



The Underground River
became one of the New7
Wonders of Nature

RISING UP FROM THE UNDERGROUND

PUERTO PRINCESA IS ENJOYING A CULTURAL RENAISSANCE, WITH COSMOPOLITAN GLAMOUR COMPLEMENTING ITS ENTICING LOCAL BUSINESSES. JONATHAN EVANS TAKES A TOUR AROUND A CITY WITH SO MUCH MORE TO OFFER THAN ITS FABLED SUBTERRANEAN RIVER

PHOTOS BY **AL LINŠANGAN**



Clockwise from left: Indigenous Palau'an fire lighting at Butterfly Eco Garden & Tribal Village; KaLui, a popular restaurant, doubles as a gallery; inside the Underground River



As our tour bus pulled away from Puerto Princesa's unfeasibly long main thoroughfare, Rizal Avenue, and veered towards the Iwahig River past small barangays and bridges, Cleo Marcojos reflected on the transformation of the city where she's lived since the age of three — one that's given her not just a livelihood but a palpable civic pride. In 1999 the Subterranean River National Park, indisputably one of Asia's most singular attractions, was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The designation opened the floodgates for mass tourism, stimulating a surge of interest in Palawan that reached a crescendo when it won *Condé Nast Traveler's* Best Island in the World award in both 2014 and 2015.

"Before 2000 there were almost no tourists," Cleo, now 39, tells me. "There was just one flight a day from Manila. Then many more tourists started to arrive in 2010, and the following year the Underground River became one of the New7 Wonders of Nature. Now there are 20 flights a week to Manila, Cebu, Iloilo and Davao." Soon that figure will be significantly higher when an international airport, now under construction in the town center, opens early next year, bringing flight operations away from the small

domestic terminal that currently serves the city and making Palawan's capital directly accessible to visitors from Taiwan, Japan and China.

As a tireless guide with the company BizItPalawanTravel.com, Cleo ferries visitors not just to the Underground River — 45 minutes from the city proper — and Iwahig, but also the stunning Honda Bay archipelago. As a child she remembers Palawan was snubbed by many Filipinos, stigmatized in part by the leper colony which stood for most of the 20th century on Culion Island.

PUERTO PRINCESA DIARIES

Clockwise from right: Entrance to Palawan Heritage Center; historic Plaza Cuartel; touring the mangroves of Irawan River



Sparsely populated, with a strung-out location — Puerto Princesa is one of the remotest destinations on the Cebu Pacific network, and certainly the furthest out west — the province was perceived as distant in geography and mindset from key metropolitan centers such as Manila and Cebu. For decades, “Puerto” (as locals call it) was known to tourists principally as the site of the horrific 1944 massacre of 139 American soldiers by Japanese troops, a tragedy commemorated in Plaza Cuartel opposite the pristine Immaculate Conception Cathedral.

But 2016 is an exciting time to be in Puerto Princesa. New airport aside, it’s clear the city is blossoming — and, in truth, has been for some

time, with its striking cleanliness, plentiful amenities and plethora of commercial outlets making it one of the country’s premier city centers. Witness the string of fine-dining restaurants along Rizal Avenue, like the garlanded La Terrasse and Italian specialist Rusticana; The Loft off the leafy, affluent Manalo Extension, which wouldn’t look out of place on Boracay’s beachfront; and Industriya, a buzzing new party den opposite Robinsons Place mall, which flaunts designer cocktails, slick design and performers from Manila.

The just-opened Canvas Boutique Hotel is leading the charge for an influx of flashpacker cubbyholes, with a focus on locally inspired design

With its striking cleanliness, plentiful amenities and many commercial outlets, Puerto Princesa is one of the country’s premier city centers

and guest comfort — it even plans to branch out with an “art park” in the coming months. Blue Palawan is one of the more surprising city-center hotels, its unassuming façade opening on to private huts and a hidden beach. And Microtel, recognising that Palawan is better known for its



seascapes than its interior, saw the potential in setting up beside the white-sand stretches on the city's eastern fringes, where I dined on excellent cuisine, slept in blissful peace and woke to stunning sunrises as the Sulu Sea's high tide lapped the edge of Emerald Beach.

So while Puerto has no shortage of 21st-century comforts, nods to modernization come at no cost to its most notable cultural trait — the earnest preservation of its patrimony. Everywhere I go, I meet ordinary people who love their city and know its backstory intimately. There's no better example than Palawan Heritage Center, where for only PHP50 you'll receive a witty whistle-

stop tour of the province's history, including a re-creation of one of the island's earliest inhabitants, Tabon Man. Make time, too, for the tiny Palawan Special Battalion World War II Museum, which tells how the Japanese occupation affected local people. A trip out of town takes you to the Butterfly Eco Garden, where the blue-winged butterflies and bearcats make a swoonsome spectacle; but the real draw is the Tribal Village, occupied by families from the Palau'an indigenous group who showcase tools of their rural lifestyle such as guitars, crossbows and flint lighters.

Puerto really hits its stride when this local pride filters into progressive practices that enhance residents' lives

Where to eat and drink

- La Terrasse, Rizal Ave, Brgy Banca Banca, +63 48 434 1787; laterrassepalawan.com

- Rusticana Restaurant & Bar, Rizal Ave, Brgy Banca Banca, +63 915 706 8653; facebook.com/Rusticana-Restaurant-and-Bar

- The Loft, Abrea Rd, Brgy Banca Banca, +63 48 434 0791; theloftpalawan.com

- Industriya, Km 3 Tiniguiban, +63 48 433 0782; facebook.com/industriyabar

- Ka Inatô, Rizal Ave, Brgy Banca Banca/Km 4 cnr San Manuel Rd, Brgy Tiniguiban, +63 48 434 2288; facebook.com/pages/Ka-Inato-Restaurant-Palawan

- White Fence Country Café, 296 Manalo Extension, Brgy Banca Banca; whitefencecafe.weebly.com

- KaLui, 369 Rizal Ave, +63 48 433 2580

- Katabom, Rizal Ave Extension; facebook.com/pages/Katabom-Bar

- Cafe Olé, Maresca Bldg, 3 Valencia St, +63 48 723 2667; facebook.com/cafeolepalawan

- Itoy's Coffee Haus, Rizal Ave, +63 48 433 5182; facebook.com/Itoys-Coffee-Haus

Check out

• Palawan Heritage Center,
Provincial Legislative
Building, Fernandez St, +63
48 434 7524; [facebook.com/
PalawanHeritageCenter](https://www.facebook.com/PalawanHeritageCenter)

• Palawan Special Battalion
WWII Museum, Rizal Ave
Extension, +63 91 7545 4052

• Palawan Butterfly Eco-
Garden & Tribal Village, South
National Hwy, Brgy Sta
Monica, +63 91 7597 5544

• Baker's Hill, Mitra Rd, Brgy
Sta Monica, +63 48 433 0172;
[facebook.com/Bakers-Hill](https://www.facebook.com/Bakers-Hill)

• Mitra's Ranch (Rancho ni
Mitra), Mitra Rd, Brgy Sta
Monica, +63 920 661 7887

• Kay's Hot Springs, Purok
Mainit, Brgy Sta Lourdes,
+63 91 2220 8699

• San Jose New Market
Enjoy the sausage-making
displays at Merit Manal
Martinez Meatshop (stall
#1 and #2). San Jose Bus
Terminal, between Puerto
Princesa South Rd & North Rd

• Palawan Wildlife Rescue
and Conservation Center,
National Rd, Brgy Irawan,
+63 48 433 2968

• Binuatan Creations,
Bougainville Dr cnr Rafols
St, Brgy Sta Monica;
binuatan.com

• Viet Ville, Brgy Sta
Lourdes, +63 920 220 8694

• Palaweno Brewery, 82
Manolo St, +63 48 725 6950;
palawenobrewery.com



and make this sprawling city equally appealing to tourists. Proceeds from the Iwahig firefly trip, for example, go to local communities, while Ka Inatô, an arty haven that's become the city's most famous restaurant, employs deaf staff. On passing a probationary period, prisoners at Iwahig Penal Farm are allocated a "job" — such as ploughing the rice fields — and live with fellow inmates in a self-sustaining community, as documented in the award-winning 2005 film *Out of Bounds*. (Though they're under constant surveillance, according to Cleo, "They live as free men. They don't want to leave.")

Puerto is refreshingly free of the snarling traffic that clogs many large Philippine cities, and tricycle fumes aside, the environment is well looked after. The citywide anti-litter ordinance has worked wonders; the

streets here are as clean as Davao's. Baker's Hill and Mitra's Ranch, a stylized leisure park and former senator's residence up in the hills, show the city governors understand the importance of public space. Tourist assistance centers are dotted around at strategic points and are open all hours.

Noodle stalls and restaurants around the city with names like Pho Saigon betray the strong influence on the city of Vietnamese immigrants, who found a home here after the Fall of Saigon in 1975. One of Puerto's most compelling curiosities is Viet Ville, a ramshackle micro-community conceived in 1996 by the Catholic Church's Center for Assistance to Displaced Persons to rehouse "boat people" living in refugee camps (one was at the building now housing the Special Battalion Museum). Though



Clockwise from far left: One of the weavers at Binuatan Creations; Baker's Hill; a *pho* dish from Viet Ville

it's now largely a ghost town — many original inhabitants have returned home, or resettled elsewhere in Puerto — five households remain, some with young children; and since the souvenir shop has fallen into disrepair, the restaurant, strewn with Vietnamese conical hats, fans, drums and guitars, has become the village's lifeblood.

Arman, 40, originally from southern Vietnam, works here and has lived in Viet Ville for nine years. He tells me the United Nations now helps the latter-day diaspora set up homes in other countries. "I knew people who live in this village, so they sent me here," he tells me in a soft, naturalized Pinoy accent. "Now, under the UN program, if you get lucky you go to the United States or Europe. After a few years some go back to Vietnam — those still here



have Filipino wives [and children], so they are allowed to stay."

The marvelous authentic fare here makes this one of the best restaurants in Puerto: I had noodles with crunchy spring rolls stuffed with pork meat, but there are also Pinoy-Viet crossover dishes (try the *chao long* porridge with buto buto, beansprouts and calamansi). It's a fascinating afternoon out, and one of the most enriching cultural trips you'll make in Palawan.

If you're after high-quality local pasalubong, head for the handlooms at Binuatan Creations, a weaving

co-operative set up in 2002 to provide local women with artisanal skills and earning potential (*binuatan* means "creation" in Palawan's native Cuyonon dialect). Florence Gacasa, who works here, tells me the materials come from *buntal* (talipot palm fiber), mangrove and amumuting grass, buri sprigs and vetiver — wild grass is threaded in later — then, through a special dyeing process, get turned into a spectrum of colors. In the adjacent shop, Florence guides me through Binuatan's prodigious output — placemats, coasters, purses, blinds, bags, fans — and it becomes



Clockwise from top: Mitra's Ranch; bottled beers from Palawano Brewery; the UFO-like Capitol building



Where to stay

• **Microtel Inn & Suites by Wyndham – Glorious boutique hotel away from the city center on Emerald Beach, with delightful staff, bright beachfront rooms and fine food at the poolside restaurant. Brgy San Jose; +63 48 723 0977/1018; microtel-palawan.com**

• **Canvas Boutique Hotel, Palawan North Rd cnr San Juan, Brgy San Miguel, +63 917 807 1360; canvasboutiquehotel.com**

• **Blue Palawan, Hidden Beach (left at end of B.M. Rd), +63 917 831 4119; bluepalawan.com**

clear why this inspiring workshop receives so many orders from hotels and restaurants.

Another off-the-grid must-see — and one that sums up the entrepreneurial spirit in one of the least globalized cities I've visited — is Palawano Brewery. Though it only opened in 2013, it already feels like an institution. The first Philippine craft brewery founded and run by two women, it produces a range of homegrown beers — some seasonal, with names like Oktubre, and some intended for festive drinking (Nognog, Tipping Point). You can order five bottled brews at the small cabin bar, all of which are excellent and none of which are light (they range from 6.5% to 7% ABV). Particularly noteworthy is the Ambog Ale, an orange-tinted delight that's "brewed with extra ego". Daily afternoon tours (except Sundays) showcase the house brews with tastings and food pairings, and there's extensive outdoor seating space a few steps from the indoor bar.

A Filipino-American from Virginia, whose childhood home is in Puerto, tells me he's surprised that it has taken Palawan so long to reach the "number 1 island" spot — and that more Filipinos don't move here. Perhaps its relative remoteness contributes to its oddly disproportionate profile — though the country's second-largest city in land area, it's the least densely populated — but the advantages of Puerto speak for themselves. It's blessed with a year-round warm climate, clean and green surroundings and a low cost of living. To think there were no tourists 15 years ago seems extraordinary now; for while El Nido and Coron lap up the plaudits in Palawan, it's clear that the province's capital is itself marching towards something of a golden age. ⁵



Cebu Pacific flies to Puerto Princesa from Manila, Iloilo and Cebu. cebupacificair.com