

From pure white sands to sparkling blue seas, Philippine island Boracay is the jewel of south-east Asia and a holiday there is like a visit to paradise.

MARY ANN PICKFORD

# Phil's like heaven



**LUSH** Boracay island is a virtual paradise



**INTENSE** The hustle and bustle of Manila



**THRILLING** Mary Ann on her helmet dive

*"Luscious greenery, turquoise sea, it all looked so enticing"*

**With more than 7000 islands and an average year-round temperature of 26C, the Philippines is pure paradise for sun and beach worshippers.**

There are many hidden gems in this tropical country that I call home (I grew up there before coming to the UK) but arguably the best is Boracay.

With its hot climate, aquamarine water and white sand, this small island just south of Manila – the country's capital – has everything you could ever want for the perfect holiday.

It's not just me, it was voted the best island in the world by readers of Travel and Leisure magazine.

And it was all too easy to see why, even before we landed. From the air, the view was breathtaking. A cluster of luscious greenery was framed by a strip of sand that blended into the turquoise sea – and it all looked so enticing.

To access the island, which is pretty small at just 3.985 square miles, my mum, aunty Stela and I were led from Caticlan airport to the jetty to catch a ferry.

Catching the breeze as we sped across the Tabon Strait was a welcome relief from the fierce sun. Our hotel, Le Soleil de Boracay, also provided comfortable shelter during our two-day stay there.

We'd spent two weeks altogether visiting family and friends around the Philippines and Boracay was just one of the many stops we made.

We certainly made the most of it. After checking out the activities on offer, which range from scuba diving to sailing, we settled on a three-hour island-hopping boat tour and helmet diving.

Both were incredible fun. Our boat tour took us around the bone-shaped island where we stopped twice – once to go scuba diving and the second to relish the super soft sand and stunning rock

formations of Puka Shell Beach. The helmet dive, where you walk on the ocean floor, was exhilarating and is one of the main reasons why Boracay was my highlight of the whole trip.

After a short speedboat ride out to the Sulu Sea, my friendly diving guide Bebot gave me the safety orientation while my mum and aunty looked on in amusement.

I was going to wear a heavy, glass-plated helmet connected to an oxygen tank on deck and then climb 10ft down a ladder until I reached the seabed.

I was terrified but the 30-minute experience exploring the coral reef and feeding colourful fish was unforgettable.

However, the island isn't just for adventure seekers. It's a romantic haven with a wide range of restaurants and luxury hotels along the main strip, as well as a relaxation resort that offers spa treatments at highly affordable prices.

The pound stretches a long way in the Philippines, so you'll find everything from food to hotels fairly cheap. For example, the helmet dive I did cost 700 pesos, around £10. And it's the same in the rest of the places we visited.

Our journey took us well off the beaten track to regions rarely seen by travellers.

Our jam-packed itinerary seeing various relatives started amid the intense hustle and bustle of Manila then to Tacloban City in the Leyte province.

We enjoyed a few days there revisiting some of my family's old haunts and savoured the hectic scenes that played out on the grimy streets. The heart of Tacloban was less refined but that didn't detract from its cultural charm.

One thing you won't have to worry about here is the language. Although Filipino is the official tongue, the majority are bilingual and speak English well. Luckily for us, we could travel with ease anyway as my mum and aunty still

retained their mother tongue. Visiting Laoang at the tip of Northern Samar was a memorable time as it was a return to my mum's birthplace. We reconnected with cousins and I discovered more about my relatives through my mum's side.

To reach the tiny island, we had to ride on a small, traditional boat, much to my excitement. Here you can get a real flavour of the laidback, happy-go-lucky Filipino lifestyle by the sea.

One of the most popular places to chill out is at Onay beach, which translated means suicide beach. Locals call it such because legend has it that two lovers killed themselves there years ago.

But its gorgeous landscape more than makes up for its grim tale.

A long stretch of golden sand leads up to rocky cliffs towards one end where local teenagers were having fun diving into the turquoise sea. Coupled with the blaze of the sun in the clear sky, it was a scene of tropical bliss.

Beaches aren't the only attractions though. For culture seekers, the Basilica del Santo Niño in Cebu City is a major draw. Masses are held daily in this historic 16th century building, believed to be the oldest church in the country.

After we caught a large open-air mass in the huge courtyard, we went back to our hotel to take cover from the heat.

The Summit Circle hotel is a stylishly elegant and modern haven located within a mall in downtown Cebu.

The sophisticated decor is also emulated in the room itself and staff went out of their way to make us feel welcome.

There is so much to cover about this amazing country but you'll just have to go and see for yourself.

Its unique heritage is a combination of Spanish and US culture and, to me, it is the real jewel in the crown of south-east Asia.

## Travel info

■ Fly indirect from Glasgow to Manila with Emirates, British Airways or KLM.

■ Mary Ann stayed at Le Soleil de Boracay ([www.lesoleil.com.ph](http://www.lesoleil.com.ph)) and Summit Circle Hotel in Cebu ([www.summitcirclehotel.com](http://www.summitcirclehotel.com)).

■ Helmet diving with White Blue company in Boracay, which also organises other watersport adventures. Visit [www.whiteblue.jp/tope.html](http://www.whiteblue.jp/tope.html)

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**BEAUTIFUL** Turquoise seas are a big draw

