



WORDS AND PHOTOS: MOONWALKER

“Four hundred years in a convent, fifty years in a whorehouse” is a common, outdated journalistic expression used to describe the Philippines. It springs from the country’s perceived pious past, courtesy of centuries of Spanish (read Catholic) subjugation, followed by the influence of the US which governed the place for the first half of last century. Since gaining independence after WW2, it’s swayed back-and-forth from dictatorship to crony capitalism, and as a result, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is immense.

The Western media is quick to cover the frequent floods and typhoons, and to produce heart-wrenching doccos on the sad shantytowns that surround the mega-dump known as Smokey Mountain on the outskirts of the capital Manila, or to bang-

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on endlessly about coups and how corrupt the place is. Ex-President Ferdinand Marcos and his government cronies were accused of siphoning a cool US\$20 billion or so into private bank accounts during their reign. But ask most people what they know about the Philippines and the answer is invariably, shoes.

Ferdinand’s wife Imelda’s enduring legacy was a wardrobe of 1060 pairs of shoes, 15

mink coats, 508 gowns and 888 handbags. Dipping into the public purse? Nooo!

Now why subject you to this brief historical rant? Simply to give some idea of what the poor, average Filipino has been through - from endless political upheaval to epic weather disasters - these people and this country have seen it all. With all of this, it’s amazing to think that something as pure and simple as surfing has flourished here!





Surfing's beginnings in the Flips (as those in-the-know refer to the country – you're one now) date back to the early '70s when American servicemen were stationed at airbases a few bumpy hours north of Manila near the town of San Fernando. They hit the waves right out the front of an R&R locale at a spot called Car-rille, a part-rock part-sand right point that's a little sectiony but super fun. (*Apocalypse Now* was filmed there in '76.)

This spot is an icon to Filipinos thanks to the Jesus statue by the waters edge, and it has to be said that there's something a little un-nerving about surfing with Jesus looking on. Tendencies to snake or drop-in are immediately quashed. It's kinda' like driving with the cops on your tail, you're nervous the whole ride even though you've done nothing wrong.

And while other spots close-by aren't as divinely endorsed, there are some cracking waves to be found both north and south of San Fernando. Mona Lisa is the main break with a couple of surf resorts and restaurants smack on the beach. It's the swell magnet for the area, but head north and there's a variety of beachbreaks, with one of the best simply known as Cement Factory – and you guessed it, it's right next to a cement factory. All the waves around this area are very longboard friendly, but are equally suited to fish or mid-lengths on most days.

Best time for swell in the Philippines is from September through to February and

it's boardshorts all year 'round. The food and local brew are generally pretty good and cheap too. And while this region in the North West is pretty poor, the locals here are way more laid back than in manic Manila. At one out-of-the-way spot I had local kids clamouring to screw the fins into my board as local fishermen looked on – all curious at the ingenious invention.

As with most surf travel experiences, the place really comes alive when you abandon the surf camps and explore further afield. Jump on a local Jeepney, the garish jeep/truck/bus mutants that heavily populate the roads, or maybe grab a trike, and the motorbike/sidecar combo has never looked or felt so cool. Never once did I feel like a sissy getting into one of these souped-up sidecars – plus they can fit boards, market wares, chickens and buckets of fish in, on and around them too.

These unique transports and the folks you meet on them are but one incentive to get out and about. The best reason though (I was going to say excuse, but do you really need one after a hard days surf?) is to visit the local watering holes to partake in the Filipino tradition, nay obsession, of karaoke. And don't try and hide out in the

dark corners avoiding the microphone like John Howard dodging the Kyoto Protocol. You have to join in, belt out a song or two (anything in a deep voice eg. Dean Martin or Barry White and they go crazy, especially when a white guy does it) and you'll have friends for life . . . and likely wake up with a thumping hangover. San Miguel beer is tasty, but Red Horse is for real men and has the kick of a mule.

In short, the local folk are great, so is the surf, ditto for the grub. Plus the North West Philippines is somewhere that hasn't been overly sanitized and pre-packaged – and probably never will be. There is still a bit of the off-the-beaten-track grit and grime about the place. See it while you can!

Oh, and just for the record, the night I flew out there was another attempted coup. But one thing's for sure, whoever's in charge, the waves are guaranteed to keep on breaking. *