



El Nido, a protected area, offers wonderful marine experiences with beautiful backdrops



White sand beaches and luxury resorts in Bohol provide the perfect place to relax and unwind

# Celebrating the islands' star attractions

## The Philippines' new tourism chief discusses hospitality, open skies and magical holidays

The Philippines, a beautiful group of tropical islands in the heart of the South Pacific, is gearing up for new generations of visitors, as tourism chiefs work to draw in the crowds to sample the country's long list of tantalizing attractions.

Having showcased just a sample of the islands' beauty, in the form of pristine beaches, fascinating wildlife and tropical paradises — not to mention the wonderful mix of Spanish and Asian culture that spills out of every corner — at the Shanghai Expo this year, the Philippines is continuing to brand itself as a unique and special tourism destination.

A new Tourism Act offering private investors more incentives has been brought in as a priority, with Alberto Lim, the new secretary of tourism, committed to promoting his country's outstanding natural and cultural assets.

"We need to project the country's treasures, especially our people," he said. "One of our greatest advantages is the warm hospitality offered by our English-speaking people. We also have the natural beauty, like the sand, sun, and beaches, as well as culture and history."

Bringing more than 20 years' of private sector experience to the post, Lim said: "I am very happy to be assigned to the development of this



Alberto Lim  
Secretary  
of Tourism

opportunities. There is the greatest potential for tourism under this administration."

### The main attractions

Split into three main regions, each one completely different from the other, the Philippines' tourism map has something to please every visitor. Bohol, for example, an oval-shaped island in the heart of Central Visayas and known as the Heritage Province, is also a fast-growing ecocultural destination.

Situated approximately 803 km south of Manila and 79 km southeast of Cebu, Bohol is the country's tenth largest island and home to roughly a million people.

Boracay, home to pristine beaches, is located on the northwestern tip of Panay Island. Boasting exclusive beach clubs, spas and resorts, the award-winning Main White Beach, secret coves and excellent nightlife, Boracay is ideal for the adventur-

beaches, Cebu is also home to some magnificent heritage sites.

The Province of Palawan, known as the country's last ecological frontier, is richly endowed with wonderful marine and land resources. Popular with travelers, tourists, backpackers and even businessmen, who come to the region for conventions, conferences and other business pursuits, Palawan never fails to delight with its natural charms. With vast tracts of tropical rainforest, mountain ranges and coral atolls, Palawan probably has more protected areas than any other province in the Philippines.

The Calauit Game Preserve and Wildlife Sanctuary in the northern Calamianes islands is home to exotic and endemic species of animals that roam freely in its verdant hills and plains. On the northern coastline, El Nido resource protected area is noted for its limestone cliffs and coral reefs.

In the middle of the Sulu Sea lies the Tubbataha Reefs, a pair of coral atolls which was declared a World Heritage Site for its highly diverse collection of fishes and other marine life by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Along the west coast, the Puerto Princesa City Subterranean River National Park, another World Heritage Site, has one of the longest underground rivers in the world. It is also noted for its old growth forests, cathedral caves, white sand beaches, limestone cliffs and unique flora and fauna. In the south, Ursula Island is a haven for migratory and resident birds.

### MassKara madness

One attraction growing in popularity is the MassKara Festival, which takes place in Bacolod in October every year. A vibrant, colorful festival, MassKara is coined from two words: Mass, which means "many, or multitude," and Kara, the Spanish word for "face" — MassKara is, therefore, mass or multitude of smiling faces.



Colorful and vibrant street scenes at the increasingly popular MassKara Festival in Bacolod

For Bacolodnos, MassKara is a celebration and expression of thanks for the abundance of blessings life brings them. It features a street dance competition where people from all walks of life take to the streets to see masked dancers gyrating to the rhythm of Latin musical beats in a display of mastery, gaiety, coordination and stamina.

Other major activities include the MassKara Queen beauty pageant, carnivals, drum and bugle corps competitions, food festivals, sports events, musical concerts, agriculture-trade fairs, garden shows and other special events organized ad-hoc every year. The festival started in 1980 and is a not to be missed attraction for visitors to the island.

Bacolod, where the festival takes place, is also an attraction in its own right. Visitors can enjoy the famous chicken inasal (chicken marinated in native herbs and spices and then grilled) that gave birth to another festival; the Manokan Country Inasal Festival, launched in May 2009.

Bacolod's charm as a destination is in its half million people who exude legendary hospitality and a trademark smile—from the porters you meet at the airport and seaport terminals, taxi drives, bellboys, receptionists and almost everyone in the streets. It helps, too, that almost everyone understands and speaks English. The smiling nature of its people has earned Bacolod the moniker "City of Smiles." It was this propensity to smile through adversity that started the MassKara Festival.

Bacolod is also known as a city of

contrast, its rural ambiguity lending a certain mystique to its stylish modern urbanity. Visitors can enjoy modern first-class hotels or other accommodation establishments, upmarket restaurants, and coffee shops. Malls and big department stores, boutique and souvenir or handicraft shops offer limitless shopping while the market stalls offer amazing bargains.

flights to Korea.

"My original target was to double the number of tourists from 3 to 6 million, but although we had a good start this year, we have had to recalculate and double our figures for next year. In five years, this will mean growth of 15 percent compared to the average growth of 4 percent. So we will have to work hard to fully develop the infrastructure,



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ALBERTO LIM, SECRETARY OF TOURISM

### Open sky policy

Despite so many beautiful attractions, access to the Philippines has been a challenge, although that is set to change, as the tourism chief explained: "We have the attractions and the people, but what we need are more flights. Later this year, however, an open sky policy will be implemented within the Asian countries, and of course, we want to attract all the big markets like China and India.

"Presently, we are just scratching the surface of China; we have the potential to attract many more Chinese visitors, including those from Hong Kong. We are getting twice as many tourists from Korea, which is a much smaller country... but then we have a higher number of

policy, local community development, standards and expectations.

"I am the first secretary of tourism in this country to have experience in the sector. The job is much more than simply promoting the country by advertising. I know how to develop the product first and market it later. We can make more of a difference in this administration toward the development of tourism for this country.

"Many Filipinos have Chinese roots, so there is a cultural connection, but we are unique in Asia in that our culture is influenced by western civilizations.

"We invite all visitors to come and discover the Philippines—we guarantee they will be surprised and will want to return."

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field. It is one where I am knowledgeable. In the past, we were advocating policies while we were in the private sector to increase the growth of tourism and now I am in charge of this growth, it is an opportunity for me to apply those principles.

"The difference now is that this is a government of change; we have to reform our system and increase job

ous traveler, with its reef-protected waters perfect for kite and wind surfing and water activities.

Known as the Island of Festivals, Cebu is a sophisticated tourism and business region, offering a clutch of islands and around 20 local festivals celebrating local delicacies, dances and rituals throughout the year. As well as this and scores of white sand



Boracay's award-winning Main White beach is perfect for water activities



Cebu is home to some of the islands' most magnificent heritage sites

# PHILIPPINES 菲律賓



El Nido, Palawan