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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. >>**



SILVERKRIS (5)

JASON TABLANTE



**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.



## 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

24/7 for the first time on Batan Island last year. Sabtang has it for 12 hours a day and Itbayat even less.

There are many things Batanes doesn't have, but this has only added to the resilience and unity of the Ivatans. When typhoons threaten to wreak havoc, families hunker down in their homes and wait for them to pass. If any home gets damaged, everyone pitches in.

Come summer, Ivatan fisherfolk cast nets from their *tatayas*, or small fishing boats. Sometimes they go further out to sea, taking the chance to stock their pantries for winter.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Batanes is the lack of crime. Jails are used as store rooms for cleaning materials.

Visitors have their integrity tested at the

Honesty Cafe on Batan Island. The tiny shop is like any other *sari-sari* (convenience store) in the Philippines, except that there is no storekeeper. Customers take what they need and leave their payment on the table.

#### LOTS TO DO

Batanes offers many attractions, such as its beaches, which are pristine and perfect for swimming. On Batan Island, climb Mount Iraya, a dormant volcano standing at 1,517 metres and whose last eruption was recorded in 505 AD. Try surfing or flying a kite at Tukon.

Diving is best with a local expert who is used to the sometimes volatile seas. When the waters are calmer, try deep-sea fishing or catch a boat for Sabtang or Itbayat. >>

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