

Every trip back to the Philippines reminds me just how much my family is blessed. My eldest sister had her 93rd birthday in the middle of June. Her mind is sharp as ever. A cousin who would have been 94 at the end of June passed away in May, but never lost her faculties. Incredibly, she was still working as a financial officer up to the last year of her life. A cousin of my father is 92, spry and alert. He delivered a eulogy at the memorial of the cousin who passed in May. His favorite pastime is going to the casinos that have proliferated around Manila. He must figure that he can keep beating the odds. Among my Orosa first cousins, there are six who are in their 80's. One still writes a weekly column on music and art. The only one who is frail is a 94 year old first cousin. On my mother's side, there are five first cousins in their 80's. I visited an 88 year old who raised 13 children. Deo gratias.

The Philippines, at least in the Manila area, appears to be in the middle of a real estate boom. One of my nephews and his wife bought condominiums in Quezon city, a virtual stone's throw from the property my parents bought back in the 1950's. My parents paid less than ten pesos a square meter. The going price today is 50,000 pesos. That is a staggering rise of 500,000 percent. The price of a 36 square meter (a sq. m. is about 10 square feet) unit is 4,000,000 pesos or more than \$90,000. That is about \$250 a square foot, a bargain by New York City or London standards but considering the size and location, a little pricey. The best houses in the best neighborhoods of Cincinnati are only half of that per square foot. Those condo units are smaller than the size of the living / family room of our Fairfield home.

There is a fairly new attraction that is a must see for anyone visiting the Philippines and is interested in the culture BA (before Americans). The Acuzar family has built a complex called Las Casas Filipinas de Acuzar. They have taken ancestral houses from all over the country, reinstalling them on their multi-hectare property facing the West Philippine Sea in southwest Bataan. Some of the houses were lovingly restored from a dilapidated condition. In some cases, where no original house was available to be transferred, they have built reproductions. My favorites are the Casa Binondo, from Manila's Chinatown, and Paseo de Escolta, from the once premiere shopping district of Manila. Check out their website.

I've been to the province of Palawan three times, the latest trip barely a week ago. Palawan is now, hands down, my favorite province from among the 80 provinces that comprise the Philippines. My mother came from Zambales and she absolutely loved the place. She bought her siblings' properties, combining several adjacent plots, building a two story house in an idyllic setting. The gray sand beaches of Zambales stretch for tens of kilometers. But move over, Zambales, It is Palawan for me. My father comes from Batangas, a very historic province. It has a 400 year old cathedral, the largest in the Philippines. Batangas has Lake Taal and Taal volcano. If the Philippines has the equivalent of the Hawaiian goddess Pele, she would reside in Taal's crater. No less than the Spanish writer Wenceslao Retana spoke affectionately of the Batangueños in his tome "*El Indio Batangueño*." Sorry Batangas, but it is still Palawan for me.

Calling Palawan the Philippines' last frontier has become a cliché. But Palawan is the Philippines as it was, and I believe, meant to be. Its population density is the second lowest of any province,

one sixth of the national average. That is roughly equal to the population density of the combined southern states of the U.S. Note that if the population density of the continental United States were the same as that of the Philippines, her population would be 3 billion. Most of Palawan is covered with forest, including some of the last remaining stands of rainforest and hardwood. They do not allow logging or mining. There are miles and miles of beaches, islands (more than 1,000 of them) and corals. I've gone snorkeling all over the Philippines, the Great Barrier Reef, Maui, Kauai and the Big Island, Mexico and Florida. Okay, I'm bragging. But you don't have to visit all these places, just go to Palawan, especially if you are a serious diver. Part of the province, located 150 kilometers southeast of the capital Puerto Princesa, is Tubbataha Reefs, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Another Palawan World Heritage Site is the Puerto Princesa underground river, the world's longest navigable subterranean river. Every year, new discoveries are made inside the cave.

Lest you think that Palawan is an isolated backwater, consider that the capital's small airport, probably handling a few dozen flights a day, has free wi-fi. When we stopped for lunch at a small island named Cowrie, the guide said, "if you want to check your email, this place has wi-fi." Palawan is perfect for someone on a limited travel budget. I have never seen such a variety of street food, such as those in Puerto Princesa. You can get your fill, including *lechon* (roast suckling pig) for less than what you'd pay for a Big Mac in Cincinnati. Air conditioned hotel room? How about \$35? The only downside? There are no elevators for the four story hotels (the tallest buildings I saw), and bring your own shampoo.

Puerto Princesa has a "Baywalk" which consists of a long promenade having a seawall, wide brick sidewalk and rows of palm trees. The water along the Baywalk is absolutely clean, I didn't see garbage or plastic. On the day I took my walk, there were young kids trying to spear some fish. It reminded me of Dewey Boulevard and pristine Manila Bay of 60 years ago.

Sink those bastards! Leaving from the Puerto Princesa dock on our way to island hopping, our guide pointed out several fishing vessels, including one that was heavily damaged, barely floating. They were vessels confiscated by the Philippine Navy for illegal fishing. Go RP Navy! The perpetrators are usually from China, Taiwan or Vietnam. They are poaching not only within the Philippines' economic exclusion zone but within the Sulu Sea. This sea is enclosed on all sides by Philippine islands, Palawan on the west, Mindoro on the north, the Visayas on the east and the Sulu archipelago in the south. If the Navy is willing to take a 74 year old volunteer to man their weapons, tell me where to sign up. I would love to send these poaching vessels to the bottom of the Sulu Sea.

Unfortunately some of the perpetrators are also Filipinos using illegal methods such as cyanide poisoning to stun fish for live capturing. On a walk through another part of the bay, I saw Filipino boats that had also been confiscated. A lot of fish die for every one that is captured, to be sold for tropical aquariums. Please, please, don't buy tropical saltwater fish.

To explain the Filipino dilemma of underdevelopment and corruption, a lot of commentators quote Atlantic Monthly writer James Fallows. One of the statements Fallows made was that Filipinos treat each other worse than any other Asian people. Filipinos don't seem to trust each other. Every subdivision is a fortress. I have written about this before. My sister and brother-in-law have a new neighbor who has taken this to new heights, literally. They installed an electric fence on top of their already formidable concrete wall. Remember that to get into their subdivision, you have to go through a gate manned by pistol wielding security. If you are not a resident, you have to surrender a picture ID, typically your driver's license. It always bothers me to see all this, no other country I've traveled to has such mistrust and paranoia.

I am writing this paragraph at the Delta Lounge of Narita airport outside Tokyo. Nothing illustrates the economic chasm that Filipinos have to close than comparing the lounge at Manila's NAIA (Ninoy Aquino International Airport) with Narita's (or Nagoya's). True, this chauvinist writer finds the lounge attendants at NAIA more attractive and friendlier. The good news stops there. At Narita, there are huge, more than 20 inches screen size, Apple iMac computers lining desks along the window overlooking the tarmac. They are free for lounge guests. Then there are those Japanese made high tech Toto toilets all over the airport. I can imagine in a few years, you will be able to use voice commands to order "Toto." "More gentle spray," "higher please," "more to the left," etc. The finale would be what kind of blow dry you prefer. With that, we end on a low? note.

Mario E. Orosa
July 1, 2014