

# International LIVING

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## Is This Country the World's Biggest Theme Park?

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# The Philippines: The World's Biggest Theme Park

BART WALTERS



In one archipelago, you'll find global cities, laid-back beach towns, and rural hideaways—each offering a different lifestyle at a surprisingly low cost.

**As a kid growing up in the shadow of Walt Disney World, I visited the Magic Kingdom so many times it reached triple digits—but I still remember the very first time. It felt otherworldly, with all those different lands to explore: Tomorrowland, Adventureland, Frontierland, Fantasyland.**

Fast-forward a few decades to when I began exploring Southeast Asia, and I discovered a place that takes Walt Disney's original concept to a whole new level—a place where the entire country feels like a theme park, with thousands of unique new lands waiting to be explored.

Imagine a destination with more than 23,000 miles of coastline. Gleaming modern cities straight out of Tomorrowland. Volcanoes, tropical rainforests, and over 10,000 square miles of coral reefs form the ultimate Adventureland. Breezy mountain retreats and

postcard-perfect beaches that define Fantasyland. And with more than 5,000 uninhabited islands, you get the purest expression of Frontierland imaginable.

Pack up the family and discover a whole new universe in the island nation of the Philippines—the world's biggest theme park.

## Cross-Cultural Collision

With 7,604 individual islands, diversity quite literally comes with the territory. Add layer upon layer—and century upon century—of history, and the result is a wonderland of cross-cultural collisions unlike anywhere else on Earth.

Colonized by Spain, occupied by Japan, and governed by the United States for nearly 50 years, each era left behind its own imprint. The Philippines is unmistakably exotic, yet feels familiar.

## Familiar Territory in Subic Bay

A few years ago, one of my oldest and dearest friends, Steve, came to visit me in Thailand. He was thinking about retirement, but after decades in Dallas, he was worn down by rising costs, constant stress, and an increasingly hostile social climate.

Sadly, the Thailand experiment was a complete failure. He couldn't handle spicy food. Driving on the left side of the road terrified him. He didn't like taking his shoes off indoors. And despite our best efforts, he never managed to say "Hello, how are you?" or "How much spa?"

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of Subic.

He met a woman, learned to surf, and now spends his days shooting pool, playing golf, and swapping stories with like-minded friends. I tracked him down last year and found him lounging on the beachfront balcony of an old seafood joint, watching the sun sink into the South China Sea, and enjoying a cold San Miguel Beer.

"I never expected it to be this easy," he told me. "This place has everything I could ever want. I have more friends now than at any time in my life."

At first, he worried his \$2,000-a-month budget wouldn't stretch very far. Instead, he was pleasantly surprised. "Everybody speaks English," he said. "It was easy to make connections. I rented a cozy bungalow for \$500 a month, found a great neighborhood gym for \$2 a day, and still had money left over to live well and enjoy life."

Now he surfs every morning, plays in a senior basketball league, and recently earned his scuba certification.



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## The Manila Bubble

Many newcomers begin their Philippine adventure inside one of **Manila's** expat "bubbles." With a metropolitan population of more than 25 million, the capital can feel overwhelming—but like most megacities, daily life is neighborhood-based. People live, work, and socialize within their own compact worlds.

Two areas, in particular, have become favorites among American expats.

Sometimes called the Manhattan of Asia, **Bonifacio Global City (BGC)** is a master-planned urban enclave known for upscale residences, luxury shopping, and world-class dining. It attracts many single expats and first-time arrivals who use it as a comfortable launchpad before exploring the rest of the country.