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TRAVEL: BATANES

NATURE

# THE LAND TIME FORGOT

In a little corner of the Philippines lies a trio of islands where life moves at a leisurely pace. Temperate-cool, eco-conscious and carefree, Batanes may well be your antidote to big-city stress, says [BONA ELISA RESURRECCION](#). >>



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JACOB MANAYAT



The great blue beckons, the Pacific Ocean to the east and the South China Sea to the west.  
**OPPOSITE:** Living fences mark property ownership and protect crops from salt spray and wild winds.



**T**here is something to be said about being small and far away from the general scheme of things. People forget you exist. The sense of time standing still is part of the appeal for visitors to the northernmost frontier of the Philippines, where the Pacific Ocean merges with the South China Sea.

Batanes is a languorous slice of paradise comprising the main islands of Batan, Sabtang and Itbayat. Located on the cusp of the tropics and the temperate zone, these islands have four seasons, unlike the rest of the country where it is either dry or wet. From November to February, when it's winter or *amian*, the temperature dips to as low as 8°C. Temperatures in May, when it is warmest, average about 30°C. There is a lot of rain during non-summer months because of storms that sweep through the islands on a northwesterly path from July to October.

These weather conditions set Batanes apart from its bustling cousins like Manila,

the country's capital, or even the sun-kissed Boracay beach resort. In turn, Batanes' relative isolation has helped preserve its environment, which comes under the watchful eye of the National Integrated Protected Areas System in the Philippines (NIPAS). The whole province is being considered as a UNESCO natural, cultural and archaeological World Heritage Site.

Protected, it is. Last year, it received just 1,200 visitors, not counting the many species of migratory birds that descend on the territory to nest and breed. *Tagalit*, the local word for spring (March to May), is named after the *tagalit* bird, whose appearance signals winter's end.

Some of the Philippines' most picturesque and unfamiliar views are found in Batanes, among them hedgerows, crisscrossing some 5,438 hectares of agricultural land. These shrubs, common in the British countryside, are grown in Batanes to protect the land from winds and spray from the often tumultuous sea.

A modern take on a traditional Ivatan house commands a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean and the pastoral scenes of Payaman.



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## LUSH VIEWS, WARM PEOPLE

Batan Island might remind you of the Scottish highlands or the Irish countryside. The views are breathtaking, but instead of sheep you see the local water buffalo, or carabao. Even the architecture reflects that of a more temperate climate – unlike the nipa hut of the traditional Filipino dwelling, the houses are rock solid and keep out winds with metre-thick walls. For a sense of history, visit the ancient Ivatan graveyards – the only other people in the world to have boat-shaped graves were the Vikings of Scandinavia.

Beneath Batanes' cool facade is the warmth of its people, the Ivatans. There are 17,000 of them and their lives centre on fishing and farming. Largely isolated from the modern world, they enjoyed electricity

PHOTOGRAPHY: NOLI GABELO

# TRAVEL: BATANES

When touring Batanes, get an Ivatan guide – the islands are charmingly lacking in signage. Basco, its provincial capital on Batan Island, is an excellent base with running water, electricity, transportation, inns and eateries. A government-built resort offers duplexes with basic amenities. Prices per night start at 550 Philippines pesos, or roughly US\$10. Some inns have air conditioning and Internet access. For a novel experience, stay with an Ivatan family – ask about the Department of Tourism's Homestay Program or enquire at the Batanes Tourism Council.

Innkeepers will serve you traditional Ivatan fare like *uved'* (meatballs) and *nihaman* (rice cooked with turmeric and pork) if you ask for it.

Getting to Batanes is an adventure in itself. The winds are strong and if you're flying you may have to wait awhile in nearby Laoag City for the weather to clear. Such delays don't happen often, but if you are inconvenienced, look at it this way – no one ever said getting to paradise was easy. ■

## FAST FACTS

### CURRENCY

Philippine peso (US\$1 = PHP 53)

### VISA

Visas are not required for visitors with a valid passport and tickets for an onward journey.

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

From March to June and a two-week window at the end of September, known locally as 'little summer'.

### GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines flies 21 times weekly from Singapore to Manila; from there catch a domestic flight to Basco.

### MORE INFORMATION

[[www.batanes.gov.ph](http://www.batanes.gov.ph)]  
[[www.batanesonline.com](http://www.batanesonline.com)]  
[[www.ivatan-yamis.com](http://www.ivatan-yamis.com)]



A study in contrasts as a young girl stands within a timeless landscape.

TOP: Some of Batanes' many lighthouses will soon be turned into inns for guests in search of a novel experience.