

Southern comforts

A growing number of Filipinos are trading in big-city living for the eternal summer vibe of Davao. Jonathan Evans makes a long-overdue first visit to find out what the fuss is all about

Three times bigger than Metro Manila, six times the size of Cebu, one of the largest metropolitan areas not just in Asia but in the world, the Philippines' fastest-growing city and, thanks to a zero-tolerance approach to law enforcement, the planet's ninth safest city as recently as 2014. Davao: to those

who've never visited Mindanao, the region's premier city is perhaps better known for its statistics — and a certain sterility — than the flavor of its streets.

It doesn't help that its remote location in the country's deep south-east makes it somewhat tricky to get to. After landing in Manila, a newcomer to the archipelago is more likely to hop on a short flight bound for the idyllic

islands of Boracay and Bohol than spend another two hours on a plane to get from the capital to Davao City (that said, stats show that Davao welcomed two million tourists in 2014). To some avowed city folk living in Metro Manila, Davao's even something of a punchline. It's backward and unsophisticated, they say, a big city with a small-town mindset and little buzz.



Yet for years Davao has been heralded as the country's most liveable city, earning nicknames like "the Singapore of the Philippines". And for all the brochure-ready figures that have been trotted out to support this claim, it's the gushing testimonials — about the sense of safety, the light traffic flow, the low cost of living, the generally good air quality, all that *space* — of young urbanites who've relocated from Manila to Davao that truly piqued my curiosity. So what makes this enormous place tick? I've journeyed here to feast my eyes on the urban sprawl laid out in the shadow of Mount Apo, the real city that exists beyond urban myth and regional prejudice. In short, I've come with the intention of answering that question for myself.

At first glance

As I emerge from Francisco Bangoy airport on a Thursday evening, Davao seems strangely quiet, disconcertingly orderly, almost un-Philippine. There are no taxi touts in the spotless car park; everything's in its proper place. Tank-like SUVs, compact jeepneys and trikes loaded with travelers purr down the gentle gradient into town. No motorbikes, no noise, no sleaze; a ubiquitous calm prevails.

Ahead of my trip, I'd imagined the city as some kind of southern re-creation of Metro Manila's Fort Bonifacio, a quasi-American theme park of consumer contentment, but it feels significantly older, or at least more lived-in. Even so, it comes as a surprise when I learn that the Apo View Hotel on J Camus Street, built in 1948, is the Philippines' second-oldest hotel.

Another revelation is the scale of the city proper. Metro Davao's wider outskirts cover 244,000km² — you can get a measure of its ridiculous scale from Jack's Ridge, a WWII bastion-turned-viewing point — but it's possible to breeze through Davao City, its business and commercial district, in just minutes even with the sleep-inducing 30kph speed limit in the downtown area. Of all the compliments paid to Davao by new residents, the near-absence of traffic snarls is the most frequently heard. Here the flow of vehicles only grinds to a halt near

Clockwise from top left: a fine-feathered friend at the Malagos Garden Resort in Calinan; an outsize replica of Michelangelo's "David" on the baywalk; going bananas at Saging Republik with its all-banana menu; a boat to Talicud Island; at Malagos' butterfly sanctuary. Facing page: San Pedro Church



roadblocks where police clamp down on speeding drivers.

The oddly intimate geography of the place helps account for the fact that its many dimly lit alleyways, well off the main drag, are packed with alluring eateries. My guide takes me to Belito's Vineyard, a cul-de-sac charmer so secluded it feels as if I've been transported to a rustic village deep in *taga-bukid* country. Yet it's first class, both as an introduction to the seafood-rich local cuisine (*kinilaw* is particularly good here) and to the warm hospitality of the Dabawenyos. One thing you notice straight away is the affordability of the food and drinks here as compared to Manila or Boracay. Likewise, commercial rents are up to four times cheaper here for start-ups, and private accommodations are just as affordable. Neat freak that I am, I clue in to yet another element of Davao's magnetic appeal the moment I exit the restaurant: the streets are

spotless. So much so that during my four-day stay, I see exactly one small pile of litter by the road. It's a remarkably clean place, with recycling bins distributed throughout the city center and a citywide ban on outdoor smoking except in designated areas.

I strike up a conversation with frequent traveler Dan Andrews, a native of the US state of Pennsylvania who owns a manufacturing business in California, holds business seminars in Hong Kong and now calls Davao home. I ask him what makes this city the perfect base for him. "I've been visiting Davao for over two years now and I have many friends in the area for business," he says. "Davao is one of the best places in the Philippines to hire, and it was that, along with my love of pick-up basketball, that brought me here initially. I've found that during the times I needed to be based in the Philippines, it's the spot with the best mix of things to do but still a slow pace

Clockwise from top: the Davao City Legislative Building; signature products at Sea Green Café; a sampling of the café's healthy brunch offerings; a viewing deck at the Malagos Garden Resort

of life. Beyond that, there's the easy access to nature and quiet."

Dan's words returned to me that night as I plugged in to my decidedly First World-speed hotel Wi-Fi, downloaded Google Maps and vowed to take a break from the virtual world the next day and step into something significantly more real.

Mountain to sea

"Relax. Explore. Repeat." So says the Tourism Promotions Board's slogan for Davao, which appears in a video picturing vast open spaces, glimmering lakes and hike-friendly mountains. Happy to do the tourist board's bidding, at sun-up I head over to the lofty Eden Nature Park & Resort, which is an hour from town via the city's western

DELIGHTFUL DAVAO



outskirts. The drive along MacArthur Highway towards Mount Apo National Park gradually reveals a verdant, very different landscape. Setting aside the occasional shack, for the most part it's a scene of comfortable rural living, complete with plantations, makeshift stalls and roadside homes. The sturdy road leads up a giddy incline towards Toril, a Japanese settlement dating back to the early 20th century.

Figuratively and literally, Eden works on many levels: it's an undulating patchwork of gardens, water features, sports facilities, private cabins, a spa and nature attractions, all connected by walkways that provide a workout and a welcome blast of mountain air. The real draw for daytime visitors is the wildlife: fan-flaring peacocks that strut around like they own the place, a smattering of wild horses, a deer herd and an impressive number of rare bird

species. A sort of all-in-one family health resort-cum-zoo, Eden also offers a fine opportunity to soak up views of mighty Apo. Those who aren't inclined to leg it along hilly trails might find Malagos Garden Resort in Calinan — with its orchid nursery, butterfly sanctuary and bird parks — a satisfying alternative. Blessed with plentiful coastline to go with its hilly outskirts, Davao is generally typhoon-free and its year-round warmth and best-of-all-worlds situation make for easy access to islands and beaches. Though Isla Reta (on Talicud Island, boats depart from Sta Ana Wharf downtown) is more remote and, inevitably, more enticing, Samal — a short sea crossing away — is the largest and most popular of the islands here. It's the best option if an idle afternoon of pristine sand and translucent seawater — served up in this case courtesy of Paradise

Island Beach Resort — is what you're after. The 10-minute ride from the city in an outrigger boat (PHP40) offers a preview of Samal's palm-filled interior while the return trip on the final boat at 5.30pm boasts fabulous views of the sinking sun as it casts an orange halo around Apo's boulder-strewn peak.

Local flavors

Its proximity to nature's delights notwithstanding, Davao City is better described as solid and functional than spectacular. But just about any city looks impressive from on high and that's the selling point of Jack's Ridge, my next stop. Davao's premier vantage point, it's also home to the city's best

Clockwise from top: Huckleberry offers cocktails by NYC-based mixologist Enzo Lim; the flavors and ambiance reflect the US Deep South; among the offerings are jugs of rum infused with tropical fruit like mangosteen; exterior view; a wicked cocktail



Newly opened drinking and dining spots have helped spice up Davao City's downtown core

traditional Filipino fare. If you neglect to try the *kare-kare* at Taklobo, with its super-rich peanut sauce, your heart might thank you but you'll have missed a sublime treat. The restaurant's quintessentially local *kinilaw*, *bagaybay* (tuna testicles) and *bihod* (fish roe) deserve a mention, too.

Back in the downtown area, another don't-miss Davao diner is Toryano's Chicken Haus, a cholesterol-rich carnivore shack serving crocodile *sisig* alongside *lechon manok* (skewered poultry), *tinola* and a mean *sinigang* (meat and tamarind soup).

Packing away all that salty animal flesh is thirsty work. So after a hearty meal I head off to Huckleberry Southern Kitchen and Bar, an instant-hit concept space twinkling with fairy lights and boasting personality in spades. This eatery with its "modern Americana cuisine featuring dishes from the Deep South," as co-owner Chris Pamintuan puts it, occupies the ground floor of the Casa de Oboza, which was built in 1929 by the family of a former mayor. For true-blue local flavor, try the Cacao Old Fashioned,

where nib rum infused with Mindanao coffee beans is used in place of whisky. Davao isn't a city full to bursting with hipster nightspots but this retro-modernist curio just might prove the game-changer.

Despite a local tendency to stick with old foodie favorites, other entrepreneurs have set up stall here to considerable success. There's the cozy BU Tapas, Bebidas y Bodega, Davao's first tapas bar, which is owned by an Australian of Spanish-Filipino descent; the original Hoy, Panga!, a tuna specialist that has hit it big nationwide on the strength of its imaginative take on seafood (grilled tuna flakes in a deep-fried bun, anyone?); and the bright, inviting Sea Green Café and Lifestyle Shop, whose claims to fame are its "soul food" (aka healthy pescetarian dishes) and killer coffee. Starbucks has notably refrained from opening here and, given that local chains such as BluGré Coffee (est 1998) have been so successful, it would likely be tough to penetrate the market. Within a 200m radius of Sea Green, several foodie haunts have opened in

DAVAO DIRECTORY

EAT AND DRINK

Belito's Vineyard, Palm Dr, Bajada, tel: +82 227 6726

Taklobo Restaurant, Jack's Ridge, Shrine Hills, Matina, tel: +82 297 8830/297 8831

Huckleberry Southern Kitchen and Bar, Corner of Rizal St and Bangoy St, tel: +82 285 2586

Hoy, Panga!, Bacaca Rd, tel: +82 921 550 6090

Sea Green Café & Lifestyle Shop, Circumferential Rd, Dona Vicenta Subd, tel: +82 305 4765

Toryano's Chicken Haus, Legazpi St (in front of Apo View Hotel), tel: +82 221 5556

BU Tapas, Palayo St, tel: +82 284 6364

Sales Bar Tekanplor, Sales St
Soundbox Bar, J Camus St, tel: +82282 4220

Coffee for Peace, G/F, Fredric Bldg, MacArthur Hwy, Matina, tel: +82 296 1053



DAVAO DIRECTORY

VISIT

Paradise Island Beach Resort,

Samal Island, tel: +82 233 0251;
paradiseislanddavao.com

Eden Nature Park & Resort,

Toril Barangay Rd, Toril, tel: +82
296 0791

Malagos Garden Resort,

Calinan-Baguio Rd

STAY

Seda Abreeza Hotel,

JP Laurel Ave, Bajada, Davao City, tel: +82
244 3000/322 8888; sedahotels.
com/abreeza

Apo View Hotel,

150 J Camus St, Davao City, tel: +82 221 6430;
apoview.com

the past year alone, including a dim sum joint, an Italian eatery and an upscale pâtisserie.

While the food scene appears to be thriving, at the moment culture isn't among the city's strong points. Still, there are pockets of promise that suggest more might be revealed if I had a few more days to spare. Then I could find out what's on offer beyond live-music spaces like Sales Bar in quiet Chinatown, a graffiti-ed refuge for rock bands and iPod battlers, Soundbox Bar, a music and revue space that keeps the party crowd happy, and modest indie cinema Cinematheque Davao.

And while at the moment the city lacks a major performance space, I suspect there's no shortage of performers waiting in the wings for a proper venue. One night I see a talented dance troupe practicing by a roadside shopfront, likely for lack of anywhere

Clockwise from above: A leisurely Sunday by the Davao Gulf; artwork by Ann Pamintuan at the Seda Abreeza Hotel; the hotel's lobby restaurant serves fresh tropical fruit juices made from local produce; baked goods and a fresh salad at the Sea Green Café

else to bust their moves. And these are proper, energetic moves — a mix of choreographed hip-hop and easy freestyling that seems to capture some of the city's upbeat spirit.

Ahead of my visit, I'd expected a city far more straight-laced and restrictive than the one I end up discovering. I come away with one abiding impression — that Davao's defining characteristic isn't on-edge obeisance, but a far more relaxed contentment. Davao's benign climate and ambience mean that it always feels like summertime — and yes, the living here is undeniably easy.

"Relax. Explore. Repeat"? Thanks, don't mind if I do.

Escape to Mati

When Davao City urbanites are looking to decompress, they hop in the car for the three-hour drive to the neighboring province of Davao Oriental and hole up in this laid-back town



For visitors to Mati, the most popular leisure-time activities include surfing, skim-boarding, light-aircraft flights and, well, snoozing. The conditions in this southeastern gulf town on the fringes of the Pacific Ocean are perfect for doing all four in a single weekend, and vacationers from the nearby big city wouldn't have it any other way. Before heading to Mati — be sure to stop at the Sleeping Dinosaur viewing point as you get close to town — pre-book your resort stay or pack tents and other camping gear.

SURF OR SKIM-BOARD IN DAHICAN BEACH

Dahican Beach, about 10 minutes from the city center by car, is Mati's centerpiece. This 17km stretch of soft, beige-colored sand is ideal for sunbathing and has plenty of shade-providing palm trees. Kids who like to build things in the sand are sure to stay busy for hours, but be careful not to let them wander off unsupervised to the rocky sections of the beach, where sea urchins dwell amid the sharp coral. Compared to other well-known surf-and-sand destinations, Dahican is a rather quiet beach with just a few resorts

— a quick online search yields fewer than 10 results — that are well separated from one another. Stroll along the beach and eventually you'll come across a lifeguard station that doubles as a surf shack, manned by lifeguards who rent out boards and give surf and skim-boarding lessons (it's about PHP300 for the board rental and coaching). Dahican makes for the perfect classroom if you're new to either sport — the waves here are manageable and break on the sandy beach.

FLY WITH THE MINDANAO SAGA FLYING CLUB

For a bird's-eye view of the beach and most of Mati, for that matter, head to the city's airport where the Mindanao Saga Flying Club (facebook.com/mindanaosagaflyingclub) offers 15-minute ultralight plane rides for just PHP1,600. Licensed pilots are available to take you on exhilarating flights that offer breathtaking views — of the city, the green fields beyond and the beach itself, where the plane swoops down until you can almost make out the faces of sunbathers (how's that for a thrill ride?). Prime flying hours are from 5.30-9am, when wind conditions are at their best, so be sure to turn up at the airport early.

RECHARGE BEACHSIDE AT TROPICAL KANAKBAI

If you're traveling with a big group (it's always good to bring the party with you), rent a fully furnished beach house at Tropical Kanakbai (tel: +63 927 287 1790; dahicanbeachclub.com). You'll enjoy all the comforts of home and then some: alfresco dining areas, a garden dotted with coconut trees and a scenic beachfront that's ideal for after-dark viewings of the moon and stars. There are two luxury beach houses on the property, each with two bedrooms that can accommodate at least four people per room. You can book a room or an entire house and make full use of the kitchen facilities. Hit the market early in the morning to get first dibs on the catch of the day and let your designated chef whip up lunch while you lounge on beachside hammocks. If you think Davao City is laid-back, be prepared for an even more blissfully unhurried pace in Mati City. 



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