoned from the road, but behind the deserted lots is Roxas' swankiest hotel. It may feel lonely but rooms are spacious and modern, with cable TV, air-con, hot-water marble bathroom, fridge and coffee bar.

Plaza Central Inn (☎ 621 3061; 2075 P Gomez St; r from P500; Ⓐ) A small step up in quality from Halaran Plaza a few doors down, the Plaza Central has bright and modern well-kept rooms with polished-wood floors. Cable TV is available for P50 extra.

Julieta's Hotel (☎ 621 2089; Arnaldo Blvd; s/d P600/750; Ⓐ) Just north of Gaisano Mall, and La Hacienda Hotel, Julieta's is a modest green hotel with big, slightly drab but clean, tiled rooms with hot water, cable TV and air-con. Rooms here tend to be quieter than those in the centre of town. Breakfast is included.

Halaran Plaza Hotel (☎ 621 0649; P Gomez St; r with fan/air-con P450/600) This long-standing place is beginning to show some wear, though its riverside location and large rooms with timber floors go some way to make up for this (and the noise). Downstairs is a breezy, riverside café with Chinese and Filipino food (P30 to P100).

Eating

Eight Dragons (Burgos St; Ⓐ) serves Chinese food and **Nestas Restaurant** (Magallanes St) does Filipino and Western standards. Gaisano Mall on Arnaldo Blvd has a Jollibee, Chow King, Greenwich and a few other food outlets.

The best dining is in Baybay, where 'resorts' – comprising a string of nipa barbecue huts – line the beach. They include **Baybayon** (Marc's Beach Resort; ☎ 621 1103; Baybay), left (towards Culasi Wharf) off Arnaldo Ave, which serves baskets of fresh oysters (approximately 15 to 20 shells for P40) and a variety of fish and squid (starting at about P40). **The Wayfarer** (☎ 621 1479; Baybay; seafood around P100, steaks around P140), next to Baia Norte Beach Club, is a more upmarket Baybay option, with a pool table and bar.

Shopping

Gaisano Mall (Arnaldo Blvd) The city's shopping plaza, and the best place to head for fast food, cinema, Internet access, groceries and general shopping.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Roxas–Manila route is serviced daily by Cebu Pacific and PAL (one hour). Dirt-cheap promo fares are sometimes available. Offices are at the airport, a five-minute tricycle ride (P15) north of central Roxas.

Cebu Pacific (☎ 621 0307; Legaspi St) also has an office on the street that runs behind the cathedral.

BOAT

There is a boat terminal on either side of Roxas. To the west, the large Culasi Port has boats going to Manila. To the east of town, the little Banica wharf serves pumpboats to Masbate, though the schedule is very iffy. Jeepneys from town will take you to Culasi/Banica for P5/10.

Negros Navigation (☎ 621 3822; Roxas Ave), **SuperFerry** (☎ 621 5567; Rizal St) and **Moreta Shipping** (☎ 621 1283; Magallanes St) all have boats several times a week to Manila (tourist class from P1300, 17 hours) and offices at Culasi Port. **SuperFerry** also has a boat once a week to Dumaguait Port (Kalibo; P100, 1½ hours).

PPA (☎ 621 2008) cargo pumpboats travel between Roxas and San Fernando (Sibuyan Island; P180, five hours) three times a week.

Roxas' Banica wharf services pumpboats to Masbate, with trips to Milagros (P180, six hours) and Balud (P100, four hours) once a week.

BUS & JEEPNEY

Air-con buses for Iloilo City (P120, three hours) leave from the Ceres Bus Liner terminal on the southern end of Roxas Ave, opposite the Caltex service station. There are no Ceres Bus Liner buses going direct to Kalibo, but you can take one to Sigma, then change for Kalibo (P50, two hours).

Much easier is to take an L-300 van direct (P80, 1½ hours) – they leave hourly all day from 6am until 5pm from the main Albar terminal, just near the Ceres Bus Liner terminal. Caticlan is serviced regularly as well (P180, four hours). There are other signposted L-300 terminals around town.

There is also a large jeepney terminal at Gaisano Mall with vehicles that head for Estancia (P60, one hour) and various other destinations.

KALIBO

☎ 036 / pop 62,440

For travellers Kalibo is primarily an alternative port of entry to Boracay and the site of the raucous Ati-Atihan Festival (p322). The city is thought to have been founded around 1250 by Malay settlers from Borneo.

Information

Internet cafés are easy to find around town; there's one in Gaisano Mall, as well as **i-Next Internet** (Roxas Ave). The **Kalibo Tourism Office** (☎ 262 1020; 2nd fl, Municipal Hall, Burgos St; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) is not accustomed to tourists.

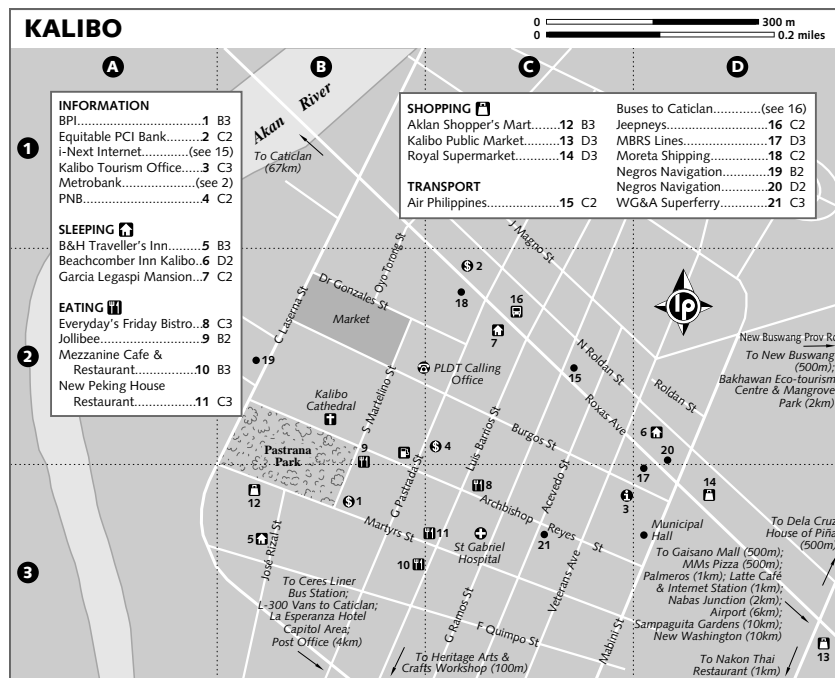
Banks include **BPI** (Martyrs St), **Equitable PCI Bank** (Roxas Ave), **Metrobank** (Roxas Ave) and **PNB** (G Pastrada St).

Sights & Activities

Five minutes from town in New Buswang (P25 by tricycle) is the **Bakhawan Eco-tourism Centre & Mangrove Park** (☎ 262 5140; www.mangrovesecopark.com; New Buswang), the base for a 70-hectare mangrove reforestation area. The area was originally mangrove, but due to bad land use it deteriorated to mudflats which have since been naturally 'reclaimed' by the land; it's a thriving ecosystem, providing the community with many valuable dietary and economic resources.

Run by a community co-operative, the park has a laboratory for researching crustacean and fish cultures; visitors can check out the plantation and intertidal ecology from a bamboo boardwalk (P2). There is also a bird-viewing platform, and binoculars and local tour-guides are available. **Accommodation** (dm P200, r from P500; Ⓐ) is available at the centre as are Filipino meals (P100); there are also several restaurants nearby.

Kalibo is the centre for many types of weaving such as: *pinya* cloth weaving, an 8th-century tradition that produces fine cloth from silk and pineapple-leaf fibres; abaca weaving – from banana seeds, producing a stiff cloth; and *nito* weaving, a sturdy vine that is woven into stiff baskets and mats. The *pinya* cloth is still used for producing *barong* (traditional formal wear), but all methods are employed for



producing modern designs popular with the European market.

To view the *pinya* weaving process, visit **Heritage Arts & Crafts** (% 268 5270; General Luna St, extension of Luis Barrios St; h 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) and **Dela Cruz House of Piña** (% 262 3267; New Buswang; h 9am-5pm Mon-Sat). For sales, Heritage Arts and Crafts has a tiny shop selling ordinary *pinya* and abaca products a few blocks away.

Festivals & Events

In January the fantastic **Ati-Atihan Festival** is held. The nation's biggest and best mardi gras, it possibly dates back to the days of the Borneo settlers. It's a week-long street party raging from sun-up to sundown and peaking on the third Sunday of January.

Similar festivals are held in January in the neighbouring towns of Batan (late January), Ibajay (late January), Makato (15 January) and Altavas (22 January).

Sleeping

During the huge Ati-Atihan Festival, you should book a hotel at least a month in

advance and expect to pay from two to five times the regular listed price.

Beachcomber Inn Kalibo (% 262 4846; bcombinn@cruznet.ph; 467 N Roldan St; r from P1050) Within walking distance of shops and the mall, the Beachcomber is a friendly and professional place that will help with ticketing. Rooms are small, marble floored, and furnished with wicker and bamboo. Breakfast can be provided in the pleasant ground-floor dining area.

La Esperanza Hotel (% 262 3989; laesperanzahotel@yahoo.com; Osmeña Ave; r from P700; a) Next to the Ceres Bus Liner and minivan terminals, and on the way to the airport, this is a good choice for those desiring a little quiet and professional service. More expensive rooms have hot water and bath tub.

B&H Traveller's Inn (% 268 3806; Arguelles Bldg, Rizal St; r P950; a) and **Garcia Legaspi Mansion** (% 262 5588; 159 Roxas Ave; r with fan P400, r with air-con from P700) both have clean modern accommodation near the city centre.

There is peaceful accommodation at the **Bakhawan Eco-tourism Centre & Mangrove Park** (p321).

Eating & Entertainment

L@tte Coffee & Internet Station (dishes P70; a i) As hip and modern as they come in Kalibo, this multipurpose place, a kilometre or so from the centre on the way to the airport, has comfortable couches, outdoor patio, fancy coffee and ice-cream drinks like the jungle java shake (P85). Food includes pasta (P70), sandwiches (P50) and honey-smoked ribs (P140). Internet is available at a bank of computers against one wall (per hour P30).

Nakon Thai Restaurant (c 0921 375 8198; dishes P80) Find this place serving up good Thai cuisine on the road past the capital building.

Mezzanine Cafe & Restaurant (% 262 3077; Luis Barrios St; dishes P80) Set-up-tempo décor and a permanently set-up stage for the Friday night live music. The dishes are good and cheap and include noodles, burgers, pizza and Filipino and Chinese dishes.

Everyday's Friday Bistro (c 0921 375 8198; h 5pm-midnight) A good place for a drink and a game of pool; there's music and no videoke.

New Peking House Restaurant (Martyrs St; meals around P80) An unassuming eatery serving fine Chinese food.

MMS Pizza (pizza P35) is a little hole-in-the-wall pizzeria across from Gaisano Mall, and **Palmeros** (dishes P200) does good sizzling meat and has outdoor seating. Jollibee fans will rest easy since there's one near Pastrana Park and another in the Gaisano Mall.

Shopping

Gaisano Mall has an Internet café, cinemas, shopping and a few fast food joints.

Getting There & Away

AIR
Kalibo airport is an alternative to Caticlan for travel to Boracay. The planes are larger but of course it involves a road connection that Caticlan doesn't.

There are offices at Kalibo airport for **PAL** (% 262 3260), **Cebu Pacific** (% 262 5406), and **Air Philippines** (% 262 4444). Air Philippines also has an office on Roxas Ave. All have daily flights to and from Manila (one hour). Cebu Pacific flies to Cebu City and back three mornings a week (40 minutes).

BOAT

Manila and Cebu are serviced by boats from Kalibo's nearby ports of New Washington and Dumaguait. Jeepneys for the ports (P20,

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Sampaguita Gardens (% 264 3422; www.sampaguitagardens.com; 500 Rizal St, New Washington; s/d from US\$33/39, ste US\$90; a i s) Trippy, fantastic, unbelievable. None of these words can quite describe this little fantasy world 10km from Kalibo in the port village of New Washington (jeepney P12, 20 minutes). What is it that makes you feel as if you slipped down the rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland? Could it be the huge gingerbread mansion selling Christmas decorations year round? The children's amusement park, the original Model-T Ford automobile, the larger-than-life garish, gold-plated statues in the restaurant serving Chinese and Thai cuisine? Is it the aquarium, the butterfly farm or the church building? Or is it the Balinese-inspired mansion with a huge Presidential suite complete with a four-poster bed and a chest inlaid with mother-of-pearl from North Korea (good value, seriously, at P15,000 a night)? This resort on a brown and rocky beach is owned, or was once owned by a semi-mysterious American from Missouri. The modern rooms are extremely comfortable, comparable to the nicest resort in Boracay. Oh, and there's a deluxe spa, gym, juice bar and pool. Jeepneys to New Washington leave frequently from Kalibo along Roxas Ave.

30 minutes) leave from Magma St, near the Caltex service station on the corner of Mabini St.

Negros Navigation (C Laserna St; Roxas Ave % 262 4943), **Moreta Shipping** (% 262 3003; Roxas Ave) and **WG&A SuperFerry** (% 268 4391; c 0921 375 8198) have boats at least one day a week to Manila (from P1500, 17 hours). SuperFerry also goes to Roxas (P250, 1½ hours) three days a week.

MBRS Lines (% 268 6850; Roxas Ave) has a boat to Cajidiocan (Sibuyan Island; P280, three hours) and on to Romblon town (Romblon Island; P310, five hours).

BUS, JEEPNEY & VANS

Ceres Bus Liner (% 268-4026; Osmeña Ave terminal) buses leave all day for Iloilo City (P68, five to six hours). There are also buses five times daily from Iloilo City to Caticlan that pass through Kalibo (P50, 1½ hours from Kalibo).

L-300 minivans to Iloilo (P150, 3½ hours) and Caticlan (P75, two hours) run from 5am to 6pm, whenever the vans are full, from this same area. Buses and vans also go to Roxas – for details see p321.

Air-con buses and minivans meet Manila flights at Kalibo airport, taking passengers to Caticlan (P150, or P175 including a boat transfer to Boracay, two hours).

TANGALAN

☎ 036

Near the town of Tangalan between Kalibo and Caticlan is a 375-hectare marine sanctuary established in 2003 through the efforts of a locally inspired ecotourism project. Colourful species of coral and fish, sea snakes, turtles and dolphins are once again thriving near Pungtod reef, which was not long ago decimated by dynamite and cyanide fishing. A 10-hectare area within the marine sanctuary is due to open for diving and snorkelling in May 2006. For information contact the local office of tourism (☎ 265 2004; <http://elgu.ncc.gov.ph/ecommunity/tangalan-aklan>).

All accommodation is on the tranquil, white-sand beach in the nearby barangay of Jawili. The resorts will prepare food upon request. Modern Wassenaar Beach Resort (☎ 265 2069; r with fan/air-con P450/1200; Ⓢ) is 3km west of town proper and plans to open up a dive facility. Green Meadows Beach Resort (☎ 265 2013; r P500) has a few nicely designed rooms with character. Also try the Wave Beach Resort (☎ 276 3291; r with fan/air-con P450/1200).

There are frequent jeepneys from Caticlan (P65, one hour) and Kalibo (P15, 30 minutes).

CATICLAN

☎ 036

Caticlan is little more than a departure port for Boracay. Buses arriving here carry passengers straight to the wharf and guides lead the throngs through a smart pavilion onto outrigger boats. For details, see p334. Boats also leave from here to destinations in the Romblon island group.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There's a small airport servicing the ever-popular flights from Manila and Cebu, 1km from the port. Tricycles charge P30 for the trip. With light baggage it's an easy walk.

Asian Spirit (☎ Manila 02-855 3333, in Cebu 032-341 2555), **SEAIR** (☎ Manila 02-884 1521, in Boracay 036 288 5502; www.flyseair.com), **Corporate Air** (☎ Manila 02-852 5504) and **InterIsland** (☎ 288 6876; info@interislandairlines.com) have daily small aircraft servicing Manila (one hour) and Cebu (one hour). For the larger Asian Spirit flights, there are usually airport-wharf transfers included. There are special promotional fares offered throughout the year, often on the early-morning flights.

BOAT

For the Caticlan–Boracay boat service, see p334.

Manila

Negros Navigation departs Caticlan every Thursday at 6pm for Manila (P1600, 12 hours).

The MBRS Lines' MV *Virgin Mary* and MV *Mary the Queen* ply the Lipata (Panay)–Caticlan–Odiongan (Tablas Island)–Manila route. The former departs Caticlan on Tuesdays and Saturdays at 6am while the latter departs Caticlan every Thursday at 6am (P985, 30 hours).

Romblon

There are daily morning pumpboats to and from Santa Fe (P130, 2½ hours) and Looc (P180, three hours), both on Tablas Island, as well as to and from San José on Carabao Island (P50, one hour). All three depart from the Caticlan wharf just past the restaurant with the large San Miguel beer banner around 9am.

LSGA Ferry Corporation (☎ 092 020 8264) has a boat to Looc every Monday at 11.30am (2½ hours) and another to Odiongan every Saturday at 10.30am (three hours). Both return to Caticlan the same day.

Roxas (Mindoro)

There are daily departures (6am to 6pm) from Caticlan to Roxas, Mindoro (nonair-con/air-con P210/250, four hours). The route is serviced by shipping lines including Maharlika, Montenegro and Starlite (☎ 0919 693 7183; www.starlite.ph/ferry.htm). Montenegro's *Maria Vanessa* leaves Caticlan at 6am.

BUS & JEEPNEY

As soon as you exit the port at Caticlan, a throng of bus, van and jeepney drivers

will converge upon you, yelling out destinations and signalling for you to follow. Ceres buses depart Caticlan every hour on the hour from 7am to 2pm for Iloilo (P247, five hours). These buses stop in Kalibo (P100, 1½ hours).

Air-conditioned L-300 vans ply the same route (Iloilo P210, four hours; Kalibo P70, 1½ hours).

BORACAY

☎ 036

Like an ambitious and beautiful pageant winner unwilling to relinquish her crown, Boracay primps and preens year after year, going through its own version of cosmetic surgery in the off-season in order to maintain its crown as the trophy beach of the Philippines. Despite oft-heard nostalgic laments ('In the '80s, the only sound was from the fruit juice shaker machines'), Boracay, little more than a speck off the northwestern tip of Panay, still satisfies the paneloads of holidaymakers looking for sun, sand and nonsobriety. Of course no place (including White Beach, where the action is and all that most people see of the island) can ever live up to the hyped up superlatives bandied about by tourism-department officials. Hotels, restaurants and shops are crowded along the beach like spice shops in a Middle Eastern bazaar, and vendors selling watches, sunglasses, jewellery and boat trips *do* pester you like flies on honey, and the colourful *paraws* are sometimes lined up on the beach as if it were a mall parking lot. But all this aside, Boracay, which is only about 9km long and only 1km wide at its narrow midriff, is an intoxicating mix of yes, sun, sand and nonsobriety.

The island really only started receiving visitors in the '70s, and since then more than 300 resorts and hotels have been built, and the outdoor pedestrian D'Mall expands every year, taking over more real estate and birthing more shops, bars and restaurants. None of this though seems to affect the regular rhythm of the typical day which includes tropical cocktails, fruit shakes, tanning, the occasional afternoon beach-volleyball game and, for the actively inclined, just about every imaginable water activity known to man.

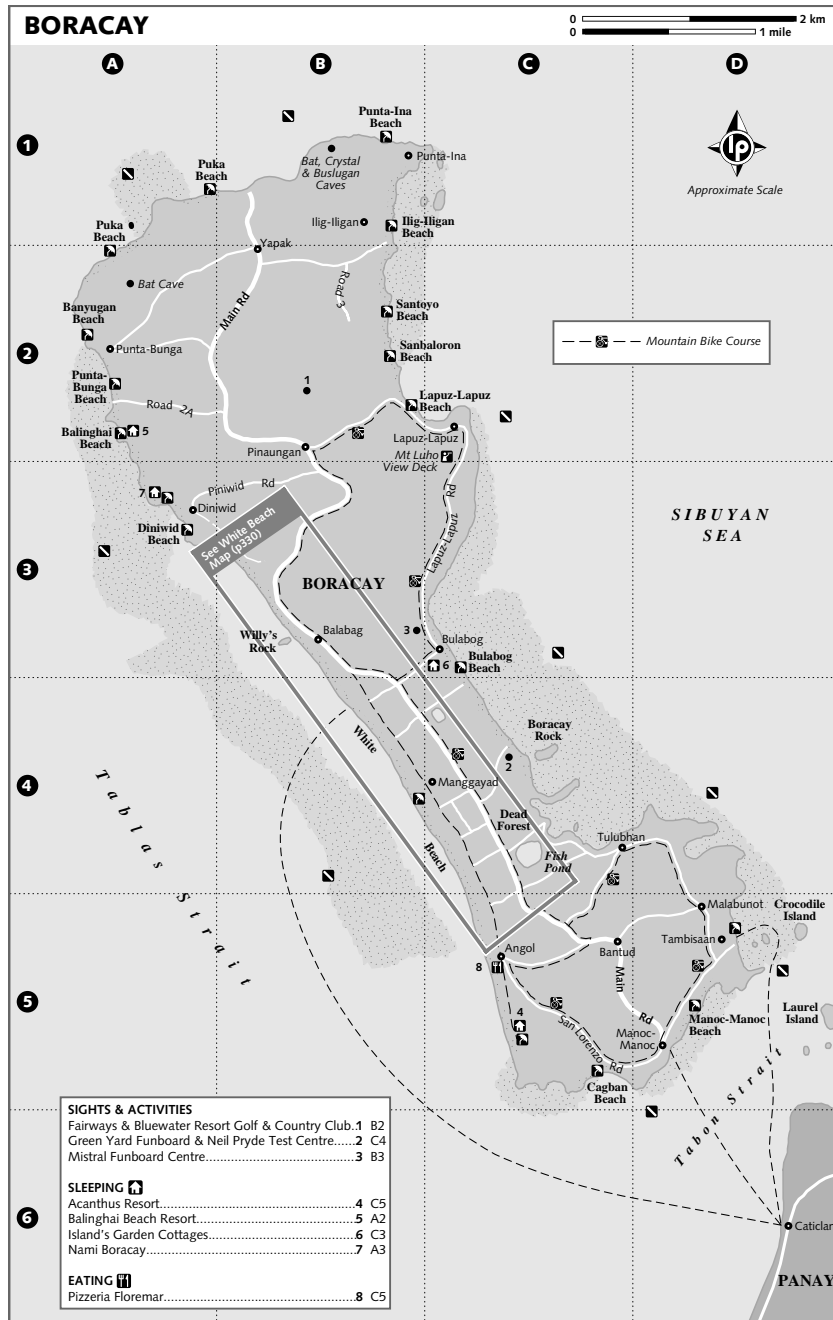
WHEN TO GO?

Of course most people visit during the high season, which is roughly from November to June, and especially in January when nearby Kalibo's Ati-Atihan festival, the International Funboard Cup and the Paraw Cup are held. While the days tend to be sunny and dry, it does mean you will be sharing your paradise with loads of others; hotels will fill early and charge exorbitantly and you're as likely to find peace and quiet as you are to be left alone by vendors selling sunglasses.

Longtime foreign and Filipino visitors say they prefer the low season, roughly from July to October, when White Beach endures onshore winds and soaking afternoon rains. A bamboo and cloth barrier is set along almost the entire length of the beach to keep sand from blowing into hotels and restaurants, and some seaweed is washed ashore. However, there is usually enough sun to keep most people happy, the sandy pedestrian walkway becomes navigable, hotels lower their rates drastically and it's possible to find a quiet part of the beach away from vendors and others just like you.

The national government is trying to partner with the private sector in dealing with contentious issues such as land titling and waste; there's a growing amount of waste arising from poorly regulated development that threatens not only the island's ecological balance but its future as an economic cash cow for the tourism industry and locals alike. A January 2004 fire which razed the Talipapa Public Market and several hotels nearby was partly the result of cramped conditions due to overdevelopment. Shangri-La Hotels is planning a major new development on Punta Bunga, scheduled to open in mid-2007, and there are rumours that Hyatt, Hilton and Novotel are considering building on the island. The majority of visitors to Boracay are increasingly from Korea and other Asian countries, and resorts and restaurants are beginning to cater to their tastes.

You can escape the heavily toured White Beach to Bulabog Beach to the east, which because it's wilder and windier is a favourite windsurfing spot, and to the



long and quiet Puka Beach to the north. Mt Luho View Deck (admission P20) offers views both magnificent and decidedly trashy; its slopes are the site of Boracay's garbage dump (at the time of research there were alternative proposals for dealing with this growing problem).

ORIENTATION

White Beach is the centre of Boracay's tourist area, and three 'boat stations' are stretched out across its sands. These can be hard to spot, being only patches of beach with waiting sheds set back. The beach is dominated by a sandy pedestrian highway – the White Beach Path – where motorised vehicles are banned and it's almost compulsory to go barefoot. A paved road, often clogged with traffic, runs parallel to White Beach and extends beyond it in both directions. There are several smaller roads, some only dirt, that can take you to other parts of the island.

The *E-Z Map*, published annually, is on sale at the Boracay Tourist Centre (right) for P150.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Internet access is everywhere, on both the White Beach Path, Main Rd and within resorts, with rates around P50 to P70 per hour. Wi-fi Internet is accessible at a few places including Friday's Resort and La Capinnina Restaurant, though service is hit or miss; there's talk of more to come.

Boracay Tourist Centre (Map p330; per hr P60; 9am-10pm)

Shines Internet (Map p330; per hr P40; 9am-11pm)

Station 168 (Map p330; 2nd fl, D'Mall entrance; per hr P70; 24hr)

Laundry

Lavandera Nation (Map p330; 288 6575; D'Mall; 8am-10pm)

Pretty Lavandera (Map p330; 9am-6pm)

Medical Services

For serious ailments, diving boats can provide fast transport to the mainland and then patients are taken to Kalibo.

Bysse Medical Clinic (Map p330; 260 3263; D'Mall; 9-11am & 2-7pm)

Don Ciriaco Senares Tirol Senoir Memorial Hospital (Map p330; 288 3041; off Main Rd) Behind station two.

Money

BPI at D'Mall, Allied Bank and Land Bank have ATMs and change money and travellers cheques. Many resorts and the tourist centre will also change both; the foreign-exchange desk at the tourist centre (below) is open 9am to 10pm daily.

Post

There's a postal counter at the tourist centre (below), which has a nominal service fee, and a post office at the northern end of Main Rd.

FedEx and Air 21, both located in D'Mall, can ship packages abroad.

Telephone

Most of the resorts have phones but the rates are high – you are better off going to the tourist centre (below) or one of the many international phone booths dotted along White Beach's sandy path, including several in D'Mall.

Many resorts and restaurants will let you make local calls for free.

Tourist Information

Boracay Tourist Centre (Map p330; 9am-10pm)

Between boat stations two and three, this is a hive of tourist-related activity. From behind a long row of desks, staff offer postal and telephone services, general Boracay information, money changing, ticketing and fast Internet connection (P60).

DOT office (Map p330; 288 3689; D'Mall; 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) The staff is listless but can provide some basic transport info.

Filipino Travel Centre (Map p330; 288 3704/5; www.filipinotravel.com.ph; 9am-6pm) In the Boracay Tourist Centre.

Travel Agencies

BJS Information (Map p330; 288 5646; bjstoursservice@boracay.i-next.net; D'Mall) Can book and confirm domestic and international flights.

Philquest Asia (Map p330; 288 5355; pqaboracay@philquestasia.com; Tirol Business Centre, Main Rd) Books ferries, domestic and international flights. Just off Main Rd in Tirol Shopping Centre.

ACTIVITIES

Boating & Other Water Sports

If it floats then you can find it here. Just about every imaginable water sport can be organised from your hotel, from one of the water-sport centres along the beach path

or from one of the roaming vendors selling trips and activities. Besides the standard boat (P300 to P2500 per hour), kayak (P500 per day) and jet-ski rental (P1500 per half hour), you can try the more unusual kite surfing in which you strap your feet to a small surfboard and lasso your torso to a 4.5m kite or skim boarding (P200 per hour) in which you jump and glide in the shallow surf on a piece of fibreglass.

Allan Fun Tours (Map p330; % 0921 339 8097; allanfunstours@yahoo.com; in front of Villa de Oro) Daily five-hour boat trips around the island that include snorkeling gear, food and drinks (P500 per person).

Hangin Kiteboarding (Map p330; % 288 3663) On the walkway between the beach path and Main Rd that turns into Road 1A.

Isla Kiteboarding (Map p330; % 288 5352; Victory Divers)

Ocean Republic Kite surfing (Map p330; % 288 3876)

Red Pirates (Map p330; % 288 3561; redpi_ratesboracay@hotmail.com; Bom Bom Bar) Does private, full-moon or sunset *paraw* tours, and can be chartered to take you to many spots around northern Panay (per hour P350, full day P2500; food included).

Tommy's Sea Sports (Map p330; % 288 6453) Booth next to Mañana Mexican Cuisine. Rents speedboats (per hr P3500), kneboards (P1500 per half hour), wakeboards (P16 00 per half hour) and any other aqua-cruising device.

Diving & Snorkelling

The entire island of Boracay is surrounded by reef and there are 30-plus dive sites within a 15- to 20-minute boat ride. Boracay's pride and joy, Yapak, off the northern tip, is a sheer soft-coral-covered wall running from 30m to 65m. Big-fish lovers adore this spot, though depth, currents and surface chop restrict it to advanced divers only. There are also drift dives, cave dives, and the protected (usually west) side of the island offers calm, shallow reefs for beginners. One such reef is Crocodile Island; you can swim out here on your own from the small beach at Tambisaan.

There are more than 25 dive centres on Boracay, so if you have the time, it's best to shop around before committing to any in order to find the instructor, location and package that best suits your requirements. Prices are generally as follows: one dive US\$18 to US\$25, equipment rental US\$2 to US\$7, open-water diving certificate US\$280 to US\$320. The following is by no means a comprehensive list.

Aqualife Divers Academy (Map p330; % 288 3276; www.aqualife-divers.com)

Aquarius Diving (Map p330; % 288 3132; www.phildive.com)

Boracay Scuba Diving School (Map p330; % 288 3327; boracayscubadiving@yahoo.com)

Calypto Diving Resort (Map p330; % 288 3206; www.calypto-asia.com)

Dive Gurus (Map p330; % 288 5486; www.divegurus.com)

Lapu-Lapu Diving Centre (Map p330; % 288 3302; www.lapulapu.com)

Victory Divers (Map p330; % 288 3209; www.victorydivers.com)

White Beach Divers (Map p330; % 288 3809; www.whitebeachdivers.com) Also has windsurfing and kite-boarding.

Golf

Club rental is P1000 at **Fairways & Bluewater Resort Golf & Country Club** (Map p326; % 288 5587; www.boracaygolf.com; weekday 18 holes P3360).

Horse Riding

Boracay Horse Riding Stables (Map p330; % 288 3311; hors_estable@yahoo.com; 11 6am-6pm) caters for all levels of experience (one to two hours P550 to P990). The stables are off the main road, north of the post office.

Massage

Freelance masseuses roam the length of the beach.

Bora Spa (Map p330; % 288 5579; 11 9am-10pm) A one-hour massage costs US\$20. Near Angol Point Resort.

Fausto's Shiatsu (Map p330; % 288 3305; 11 9am-7pm) Near boat station three; one of the blind masseuses on the island. One-hour massage P300.

Kaizen Salon Spa (Map p330; % 288 6572; Paradise Garden Beachfront Plaza; 11 9am-10pm) One-hour massage P600.

Mandala Spa (Map p330; % 288 5858; www.mandala spa.com; 11 10am-10pm). Tucked away into lush inland forest, this first-class operation offers indulgent packages conducted in your own private, native-style villa. Treatments cost US\$31 to US\$137. For accommodation available here, see p330.

Windsurfing

Since 1988 Boracay has hosted the **Boracay International Funboard Cup** and has become one of the windsurfing meccas of Asia. The best conditions for most of the year are on the eastern side of the island, off Bulabog Beach, where onshore winds and a shallow bottom make the area ideal for beginners as

well as advanced board riders. For inquiries about the Funboard Cup, or windsurfing in general, stop by **Green Yard Funboard & Neil Pryde Test Centre** (Map p326; % 288 3449/3207; Bulabog Beach) or **Mistral Funboard Centre** (Map p326; % 288 3876; windsurffun@hotmail.com; Bulabog Beach). Equipment rental rates start at US\$12/40 per hour/day, with instruction and packages also available.

SLEEPING

Boracay accommodation rates are ruled by the high (or 'regular') season (1 December to 31 May) and the low (or 'lean') season (1 June to 30 November). During the low season, prices are halved. Many resorts pump their rates up another 20% at peak season during the periods of 23 December to 3 January, Chinese New Year and Easter.

The rates quoted here apply to the standard high season and generally aren't good value compared to accommodation elsewhere in the country, but you're paying for location after all. Several hotels listed under budget are for fan-cooled rooms and have midrange prices for air-con rooms.

Most of the cheaper, simpler places are south of the Boracay Tourist Centre. Having said that, many of the good food and bars are north. And if it's all too much on White Beach, seek out the solitude of lovely Diniwid Beach's low-key resorts just to the north.

White Beach

BUDGET

Dave's Straw Hat Inn (Map p330; % 288 5465; www.davestrathatinn.com; r with fan/air-con P1000/1500) Down a lane next to the PAL ticketing office and next to Orchids Resort, Dave's Straw Hat has concrete modern cottages with nipa roofs and sliding glass doors around a neat little garden property. A charming little fan room is up a spiral staircase in the back. Internet access is available and there are plans for wi-fi.

Melinda's Garden (Map p330; % 288 3021; www.melindasgarden.com; nipa huts from P800, family cottage P3500) Rightfully popular, Melinda's is set in a leafy garden down the same path as Orchids Resort, and is highly recommended. Simple nipa huts have porches with hammocks and clean modern bathrooms. The family room is unexpectedly posh and unique with a separate sitting room and stone-wall outdoor shower. There's a small bar-restaurant and book exchange.

Orchids Resort (Map p330; % 288 3313, 0916 318 8095; orchidsllynn@hotmail.com; r with fan/air-con US\$14/36) On the lane past Melinda's Garden, Orchids is another popular budget choice with well-maintained rooms in a two-storey nipa building, several stand-alone native cottages and a small bar set around a quiet little garden. Cheap low-season rates.

B&B Beach Resort (Map p330; % 288 3235; cottages with fan/air-con P800/1500) Just south of the Main Rd (or alternatively up a long path immediately after the tourist centre) on the beach is this attractive resort. White concrete buildings with nipa roofs, thatched-bamboo interiors with modern bathrooms and small porches are set on a long tree-and-flower-lined walkway.

MIDRANGE

Watercolors Boracay Dive Resort (Map p330; % 288 6745, 0915 552 2231; www.watercolors.ph; r US\$60; 11 11) If you stay at this friendly resort you'll feel like you've never left the beach, even when you're sleeping. Four absolutely charming boutique-style rooms – one on the 1st floor and three on the second – all have high ceilings and delightful touches like potted plants, high-quality linens and great bathrooms with glassed-in shower stalls. The two that face the beach have little balconies. There's a full-service dive centre on the premises.

Blue Lilly Villa (Map p330; % 0918 457 7171, 288 6404; bebersole@harbornet.com) Though the Blue Lilly was under renovation at the time of research, it appears that rooms here will resemble next-door Watercolors in terms of style and comfort.

Villa Camilla (Map p330; % 288 3354; www.villacamilla.com; r with fan/air-con from P1600/3000; 11 11) Not to be confused with the Casa Camilla further south, this friendly resort welcomes you like family. Rooms are set back from the beach path and there's a little pool in the back with a swim-up bar. The deluxe rooms with kitchenettes and fancy TVs are good deals and sleep up to four. It also has an open rooftop perfect for star watching.

Surfside Boracay Resort (Map p330; % 288 5006; www.geocities.jp/surfsideresortspa; r from US\$65; 11 11) Some of the rooms here have four-poster beds with brightly coloured linens; the large wood-floored suite with small dining area is especially attractive. Surfside has a restaurant on the beach and spa and dive centre attached.

Frendz Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 3803; frendzresort@hotmail.com; r from P1500; j) Frendz is an Aussie-managed, backpacker-friendly resort down a long, narrow dirt road off the beach. There are 15 well-kept native-style cottages with marble-floored bathrooms, cable TV and hot water upon request. There's a restaurant, bar, pool table and Internet access.

Saigon Beach Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 3203, 0920 620 2386; r with fan/air-con P2000/3500) Cosy bamboo cottages with small porches all on one side of a palm tree-lined path off the beach road. Better maintained than next-door Paradise Lodge, and you can strike a good deal during the low season.

Angol Point Beach Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 3107, in Manila 02-522 0012; cottages P2000) This resort has large, leafy, slightly unkempt grounds, with eight octagonal bamboo cottages. The staff is not the most readily available but a big plus is the large terraces with hammocks.

Casa Pilar Beach Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 3073; fax 288 3202; r with fan/air-con from P1500/2800; a) Casa Pilar has several categories of rooms: the cheapest are rustic and basic; the more expensive deluxe rooms are spotless bamboo huts with nice balconies. There's a popular restaurant and Internet café (open 9am to 10pm, P60 per hour).

Villa de Oro (Map p330; ☎ 288 5456; r with fan P1200, r with air-con P1500-2500; a) The standard rooms at Villa de Oro are nothing special but at least they're painted bright, cheerful colours. It's worth shelling out for the higher-priced Indonesian-inspired cottages with porches and stone-and-bamboo bathrooms set in nicely landscaped garden. There's a popular buffet-style restaurant out front (nightly Mongolian barbecue P180).

Sunset Beach Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 3648; r P800) This place, 20m down the lane north of Villa de Oro, has both native-style and tiled rooms with a small terrace.

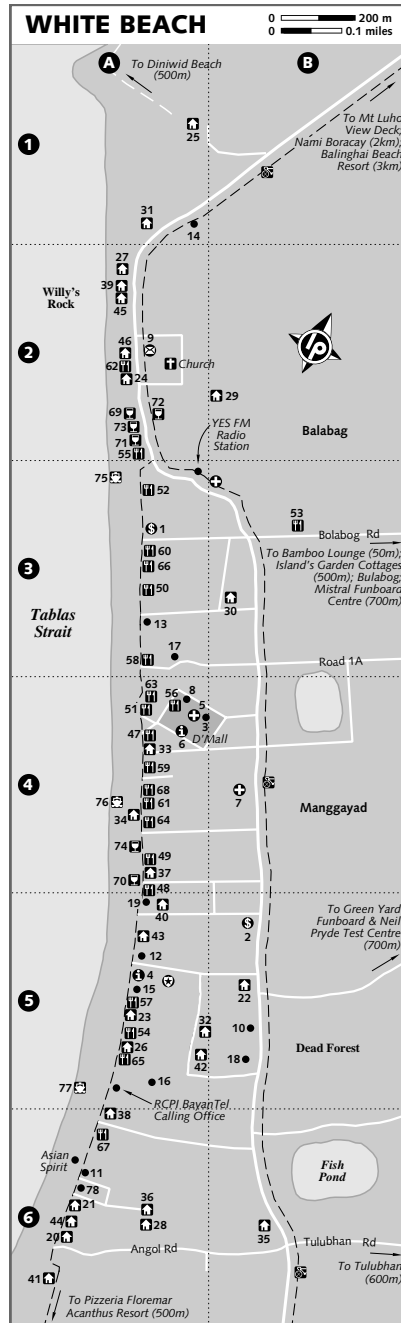
Also recommended:

Bamboo Beach Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 3109; fax 288 5047; r with fan/air-con P800/1800; a)

Giulius Bamboo Beach House (Map p330; ☎ 288 5840; r with fan/air-con P1500/2500)

TOP END

Acanthus Resort (Map p326; ☎ 0910 223 4729, 288 6207; acanthusresort@yahoo.com; r US\$170; a) Probably the most spectacular rooms on Boracay are at this resort on the far southern



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end of the beach. It's certainly the most private and exclusive resort, with only six rooms, perfect for honeymooners. Each suite combines high-end modern amenities with traditional Balinese-inspired design and art. The bathrooms themselves are the size of an average hotel room and have Jacuzzis.

Mandala Spa (Map p330; ☎ 288 5858; www.mandalaspa.com; r US\$180) Primarily known as a spa, the Mandala has several gorgeous villas made of teak and bamboo with cogon grass roofs. Each has a beautiful bathtub and outdoor shower with stone walls. A vegetarian restaurant serves dishes such as eggplant, feta and fresh salads.

Friday's Boracay (Map p330; ☎ 288 6200; www.fridaysboracay.com; r US\$170; a i s) Standing proprietarily and elegantly on the finest stretch of White Beach, Friday's is simultaneously quaint and luxurious, charming and extremely well run. The cottages with private verandas and hammocks look like treehouses, but inside they're anything but rustic with DVD players, bathrobes, slip-

pers and plush pillows and linens. A large nipa pavilion houses one of the island's top restaurants (see p333). Full service dive centre and wi-fi Internet.

Sea Wind (Map p330; ☎ 288 3091; www.seawindboracay.com; r from US\$100; a s) Near Friday's on the far north end of White Beach, the rooms at the Sea Wind are some of the nicest on the island, especially the beautifully designed suites, full of antiques, wood carvings and paintings. Alfresco seafood and barbecue grill.

Nigi Nigi Nu Noos Beach Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 3101; www.niginigi.com; r with fan/air-con US\$90/112; i) The Balinese style bamboo and nipa cottages have huge rooms and balconies with benches; they're easily the most elegant fan-cooled rooms on the island. Fan or air-con, each room has wide windows, tasteful handicrafts and wooden sculptures and is set in a lush garden. Centrally located, and with a popular bar on the beach path and an Internet café.

Escondido Resort (Map p330; ☎ 288 4777, 0917 527 4777; escondido@hotmail.com; r US\$70; a) As its name

indicates, this resort is hidden down a quiet dirt road far off the beach. The rooms in this low-slung peach-coloured building have character though, with dark-wood floors and seashell-filled lamps. Two suites have Jacuzzis and there's a dining area on the balcony.

Le Soleil de Boracay Hotel (Map p330; % 288 6209; www.lesoleil.com.ph; r US\$120; a i s) This boutique-style hotel brings a little bit of the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia. It's the little touches like the arched stone lintels over the doors, the tiled hallways, the detailed mahogany woodwork and the colourful pillows and linens that make this place a mix of the warm and the elegant. There's a quieter new wing with a beautiful pool area and bar in the back. Wi-fi Internet is available.

3-5-7 Boracay (Map p330; % 0927 361 0826; www.357boracay.com; r from US\$125; a) Rooms at this small boutique resort have wood floors and modern tiled bathrooms. The nicest rooms have four-poster bamboo canopy beds. It's at a quiet spot on the beach, though not too far a walk from the action.

Hey Jude (Map p330; % 288 5401; www.heyjude-boracay.com; r P2650; a) On a small path just off D'Mall is this three-story attractive white building. Each tastefully done room has nice wood beds and a private porch as well as little touches like flowers on the beds that make it an especially attractive choice.

Chalet Y (Map p330; % 0920 970 8855; www.chalety.com; r US\$98; a) Chalet Y occupies one half of a building – Chalet Tirol has the other – but it's easy to spot; just look for the log-cabin façade. Each of the three rooms has large beds with high-quality linens, wood floors and big bathrooms. On a quiet part of the beach, with meals cooked upon request.

Waling-Waling Beach Hotel Boracay (Map p330; % 896 9456; www.waling.com; r US\$120-260; a) Waling-Waling's rooms are less than spectacular, generally more motel than luxury resort though each does have a few wood details. The highlights of the resort are the beach cabanas with hammocks and cushions – the perfect shady spots to spend a few hours a day.

Tonglen Beach Resort (Map p330; % 288 5190; r P2950; a s) The well-kept grounds of this peaceful resort extend far back from the entrance. The bright, two-storey concrete buildings with nipa roof contain modern, nicely furnished rooms, and the pool area is particularly pleasant.

North of White Beach

If you take the narrow concrete path around from the Boracay Terraces' restaurant, you get to Diniwid Beach (which is also accessible by tricycle from the main road back at White Beach). Around the next rocky outcrop, you find Balinghai Beach, which is best approached inland by tricycle, or by boat.

Nami Boracay (Map p326; % 818 6435; www.namiboracay.com; Diniwid Beach; r from US\$200; a) Perched above the beach like a deluxe tree house, Nami offers privacy and breathtaking views. All of the luxury top-floor rooms have their own outdoor Jacuzzis and the restaurant has an eclectic menu, serving everything from Filipino to Italian to Asian fusion and burgers and burritos. Full-service spa and reduced rates for longer stays.

Balinghai Beach Resort (Map p326; % 288 3646; Balinghai Beach; r from US\$65) For total privacy, head to this resort of twisting wood and coral cottages built on a steep cliff above a tiny beach. The beach is accessible only sometimes during the high season when a small bar is set up and drinks and food are delivered the 40m down by a dumb waiter. Each oversize cottage has great views (the best may be from the bathrooms), and each has king-size beds made from polished tree trunks.

Boracay Terraces (Map p330; % 288 4000; www.boracayterraces.com; r P5400; a) Boracay Terraces has an enviable location, tucked against a rocky point at the far northern end of the beach with almost zero traffic. It resembles a green pyramid, with three levels of rooms stacked one on top of the other; some have excellent views and huge bathrooms.

Bulabog

Across Boracay's narrow middle from White Beach is the far-less-peopled Bulabog Beach, where you'll meet plenty of serious windsurfers who call this place home for many months a year. Ask at the Bayview Hills Snack Bar for locals who have huts for private short- and long-term rent. **Island's Garden Cottages** (Map p326; % 288 3161; r with fan/air-con P500/1300; a) has a few nipa huts.

EATING

White Beach Path is one big food court – half the fun of dining is taking a walk around sunset and checking out the sites, smells, menus and other people along the path. Many places tempt customers with

generous set meals or buffets (from P150 to around P200 per person). Think twice and scrutinise well before being seduced by the displays – many of the seafood lies out in the heat for hours on end.

For breakfast and snacks, nearly every eatery here does good fruit shakes, pancakes and set breakfasts. For bread, English Bakery (with two outlets) is popular, offering excellent Filipino baked goods.

If you are on a tight budget, there are a handful of eateries offering cheap meals in the back of D'Mall and a bunch along the Main Rd. For a real budget option, buy a fish from the market and cook it up if your resort has a communal kitchen, or ask around for a local to help you out.

Unless otherwise mentioned, all restaurants are on White Beach, open between 7am and 8am and close between 10pm and 11pm daily. Those restaurants with bars close between 1am and 3am.

Restaurants

La Capinnina Italian Restaurant Cafe & Wine Bar (Map p330; % 288 3259; dishes P150-350) Run proudly by an Italian chef, La Capinnina specialises in creative Italian cooking with regularly updated specials and pastas, pizzas and desserts. The softly lit garden dining area is one of the nicest on White Beach. You can access wi-fi Internet here while sipping an espresso.

Restaurante Banza (Map p330; % 288 5167; meals P240-450) Considered one of the best restaurants on the island, it's also one of the more expensive. Portuguese owner/chef Antonio serves the freshest seafood, with an emphasis on quality, flavour, oil and garlic. There's plenty to choose from, but the simple meals like garlic tiger prawns (P330) are some of the best.

Pizzeria Floremar (Map p326; Little Corner of Italy; % 288 3601; pasta & pizza P150) You wouldn't guess it from the humble outdoor seating, but this place at the very southern end of the beach does fantastic pizza, probably the best in Boracay. Call to have food delivered to nearby hotels.

Sulu Thai Restaurant (Map p330; dishes P140-250) Sulu Thai is an unassuming eatery with a thick menu, with helpful photos of all the dishes, including seafood entrees (P240), vegetarian dishes (P140), crispy spring rolls and spicy soups.

La Reserve Restaurant (Map p330; % 288 3020; meals P1000; a) Foodies consider La Reserve, next to the Red Coconut Resort, to be the best restaurant on Boracay. It is certainly the priciest. It serves continental cuisine and seafood such as green lobster (P900) and royal king crabs (P800), with a good selection of wine and champagne. Try eating outside in the charming garden area.

Friday's Boracay (Map p330; % 288 6200; brunch buffet P462, Friday evening buffet P690, à la carte P370-640, kids meals P180) The place to go to gorge yourself on food from around the world. Friday's has a different set menu every night of the week, but perhaps the best night of all is appropriately enough the Friday barbecue which is a feast of sushi, sashimi and grilled meats and fish. During dinner on Friday, Monday and Wednesday nights, there's a cultural show. You can always choose from the à la carte menu dishes such as ostrich steak (P950), sea bass (P850), and prawn, chicken and pumpkin risotto (P390). The bar has a 3pm to 6pm happy hour and is a beautiful place to watch the sunset.

Mañana Mexican Cuisine (Map p330; dishes P250) There are only three tables on the beach path here but the sombreros and terracotta plates tell you this is a Mexican restaurant. Serves big tasty dishes such as burritos (P280), tortillas (P250), and top-of-the-line fruit shakes.

Pomodoro Italian Cuisine (Map p330; dishes from P200) This restaurant is nothing more than a few tables set out on a sandy platform in front of the Blue Lilly Villa, but it's a romantic spot for an early-evening sunset dinner. Does pastas (P200) and pizzas (P250).

Steakhouse Boracay (Map p330; dishes P200) Look for this stylish restaurant above the Habagat Kiteboarding shop. The service is especially good as are the imported steaks and Californian, German and Australian wines. Some menu items worth ordering are the tasty schnitzel with pan-fried potatoes (P250), spare ribs (P250) and fish carpaccio (P260).

Bamboo Lounge (Map p330; % 288 3161; dishes P150) This new restaurant, part of the same compound as the boutique Freckles hotel, serves an interesting mix of food, mostly Asian, including dim sum (P80), spare ribs (P170), and Peking duck (P270). It has a stylish dining area on the 1st floor and a bar open till 2am upstairs.

Aria Restaurant (Map p330; ☎ 288 5573; dishes from P250) Aria has a prime people-watching location on the beach path at D'Mall's entrance. It has a stylish and modern dining room and cooks Italian and continental cuisine such as roasted chicken with polenta (P320).

Summer Place (Map p330; all-you-can-eat Mongolian barbecue P195) One of the better Mongolian barbecues available on Boracay, Summer Place keeps all its ingredients fresh and quickly replenished. Take your spoils to the tables on the beach; the dining room gets hot.

True Food Indian Cuisine (Map p330; meals P125-500) It's a good thing the cushions you crash on are comfortable since you could fit in a short nap by the time your food arrives. True Food's Far Eastern ambience is especially romantic at night and the menu features a good choice of vegetarian dishes; the huge set meals are delicious but pricey (P460).

Boracay Regency Restaurant (Map p330; dishes from P140) This stylish hotel restaurant has outdoor seating and a large menu where you can choose from Korean or Japanese specialities like *bibimbap* (boiled rice with fresh vegetables; P250), mixed Korean BBQ (P350), or sushi and tempura.

Kaesike (Map p330; dishes from P200) Try the prawn tempura (P300) and sashimi (P300) at this casual Japanese restaurant in D'Mall where seating is strictly floor-side.

Hey Jude (Map p330; pizza P125-180, other meals P160-300; 11 9.30am-1.30am) A slice of the city right on the beach. For a slick café-bar with smooth music, it has surprisingly good food.

Jonah's Fruit Shake & Snack Bar (Map p330; shakes P50-75) Amid plenty of competition, it proudly boasts the best shakes on the island, and also serves food like pizza (P220) and vegetable tacos (P65).

Other recommendations:

Café Breizh (Map p330; seafood P250) Charming little place specialising in crepes (P150).

El Toro Español (Map p330; meals P400) Mediterranean-style décor and Spanish specialities.

Liebevoll (Map p330; dishes P200) German owned pizza and pasta place.

Mango Ray (Map p330; pastas 200) Outdoor garden with a seashell floor and eclectic menu.

Seafood Lovers Bar & Restaurant (Map p330; 11 24hr)

Cafes

Real Coffee & Tea Café, next to the Bom Bom Bar, is a good place for fresh coffee and

all-day breakfasts and omelettes. **Café del Sol Boracay**, a Starbucks-like spot directly at the entrance to D'Mall, can't be beat for people-watching, fancy coffee drinks and cakes, and **Benito's Café**, across the sand from Charlh's Bar, serves cappuccino (P55) and crepes with fruit (P80). All cafés are marked on the White Beach map.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

White Beach is one long happy hour though the official ones start around 4pm or 5pm and finish at 7pm, 8pm or even 9pm. Most bars don't usually close down until between 1am and 3am or when the last customer stumbles home. All these places are on the White Beach map.

Bom Bom Bar is a hip little laid-back rustic bar, its attitude clear from that universal signifier of coolness – Bob Marley posters. Jam sessions with local drummers often start up around 11pm. **Café Cocomangas**, along with **Moondog's Shooter**, is a sprawling, tropical nightclub with plenty of drinking and entertainment. **Wave Disco** is an underground club with live music and a P100 cover after 10pm. **Club Paraw** is a great place to drink, eat, and most of all just veg out on the cushions on the beach. It serves Jamaican food such as goat curry and is next to Pier One, another hard-partying beachside club. **Charlh's Bar** is a little shack right on the sand with live music until late nightly. **Hey Jude** (see p333) is popular with regulars from Manila's elite and foreigners looking for hip, urban familiarity; it plays house music.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The swiftest way to Boracay from Manila is by air to Caticlan (see p324) – but you won't be alone trying to book this flight during the high season. Good alternatives are the airports of Kalibo and Roxas, from where it's an easy two to four hours by road to Caticlan. For flight details, see p323 (Kalibo) and p321 (Roxas).

Boat

A fleet of pumpboats shuttle people back and forth between Caticlan and Boracay every 15 minutes from 6am and 6pm (P19.50, 15 minutes), and then as the need arises between 7pm and 10pm (P30). A special trip costs around P300 to P400.

The boats arrive on White Beach, stopping at one or more of the three boat stations. During the southwestern monsoons (June to November), the sea on the White Beach side can get too rough for outriggers. During this period they dock on the east coast, at or near Bulabog, a P20 tricycle ride from White Beach. Be prepared to get your feet wet upon arrival in Boracay.

A new jetty is under construction in the south of the island at Cagban Beach, near Manoc-Manoc, in order to reduce the traffic on White Beach. When complete, Caticlan boats will dock here and ferries will carry passengers around the island.

Negros Navigation (☎ 288 5891; www.negrosnavigation.ph) has a desk at the Carmela de Boracay Hotel, near Boat Station Two on the beachfront road.

GETTING AROUND

Along the main street behind White Beach, a short tricycle ride costs P5. Beyond the main strip, trips rise in P5 increments. Mountain bikes can be hired for around P50\400 per hour\day and motorbikes for P250 per hour. Pedal-powered tricycles ply the sandy beachfront road as well.

ROMBLON

☎ 042 / pop 264,400

On a map the Romblon group of islands looks like it's within throwing distance of Boracay, but in terms of development and tourism profile it couldn't be further away. Those who do brave the perils of irregular boat connections will be rewarded with the by-products of isolation: quiet and the urge to never leave. Of course accessibility decreases the further away you go from the north coast of Panay. While you can find appealing beaches on Carabao and the southern part of Tablas, idyllic Romblon Island with charming (an adjective rarely used to describe Filipino provincial capitals) Romblon town, and Sibuyan Island, with its rugged interior and forests of unique creatures, are worth the hassles involved in getting there.

Getting There & Away

AIR

A new airport near Tugdan on the east coast of Tablas is serviced by Interland

Airlines (☎ Manila 02-852 7793, in Boracay 036-288 6876; www.interislandairlines.com) which flies the Caticlan–Tablas–Manila route three times a week.

BOAT

MBRS Lines (☎ Manila 02-921 6716, in Romblon 243 5886/8) has two boats servicing the area. Three times a week, either *MV Virgin Mary* or *MV Mary the Queen* ply the following route: Manila to Odiongan (Tablas Island; P450, 10 hours), then on to Caticlan (Aklan, Panay; P180, three hours), then to Lipata (Antique, Panay; P150, three hours) and returning the way it came.

Once a week, *MV Mary the Queen* also sails from Manila to Romblon town (P450, 10 hours), then to Cajidiocan (Sibuyan Island; P160, two hours), then to Dumaguít (Kalibo port; P280, three hours) and returns the way it came.

Shipshape Shipping (☎ Manila 02 723 7615) boat *MV Princess Colleen* departs Batangas three times a week for Odiongan (P250, eight hours), continuing on to Romblon town (P170, two hours) and returning along the same route.

Shipshape's *MV Princess Camille* departs Batangas three times a week for San Agustín (Tablas Island; P310, 10 hours) then on to Romblon town (P60, one hour) and Magdiwang (Sibuyan Island; P160, two hours), and returns along the same route.

On all these boats, the fare is reduced when you travel more than one leg.

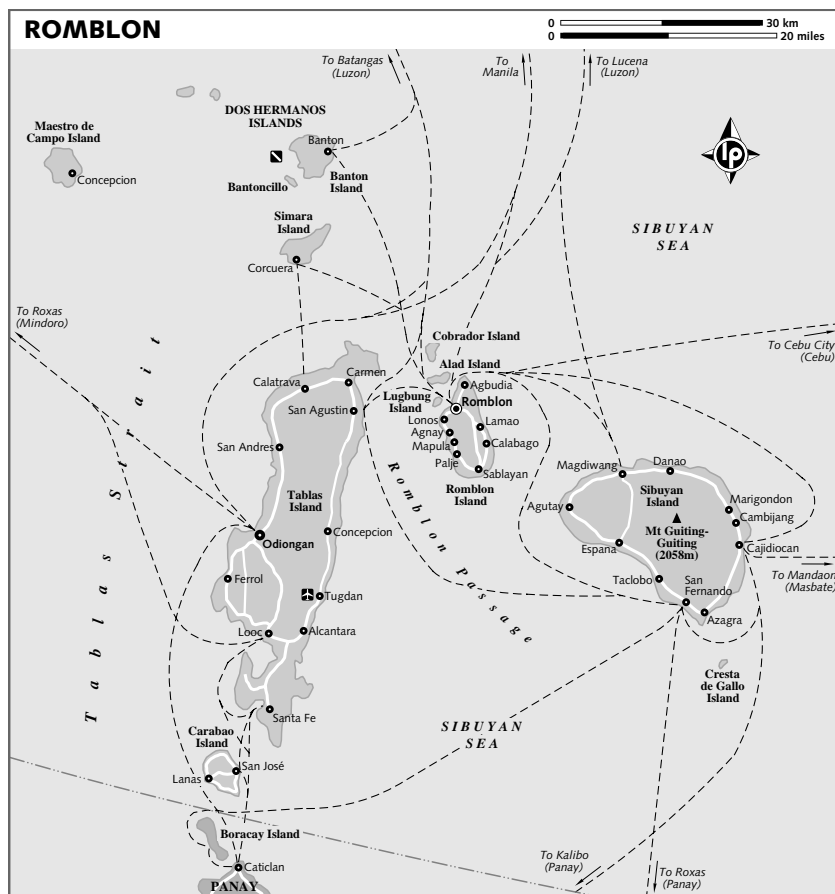
Several big, wooden cargo boats service Romblon Province. They are less reliable, less comfortable and hard to get schedules for – try the respective piers.

Looc and Santa Fe on Tablas Island, and San José on Carabao Island, all have connections with Caticlan on Panay; Looc and Odiongan have connections with Roxas, Mindoro; Odiongan has a connection with Batangas; San Fernando (Sibuyan) has a connection with Roxas, Panay; and Cajidiocan has a connection with Mandaon, Masbate. See individual Getting There & Away sections for more information.

CARABAO ISLAND

☎ 042 / pop 12,000

Carabao Island (known as 'Hambil' by locals) is more a day trip or diving destination for visitors from Boracay, less than 10km



away, than a destination in its own right. This is primarily because of a lack of accommodation, but its quiet streets, white beaches and surrounding reefs offer the chance for a vacation from your vacation on Boracay. If the very vague plans to build an airport near the barangay of Busay ever come to fruition, the nature of the island will undoubtedly change. Besides the land that would have to be cleared away, and the roar from round-the-clock take-offs and landings, no doubt developers, small and large, would begin to build here, hoping to capitalise on tourists looking for a low-scale alternative to Boracay.

Only 6km wide (from San José to Lanas) and less than 10km long, the island of

Carabao is home to about 12,000 residents, 5000 of whom live in the main town of San José, on the east coast. Although this side is blessed with a long, soft-sand, white beach, during the dry season (November to May) it is often hammered by winds, making the lesser (but still good) beaches on the west coast the better option to visit. In any case, a trip from one side of the island to the other will only take 15 minutes by motorbike, so there is always a protected beach nearby.

San José has little more than a municipal hall, plaza, church, school, district hospital, public long-distance calling office and basic shops. The market has meagre supplies of fruit and vegetables, and when fish and

meat arrive a bell is sounded, summoning people onto the street.

The narrow streets of the island are so quiet that on a long walk past rice fields, over hills and through shady coconut and nipa stands, you may only pass the odd *kalabaw* (water buffalo). Motorbikes are available for hire if you ask around (P200/100 per hour with/without driver) – a coastal trip, stopping at beaches and visiting Ngiriton Cave to the north and Angas Cave to the south, should take about two hours. Inobahan Beach, almost a kilometre long, is where accommodation is available. Another more leisurely transport option is to hire a horse (P200 for two hours, P100 for guide) – again, ask around in San José.

Several dive centres on Boracay (p328) run dive trips to the reefs around Carabao (two dives and lunch on the island USS50), and can organise mountain-bike hire and transport to the island.

Getting There & Away

There is a daily morning boat between San José and Caticlan (P120, one hour) and Santa Fe (Tablas Island; P60, one hour).

Private boats can be hired on Boracay to take you to Carabao (P500 to P700).

TABLAS ISLAND

☎ 042

Tablas, the largest of the Romblon islands, is a three-hour boat ride from Mindoro's east coast. Its largest town is Odiongan. Few tourists come here except as a stepping stone to Romblon and Sibuyan Islands. However, the local government is trying to make this a more attractive tourist destination. It is difficult to travel from Panay to Romblon without spending a night on Tablas. The best stopover option is Looc, then Odiongan, and San Agustin is also OK.

The best beaches are in Ferrol, in between Odiongan and Looc, and also at Alcantara. There are waterfalls at San Andres and near San Agustin, and mangroves at Roda Beach near Looc. There is also a marine sanctuary near Looc.

Daily pumpboats connect Tablas Island to Carabao Island and Caticlan (Panay); as well as running between San Agustin and Romblon town. Odiongan is connected to Mindoro and Luzon. See individual entries for boat information and details.

Looc

Looc (lo-oc) is primarily the first stop on a journey from Boracay to Romblon and the Sibuyan Islands further north. There's a town plaza surrounded by what passes for commercial buildings, and several blocks worth of charming flower-and-tree-lined residential streets. The main attraction however, and what makes Looc worth a stopover, is the Looc Bay Marine Refuge & Sanctuary (☎ 509 4120; Looc wharf). It's a 48-hectare coral reef protected area, 10 minutes by pumpboat from the town pier. A boat can be organised from the little office at the wharf to take you to the sanctuary's moored bamboo raft, from where you can snorkel amid giant clams (P200 for one to four people for three hours, including snorkelling gear). Buenavista Marine Sanctuary, a little further north, is only 2 hectares, but is located around an islet where tourists can wander about. You can also organise trips to white, sandy Agojo Beach, 30 minutes away by pumpboat.

Taking place in late April, the week-long Fiesta Sa Dagat (Festival of the Sea) includes a boat parade, boat races and a fishing competition. The Talabukon Festival (the town fiesta) – which celebrates the legend of the giant who defended the area from pirates by strangling them, giving the town its name Looc (literally, 'to strangle') – is at the same time.

INFORMATION

The Looc tourist office (☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm) is at the southern corner of the town plaza but a better source of information is vice-mayor Juliet Fiel (☎ 0918 925 0903) who can be found in the shop off the main plaza bearing the sign 'Fiel Merchandising'. The ground floor of the Marduke Hotel building has a BayanTel international telephone office. The Brain Storm Internet café (☎ 8am-5pm) is on the plaza.

SLEEPING

Marduke Hotel (☎ 509 4078; Grimares St; s/d P400/500; a) On the north side of the plaza behind the Koop Cooperative Drug Store, the friendly Marduke (no sign, just ask around) is the best place to stay in town. It has five large rooms with air-con and private bathroom, and free brewed coffee and fresh fruit in the mornings.

Roda Beach Resort & Gishelle's Beach Resort (☎ 0919 419 8997; r with bathroom & fan/air-con P350/600)

Sharing the same beachfront property 4km southwest from Looc proper (tricycle P50) are these twin resorts owned by siblings; one of whom is Juliet Fiel mentioned earlier as an excellent source of information. When the tide is in the snorkelling is good and the sunsets are always beautiful. There are several big, plain motel-style rooms in a concrete building with air-con and other basic native rooms with fans. The attached Poka Grill & Bar serves fresh seafood – ask for the sea urchin and jellyfish – and the requisite karaoke on request.

EATING

Pacific Garden Restaurant (dishes P50; 𠄎 6.30am-9.30pm) Conveniently located facing the town plaza is the bright and friendly Pacific Garden Restaurant, offering good Filipino and Chinese noodle dishes (P50) and burgers (P25). It also has a well-stocked bar and no videoke. A few immaculate rooms (P300) with nothing more than a bed and overhead fan are available on the 2nd floor; there's a shared bathroom.

Roberto's Bar (% 509 4031; meals P40-80; 𠄎 9am-midnight) A friendly night-time oasis two blocks from the town plaza, on the same street as the Looc Foursquare Gospel Church. This place is one long, deep and green garden, furnished with rock-slab benches and tables, with an open-air, native-style bar and restaurant. Good Filipino, Chinese and seafood dishes are available until late, as are wine and champagne.

Tirol's Restaurant (Tirol St; meals P25-50; 𠄎 6am-9pm) Across the street from the Fiel Merchandising store, this is a simple eatery serving light snacks and basic Filipino dishes like rice and veggies (P30).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Looc's Fish Port (P5 by tricycle from town), on the sea side of the market, services boats to Caticlan. Port Malbog, a 10-minute tricycle ride south (P15), has boats for Roxas (Mindoro).

There are daily 9.30am pumpboats between Looc and Caticlan (P180, three hours) and vice versa at the same time.

Larger pumpboats travel between Looc and Roxas, on Mindoro (P200, 3½ hours) on Monday and Thursday.

There are regular jeepneys from Looc to Odiongan (P35, one hour) until about 3pm,

and a 6am, 8.30am, 9.30am and 11.30am jeepney to San Agustin (P60, 2½ hours); the first three trips should get you to the pier in time for the boat to Romblon town. A private motorbike ride to Odiongan should cost no more than P150 (25 minutes).

Alcantara

Alcantara, only 9km from Looc on the east coast of Tablas, is a small town with an OK beach. There is accommodation here and the jeepney from Looc to San Agustin passes through, making this an alternative overnight stop for tourists heading up to San Agustin.

Aglicay Beach Resort (% 0919 634 6708; www.geocities.com/aglicaybeachresort; Aglicay, Alcantara; r from P700; a) , about a 20-minute drive from both the Tablas airport and Looc, has several modern concrete bungalows, some with air-con, others with fan. It's set in a grassy compound back from a wide white-sand beach shaded by a line of tall palm trees. There's a bar, restaurant and souvenir shop. Snorkelling and boating can be arranged.

You can get here from Looc by jeepney (P8) or tricycle (P100, 35 minutes). To San Agustin, it's P50 by jeepney.

Odiongan

Almost halfway up the west coast of Tablas, Odiongan is a port town but also a charming mix of brightly coloured houses and neatly trimmed hedges. Odiongan's fiesta is held in early April. Near the village of Tuburan, 7km from town, is an impressive, multitiered *busay* (waterfall) known simply as *Busay*. You can get there by tricycle or motorcycle for around P200 return (including waiting time). There's a 500m walk up from the rough road to the falls.

INFORMATION

There's a Landbank on the plaza next to Lyn's Snack Bar and a **PNB bank** (cnr M Formilleza & JP Laurel Sts) a few blocks from the market, both with ATMs, and an **Internet café** (Manuel Quezon St; per hr P50; 𠄎 9am-9pm) next to the Odongian Plaza Lodge.

SLEEPING

Rencios Resort (% 567 5834; r with fan P400, r with air-con P600-1000) The location in the barangay of Liwang on a fish pond outside of town is a bit odd, though it's certainly quiet. Newly

built Rencios has seven very nice air-con rooms with cable TV in the main building. Several cheaper fan and air-con rooms are in a little bamboo annex, though these aren't very nice; there's no shower and no toilet seats. There's a restaurant and bar, and karaoke in a big pavilion.

Odiongan Plaza Lodge (% 567 5760; r with fan P400, s/d with air-con P600/1000) This hotel is on the plaza, diagonal from the town hall and next to Lyn's and the Landbank. It has small, well-kept air-con rooms with cable TV and tiled floors and windows that get good sunlight.

Haliwood Inn (% 508 5292; Barangay Liwayway St; r P850-1750; a) It's an attractive building and well staffed, however the big and fairly drab marble-floored rooms don't get much light and have cold-water bathrooms.

Aloha Beach Resort (r P400; a) This is a two-storey home a few kilometres north of town just off a rather unspectacular brown beach. Just show up and hope someone is around. The large, clean rooms overlook a yard full of roosters, aka 'your wake-up call', and the bathrooms may have some cobwebs. The power supply is unreliable. An outdoor grill restaurant/bar is just behind on the beach.

EATING

Star Place Chinese Restaurant (% 0920 368 2083; dishes P110; 𠄎 8am-9pm; a) A friendly Chinese restaurant serving Cantonese dishes, noodles (P80) and seafood.

Lyn's Snack Bar & Restaurant (snacks P25-50; 𠄎 6am-8pm) Next door to the Plaza Lodge, this is a little air-conditioned diner serving simple Filipino dishes like *pansit* (noodle soup; P25), burgers and hot dogs.

Haliwood Inn restaurant (% 508 5292; Barangay Liwayway St; dishes P50-200) As fancy as it gets in Odiongan, this restaurant has uniformed wait staff serving well-priced Filipino and Chinese dishes such as sizzling chicken with rice (P80).

You can buy baked goods, snacks and loads of fruit and nuts at the market in the centre of town.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Jeepneys run up until about 4pm from near the market, as well as from the pier, to and from towns north and south of Odiongan. The main destinations are Looc (P35, one hour) and San Agustin (P60, two hours); reg-

ular departures for the latter are at 5.30am, 10am and 1pm so that you can catch onward ferry connections to Romblon town.

Montenegros Shipping Lines has boats from Odiongan to Batangas (P250, 10 hours) and back again, three times a week.

Pumpboats leave from Odiongan for Roxas (P100, three hours) three times a week.

San Agustin

With a backdrop of high, rugged mountains and a deep, palm-fringed harbour, the serene town of San Agustin is a picturesque stop on the way to or from the island of Romblon. The building next to the pier says 'tourism office' though little information is forthcoming.

August Inn (% 0919 592 2495; r P300), a bright-pink building just off the plaza, has extremely clean, small, tiled rooms on the 2nd floor. Private bathrooms are only P50 more though the shared bathroom is well maintained. Rooms in the grey building of **Kamilla Lodge** (r with fan/air-con P250/500) are not as bright or spotless as those in the August Inn next door, however the floors and bathroom are marble and the air-con room has a TV.

There are several **food stalls** (meal with rice P15-30; 𠄎 7am-5pm) within the market and the peachy-white commercial complex adjoining it. A canteen in the small port terminal where ferry tickets are sold serves decent Filipino dishes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are three daily jeepneys from San Agustin to Looc and Odiongan (P60, two hours, 6am, 9am and 2pm), timed to depart a few minutes after the arrival of the ferry from Romblon.

Pumpboats to Romblon town (P80, one hour) leave from the pier in front of the tourism office at 8am and 1pm.

For boats going further afield, see p335.

ROMBLON ISLAND

% 042

Blessed with a charming town by standards in the Philippines, an alternately rugged and sandy coastline, and the fact that it's not the most convenient island to reach, Romblon is an ideal destination for those with patience, time and a taste for beautiful remote places. It's famous domestically for its

marble, which graces the floors of churches and homes all over the country, and a ride around Romblon takes you past dusty marble quarries and workshops large and small. The rough, exhilarating road skirts the shore along the west coast, where there are several simple, idyllic beach resorts. On the eastern side of the island, the road heads inland through coconut-covered mountain, streams and rice-terraced valleys.

Both Tiambin Beach and a little closer to town, **Bon Bon Beach** are good for swimming and can be found by heading south on the west coast road (tricycle P50 or jeepney P5). San Pedro also has a lovely beach, and OK reefs for snorkelling and diving.

Information

Around the small triangular town plaza beside the dock in Romblon town, you'll find several international telephone offices, a post office and a police post. Plans call for a tourism office to open in the near future. Right now the best place for information is the **Romblon International Business Centre** (per hr P90; 7.30am-9pm) opposite Jak's Restaurant, where you can access the Internet and get answers to transport questions.

Sights & Activities

Beautiful, historic Romblon town, surrounded by lush, green hills, is a delight to approach by sea, and offers an even greater pleasure to those with time to wander its charming streets. The capital of the province of the same name, this town boasts the 17th-century Fort San Andres, Fort Santiago and the fantastically solid San Joseph's Cathedral and belfry. There is also the Fuente de Belen fountain in front of the municipal building, and some bridges and a cemetery thought to have been built around the time of the 17th-century churches. There are good views from the Sabang and Apunan lighthouses.

From Romblon town, pumpboats can be hired for day trips to 'Tres Marias' – the nearby islands of Lugbung, Alad and Cobrador (per boat P500 to P600). Cobrador has OK snorkelling, and Lugbung has a good beach for pitching a tent, cooking a barbecue and spending a quiet romantic night – you'll have to bring all food and a tent. Of course, you'll have to pay the boatman to pick you up the following day unless you want him there with you.

For diving, **Big Bantoy Scuba Diving Centre** (bigbantoy@yahoo.com; one dive US\$15, equipment rental US\$5) runs out of the Marble Beach Resort (opposite). The resort is lucky to have a marine sanctuary in front of it and stretching for 5km along the coast, so some of the best dives are on the house reefs. The Cabanbanan Beach Resort (opposite) also has a dive centre. North of Romblon Island, there is a WWII Japanese wreck, and on nearby Tablas Island, the Blue Hole dive – the inside of an old volcano – is favoured by advanced divers.

Sleeping & Eating

ROMBLON TOWN

Fiesta time in Romblon town runs for a week, around the second week of January; you may need to book accommodation well in advance for around this time.

Romblon Plaza Hotel (96 472 2269, 0919 397 7924; rphreservation@yahoo.com; President Roxas St; r with fan/air-con from P400/800) This high rise, adorned with plastic flowers and plants, is situated one block from the pier. The rooms are big, clean and bright, and more expensive rooms have cable TV and beautiful views. A massage clinic (one-hour aromatherapy P350) operates out of the hotel and there's a bar as well as a rooftop restaurant (open 7am to midnight) serving a variety of food from Filipino standards to pizza (P160), spaghetti (P40) and burgers (P25). The views alone make it the best spot for a sunset drink in one of the private little bamboo huts.

Parc Bay Mansion (96 507 2408; r P600-750; a) Formerly the Bayview Mansion, where the San Agustin boats dock, this is not exactly a mansion, but it is excellent accommodation. All rooms are very clean and have million-dollar harbour views, and the hallways are decorated with artwork. There is a communal sitting area and kitchen on the ground floor and staff will happily cook up meals (breakfast P50, lunch or dinner P150).

Blue Ridge Hotel (96 507 2274; Governor Fetal Vero St; s/d with fan P400/500, s/d with air-con P600/700) A few minutes' walk from the town plaza, the Blue Ridge is another good-value option. Rooms here are simple but kept perfectly cleaned, there's a comfortable kitchen and dining room on the top floor to prepare your own food, and the mini nipa hut on the rooftop is great for hanging out and gawking at the views.

Jak's Restaurant & Bar (meals P65-125; 7.30am-9pm) Behind the town plaza, this is a well-run place offering a regularly updated menu, cool tunes and friendly service. The food ranges from Filipino regulars such as *pansit* (P65), to Western dishes such as beef goulash (P125), spaghetti (P100) and pizza (P75). When you arrive or leave by boat, this nearby place is a great stopover for real coffee and a decent bite to eat.

Romblon Shopping Centre Eatery (Filipino dishes P40; 7.30am-9pm) Behind Jak's, facing the triangular town plaza, it has average Filipino fare, but it's a good place to sit and watch the world go by.

WEST COAST

San Pedro Beach Resort (96 0920 905 5780; minamingoa@yahoo.com; Ginablan; cottages P400) This idyllic resort refuge is set on a little white-sand beach in Ginablan, about 10km south of Romblon town. Several spotless bamboo cottages with balconies and marble floors are perched over the beach, which has good snorkelling when it's high tide. There's an extremely attractive restaurant beside the beach serving big meals (P150), as well as a library of discarded books to while away your days. Staff can arrange tricycles, motorbikes, snorkelling gear or diving. From town, a tricycle all the way to the resort costs around P150; it's possible to pay less to be dropped off at the turnoff from where it's a picturesque walk of a few kilometres.

Marble Beach Resort (Ginablan; cottages P250-350) A few minutes' walk from San Pedro Beach Resort, perched on a rocky headland, the Marble Beach Resort has several basic bamboo cottages with fan and cold-water bathroom. The Big Bantoy Scuba Diving Centre is attached. The restaurant can cook meals upon request.

Tiamban Aqua Club Beach Resort (96 02723 6710; www.emc.com.ph/tiamban; r P750) Of the resorts listed, Tiamban is the closest to town off the coastal road (hire a tricycle) and is set on a nice, secluded section of beach. The thatch bamboo cottages with cold-water bathroom are big but upkeep is spotty. There is a shady garden, good for dining. When fully operational – it's best to call ahead to insure they are prepared to receive guests – the resort offers snorkelling, mountain biking and day tours.

ELSEWHERE ON ROMBLON

Cabanbanan Beach Resort (96 0910 283 7612; www.romblon-isl.com; dm P300, cottages P700) Call in advance for free boat transfers from Romblon town to this paradise refuge – to hire your own costs P200 to P300. Located on a spit of land only accessible by boat, there are several pleasant cottages, a restaurant and PADI dive centre run by dive master Josef Mazenauer. The house reef is a fish sanctuary.

Buena Suerte Resort (96 507 2069; cottages P700; S) On the less travelled mountainous eastern side of the island, 10km from Romblon town, take the signposted turn-off in the small village of Tambac, and a 1km rough road will take you inland to this secluded retreat set around a large, marble-floored swimming pool. The basic cottages have fan and cold-water bathroom. A canteen beside the pool serves simple meals.

Getting There & Away

Daily pumpboats leave Romblon town for San Agustin on Tablas Island at 8am and 1pm (P80, one hour). Pumpboats leaving from San Agustin for Romblon leave at the same time.

There are daily pumpboats at 1pm from Romblon town to Magdiwang on Sibuyan Island (P180, two hours). Magdiwang-Romblon town boats leave at 8am.

A pumpboat leaves Romblon for Banton Island (P100, four hours, twice a week), returning the following day.

If the stars align – and this is impossible to predict in advance – there is a Saturday-morning boat from Romblon town to Boracay (P600, five hours); it goes on Sunday at 1pm in the other direction.

MBRS Shipping (7.30am-4pm Sat-Wed) has an office at the corner of the shopping centre near the port. MV *The Queen* and MV *The Blessed Mother* depart Romblon for Manila once a week (P780).

There is an infrequent boat between Romblon and Masbate (P500) depending on weather and other unpredictable factors.

For more shipping information, see p335.

Getting Around

A circuit of the island by tricycle is pretty much impossible on the steep, rocky road. You're much better off hiring a single motorcycle (with/without driver P500/250-500 per day).

SIBUYAN ISLAND

Sibuyan Island is the Galapagos Islands of the region. Having been cut off from all other land masses during the last Ice Age, in pristine isolation, with 60% of the densest forest cover found in the Philippines, the island is home to five unique mammal species – including the bizarre tube-nosed fruit bat. No other island of its size in the world is known to have that many, and it is believed that more flora and fauna species will be discovered with further exploration. The island's natural resources are being protected and nurtured, largely thanks to the dedication of a former mayor of Magdiwang, who pushed for protected area status around the massive Mt Guiting-Guiting (2058m).

Technically there are entry points into the Mt Guiting-Guiting Natural Park from the three municipalities of Magdiwang, Cajidiocan and San Fernando, but, as guides and permits are compulsory, visitors must first proceed to the Magdiwang visitors centre where information and the necessary arrangements can be made.

The island's electricity supply is erratic.

San Fernando

This town, near the banks of the mighty Cantingas River, is one of the three entry points onto the island. Although it's a quiet town, caught almost off guard by visitors, the accommodation here is scenic and relaxed.

For a real getaway, private pumpboats (P1000 per boat per day, 40 minutes) can take you to Cresta de Gallo, a small white-coral sand island off the southern tip of Sibuyan. You can skip around the island in about half an hour and see little but your own footsteps. There is some OK snorkelling, but you will have to bring your own gear.

On the coastal side of town, **Sea Breeze Inn** (s/d with shared cold-water bathroom P150/300, r with private bathroom P400) is a family-run affair; bamboo huts with verandas face out to sea. There is a common kitchen, or visitors can make use of the attached café which opens for visitors.

There are three small inexpensive eateries in the market area with irregular opening hours.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A cargo pumpboat travels between Roxas (on Panay) and Azagra port in San Fernando (P120, five hours) three times a week.

Kalayaan Shipping has a boat from San Fernando (via Romblon) to Lucena (P350, 15 hours, twice a week).

Private MB *Godspeed* leaves San Fernando for Boracay (P300, 2½ hours, once a week), staying overnight before returning. For details, visit Laura's Shop (opposite).

Whenever there's an early boat arrival, jeepneys leave San Fernando for Magdiwang at 4.30am (P70 plus P5 to the pier, two hours), wait for the morning boats and then return with passengers. In addition, three jeepneys run between San Fernando and Magdiwang before early afternoon. Tricycles can be hailed for a lift to Cajidiocan (P50 or P100 for 'special trip').

Magdiwang

The gateway to Mt Guiting-Guiting Natural Park (opposite), Magdiwang is a friendly, no-frills port town. Its pier, 2km from the town, is lined with picture-perfect little houses on stilts, decorated with flowering pot plants.

About 12km from Magdiwang (4km past the turn-off to Mt Guiting-Guiting Natural Park Visitors' Centre) is the beautiful **Lambingan Falls** and swimming hole. Tricycles can take you from Magdiwang to the visitors centre (P40, 20 minutes) and to the falls (P50, 30 minutes).

SLEEPING & EATING

Vicky's Place (MH del Pilar St; r per person P150) Vicky's is officially a homestay just off National Rd opposite the school. There are homely, timber-floored rooms on the 2nd floor with an immaculate shared bathroom. Vicky cooks wonderful Filipino and Western meals (breakfast P50, lunch or dinner P70 to P120) and is a wealth of helpful travel information.

Roger's Place (Mt Guiting-Guiting Parkview Inn; José Rizal St; r per person P150) This lodging house above the RCPI (Radio Communications of the Philippines, Inc) building has simple rooms with wonderful mountain views, and there's a communal sitting area with cable TV. Roger can organise meals from the nearby café he conveniently owns (meals P125). There's a 24-hour generator, great for electricity, less so for quiet.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are three jeepneys daily between Magdiwang and Cajidiocan (P30, one hour)

and an early-morning jeepney from San Fernando to the pier at Magdiwang most days (P75, two hours), in time for the first boat arrival, which returns to San Fernando after picking up passengers.

Pumpboats travel between Romblon town and Magdiwang (P120, two hours) once daily.

For shipping options taking you further afield, see p335.

Mt Guiting-Guiting Natural Park

This 15,000-plus-hectare natural park is one of the Philippines' natural treasures. A biologist's wonderland, the island has been cited as one of the centres of both plant and animal diversity in Asia and the Pacific. It's home to an estimated 700 plant species, some of which are only found on the island, and 130 bird species, and a long list of rare and endangered mammals and reptiles.

About 8km east from Magdiwang is the Mt Guiting-Guiting Natural Park Visitors Centre, the main entry point for the park (P40 by tricycle from Magdiwang). From here, you can gather information, organise permits, guides (P350 per day) and porters (if necessary for the groups' food) to take you up the trail to the 2058m-high mountain peak that stands before you. Although there are other trails throughout the park, this is the only one that takes you to the summit. It's a very challenging, 10-hour trek one way, so you definitely need three days if you plan to go the distance, plus a few days to organise a guide and equipment. Very ratty tents are available free of charge from the visitors centre but you'd be advised to bring your own. If you plan to conquer the summit, you must bring mountaineering attire (including cold-weather gear and good shoes).

Cajidiocan & Around

Cajidiocan (cah-ee-d'yo-can) is Sibuyan Island's access point for boats to and from Masbate. It's also an alternative base to Magdiwang for trips into Mt Guiting-Guiting Natural Park. However, visitors should check in at Magdiwang first (see above).

From the Residential Ranger Station just outside town, you can do a one-day trek to some excellent caves within the park. **Cawa Cawa Falls**, an excellent swimming spot, are 8km from town, but a motorbike or tricycle

(P50 one way) can take you most of the way, then you just walk for half an hour.

On the town's main street you'll find **Marble House** (per person P150) – it has no signposting but is known by all the locals – with rooms with fan and large windows onto the street or towards the mountains. The shared bathroom is large and, of course, marble. On the next corner (E Quirion St), **Gladys Point Eatery & Snack House** (meals P20-40; 11am-10pm) serves Filipino food and hamburgers.

About 3km toward San Fernando (P20 by tricycle), **Laura's Shop** (meals P20-50; 11am-9pm) is a little eatery and gathering place for a community known by locals as 'the German Village'; it's made up of only German and German-Filipino families. **Accommodation** (r from P400) is available in stone-walled, nipa-roofed duplexes with ceiling fan and a shared kitchen and marble bathroom.

Getting There & Away

There are two pumpboats between Cajidiocan and Mandaon (Masbate; P150, four hours, twice a week).

For other boat options, see p335.

There are three jeepneys daily from Cajidiocan to Magdiwang (P35, one hour) and back, finishing in the early afternoon. Tricycles to San Fernando cost P30, or P100 for a special trip.

BANTON ISLAND

Remote Banton Island is a small rock island with some good white-sand beaches, a cone-shaped mountain, plenty of coconut palms, a crumbling 18th-century Spanish fort, and some great diving. You can rent motorbikes to tour the island on the Spanish-laid cobblestone coastal road, but as the island is so small, getting around on foot is more than adequate. The strong currents, which restrict diving to the advanced, bring in sharks, barracuda and other big pelagic fish. Even better diving can be found in the marine sanctuary off **Bantoncillo Island** to the southwest. As there is no dive centre on Banton Island, divers will have to take a live-aboard from Boracay to enjoy the underwater delights.

Visitors can stay in basic accommodation (r P100-300) at the fort in simple rooms with fan and shared bathroom, and get basic food from local eateries.

There is a pumpboat service between Romblon and Banton Island (P180, 3½ hours) on Monday and Friday at 2pm. You're likely to get a smooth crossing to the island only between March and May.

MASBATE

☎ 056

Though geographically smack in the middle of the Philippine archipelago, this hilly island province is as far as can be from the consciousness of the economic, political and cultural movers and shakers in the nation's capital, Manila; currents of change are as likely to reach Masbate (*mas-bah-teh*) as a boat connection from the island is likely to depart on schedule. A poor island-province even by Philippine standards, Masbate has long been known for the ruthlessness of its local politics. As is the case with plantations on other islands in the Philippines, Masbate's vast cattle ranches are owned by a handful of wealthy families while the majority of the population struggles to make the most of its marine and agricultural resources. A ray of progress in all this is the provincial government's Fishery Development Program, which is aimed at improving Masbate's fishing industry through sustainable technology, conservation, tougher fishing laws and loans for local cooperatives.

Grassy green and sparsely inhabited, the island is ideal for cattle grazing, but it's best known for its annual rodeo (see opposite). The island was once heavily forested and provided timber for the building of Manila Galleons. Masbate has a few stunning unspoiled, white-sand beaches (see p346), however most of the province's best beaches have no formal accommodation and are difficult to get to – a visit here is best considered by those with time and patience to spare.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Masbate is serviced by Asian Spirit. See p346 for more information.

BOAT

Regular morning pumpboats sail from the busy pumpboat area at Masbate town's pier

to the nearby islands of Ticao and Burias (part of Masbate province).

Cebu

Trans-Asia and Sulpicio lines together make six trips a week leaving at around 6pm (P675) in either direction.

Manila

The Manila route is serviced by a once weekly Tuesday night (19 hours) ferry. From Masbate to Manila the same ship leaves every Thursday at 4pm.

Panay

Pumpboats sail from Mandaon pier to Roxas' Banica wharf (P150, five hours, 8am) on Wednesday and Saturday – it has been known to load up fast and leave as early as 7am, so if you're really committed to this trip you should probably spend the previous evening in Mandaon. Boats leave Roxas for Mandaon at 9am or 10am Monday and Thursday.

A word of caution: these boats sometimes depart from Calituchi pier near the town of Milagros. There are jeepneys and vans to Milagros, however it's more convenient to hire a tricycle for a 'special trip' (P150, one hour). Unfortunately, the departure location seems nearly impossible to determine in advance from Masbate town.

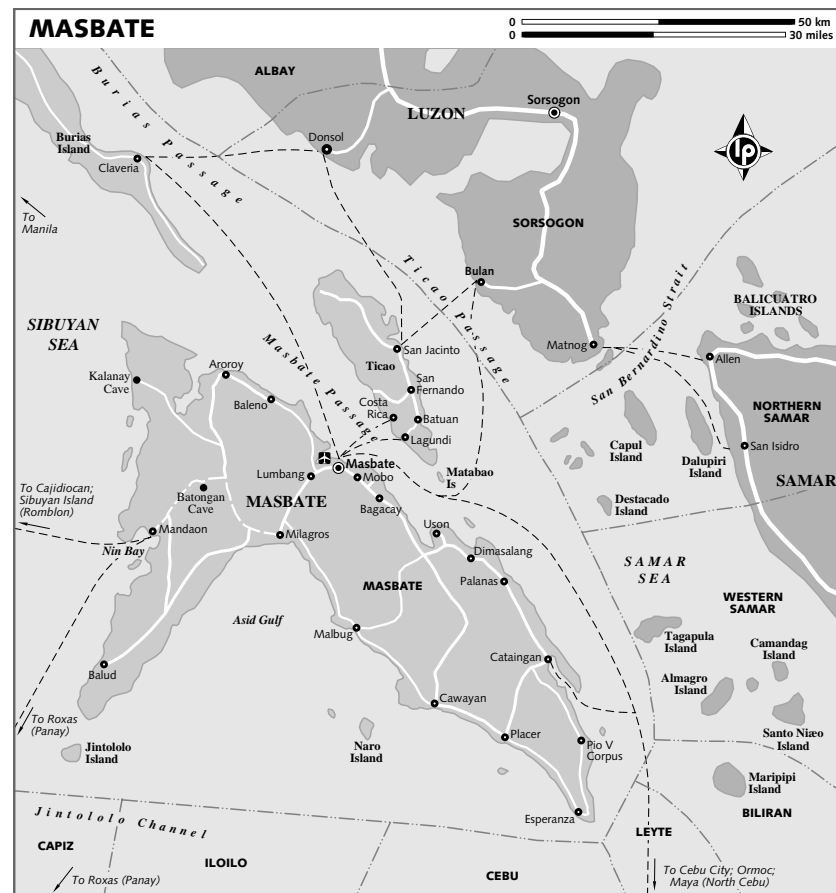
Romblon

Large pumpboats sail from Cajidiocan on Sibuyan Island to Mandaon (P100, 4½ hours) on Wednesday morning. There are also boat services that leave Mandaon for Cajidiocan on Thursday morning. Nostradamus-like powers are needed to know whether the trip will actually take place.

Southern Luzon

Pumpboats service the south Luzon towns of Bulan and Donsol daily (P120, five hours, 7am and 1pm). The quickest and most comfortable option is the Montenegro air-con fastcraft (P280, two hours, 5am, 8am, noon and 2pm) to the Port of Pilar. Sorsogon on Bicol. Lobrigo Lines has a slower boat on the same route (P140, three to four hours). Boats go to Bulan from San Jacinto on Ticao, and to Donsol from Claveria on Burias Island.

Blue Magic Ferries has boats to Lucena further up the peninsula on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday at 7pm (P600).



MASBATE TOWN

☎ 056 / pop 71,441

The approach by water to the harbour town of Masbate, the capital of the eponymously named province, turns from hope that the tropical greenery and relative isolation will be preserved in the urban character – or at least help guard it against the common pitfalls of development – to the realisation that Masbate town is much like the charm-deficient provincial towns elsewhere. It does have a busy wharf area and is the venue for the annual rowdy Rodeo Masbateño.

Body & Sole (☎ 333 6336; Quezon St; body massage P250), a spa on the corner of Tara St, is worth a mention, since a soothing massage is always a welcome relief after the rigors of travel.

Information

The police station (☎ 166) is beside the pier. Cervante Service Internet (11 8.30am-10pm) is on Quezon St. PNB and Landbank, both on Quezon St, have ATMs.

There's a tourist desk in city hall, but help is limited. You're more likely to get good info at the Coastal Resource Management Interpretation Centre (☎ 0926 484 7826; espe.ranzadanao@yahoo.com). Ask for Jaja.

Festivals & Events

Rodeo Masbateño (☎ 333 2120), also known as the Rodeo Filipino, is usually held in April or May each year. This five-day event attracts cowpokes from all over the Philippines, and features men's and women's

lassoing, barehanded cattle wrestling and bull riding.

Sleeping & Eating

Most of Masbate town's accommodation is on Quezon St, running in an arc above the port area. Keep in mind that during the week-long rodeo, accommodation books up fast and prices quadruple.

MG Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 333 5614; r P1050; a) The classiest place in the province for eating or sleeping, MG has the feel of a friendly B&B, and the large tiled rooms with small private balconies are modern and lovingly cared for. A ground-floor restaurant with a fancy dining room serves dishes including fettuccine alfredo (P150), shrimp tempura (P150), Caesar salad (P120) and steak (P350). Look for a three-storey building, a 10-minute tricycle ride from town.

Masbate Lodge (☎ 333 2184; r with fan/air-con P150/350) Not a bad place to stay for a night or two, Masbate Lodge offers the best-value accommodation on Quezon St. 2nd-storey rooms are large and clean, and the polished wooden floorboards are an attractive change of pace from the usual concrete or tile. However, street and air-con noise is an issue and the only views are from the shared bathroom.

St Anthony Hotel (☎ 333 2180; s/d with fan P250/P300, s/d with air-con P450/500) The lobby is clean and bright, furnished with fish tanks and a lounge, however the rooms are dark and boxlike. The mattresses, even in the air-con rooms, are uncomfortably thin.

Rancher's Hotel (☎ /fax 333 3931; r with fan P250, s/d with air-con P500/700) Down near the port area on Tara St, some of the very plain rooms at Rancher's have harbour views while those without are decidedly dim and unwelcoming. Noise from the next-door bar, separated from the hotel only by a glass window and door, is certainly an issue at night.

Joe's Pizza & Pasta (pizza P150; a) Also on Tara St in the port area, Joe's does delicious, large pizzas.

Quezon St proudly boasts a new Jollibee restaurant.

Ibañez St, which runs off Quezon St, is a lively food street, especially at night. Stalls and small cafés offer freshly cooked chicken, spring rolls and other snacks from P10 to P45.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Masbate town's airport is a P10 tricycle ride from Quezon St.

Asian Spirit flies from Manila to Masbate town daily (one hour, 6am). The same plane returns to Manila at 7.30am.

BOAT

The Masbate town pier is near the market, below Quezon St. There's a SuperFerry ticket office (☎ 333 2373, 333 2342), as well as offices for Montenegro and Blue Magic Ferries at the pier, opposite the Shell service station. Pumpboats here offer regular connections (usually around 9am or 10am) to Costa Rica and Lagundi on Ticao Island (opposite), and Claveria on Burias Island (see opposite). For information on other boat services, see p344.

BUS & JEEPNEY

Small minivans travel between Masbate town and Mandaon (P100, two hours), as do regular buses and jeepneys, which run from around 6am to around 2pm. In Masbate town, the minivans drop passengers at the Shell service station at the end of Quezon St, though if you tell the driver the name of your hotel they will usually take you there after dropping off other passengers.

Most buses and jeepneys terminate next to the market in the pier area.

The scenic Masbate town–Mandaon route is sealed and smooth from Masbate town to the small town of Milagros, but from there to Mandaon it's unsealed and bumpy.

BAGACAY

☎ 056

About 14km from Masbate town, **Bitoun Beach Resort** (☎ 333 2242; huts/cottages/r P350/500/1500; a s) is a popular weekend getaway for locals and the only beachside accommodation on Masbate. Set in a stunning, secluded cove, this place is an idyllic minivillage offering a wide range of accommodation, from a row of small, tidy nipa hut-style rooms with shared balcony, to a few concrete duplex cottages with private balconies, and more lavish rooms next door with big balconies and air-con. The restaurant serves good Filipino and international cuisine.

The resort is a P100 tricycle ride from Masbate town (30 to 45 minutes), 7km past

the town of Mobo, at the end of an unpromising dirt road.

MANDAON

pop 31,570

A knobbly green hill provides an unusual backdrop to the port town of Mandaon, 64km from Masbate town. **Batongan Cave** is about half an hour by bus or jeepney, near the main road between Mandaon and Masbate town. Look for the high, rocky hill that looks out of place among its surroundings.

West of the gold-mining town of Aroroy, about 40km by road from Mandaon, day trips can be made to the **Kalanay Cave**, which has yielded some interesting archaeological relics. There's also a decent beach nearby.

A particularly scenic connection, if the transportation gods are smiling on you, is the five-hour pumpboat trip between Mandaon and Roxas' Banica wharf, on Panay (p344). Boats in either direction go via several islands off Masbate, including the stunning, high-peaked island of **Cagmasoso**.

Sleeping & Eating

Mesa's Lodging House & Eatery (r per person P100) Beside the pier, Mesa's has small, tidy rooms upstairs with fan, ancient shared bathroom and a cosy little common lounge area. The ground-floor eatery does good local dishes.

Lina's Store, at the nearby bus station (via the market from the pier), is run by the friendly Lorna Manuel, who has fresh food available virtually 24 hours a day. She also has a two-way radio and can keep you posted on the boat, bus and jeepney situation.

Getting There & Away

Buses and jeepneys run back and forth between Mandaon and Masbate (P50, two hours) up until about 2pm or 3pm. In Mandaon, the buses and jeepneys collect passengers at a square about 300m from the pier. Don't wait at the pier for these vehicles; they're often full by the time they pass by. Jeepneys tackling the particularly bad road to Aroroy (P50, three hours) leave from the station. There are two jeepneys per day, more on weekends, heading off between 7am and 9am.

TICAO ISLAND

On Ticao's rugged west coast, **Costa Rica** is a lonely fishing village with a long, brown-

sand beach. Not exactly an island paradise, it at least makes for a good boat trip – sometimes dolphins and flying fish are spotted along the way. It's easily explored as a day-trip destination from Masbate town, and the first and only accommodation was opening up at the time of research. **Halea Island Resort** (☎ 0917 844 7023; www.haleaisland.com) is nestled in a beautiful cove on **San Miguel Island** just off the northern tip of Ticao. There are plans to offer diving, snorkelling and rock-climbing. Daily pumpboats go from the Masbate town pier to Costa Rica (P15, 45 minutes), Lagundi and several other villages and towns on Ticao. A hired 'special ride' pumpboat will cost around P500 for the return trip.

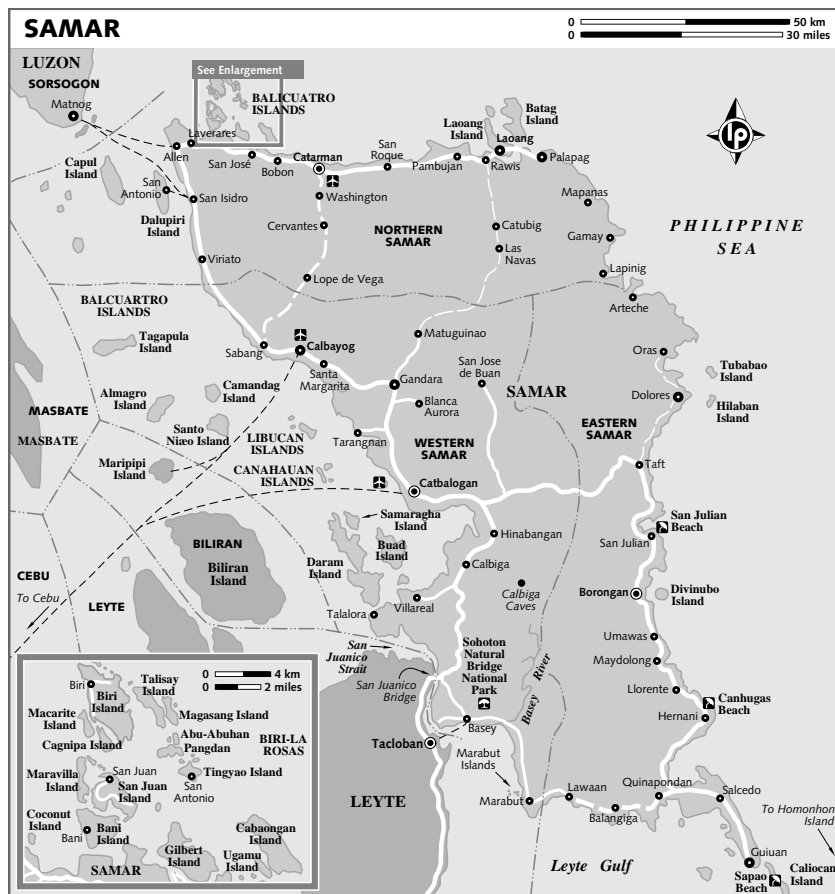
BURIAS ISLAND

In the town of Claveria on Burias, is a cave of truly cathedral-like dimensions. Thought to have been a prehistoric burial ground, the cave shows signs of relatively recent habitation in the form of scrawlings on Ming-dynasty porcelain. Known to locals for years, the cave has a well-hidden, narrow entrance. Guides (P100) may be found in sitio Macamote, Barangay Boca Enganyo, just outside Claveria proper. Make it clear that you only need one guide or you'll find half the village tagging along.

Further out than Ticao, remote Burias is still a worthy day-trip destination if you start out early; pumpboats go from Masbate to Claveria (per day P1000, three hours).

SAMAR

Samar is a rough and rugged island stretching all the way in the north to the tip of southern Luzon and all the way in the south to within shouting distance of northern Mindanao. Perhaps the most obvious sign that Samar is trailing in the development stakes is that not a single movie theatre or Jollibee is to be found. Whether this is a positive or negative depends on your perspective. However there is no doubt that it is one of the poorer provinces in the Philippines and is not surprisingly a refuge for small New People's Army (NPA) groups. These groups continue to skirmish with government forces, though foreigners are not targeted and any action tends to occur in the



ugged and remote hinterlands. While the island is almost entirely undeveloped, there are grandiose plans to convert the southern tip around Guiuan into a vacation destination, though the reality is likely to trail far behind the inflated rhetoric.

Tacloban (p354) is the de facto commercial capital of southern Samar and where most travellers enter, even though it's on neighbouring Leyte; the two are linked by the scenic 2km-long San Juanico Strait. The heavily forested interior, full of cave systems and waterfalls, is beginning to be explored by local adventure entrepreneurs, and experienced surfers can head to the wild and beautiful east coast. It's possible to fly into Catarman in the north where there is

a mass of little-explored offshore islands or to Calbayog on the more developed west coast. Wherever you go, boat and road connections are even more irregular than elsewhere, and patience and time is necessary.

Waray is the language commonly spoken on Samar, and the traditional dance of welcome – the *kuratsa* – is, astonishingly, patterned after the courtship movements of chickens. Very little English is spoken on this island and even Filipino is less likely to be understood than in other parts of the Visayas.

History

Magellan first set foot in the Philippines here in 1521, at the island of Homonhon in the south. During the Philippine-American war,

Samar was the scene of some of the bloodiest battles. Tales of brutal combat wove their way into US Marine Corps folklore, and for years after the war American veterans of the campaign were toasted in mess halls by their fellow marines with, 'Stand, gentlemen, he served on Samar'. Perhaps because it was sparsely settled before the US colonial period, Samar has a handful of towns and villages founded by or named after Americans: Allen, Taft, Wright, MacArthur and the tiny village of Washington.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Asian Spirit flies from Manila to Calbayog (one hour) and Catarman (one hour) three mornings a week, returning the same days.

BOAT

The Calbayog–Cebu City route (P275, 10 hours) is serviced three evenings a week. There are almost hourly boats from the Balwharteco Terminal in Allen to Matnog (P95, 1½ hours) on Luzon, from around 4am to 4pm. There may also be a boat between Matnog and San Isidro. There are a number of jeepneys, buses and tricycles that can take you from Matnog to Bulan, 60km away, where you can catch a boat connection to Masbate (see p344).

BUS

There are regular departures to Tacloban on Leyte from Catarman (eight hours), Guiuan (eight hours) Calbayog (five hours), Borongan (five hours) and Catbalogan (three hours).

Philtranco and BLBT have several daily services to Manila from Catarman, Calbayog and Catbalogan, and daily departures from Borongan and Guiuan (P600/30). Samar has some of the worst roads in the Visayas – huge potholes can make for very slow going.

CATARMAN

pop 67,670

Catarman is the point of air entry to northern Samar, and is a stopping-off point for trips along the northeast coast or to the offshore Biri-Las Rosas Islands. Other than that there's not much to hold the traveller's interest, although it is the only place in northern Samar with a bank that accepts ATM cards.

The limited accommodation reflects Catarman's nonexistent tourism profile. There's lodging associated with the University of the Eastern Philippines (UEP; dm per person P50), about 3km out of town and within walking distance from White Beach. The campus is green and nicely laid out. A number of small eateries nearby provide food.

Getting There & Away

Asian Spirit, which flies between Catarman and Manila (P2500, one hour, four times weekly), has an office on Magsaysay St. The airport is 2km (P20 by tricycle) from town. Buses and jeepneys meet the boats at Allen and continue to Catarman. There are long-distance buses to and from Leyte and Luzon. See left for flight and road-transport information.

AROUND CATARMAN

The Biri-Las Rosas Islands are a marine protected area and home to fishing communities. There is good snorkelling and diving at Biri, and occasionally good surf, but you'll need your own equipment. Boats from Lavezares, 30km from Allen, leave when full (P60, one hour). There is no commercial accommodation. If you're interested in exploring this area you may want to check with the DENR in Catarman or with students at UEP.

The road from Laoang along the north-east coast is open as far as Lapinig. It is an undeveloped area of surf beaches and rock formations. Of note in Laoang is the US-built lighthouse near the ferry landing – a picturesque structure that has been withstanding typhoons since 1907.

ALLEN

pop 20,066

This small port town is really only worth a stop to break up a trip between northern Samar and southern Luzon. If you can't make the boat connections and need to stay overnight here, by far the best option is Wayang Wayang Resort (☎ 0918 338 8756; Barangay Jubasan; r from P700; a), a nicely landscaped and surprisingly comfortable complex of large nipa huts and a concrete cottage 4km south of town directly on the water. There's a restaurant and individual bamboo huts good for eating or watching the sunset. A pool is in the works. You could try Lauren's Lodging (r P100-150), right at the wharf, with a

restaurant attached. It's clean, if basic and noisy, and is handy to the boats.

Manila-bound buses go via Allen. Allen is 1½ hours from Calbayog, 3½ hours from Catbalogan and one hour from Catarman.

See p349 for information on boats to and from Luzon. Buses meet each boat and depart for Tacloban on Leyte (P220, six hours).

BALCUARTRO ISLANDS

This group of islands is just below the north-western point of Samar. The largest is Dalupiri, also called San Antonio, and has good beaches and clear water; but zillions of spiky sea-urchins mean reef shoes are a must. Stay at **Flying Dog Resort** (cottages P500), the only commercial accommodation on the island. The setting is a beautiful landscaped garden right on the beach, but the pretty cottages aren't well maintained. Electricity is limited, so rooms can be hot if there is no breeze.

You can hire a boat to the island of Capul to the west, which was a galleon staging post during Spanish days and has a ruined watchtower where sentries once combed the horizon for Moro pirates.

Take a tricycle from Allen to San Isidro (P20/50 regular/hire), or get off northbound buses in San Isidro. You may have to hire a boat to Dalupiri (P150, 15 minutes) if there are no other passengers. To return to San Isidro, stand on the beach and wave down a passing passenger boat (P20).

CALBAYOG

☎ 055 / pop 147,200

The pretty road from Allen to Calbayog hugs the coast, passing through villages and river

estuaries framed with nipa palms, and has a backdrop of mountains. Calbayog has a busy wharf area that is full of painted cargo, fishing and passenger boats, and is walking distance from the town centre and hotels.

Calbayog comes alive for the annual fiesta on 7 and 8 September, with parades, outdoor performances and re-enactments, cultural displays and huge street markets.

There are several Internet cafés in town including **Citilinks** (Magsaysay Blvd). On the way to the airport is the **Marjo-Cristal Pension** (r from P500; a) which has simple and clean rooms. There's a restaurant attached.

There are food stalls set up nightly along the west side of Nijaga Park near Rosales bridge and an Orange Brutus on Orquin Ave on the corner of Nijaga and Navarro Sts.

Getting There & Away

Asian Spirit (☎ 209 1364) flies between Calbayog and Manila three days a week (P2600, one hour).

There are many regular daily buses between Calbayog and Catarman via Allen (P48, four hours) and between Calbayog and Catbalogan (P35, two hours). Jeepneys ply the coastal road, but it's faster to take a bus between the major towns. All jeepneys from Allen depart from and terminate at the Capocan bus terminal north of Rosales bridge. From there it's a P10 tricycle ride into the town proper.

There is a boat from Calbayog to Masbate (P100, six hours) on Saturday mornings.

CATBALOGAN & AROUND

☎ 055 / pop 84,180

The sound you hear in Catbalogan is silence, at least compared to most tricycle-clogged towns. Only pedal power is allowed in the centre, which added to the fact that Catbalogan has the best choice of accommodation on the island, makes it the most logical place to base yourself if you intend to explore the interior. There's an impressive looking city hall. Catbalogan is the provincial capital of western Samar, and in the middle of Pita Park, a little patch of greenery not far from the port, there is a memorial to the Doña Paz ferry disaster. Most of the victims were from Catbalogan and elsewhere on Samar (see the boxed text, p352).

But the real reason to visit Catbalogan is in order to get out of it, to venture out to

the gorges, deep ravines, lush forest, caves and subterranean rivers to the north and east. Nearby are the waterfalls of Pinipsakan, Bungliw, Bangon, Mawacat and Larik, the Guinogo-an cave system, and Mapaso Hot Springs (where, remarkably, small red crustaceans called *pokot* survive in the scalding water). The **Calbiga Cave**, the Philippines' biggest karst formation and at 2970 hectares, one of the largest in Asia, is an adventurer's playground. It was only first systematically explored in 1987 by an eight-person team of Italian speleologists, and the main cave, Langun, has a chamber the size of three football fields. All these attractions are between one and two hours' drive, plus between 15 and 40 minutes' walk, from the city.

Trexplore, a one-man operation run by the entrepreneurial and engaging **Joni A Bonifacio** (☎ 251 2301, 0919 294 3865; trexplore@yahoo.com; Abesamis Store, Allen Ave), is the only outfit qualified to lead trips to caves, rivers and gorges all over Samar. An avid and passionate mountain biker, Joni can tailor trips to about any specifications, however it's best to make arrangements well in advance.

Information

Roy's Internet Café (2nd fl, Casa Christina Hotel, General Roque St; 7am-10pm) charges P20 per hour.

Equitable PCI, Landbank and Metrobank all have ATMs.

Sleeping

Rolet Hotel (☎ 251 5512, 0921 715 5184; R&L Bldg, Mabini Ave; s/d from P650/850; a) This could be the best value in all of Samar. The Rolet is a highly recommended place to base yourself if you're exploring the interior. It's professionally run and while the rooms are nothing spectacular, they are clean, modern and well maintained. There's a bright 2nd-floor sitting area.

Summers Garden Pension House (☎ 251 5135; r P800-1200; a) An excellent alternative to the Rolet or even the first choice for those looking for more homey accommodation. This is a large, immaculately kept house with wooden floors and a sunny patio and garden in the front yard. The four rooms are all large and have big, almost royal-looking beds. The more expensive room has private bathroom. There's another branch a few minutes away on 3rd St, however it's only an ordinary hotel with slightly grubby rooms.

Casa Christina Hotel (☎ 356 1725; 152 San Roque St; s/d with fan P150/250, s/d with air-con P500/700) The walls of the Casa Christina are painted bright and happy pinks, yellows and greens. Its up a flight of stairs above an Internet café.

Fortune Hotel (☎ 251 2147; 555 Del Rosario St; r with fan/air-con from P220/650) A reliable long-standing hotel, the Fortune has a wide range of rooms in terms of size and conveniences. Regardless of your choice, it's not the quietest part of town.

Maqueda Bay Hotel (☎ 251 2386; r P500-700; a) A few kilometres south of the centre of town, the Maqueda has basic rooms with bathrooms but the real draw is the restaurant over the water with picture windows, perfect for taking in the fantastic sunsets.

Eating

Ernie's Pizza (☎ 251 3285; pizzas P40; a) Ernie's is a friendly place, always busy, serving up so-so pizzas and ever-popular *halu-halu* to locals. One of the rooms has air-con.

Fortune Hotel Restaurant (dishes P50) A bustling large dining room on the ground floor of the hotel of the same name, serving up Chinese and Filipino dishes.

Ohayo Fast Food Restaurant (hamburgers P20; 7am-9.30pm) On the same street as the Rolet Hotel, Ohayo serves up Filipino fast-food staples and noodle dishes (P80).

Choritos Fast Food (meals P30; 7am-8pm) Filipino specials, *empanadas* (pastries with sweet or savoury fillings) and baked goods.

There's also Tony's Kitchen, JC's Foodspot and an Orange Brutus.

Getting There & Away

There are frequent buses between Calbayog and Catbalogan (P70, two hours); the last departs around 6pm. There are also jeepneys, but it's faster to take a bus. There are daily bus services to Borongan (P60, three hours) on the east coast and buses (P50, three hours) and air-con vans plying the potholed road to Tacloban on Leyte. Buray, about half an hour out of Catbalogan, is the junction for Borongan-Tacloban buses, so there are more services to the east coast from Buray than from Catbalogan.

Philtranco buses to Manila (P1000, 18 hours) leave every two hours or so from the bus station near the wharf.

Sulpicio Lines has a Cebu-bound boat every Friday at 6pm (P490, 12 hours).

SWIMMING IN THE DARK

The *Caecogobius cryptophthalmus* – now say it five times fast – is further proof that necessity is the mother of invention. This 7cm-long fish, discovered in 1987 in the cave system around Calbiga, appears to have no eyes, at least none that we can see. After all, what's the point when you live in permanent darkness? This extremely rare type of fish, the first found in the Philippines, has eyes embedded under its skin; this is evidence for some that evolution is still under way, however in which direction is the question.

LEGACY OF A FERRY DISASTER

While the name *Titanic* has entered the English lexicon as shorthand for a terrible tragedy, most people know nothing of an accident that took more than four times as many lives and to this day is the world's worst peacetime sea disaster. In December 1987 the passenger ferry *Doña Paz* collided with the 629-ton tanker *Victor* in an enormous explosion in the Tablas Strait off the island of Mindoro in the Philippines. The tanker, owned by the oil company Caltex, was loaded with thousands of barrels of fuel oil, and the *Doña Paz*, owned by Sulpicio Lines, was overloaded with passengers, thousands of whom were never recorded on the ship's manifest.

The ferry's departure from Tacloban was delayed for over a dozen hours, nothing unusual for anyone who has ever been on a passenger ferry in the country, and it stopped in Catbalogan to pick up additional passengers on its way to Manila. It's generally accepted that more than 5000 people perished that night, and only 24 of the passengers survived. By comparison, around 1500 people perished in the sinking of the *Titanic* and fewer than 1000 died when the *Estonia* sank off the coast of Finland. Sulpicio Lines, which is in operation today, though under different management, never admitted carrying more than the maximum passengers allowed; it paid settlements to the families of half the victims which many believe were inadequate compensation.

A recently built airport is at Buri beach, 9km from town and there are tentative plans for Asian Spirit to fly here.

BORONGAN

☎ 053 / pop 55,140

To reach Borongan on the middle of Samar's remote east coast, you pass forested, mountainous country, little villages seemingly unfazed by the outside world and finally the waters of the Pacific where surf is up intermittently throughout the year, though it's really only for the experienced, hardy and patient. There are marlin and sailfish offshore and you can go fishing with locals if conditions are right. The scenic white-knuckle road joining the east and west coasts ends at the small town of Taft – named after the first US Governor-General of the Philippines, William Howard Taft – where there have been confirmed sightings of the Philippine eagle in the nearby forest.

Borongan is also the jumping-off point for the island of Divinubo, a pretty spot 10 minutes offshore, with a lighthouse built by the Americans in 1906. Divinubo has good snorkelling, caves and forested slopes.

Information

There are a few Internet cafés in town including **Hyper Drive** (Abenis St) and **Space One** (Cinco St) across from the Eagle Star booking office and bus terminal. The Metrobank has an ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Dona Vicente (☎ 261 3586; hoteldonavicenta@yahoo.com; r from P880; a s) Attached to the new Uptown Mall, Dona Vicente is the classiest place in Borongan and, maybe most importantly, has a nice pool. Modern rooms have air-con, cable TV and hot water.

Domsowir Hotel (☎ 261 2133; r with fan/air-con P250/500) A decided step down in terms of quality, the Domsowir is centrally located and the rooms have cable TV. There's a good restaurant attached.

Pirate's Cove (cottages P800-1200) Road signs directing you to Pirate's Cove are scattered along the coastal road but the resort itself is near the port in Borongan. The nipa cottages have a few unusual nods to style like mosaics and shell mirrors. There is a sea pool at low tide, good snorkelling and breezy pavilions out over the water. You can arrange day trips and boat hire from here.

Getting There & Away

Regular buses run between Borongan and Catbalogan (P60, three hours) and Tacloban (P150, five hours) on Leyte via Basey. There are also buses to Manila (see p349). Jeepneys make the journey to Guiuan (P40, 2½ hours) every hour from 7am until 6pm.

GUIUAN

☎ 053 / pop 38,694

The literal and metaphorical end of the road at the southeastern tip of Samar, Guiuan (ghee-won) will perhaps one day be a tourist destination. For now, for better or worse,

it's a typical town with beautiful surroundings but lacking any accommodation to match. It does have an array of historically significant attractions spanning the period from first colonisers to the days of the final liberators. Visit the impressive and well-preserved 16th-century church with fabulous carved Spanish doors and altar. Walk up to the weather station for wide, sweeping views across the Pacific Ocean and Leyte Gulf. During WWII, the US military transformed the area into a launching pad for attacks on Japan, and it was once the largest PT (patrol boat) base in the world with as many as 300 boats and 150,000 troops stationed here; the 2km runway is still serviceable. Go across the bay (a few minutes by banca) to the island of Tubabao, where traces remain of the period when White Russian émigrés lived here – most had been living in Shanghai and Canton after fleeing the Russian Revolution. The White Russians took refuge here after the newly communist Peoples Republic of China sent them packing.

Sleeping & Eating

Concordia's Place (☎ 582 1086; r with fan/air-con P350/550) This large family home has an attractive waterfront backyard and several simple rooms with polished wooden floors, however the mattresses are nothing more than thin plastic cushions. Bathrooms are shared.

Tanghay Lodge (☎ 271 2027; r P450-700) The steaming cell-like rooms are what you'd expect judging by the unpainted and crumbling hulk of a building 1km or so from the town centre (tricycle P5). More expensive rooms have air-con and private bathroom. The Tanghay (pronounced town-hi) does have a little roped-off swimming area in the bay and a concrete pavilion where food is served.

Getting There & Away

Several buses and jeepneys (P100, three hours) leave for Tacloban in the morning; the last departs at around 3pm. A more comfortable alternative is to take a L-300 van (P120, 2½ hours). Regular jeepneys run to Borongan (P40, 2½ hours). If you leave too late in the day it's possible to catch an onward van or jeepney by waiting, possibly a long time, at the junction where the road forks north to Borongan and west to Tacloban.

AROUND GUIUAN

There's good swimming at 3km long Ngolos Beach on the Pacific side of nearby cave-filled Calicoan Island. At the time of research, the owners of the deluxe Pansukian resort on Siargao Island, Mindanao, were developing a 'surf camp resort' here. WWII historians will also want to see the remains of Navy 3149 Base. Elsewhere on Calicoan, there's pleasant swimming, snorkelling and beachcombing on Sulangan Beach.

The island of Homonhon is where Magellan first landed in the Philippines on 16 March 1521. The island has blowholes, white-sand beaches and a freshwater cascade and creek. You can get a public banca from Guiuan (P20, two hours) during daylight hours and depending on the tide.

Suluán, an hour beyond Homonhon, has a derelict lighthouse. The 500 steps up to it are good exercise and the reward is a fantastic view across the islands of Leyte Gulf and the Pacific Ocean. There are also coastal caves that are accessible at low tide. If you want to stay overnight on Suluán, the *balangay* (outrigger boat) captain will help you.

Marabut Islands

There is something uplifting and magical about turning a bend in the road and spotting one of the dozens of miniature jagged limestone islands off a stretch of the coastline between Basey and Marabut; the views here are reminiscent of a shrunken version of

BALANGIGA MASSACRE

Throughout September of 1901, Filipino guerrillas, many of them dressed as women, infiltrated the town of Balangiga between Basey and Guiuan. By smuggling weapons hidden inside coffins, which they claimed contained the corpses of cholera victims, the guerrillas were able to stockpile weapons in the local church. On 28 September the guerrillas then attacked and killed most of the US garrison stationed there. A terrible revenge was subsequently taken by relieving US forces, who were instructed to 'kill anyone capable of bearing arms', including all boys aged 10 years and over. The commanding officer was later court-martialled. There is an annual re-enactment and commemoration on that date.

Vietnam's Halong Bay. There are a few scattered beachside huts but the nicest by far is the **Marabut Marine Park Beach Resort** (☎ Tacloban 053-325 6000; leypark@mozcom.com; r with fan P2100), which has several wooden-and-bamboo bungalows with private bathrooms. A restaurant does excellent seafood. There are also kayaks and snorkelling gear for rent. You can take a jeepney from Tacloban to Basey (P20, one hour), then transfer to another jeepney for the remaining 15km, or more conveniently take one of the Duptour vans to Guiuan and ask to be let off at the resort.

Sohoton Natural Bridge National Park

This is Samar's premier natural attraction, a protected area of caves and forest, and home to at least six of Samar's endemic birds. Access is via Basey which, given its proximity to Leyte, is usually visited from Tacloban. For further information see p359.

LEYTE

For students and historians of the Pacific and WWII, the name of this Visayas island conjures up images of bloody naval battles and the site of MacArthur's famous return. For Filipinos it's equally associated with the rags-to-riches rise of Imelda Marcos and the nostalgic, romanticised portrait she painted of her birthplace after she made good in the capital. For travellers, the historical monuments aside, southern Leyte is wrapped around the deep-water Sogod Bay, which contains many species of coral and fish, including a population of *ihotiki* (local Cebuano language for whale shark), visible from boats or from an island viewing station near Liloan. There are dive sites around Sogod Bay and Limasawa, with rich reefs and drop-offs. Wall and cave diving is possible at Lungsodaan in Padre Burgos. The Cebuano-speaking southern Leytenos are more laid-back and hospitable than their Waray-speaking neighbours in northern Leyte. The north is cattle-ranching country, while the mountainous interior offers hiking.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tacloban is connected with Manila by PAL and Cebu Pacific. See p358 for more information.

BOAT

Most boat connections with Cebu are to Cebu City, including a nightly boat from Baybay, a morning boat from Hilongos, twice-weekly departures from Tacloban and more frequent departures from Ormoc.

There's a daily boat service that sails from Maasin to Ubay on Bohol.

A boat leaves Baybay for Manila weekly. Sulpicio Lines leaves Ormoc for Manila via Masbate once a week.

There are several boats a week that leave Maasin for Surigao (P300, 1½ hours). A boat leaves Baybay for Surigao via Maasin on Friday, and there are three ferries daily from Liloan to Surigao, Mindanao (P275, 3½ hours, 9am, noon and 4pm).

BUS

There are frequent bus services between Leyte and Biliran and Samar, and daily connections with Luzon and Mindanao.

Regular buses leave from Tacloban and Ormoc for Manila via Samar.

Philtranco runs from Tacloban and Ormoc to Davao (P560 to P705) on Mindanao, via Surigao, in the afternoon – departure times fluctuate.

There are convenient air-con van services between several of the larger towns on Leyte, Biliran and Samar.

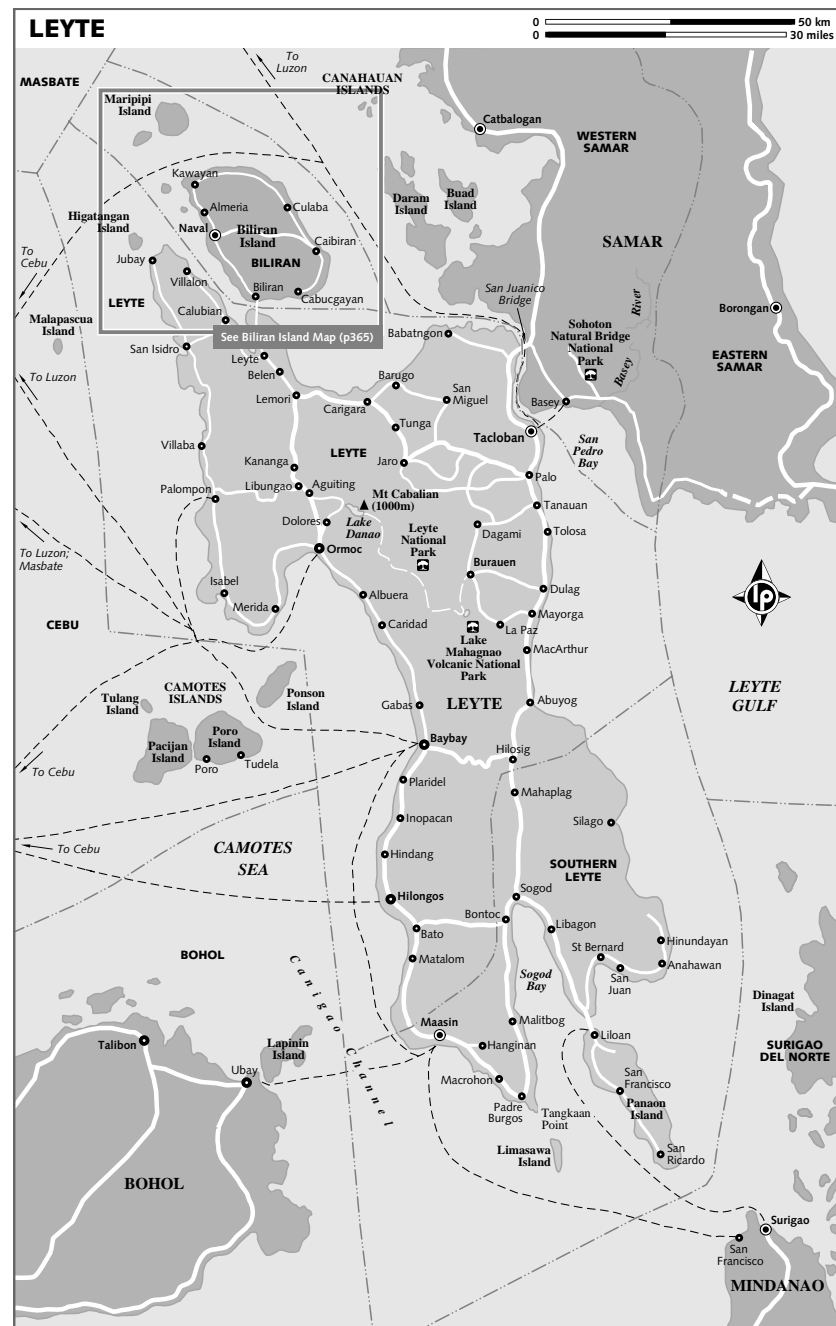
TACLOBAN

☎ 053 / pop 178,640

While it's the political capital of Leyte, this bustling city is the geographic and commercial centre of both Leyte and Samar. Smack in the middle of this pair of islands separated only by the San Juanico Strait, Tacloban is a relatively cosmopolitan outpost in a large underdeveloped and poor territory.

Activity centres on the bustling wharf area and market in the middle of town. Tacloban's most famous daughter is Imelda Romualdez Marcos, whose family home is at Tolosa, a little way south; the family's influence in the town is evident in street names and various public buildings.

Historically, Tacloban is better known as the place to which General MacArthur returned with US liberating forces on 20 October 1944 (actually, he landed at Palo, a few kilometres outside the city). This date is celebrated annually, and there are WWII memorials around the town, including



moulded reliefs on outer walls of the Capitol Building that commemorate the landing.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Most charge around P20 per hour.

3M (h 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) Opposite Alejandro's Hotel.

Centrelink Internet (225 Justice Romualdez St;

h 8am-midnight)

Queensland Internet Café (Patermo St)

Roy's Internet (MH del Pilar; h 24hr)

Tristar Internet (Ave Veteranos; h 9am-midnight)

MONEY

Equitable PCI Bank (Rizal Ave) Another branch on Salazar St; both have ATMs.

Landbank (Justice Romualdez St)

PNB (cnr Santo Niño & Justice Romualdez Sts) ATM.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Visit the DENR office off MH Del Pilar St north of the city centre for maps and information on the Leyte Mountain Trail.

Tourist office (☎ 321 2048; dotev@skynet.net; Ground fl, Foundation Plaza Bldg; h 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) In the small office complex to the left of the entrance of the Leyte Park Hotel.

Sights & Activities

Take a sunrise climb along the Stations of the Cross to the top of Calvary Hill for wide views across the San Juanico Strait. Visit the chaotic and colourful market early, as much of the fresh produce (including the gorgeous flowers) is gone by 7am and the meaty section grows smelly.

A must is the **Santo Niño Shrine & Heritage Center** (admission for up to 6 people P200; h 8.30am-11.30am & 1-4.30pm), an enormous palatial residence and opulent guesthouse built to Imelda Marcos' specifications but never slept in. It houses an extraordinary collection of antiques and *objets d'art* from across the world. In every room there is a diorama of Imelda in the midst of one beneficial act or another. The centre is sadly under-curated, decaying almost before your eyes, but it's well worth the entry fee for a guided tour.

Festivals & Events

Pintados-Kasadyaan or 'painted' festival, held on 29 June, celebrates the traditional tattooing practised here before the Spanish arrived; nowadays water-based paints are used for the festival's body decoration.

Sleeping

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Rosvenil Pensione (☎ 321 2676; 302 Burgos St; s/d P450/650; a) There are two Rosvenil Pensiones: the old building with basic rooms or the new addition of 18 Art Deco, sparkling rooms in a beautiful three-storey building with wrought-iron railings and balcony.

Alejandro's Hotel (☎ 321 7033; alejandro@nxdsl.com.ph; Patermo St; r P950-1528; a) This three-storey hotel built around the beautiful 1930s home of Alejandro Montejo looks like a regal colonial-era villa. The rooms are nothing special, but the common areas of the old building – especially the veranda on the 2nd floor – make up for them. The attached restaurant and coffee shop is also a plus. Houses a good permanent photo exhibition.

Asia Stars Hotel (☎ 321 5388; Zamora St; s/d P750/900; a) This centrally located five-storey building has a dull grey façade and none of the charm of Rosvenil, but its modern and clean hotel rooms with extra-big TVs are good value. Marble lobby and elevator.

Hotel La Roca (☎ 325 3337; Zamora St; s/d P750/850; a) La Roca has an elevator, not to be ignored when it's hot (which is always), and the executive rooms have windows that bring in lots of light. Less expensive rooms are just as clean but can be dark. Professional and courteous staff.

Tacloban Plaza Hotel (☎ 321 2444; Justice Romualdez St; r P495-700; a) Even though they are a little dark, the least expensive rooms at Tacloban are nevertheless large, comfortable and good value.

Manhattan Hotel (☎ 321 4170; Rizal Ave; s/d around P500/750; a) Next to the market and wharf, the marble-floored modern rooms at the Manhattan are large but a little rough around the edges.

Primrose Hotel (☎ 321 2248; Zamora St; r with fan/air-con P300/750) Cheaper rooms here are good value though they tend to be dark unlike the more expensive air-con rooms. It's on a very busy part of the street.

TOP END

Leyte Park Resort Hotel (☎ 325 6000; r P2000-4600; a s) The premier resort in Tacloban. The standard rooms are showing wear and tear, and the motel-style building isn't a match for the beautiful waterfront location. Good-sized pool, (nonguests P100), restaurant

TACLOBAN



and nightly entertainment: disco, ballroom dancing or live music in the open-air bar.

Eating

A boom in the restaurant scene has hit Tacloban in the last few years, making it by far the best place to eat in Leyte or Samar – and that's not meant as a backhanded com-

pliment. Besides fresh seafood, there are also several modern, independent eating establishments in Tacloban serving up a number of different cuisines.

The city's famously delicious cakes and sweetmeats are favourite *pasalubong* (souvenirs) for visiting Filipinos to take home. Try *binagol*, a sticky confection wrapped up

in banana leaves; it is available from various shops on Zamora St, near the waterfront.

Ochó Seafood & Grill (☎ 325 4171; dishes P120; a) Ochó is a small, stylish, modern restaurant. Pick your own fish, squid or shellfish from the display or try one of the enormous soups, thick enough for a meal for two.

Guiseppes (☎ 321 4910; 173 Ave Veteranos; dishes P200; h 10.30am-10.30pm; a) Where the crème de la crème of Tacloban go to eat, brick-walled Guiseppes is decorated like an Italian bistro and serves pastas and pizzas (P95) and a good Caesar salad (P125).

Stephanie Smoke Haus (☎ 325 3797; Ave Veteranos; dishes P160; a) Part of Tacloban's 'restaurant row', Stephanie has a modern, comfortable dining area and a selection of grilled fish, shrimp, meat and vegetable dishes.

Socgarden Grill (dishes P100; h 11am-2pm & 6pm-midnight) Next door to the Rosvenil Pensione, this casual outdoor grill does fish raw (sashimi P100) or cooked (*lapu-lapu* P100) and sizzling *gambas* (shrimp) (P150).

Julio's Buffet & Jazz Joint (☎ 325 8808; Paterno St; dishes P75; a) This little place near Alejandro's Hotel has a good nightly all-you-can-eat (P120) of Filipino dishes and live jazz every Thursday and Friday at 9pm.

M'la Kim Kiam Restaurant (☎ 325 1821; MH del Pilar; dishes P100; a) A mix of Filipino, Japanese and Chinese, M'la Kim has hot-pot tofu (P40) and grilled fish (P120) on the menu.

Hop Chan Teahouse (☎ 321 1111; 26 Zamora St; dishes from P80; a) Between Jollibee and Hotel La Rica, this Chinese restaurant is a cross between fast food and fine dining. Chow down on hot pot (P175), dim sum (P43) and noodle and soup dishes.

Cruise the *lechon* stalls along Real St for slices of whole pigs on spits and barbecued chicken, or visit the food stalls around the market. Fast-food joints, including Shakey's Pizza, are on Zamora St.

Drinking

Meld'z Wineshop (☎ 325 2288; h 9am-midnight Sun-Thu, 9am-2am Fri & Sat; a) A sophisticated little place, stacked with bottles of wine on one wall and comfortable indoor and outdoor seating. Besides wine there's mixed drinks like Cuba libres (P60) and desserts.

Kyle's Wine Bar is a dark little place on Gomez St for some quality vino. **Bo's Coffee Club** on Ave Veteranos is a Starbucks clone with wi-fi Internet, good cakes and comfy chairs.

Getting There & Away

AIR

From Tacloban, PAL and Cebu Pacific fly to Manila daily (1¼ hours). Cebu Pacific has an office in Senator Enage St.

The airport is about 12km south of the centre of town. A jeepney will cost P20, or you can hire a tricycle for P80.

BOAT

Cebu Ferries leaves Tacloban for Cebu (from P290, 13 hours) on Tuesday and Saturday at 4pm. In the opposite direction, boats depart from Cebu for Tacloban Monday and Friday at 6pm.

BUS & JEEPNEY

The Philtranco station is about 2km south of the city on the airport road. Long-distance buses leave from here to Manila (26 hours), with several departures between 6.30am and 11.30am, one departure around 4pm, and another around 11.30pm.

Regular daily buses and jeepneys from other parts of Leyte and Samar use the station by the market in the town centre.

Almost all destinations are also serviced by much more comfortable and quicker air-con vans for only slightly more pesos. **Duptours** (☎ 321 1370; cnr Ave Veteranos & Santo Niño St), located behind the Caltex petrol station, has air-con vans servicing southern Leyte, Bilaran (P120, 2½ hours) and a few Samar destinations including Borongon (P180, 3½ hours) and Guiuan (P120, three hours). **Van Vans** (Salazar St) and **Grand Tours** (Burgos St) are similar companies with vans to other Leyte and eastern Samar destinations respectively including Catbalogan (P200, 2½ hours), Calbayog (P275, 3½ hours) and Allen (P300, 5½ hours).

AROUND TACLOBAN

☎ 053 Palo

WWII history comes alive in the township of Palo, 12km from Tacloban. It's the site of **Red Beach** where, on 20 October 1944, MacArthur fulfilled his vow to return and liberate the Philippines from the occupying Japanese forces (see p27).

At Red Beach itself, 1km or so from Palo town, there is the **Leyte Landing Memorial**, a group of stalwart, larger-than-life-sized figures that appear to be walking out of the sea. There's also a **rock garden** where many

international tributes were set in stone in 1994 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Leyte landing.

Visit **Guinhangdan Hill**, known in WWII as **Hill 522**, the scene of fierce fighting. The beautiful, 16th-century church was turned into a hospital from October 1944 to March 1945.

MacArthur Park Beach Resort (☎ 323 4095; pta-mprbr@evis.net.ph; r P1500-3300; a s) is just beyond the Red Beach monument on a stunning part of the coast. The rooms aren't decorated especially nicely though they are large and sunny. The resort has a swimming pool (nonguests P100).

Take a jeepney from the market in Tacloban for P10, or hire a tricycle for P100 per hour. Ask the driver to drop you off at Red Beach, on the Tacloban road about 1km before Palo township. Tricycles are available locally to travel the short distance between each site.

Sohoton Natural Bridge National Park

Although Sohoton Natural Bridge National Park is on Samar, it is easiest to access it from Tacloban, which is why it's included here. The park contains a series of caves under limestone outcrops. There are enormous, sparkling stalactites and stalagmites, with cascades and swimming holes as well as three navigable rivers, the Basey, the Sohoton and the Bugasan Rivers, which traverse the cave system. The park is reached by boat, with forest and small villages on the riverbanks on either side. The forest in this area is home to at least six species of Samar's endemic birds, monkeys and other wildlife. You should check conditions before you head off – after heavy rain the caves may be inaccessible.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take a jeepney (P20 per person, 45 minutes) or boat (P15 per person, one hour) from the market in Tacloban across the San Juanico Strait to Basey.

Ask for information at the tourist office in Tacloban (p356), or in Basey call into the **Municipal Tourism Information Office** (☎ 053-276 1471; Basey wharf; h 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat & Sun) and ask for Mr Tanni Adel, who will organise transport and a guide. On the weekend guides can be found around the market in Basey where you can also check

out the mat weavings for which the town is renowned. From Basey to Sohoton takes two hours by boat.

Pumpboats (P700) hold five to seven people. You pay a US\$2 (or peso equivalent) park entry fee at Basey. Rent a kerosene lamp for P200 or take a good torch (flashlight). There are a few other miscellaneous fees: mayor's permit P5, service fee P25, and yes, an actual miscellaneous fee P10; all per person.

It's recommended to start early (leave by 7am). Take a packed lunch, and if you miss the last transport back in the late afternoon, you can stay at **Distrajo's Lodge** (☎ 053-276 1191; per person P100) in Basey.

Burauen

Burauen, 44km from Tacloban (P30, one hour by jeepney), is one of the starting points – the other is Ormoc – for the Leyte Mountain Trail. It was also the home of Justice Romualdez, Imelda's great-great-grandfather, a renowned composer of Filipino songs. The township also has a Japanese war cemetery.

Lake Mahagnao Volcanic National Park & Leyte Mountain Trail

If you wish to visit this national park – site of former volcanic activity – or to hike the 40km mountain trail, you need first to visit the mayor at the town offices in Burauen (above) for information.

The trail takes in rainforest, lakes and waterfalls as it crosses the mountain range in the centre of Leyte. It finishes near Ormoc, at either Lake Danao National Park (p363), or at the volcanically active Tongonan National Park. The DENR in Tacloban (p356) sets up the trail, so you can get information and look at route maps there.

PADRE BURGOS & AROUND

☎ 053 / pop 8926

This is considered by many to be one of the premier dive spots in the Philippines, with pristine coral reefs, deep wall dives and an abundance and variety of big fish. Padre Burgos also has some good beaches with offshore snorkelling, including **Tangkaan Point**, to the south of town. A few local leaders have taken the initiative with the help of the internationally run **Coral Cay Conservation** programme to stop dynamite and

cyanide fishing and are in the process of setting up a marine reserve.

Activities

For those interested in diving, Southern Leyte Diver Resort and Peter's Dive Resort (see below) charge around US\$22 for per boat dive, or US\$19 for shore dives, plus US\$5 for equipment per dive. Both can also organise dive trips to the islands of Limasawa and Panaon; however the crown-of-thorns starfish is threatening parts of the reef.

There are more than 20 whale sharks, known locally as *ihotiki*, that sometimes congregate in Liloan Bay near the bridge that connects Panaon Island to Leyte. Boats dock at Puyaw Islet, an observation station that has a comfortable bamboo pavilion. If whale sharks are spotted, a *bangka* can be rowed out to get a closer look. There is no guarantee that whale sharks will be spotted, though the best time of year to see them is November and February to June. They are usually spotted in the late afternoon. Package tours (per person US\$12) last all day and include snorkelling and a picnic lunch. Bear in mind that you still must pay for the tour even if no whale sharks are seen.

Trips can be arranged through Southern Leyte Dive Resort (below), Peter's Dive Resort (below) or Rio Cahambing (opposite); it's best to call a few days in advance.

Sleeping & Eating

Southern Leyte Dive Resort (☎ 0918 589 2180; www.leyte-divers.com; San Roque; r P450-880) The large and charming bamboo cottages here are the nicest in Padre Burgos. This family-run resort and full-service dive centre only 1km north of town on a little sandy beach is wonderfully landscaped, with potted plants and flowers everywhere. A few concrete air-con rooms are in the works but for now rooms are cooled by fans. Excellent food includes fresh sashimi and salads.

Peter's Dive Resort (☎ 573 0015, 0920 798 4658; www.whaleofadive.com; r P300-800) Peter's is just off the road on a pebble beach with several inexpensive rooms with shared bathroom in the bamboo main building and several large, more comfortable cottages on the water with private bathroom. It has a full-service dive centre and a new 16m *bangka*.

Davliz Travel Lodge (☎ 573 0002; r with fan/air-con P550/850) Davliz has a row of concrete cot-

tages hugging a cliff above the same beach as Peter's. There's a well-stocked bar and barbecue facilities.

Napantaw Diving Resort (☎ 0919 585 3891; pantawdivers@yahoo.com; San Francisco, Panaon Island) A newly opened resort on Panaon Island south of Liloan. Napantaw plans to offer concrete cottages and nipa huts, diving and a fully equipped dive operation to take advantage of the house reef, as well as whale-shark and dolphin watching and snorkelling trips.

Getting There & Away

Regular jeepneys and vans travel to Maasin (P25, 45 minutes) and Ormoc (P155, 2½ hours). Jeepneys pass through on their way to Tacloban but are often full so it's always an option to backtrack to Maasin or to try to catch one with space in Malitbog.

LIMASAWA ISLAND

pop 5157

Limasawa is historically significant in the Philippines as the first place in which the Spanish celebrated mass, on 31 March 1521, thereby starting the Christianisation of the country. A pumpboat makes the journey from Padre Burgos daily (P20, one hour) and lands at barangay Magellanes. If you plan to overnight here you need to contact the mayor (ask around for him) and arrange to stay at the two-room **guesthouse** (r P300-400).

The site of the first mass and its commemorative marker is a half-hour hike away in barangay Triana; a local person will probably offer to walk with you. The island also has beautiful beaches for swimming, snorkelling and diving. The daily boat to Padre Burgos leaves Limasawa around 6am.

The boats do not run if the sea is rough, so be prepared to wait for calm weather.

MALITBOG

☎ 053 / pop 19,320

From the mid-19th century until WWII, Malitbog enjoyed almost a century of prosperity due to its location near abaca plantations and the edge of deep-water Sogod Bay. During this time a number of interesting edifices were built that still stand today. Typically, the town boasts a beautiful old church, the Santo Niño Parish, constructed of coral blocks in 1857. There's also a **watchtower** built in 1862, the ground floor of which still serves as the city jail.

A few grand old mansions, once the homes of the merchant-class elite, can also be seen around town. One of these, the **Villa Margarita**, is open to visitors. Unlike many of the old architectural gems to be found in the Philippines, the Villa Margarita, a residence built in 1922, has not been restored. Short tours (P150) are given on an appointment-only basis. Contact the Southern Leyte **governor's office** (☎ Maasin 548 0882) at least a week in advance.

There are regular jeepneys from Maasin (P30, one hour) and Padre Burgos (P25, 40 minutes) to Malitbog.

MAASIN & AROUND

☎ 053 / pop 71,160

Maasin (mah-*ah*-sin), the provincial capital of southern Leyte, is distinguished from other pedestrian, small port towns by the slightly languid air from the encroaching jungle. It's a suitable base for hiking in the region and is the most convenient place for errands if you're staying in Padre Burgos.

There's a beautiful old church, built in 1700, and a huge image of Our Lady of Assumption on a hill behind the town. Built to commemorate an old legend about an angel that descended from the heavens to turn back a typhoon, the image is lit up at night and looks like a benevolent apparition floating in the sky.

Information

Olvinet Internet (Demeterio St; 11 9am-9pm, Mon-Sat) charges P20 per hour.

PNB, Metrobank and Landbank all have ATMs. Candy's Supermarket or Luz Pharmacy will change US dollars cash for good rates. Metrobank changes travellers cheques with high commission.

Nedgar Garvais in the **Provincial Planning Development Office** (PPDO; ☎ 570 9486; Provincial Capital Bldg; 11 8am-noon & 1-5pm) can provide basic info about the area.

Rio Cahambing (☎ 0919 585 3891; scuberph@yahoo.com), now affiliated with Napantaw Diving Resort, operates a one-man southern Leyte tourism bureau and guide operation from his home in town. Besides hiking trips, Rio organises diving and whale-shark trips (P700 per person).

PAL (☎ 381 4433; 207 Demeterio St) has an office in town.

Activities

Few people explore the area around Maasin even though there are several good hikes, and caves and waterfalls to explore. The newly created **Maasin Youth Organization** (MAAYO; ☎ 0919 585 3891; scuberph@yahoo.com), organised by Rio Cahambing (left), encourages environmental consciousness among the Maasin youth and provides trained guides for trekking, camping, caving and other activities. Guinsohotan Falls and Cagnituan Cave are both around a 6km hike from Maasin, and your aerobic effort will be rewarded with a refreshing dip in a natural swimming hole.

For hardy explorer types with time on their hands, **Lake Danao** in the crater of Mt Cabalian (1000m), an extinct volcano surrounded by lush forest and birds, is good for camping. From Maasin it's three hours by bus to the town of Cabalian, from where it's a one- to two-hour hike to the crater. It's best to contact a guide in Maasin for assistance.

One of the last remaining virgin forests in Leyte is **Patag Daku**, found at around 1300m atop a mountain range near the town of Libagon, two hours by bus from Maasin. It's a demanding climb over steep cliffs and narrow ledges to reach this area of more than 1000 hectares full of century-old trees, dense vegetation, wild boars, deer and a huge variety of tropical birds. The highlight of the climb is **Yamog's Peak**, which offers a fantastic view of Limasawa Island and Sogod Bay to the west, and the twin islands of San Pedro and San Pablo in Hinunangan to the east.

Sleeping & Eating

Maasin Country Lodge (☎ 570 8858; r from P450; a) The most relaxing place to base yourself if you intend to explore the area. Situated along the Canturing River, a few minutes' tricycle ride from the town centre, the pink-painted building has prettily decorated and comfortable rooms. More expensive ones have TV.

Southern Comfort Pensionne (☎ 570 8514; r P550-700; a) This is a friendly and clean alternative if you're keen on staying in the centre of town. Rooms have TV.

Ampil Pensionne (☎ 570 8084; Tomas Oppus St; r P450; a) and **GV Pensionne** (☎ 590 8481; r with fan/air-con P325/450) have similar quality rooms though the latter is up three flights of stairs and rooms are slightly smaller than Ampil's.

Superchow Garden Café (☎ 570 8146; dishes P40) A pleasant outdoor café in a park next to a

few tennis courts and near the provincial capital building. Serves sandwiches, burgers and fried fish and calamari.

Kinamot Restaurant (Abgao) Just outside of town; serves good Filipino food and steaks. There's also a Jollibee in town.

Getting There & Away

Regular buses run to Ormoc (P60, three hours), Padre Burgos (P50, 45 minutes) and Tacloban (P150, four hours). There are also regular buses to Liloan (P80, four hours), the ferry port for Mindanao.

The nearest boat landing from Cebu is at Hilongos, 37km north of Maasin. Ocean Jet (% Cebu 032-254 3687) leaves Hilongos for Cebu (P570, two hours) at 6am and 12.30pm and leaves Cebu for Hilongos at 9.30am and 5.30pm. There are many buses and multicabs (P35) to Maasin. **Cokaliang Co** (% Cebu 032-272 1118) has an overnight ferry to Cebu leaving at midnight several times a week (P230).

A bangka ferry leaves for Ubay, Bohol (P130) every day at 9.30am.

Maasin has good sea connections to Mindanao (see p354). **Cokaliang Co** has a boat that leaves Maasin for Surigao every Wednesday and Friday (P250, six hours) at 3am.

ORMOC

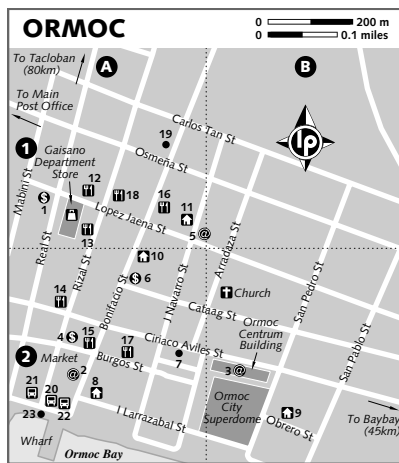
% 053 / pop 154,300

The surrounding hillsides, mostly logged and bare of vegetation, are a scenic backdrop for those arriving by boat. It's a striking first picture of Leyte, though otherwise Ormoc is a typical port town with a bustling wharf area. A grassy promenade along the waterfront qualifies as parkland in the Philippines, and it's only a short walk before one is strolling down subdued villagelike paths.

Ormoc was a centre of WWII activity, with some of the bloodiest battles on Philippine soil taking place over several days in 1944, between the allied US and Filipino forces and the retreating Japanese. **Yamashita's Gold**, a quasi-mythical treasure trove named after the Japanese commander and left behind by the fleeing Japanese, is believed by some to be hidden in the hills outside town (see the boxed text, p137).

Information

CupNet Internet Café (per hr P40; h 7am-2am Mon-Sat), **d'Kit Internet Café** (Ormoc Centrum Bldg; per hr



INFORMATION

BPI.....	1	A1
CupNet Internet Cafe.....	2	A2
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Equitable PCI Bank.....	4	A2
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PNB.....	6	A2
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SLEEPING

Hotel Don Felipe.....	8	A2
Ormoc Villa Hotel.....	9	B2
Pongos Hotel.....	10	A2
Zenaida's Chateau Tourist Inn.....	11	A1

EATING

Chez André Pizzeria.....	12	A1
Fruit Stalls.....	13	A1
Jollibee.....	14	A2
Magnolia Ice Cream.....	15	A2
Park & Go Bakeshop.....	16	A1
Suki Zuki Japanese Restaurant.....	17	A2
Tata Vmb Pizzeria.....	18	A1
Zenaida's Restaurant.....	(see 11)	

TRANSPORT

Asian Spirit.....	19	A1
Bus Station.....	20	A2
Jeepney Station.....	21	A2
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Supercat/Cebu Ferries.....	23	A2

P15; h 8.30am-midnight) and **Net Bytz Internet** (Navarro St; h 8am-10pm) have Internet access.

PNB (Bonifacio St) and **BPI** (Lopez Jaena St) have ATMs and change US dollars. There's also a branch of the **Equitable PCI Bank** (Burgos St) here.

Sleeping

Ormoc Villa Hotel (% 255 5006; www.ormocvillahotel.com; Obrero St; r from P1700; a s) This is as lavish

as it gets in Ormoc. The carpeted rooms at this peach-coloured villa a few minutes from the centre are large and comfortable. There's a good restaurant (burgers P110) and a landscaped garden and pool (nonguests P100).

Zenaida's Chateau Tourist Inn (% 255 2517; cnr Lopez Jaena & J Navarro Sts; s/d P500/600; a) Zenaida's is the best choice in the price range, offering clean, modern rooms with cable TV and private bathroom.

Pongos Hotel (% 255 2540; fax 561 9721; Bonifacio St; s/d with fan from P220/330, s/d with air-con from P420/620) A hotel with a split personality. Ordinary rooms in the old building are fading while the new building is a big step up in quality.

Hotel Don Felipe (% 255 2460; fax 255 4306; I Larrazabal St; r with fan/air-con from P360/480; j) A hulking prominent building on the waterfront. The rooms in the main building are well kept and nice while the annex rooms are decidedly not good value. There's a coffee shop and Internet café attached.

Eating

Suki Zuki Japanese Restaurant (dishes P60; h 10am-9.30pm Mon-Sat, 5.30pm-9.30pm Sun) A small modern place that looks like a Japanese restaurant should, serving teppanyaki, sushi and sashimi in Ormoc. Who would have thought?

Tata Vmb Pizzeria (pizzas P60; h 7.30am-8pm) Of the two pizzerias in Ormoc, Tata has more pleasant outdoor seating and doubles as a bakery.

Chez André Pizzeria (pizzas P54; h 8.30am-10pm) Only a few blocks from Tata, Chez André does have the more Italian-sounding name and the pizzas are equally good, but the too brightly lit dining room isn't as nice.

Zenaida's Restaurant (cnr Lopez Jaena & J Navarro Sts; dishes P60) On the ground floor of Zenaida's Chateau Tourist Inn, serving Filipino dishes such as *pansit* (noodles) and grilled meats.

There are plenty of bakeries including **Park & Go Bakeshop** and fruit stalls in town. **Magnolia's Ice Cream** looks like an old-time parlour and is worth stopping in for a frozen treat.

There's also a Jollibee near the corner of Rizal and Aviles Sts.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Asian Spirit (% 255 9068; 26 Osmeña St) has flights Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday between Ormoc and Manila (1¼ hour).

BOAT

Cebu Ferries plies the Ormoc-Cebu City route four times a week (P395, five hours). **Sulpicio Lines** boats from Ormoc to Cebu (P210, six hours) leave on Friday and Sunday at midnight. From Cebu to Ormoc departures are on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday at 1pm.

Sulpicio Lines leaves at 7pm on Tuesdays for Masbate and then Manila.

BUS

All bus and jeepney stations and shipping offices are located along the waterfront.

There are regular buses, jeepneys and vans to and from Tacloban (P100, two hours), Maasin (P130, two hours) in the south of Leyte, and Naval on Biliran Island (P100, 1½ hours). You can also take buses northwest to Palompon and San Isidro on Leyte. **Silver Star** buses depart Ormoc for Manila (air-con P1150, 26 hours, 5am). All Manila-bound buses go via Samar.

AROUND ORMOC

Lake Danao National Park

Lake Danao is a beautiful body of fresh water in the hills above Ormoc. You can swim and picnic for the day, or camp overnight. Regular jeepneys run from Ormoc (P20, one hour). It is also one starting point for the **Leyte Mountain Trail**; the other is in Burauen (for details see p359).

If you plan to start hiking from this end, contact the DENR field office at Lake Danao.

BAYBAY

pop 95,630

The south-bound road from Ormoc to Maasin passes through Baybay (bye-bye). This small township has boat connections to Cebu, Manila and Surigao (see p354). Baybay is known for its smooth but potent *tuba* (palm wine).

BILIRAN ISLAND

Tourism is yet to take off on this quiet island province, despite a number of Miss Biliran Tourism winners being crowned over the years, a reputation as a source for pure and sweet water, numerous waterfalls, rice terraces and several sandy, white beaches

on offshore islands. Biliran, about 32km long and 8km wide, became a province separate from Leyte in 1992; a short bridge connects the two.

Biliran is lush and it can rain any time, with the most rainfall in December and the least in April. This climate allows three rice harvests annually, and some rice is exported. There is little else in the way of exports or industry though, and most people are subsistence farmers or fishers. They generally speak Cebuano on the west coast and Waray-Waray on the east.

Getting There & Away

You can get to Biliran from Cebu, Leyte, Luzon and Samar.

BOAT

Sulpicio Lines *Cagayan Princess* boats to Cebu leave Naval on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday (P220, 11 hours, 8pm); travel between Naval and Cebu is faster if you get a boat to/from Ormoc, and then a bus to/from Naval. Find the ticketing office at the back of the Shell station in Naval.

BUS

There are regular bus services from Naval to Ormoc (P100, two hours) and to Tacloban (P120, three hours). Duptours air-con vans run between Naval and Tacloban (P150, two hours) several times a day.

Philtranco and PP Bus Company buses leave Naval early each morning for Manila (P790, 30 hours).

All buses and jeepneys arrive and depart from a terminal near the *embarcadero* (water-landing).

Getting Around

Buses and jeepneys make regular daily trips from Naval north to Kawayan (P15, one hour), and south and east to Caibiran (P30, 1½ hours) via Biliran town. Motorised and pedal tricycles operate in the towns. The flat fee for short local trips is P5.

The round-island road is very bumpy, slow and dusty. Public transport does not run along the coast road between Kawayan and Caibiran, or along the cross-country road between Naval and Gabibihan. You can charter a multicab for these stretches for around P1000 to P1500 per day, or hire a motorcycle with driver for around P1000 per day.

NAVAL

☎ 053

Naval (nah-*bahl*), the provincial capital, is stretched along a road from a handful of government buildings to the low-rise, harbour area. It's worthwhile really only as base for day trips to Higatangan Island and to the waterfalls to the east. Staff at the Provincial Tourism Council (☎ 500 9627; bilaranpio@yahoo.com; Capitol Bldg; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) are eager and helpful and the 2nd floor is given over to an interesting selection of local artefacts and photos. There are plans to offer free Internet access here; if not, Naval has a few Internet cafés. There's a PNB and Landbank in Naval. There are no credit-card facilities.

Sleeping

Marvin's James Seaside Inn (☎ 500 9171, 0927 528 3492; r from P600; a s) By far the best option in Naval, friendly Marvin's is a mustard-yellow three-storey modern building on the water 2km south of town (tricycle P10). Some of the rooms are awkwardly shaped but they are clean and comfortable and have private bathrooms and cable TV. There's a homey indoor lounge and dining area and the annex across the street has a nice pool (nonguests P20). A breezy patio overlooks the ocean.

Villa Cecilia (r P800-1000; a s) A new complex of concrete bungalows 3km from Naval (tricycle P10) on the banks of a small river in the village of Lombog. Cecilia offers horseriding and a mini-zoo.

Also recommended in Naval:

Jan Dell's Cabin (☎ 500 9338; r with fan from P300)

Naval Institute of Technology (r P300; a)

Eating

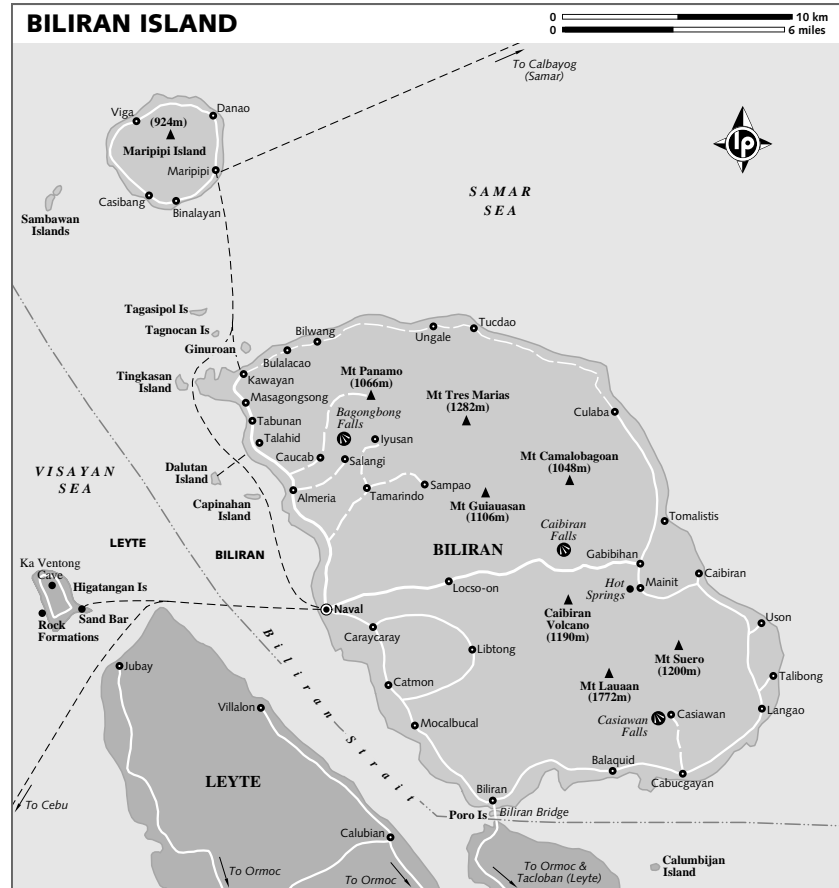
Marvin's James Seaside Inn has the best restaurant in the area.

Most eateries are on Inocentes St, the main street of Naval, which leads from the market, jetty and terminal area. Lambat Seafood Restaurant and Johnnton's Restaurant both have good *pansit* and *lomi* (noodles) and karaoke.

NORTH OF NAVAL

☎ 053

This pretty stretch of coast is the only part of the island that is easy to explore by public transport.



About 2km beyond Almeria is **Agta Beach Resort** (dm with fan P100, r P450; a), home of the Sabitsana clan, with Spartan dorm beds and big, good-value, air-con rooms with private bathroom. It's on a stretch of beach with swimming at high tide only, and is busy with locals on the weekend. The resort is a good base for visiting Dalutan, an island with white sand and good snorkelling. Hire a *bangka* for P50 and paddle yourself across in 30 minutes.

Bagongbong Falls are a two-hour hike from Caucab, where the *balangay* captain will help you find a guide (P100).

The rice terraces of Sampao, Iyusan and Salangi are each about 5km off the main road and you'll need to walk in unless you charter

a vehicle. They can't compare to the Banaue terraces, but they're quite pretty and worth a look if you can't get up to northern Luzon.

There's pool-like swimming at **Masagongsong cold spring** (child/adult P10/20), and, opposite the pool, on the main road, is the **Estrella Sunset View** (r with air-con P500-600; a), with its own concrete spring-fed pool (nonguests P20). Simple food can be ordered.

In Kawayan you can hire a *bangka* for around P300 to take you to the island of Ginuroan. It has a steep and rocky foreshore, but the offshore coral gardens are good.

You can walk around pretty, undeveloped **Maripipi Island** in under a day, or hire a motorcycle (P100 per hour). You can overnight at the **Candol Beach Resort** (r P250) on a brown-sand

beach or homestays can be arranged at the Provincial Tourism Council. The uninhabited **Sambawan Islands** have white sand and good snorkelling. You can charter a *bangka* to Maripipi (one way P300, 30 minutes) from Kawayan and there are passenger boats from Naval (P60, one hour, 10am); the boat leaves Maripipi at 5am in the other direction.

EAST & SOUTH OF NAVAL

¼ 053

Caibiran Falls is a steep 20-minute hike off the cross-island road. It is quite undeveloped and, if the water's not flowing too fast, there are two big **swimming holes** at its base. Nearby, **Caibiran Volcano**, which last erupted in 1939, can be climbed in a steady 1½ hours. Check with the Provincial Tourism Council for directions to these as they are not signposted; you will need to charter a vehicle and guide. The volcano is active, so get advice before setting out.

Mainit hot spring is a series of small cascades with sitting pools, exposed on a riverbank beside rice fields. Reputed to have exceptionally sweet water, the **Tomalistis Falls** pour from a cliff face and are only accessible by boat. **Casiawan Falls** (cah-show-won)

are worth a visit depending on the amount of recent rainfall. It's a 20-minute drive on a track off the south coast road, and then another 10 minutes by foot.

WEST OF NAVAL

¼ 053

Due west of Naval is **Higatangan Island**, a shifting white sandbar good for swimming and snorkelling, and you can walk to the **Ka Ventong Cave**, renowned for the snakes who call it home. On the western side of the island, accessible by boat only, is a series of interesting **rock formations** with small, sandy bays between them. Former President Marcos, along with fellow resistance members, reportedly took refuge on the island in WWII, and **Marcos Hill** is named in his memory.

The only accommodation is **Limpiado Beach Resort** (r with fan P150-300), near the sandbar, with simple rooms, and you have to bring your own food; electricity stops at 10pm so evenings can be hot without a breeze. There's a 10am *bangka* from Naval (P30, 45 minutes) daily, and the boats leave in the other direction at 7am. A one-way charter costs around P700 to P1000.