



# WOW Pilipinas

A recurrent series of articles about the Philippines and its people, places, events and heritage — presented by the **Filipino American Association of Greater Columbia, SC**



Note: All photos are courtesy of I. C. Go.

## The Beautiful Island and Province of Bohol

by I. C. Go

I was able to visit Bohol a second time in March 2015. My first visit to Bohol was in 2003. Back then we flew into Cebu's Mactan International Airport and then reached Bohol via ferry. This time I flew into Bohol directly via Tagbilaran airport.



Although our final destination was Panglao Island in Bohol province, visiting Bohol island's unique treasures and must-see tourist attractions was a priority. I enjoyed our excursion to Bohol tremendously. It has been a pleasure once more to be a tourist on the beautiful island of Bohol.

### Chocolate Hills

Our first stop was the world-famous **Chocolate Hills**. The grass-covered limestone hills turn brown during the dry season, which makes them look like mounds of chocolate. There are over a thousand of these hills. We climbed concrete stairs to the top of a high lookout point to have a very good view of the hills in the horizon.



## Ziplining at the Loboc Ecotourism Adventure Park



The ziplining experience (520 meters long, 120 meters high) gave me a very good view of the lush fauna along the Loboc river. Unlike other ziplines, I was harnessed belly down to what resembles a heavy duty canvas hammock, which affords the rider a very stable experience. This enabled to me to spread my arms out like a bird and left my hands free to operate a camera. (Note: A seated ziplining position is common and requires one to hold on to the ziplining hardware with one or both heavily-gloved hands.)

As an added bonus, there was actually a camera taking photos of zipliners. The adventure park offered a CD of 30 digital files of myself and one high quality paper print both for just an extra 250 pesos.



## Visiting the Tarsiers



The Tarsier is one of the world's smallest primates and is endemic to the Philippines. It takes its name after its tarsus (ankle) bones, which are very elongated and therefore results in very long hind limbs that are twice as long as its body. (Note: The world's smallest primate is Berthe's mouse lemur.)

When I first visited in 2003, I got to hold a Tarsier with my hands. These days they don't allow tourists to touch the Tarsiers because it is very stressful and harmful to the Tarsiers.

We made our way to the nocturnal Tarsiers and found a few of them sleeping. Do you see the little Tarsier under the leaf?

There were people *volunteering* for tips by taking photos for tourists. They did not ask for tips, and were very cheerful and enthusiastic about taking our photos and remained cheerful even if they were not tipped. We got photos where we seemed to be touching the Tarsier. The down side is sometimes the Tarsier looked larger than it really was.



## Panglao Island's Alona Beach



A local told us that Alona Beach took its name after Alona Alegre, a famous actress who starred in the movie *Esteban* with Fernando Poe, shot a movie scene on the beach in 1973. Thereafter, *Alona* stuck to the beach's name.



What do you do on a beach?

- Soak up the sun. Wear those sunglasses. Be ready with sunscreen.
- Play in the sand.
- Enjoy the sights (boats and other tourists). It was nice to see so many people relaxing and being in a good mood. A beach vacation can have that effect on you if you let it.
- Enjoy the surf. Swim and snorkel. There is an underwater drop a few hundred feet from the shore where people scuba dive. The Lost Horizon Hotel we stayed at is located right in front of the house reef and is adjacent to the Philippine Fun Divers shop co-owned by a Japanese and an American expatriate. Alona Beach is like a diver's paradise because several dive shops line the beach and are adjacent to hotels. I went for a couple of dives one day.

- Island hop. There are many boats for rent and the captain can customize your route based on your interests.
- Take pictures and don't forget those selfies.
- Hydrate, eat, shop, and relax. The shore is lined with restaurants and establishments with food and beverages to satisfy any palate. There's plenty of live entertainment on any given night too.
- Have a massage on the beach. There were many masseuses in uniform offering an hour's massage for just a few hundred pesos. That's a bargain by American standards.

## Beach Dining: Nightlife and Entertainment

Because Alona Beach is a major tourist destination, menus catered to local and international tourists: Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Thai, pasta, pizza, sandwiches, etc. But one thing is obvious, seafood reigns. Wherever you look there is fresh seafood sold by weight and cooked to order. Although open-air dining under a restaurant roof is standard, there were a lot of restaurants that served diners in tables less than a hundred feet from the water. We were lucky to be there under the full moon with a torch-lined beach.



Every night a similar routine played out—here it is always like Friday night. Live performers entertained diners enjoying their meal. There were soloists, female singing duos, and small to larger bands who sang and performed night after night. On most nights there was also a fire-act set to the beat of native drumming. This provided great photo opportunities with the rings of fire. Drummers and performers did not ask for money but do hope for tips.

## Renting Boats for Island Hopping

It is easy to rent a boat for island hopping and dolphin watching. Everywhere along Alona Beach, boat operators scout around for tourists needing to rent a boat. When looking for a boat, be sure to clarify if you are the only passengers or if you are going to end up riding with many other people. Either way has advantages and disadvantages.



## Dolphin Watching

We headed out early in the morning towards an area with several boats congregating. The boat captain and assistant pointed towards the dolphins that surfaced. When dolphins appear out of nowhere so quickly, catching them in a photo is a challenge. One stands a better chance at recording them on video by recording constantly and just aiming the camera immediately towards where they surface. Also beware of anyone that promises a guaranteed sighting. Although sightings might be highly probable based on their past experience, it is still the wide open sea. In fact, we were told that the dolphins were difficult to sight just the prior week.



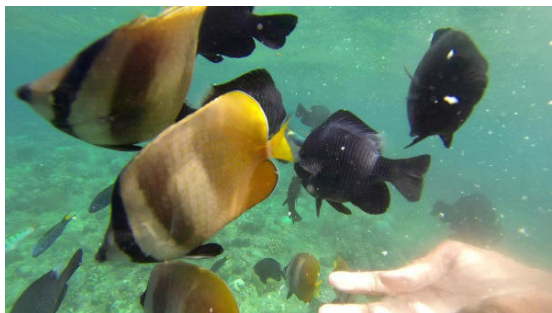
## Balicasag Island

We visited the Balicasag Island Marine Sanctuary. That early morning there were many, many boatmen and snorkelers. Most small boats (*bancas*) had two boatmen and two snorkelers. We were all excited to see the colorful fish darting in and out among the coral and the snorkelers.

The water was quite shallow where the boats were situated. This means the people were stepping on the coral with their fins, which contributes to coral damage and destruction.

Later our boat guide invited us to visit Turtle Point for an extra fee. We barely saw anyone else at Turtle Point, but we saw three green sea turtles (*pawikan*) there.

We snorkeled for a total of around two hours. The most exciting part was when a very big fish (several kilos heavy) ate a piece of bread out of one of our hands. We also experienced a mini feeding frenzy around us when bread crumbs were scattered in the water. (Tip: Fish here tended to get more excited when there bread is in smaller pieces than in big chunks.)



## Travel Tips

- **Plan your route.** At the Tagbilaran airport, there are many mini-vans and tour operators poised to bring tourists around Bohol. Depending on where your final destination is, it might be more efficient to tour Bohol island directly from the airport, which was the case for us. If you would like to do that, an early morning arrival is recommended depending on how much of Bohol island you would like to tour.
- **Bring the right gear.** Bring everything you need to keep happy and healthy under the sun (e.g., sunscreen, sunglasses). Having the right bag protects your belongings from the sand and salt water. I personally travel with a sizable dry bag whenever I am near the beach and am in a boat. I store my electronic equipment, clothes, and items that cannot get wet in this bag, which floats should it fall into the water.
- **Shop around.** There was some variation in the boat rental prices offered to us.
- **Shop in volume.** I found this 10-liter bottle of water for the cost of a few 1 liter bottles of water.
- **Prioritize.** We prioritized on what we wanted to experience based on our interests. Although we would have loved to, we did not have the time to take the Loboc River Cruise with buffet lunch onboard.
- **Be patient.** With the lure of tips from tourists, a number of very young and not-so-young children would appear at night and go from table to table singing a variety of songs. A few of them sang very well and others not so well. All of them were hoping for tips and were asking for a “donation” at the end of their performances.
- **Buyer beware.** A man offering a boat for a deposit of a few hundred pesos said we could take his picture and if he doesn’t fulfill the end of his bargain, we could go to the police with his picture. He eventually agreed to provide a boat without a deposit. The following day he was late. I called him and he explained he was having problems and that we should look for someone else to provide the boat. Fortunately there are always many people offering their boats. We hired a captain and his boat for the day. Our boat captain explained that there are outsiders coming to the area trying to get some of the business with the tourists. Since they are not from the area, they are less accountable to the police authorities should there be any wrongdoing.
- **Look around.** Bohol province is home to a good number of expatriates married to Filipinas or who just want to live and/or retire in the Philippines. We found a shop in Alona Beach with European bread and fine cakes supplied by a French expatriate. This shop also carried many pricier imported bottles of wine, cheese, and chocolates. Another shop carried a selection of imported beer. The presence of expatriates and tourists has influenced the business and community development in the area.

