

Random Thoughts from Manila January-February 2013

I visit the Philippines every two years or so, mainly to see my two older sisters, their families, cousins and the few friends who have not emigrated. I usually write something about my experience. Here's a link to an essay from several years ago:

<http://orosa.org/Ang%20Mabuti,%20Ang%20Masama%20at%20Ang%20Pangit.htm> The title of "*Ang Mabuti, Ang Masama at Ang Pangit*" means The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, with apologies to Clint Eastwood.

I've just returned from a month long trip and here are my latest thoughts. They are not in any particular order of relevance.

A current rage among the wealthy in Manila is stem cell treatments. There are clinics that provide injections or capsules. Supposedly a lot of celebrities are doing it to rejuvenate themselves, including former president Joseph "Erap" Estrada (75) and former first lady Imelda Marcos (83). I've told anyone willing to listen that the "treatment" is a lot of malarkey (with apologies to Joe Biden). There is absolutely no clinical proof regarding the efficacy of these treatments for rejuvenation. The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) may sometimes be maligned but until they approve the stem cell treatments for these "clinics," somebody is scamming rich Filipinos. Having participated in clinical studies for both food and pharmaceutical companies, I have a healthy respect for the rigorous process required by the FDA. Right now the FDA is warning against the use of these products and procedures. On the other hand, I can't think of Filipinos more deserving to be victims of a scam than the group represented by my 2 examples above.

My visit to Coron in Palawan revealed interesting tidbits of information, some disturbing. A very old practice of peasant Filipinos is called *kaingin* which means burning a field, mountain or hillside to remove trees and underbrush. The "cleared" land is then planted with crops like sweet potatoes, cassava or maize. But the soil is poor and is played out after a few seasons. In the meantime large tracts are denuded and eroded during the rainy season. Landslides occur with sickening regularity during the typhoon season, sometimes burying hundreds. From the third floor terrace of my hotel in Coron, I could see an island across Coron Bay ablaze with *kaingin*. I was told that some islands have been turned over to indigenous people called Tagbanuas who continue the practice.

My island hopping tour guide informed me that there are over 1,700 islands in Palawan, easily making Palawan the province with the most islands. The northern Calamian Islands are stunning in their beauty. They rise straight out of the sea, some with steep hillsides covered with grass or trees. Some consist of gray limestone without any vegetation. We went to Kayangan Lake on Coron Island which had stalagmite looking formation rising from the bottom. Kayangan Lake's brackish water is reputedly the clearest in the country and I can believe it. You can easily imagine these limestone formations rising from the sea and forming the Calamians over millions of years. More than 20% of the total number of islands in the Philippines is in the province of Palawan.

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There are a lot of backpackers and intrepid older travelers in Palawan who I believe are European since I never heard English spoken among these travelers. It is too bad that Americans are not quite as adventurous as the Europeans. The latter have discovered the beauty of the Philippine archipelago. I met three French seniors who were going to travel 8 hours by *banca* from Coron south to a place called *El Nido* (Spanish for the nest). They were going to travel for weeks in the Philippines.

I don't know why Filipinos keep dogs. The animals are treated horribly. Most are kept in small cages or tied to a leash. When it comes to walking the dogs, the owners delegate the task to their household help. You hear dogs barking constantly. Stray dogs roam both city and rural streets. The females seem to be perpetually nursing or pregnant. The Philippine national soccer team is called *Azkals*, a portmanteau for *asong kalye* or dogs of the street. I don't know the reason for the name but it seems it poor taste considering the state of the canine population.

Jueteng is a numbers game that has been ingrained in Philippine culture since the Spanish era. I have never paid attention to this subject but several people gave me an education. *Jueteng* has corrupted government at every level, including the Presidency. President Joseph Estrada was removed from office after being found guilty of "plunder." The main charge was having accepted bribes from *jueteng* operators. He was turned in by his bagman, a former provincial governor. Every neighborhood has a "*cobrador*" or collector that takes the money and issues receipts. His only contact in the whole chain of corruption is the person he gives the bets to called "*capo*" a name which smacks of the Mafia. Office holders from police to mayor to governor get a cut. Here is a quote from the Philippine Daily Inquirer: "*Senator P. Lacson said that a regional police director, who protects operators of the illegal numbers racket, could receive between P2 million and P3 million a month and that a provincial police director could get between P500,000 and P1.5 million a month.*" Some, including current President Aquino have tried mightily to stop *jueteng*. But a bet of 25 cents promising a payout in thousands is attractive to the poor. The government tried STL or Small Town Lottery but it didn't work. Some other system is in the works to replace STL. In the meantime *jueteng* goes on. There is some Robin Hood type of relationship that accompanies *jueteng*. The operators sometimes provide services to the towns like installing wells or paving streets. It is all straight out of the Godfather.

Considering the diet of Filipinos, it is a wonder there isn't an epidemic of Type II diabetes. They have rice for breakfast, rice for lunch, rice for dinner. There is a morning *merienda* which could be sticky rice called *suman*. The afternoon *merienda* is steamed rice cake called *puto*. It is all white rice where the nutrition has been sucked out because we like our rice white. Then there is the liberal use of sugar. Our favorite dessert is *halo-halo*, a concoction that includes ice cream and sometimes *leche flan*. Among Asians, Filipinos are second only to Thailand in the consumption of soft drinks per capita but most people are still thin. It must be the weather.

Filipinos don't appreciate good coffee. When you ask for coffee in restaurants, you are given a packet of 3 in 1, which is coffee with creamer and lots of sugar. It is horrible unless you like

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sugar with a touch of coffee flavor. I have been served coffee in a cup with milk and sugar already in it. I blame it all on Nestle for popularizing the 3 IN 1. I'd like to ask Nestle, "Do the Swiss drink their coffee this way?" I like my coffee black and piping hot, please. I finally got decent coffee when a cousin invited us to the Manila Polo Club.

The presence of legions of security guards everywhere in the Philippines is something I could never get used to. Val and I have been to a lot of countries but I have never seen anything like this. I suppose Iraq or Afghanistan would be worse but they were or are still at war. You cannot enter a mall in Metro Manila without getting your bag, purse or package "inspected." But the inspection is rudimentary. I could probably place sticks of TNT inside and they would never discover it. You are also "frisked" but unless you had an Uzzi stuck to your belt, they'd never notice. Some malls even have guards run a mirror under your car before allowing you to park. I saw a Starbucks with a shotgun toting guard. The "gated" subdivisions are even worse. The driver of every car that enters surrenders his license or other identification. The guard issues a legal pad size sticker for display on the dashboard. In comparison you can drive through the neighborhoods of American billionaires like Warren Buffett and the late Steve Jobs without security checkpoints. Their properties don't have fences either. Somehow these security measures don't make me feel any safer, just irritated. We toured China several years ago and we never saw an armed guard yet we felt perfectly safe.

There is no bigger challenge for visitors than Manila's traffic. One interesting phenomena is respect or lack thereof for ambulances. I have never ever seen anyone give way to an ambulance that had their emergency lights on. When an ambulance blares its siren and switches on their flashing light, drivers in other countries pull over to the side. That includes opposing traffic. Filipinos do not do this.

When I see the beauty of the Philippine archipelago, I get emotional in admiration. We aren't finished yet but Val and I have been to Ilocos in the north, Banaue in the mountain province, Tagaytay & Taal, Boracay, the coast of Zambales, Cebu & Mactan, Bohol, Palawan, etc. I've gone to Mt. Mayon and was driven along the Bicol coast overlooking the western Pacific to the city of Naga. Val and I have been to a lot of places around the world. If there is a better looking stretch of land and sea anywhere, I have yet to see it. Multiply the Hawaiian Islands by 100, throw the Great Barrier Reef in the middle and you'll get an idea of the extent of the Philippine archipelago. But Filipinos have abused the land. Inland lakes have had massive fish kills due to pollution and excessive aquaculture. There is coral bleaching even among the most colorful reefs. (Bleaching is occurring around the world, not just the Philippines.) The forests are denuded, logging bans notwithstanding. The rivers and estuaries around Manila resemble a sewer. But a lot of people are working hard to make a difference. One of them is my nephew Mel. Google Mel Orosa and Pasig River. A priest has received the prestigious Goldman Environmental Award for his work against illegal mining in the island of Mindoro. Even the Philippine National Police is getting into the act with an objective of planting 10 million trees. More power to you all!

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There is a northeast wind in the Philippines called *amihan*. It is a gentle, cooling breeze that accompanies the cooler weather between the end of the monsoon and the start of the dry summer. Going back to see my loving family and enjoying the beauty of these islands brings *amihan* to my soul.

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