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About 700 words

## GATEWAY MANILA

by

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If you want to travel in the Philippines you have to pay your dues by flying into Manila - there are few legal alternatives. But while the city may lack the charm or pizzazz of some other Asian cities, it is manageable and offers a few interesting sights.

Getting from the airport into the city can be as expensive as \$16 if you book through an airport limo service or ride with a dishonest cabby. Go up to the departure level and catch a cab from there, and don't pay more than \$4 (100 pesos). Negotiate before you leave the terminal and do not be coerced into paying more later.

If you arrive during daylight hours you can walk out of the departure level and turn right. Follow the sidewalk 100 feet and look for the jeepneys heading into town. You can go to several locations for less than 10 cents. If you have lots of bulky baggage you might be better off getting a taxi, though.

In the tourist area of Ermita you'll find a concentration of budget pensions. They are not as cheap as in other Asian capitals, but they generally deliver cleanliness and even coziness. I searched a couple hours and most were in the \$10 - 16 range. The cheapest bed I found (\$3) was in the dorm at the Malate Pension on Adriatico Street. This is sort of THE backpackers' center, and they have just completed a new restaurant with a range of budget-priced items. Several small restaurants offer cheap meals in the area.

Transport around Manila and environs is with the ubiquitous jeepneys. It is hard to describe one - take a US Army Jeep, extend and cover it, paint it and add chrome, bells, lights, signs, and anything else colorful, and that is your basic jeepney. They cost from 6 cents up and go most everywhere. There is also a decent raised metro system (one line), which connects to some of the regional bus terminals. All public transport is always crowded, but people seem tolerant of backpacks and baggage.

It is a bit difficult to learn the local language, Tagalog, or the national language, Pilipino. Not because they are difficult languages, however. Since English is taught in the high schools, nearly everyone speaks good, often fluent English. Away from Manila, the ethnic tribes speak English as a second language and Pilipino as an obscure third language. The only place I found which sells a dictionary and phrasebook is the National Bookstore at the Harrison Plaza shopping center (Vito Cruz metro stop).

The tourist information office is impossibly modern and organized. They can give you a computer printout of any area of the country, which will list accommodation, transport and sights. They offer a good Manila map but the country map on back is pretty basic. A good service station or bookstore map will cost about \$3. The office is in the huge Ministry of Tourism building facing Rizal Park on Taft Avenue.

Drugging tourists seems to be an unfortunate pastime. The last thing the woman at tourist info told me before I left was to be careful for this. Sure enough, three minutes later two women struck up a conversation with me and changed direction to walk with me. After some basic sightseeing they invited me to a park far away on the other side of Manila, which featured a layout of the Philippines in miniature. A bell went off in my head but I hate to be hasty, so I agreed.

They called a cab and then said we could divert to their "Auntie's" for lunch. Uh-oh. We drove near the airport and the neighborhood got more and more impoverished, and it seemed we were going in circles. Finally we stopped in front of a doorway and I bailed out, apologizing and saying I did not realize it was so late. I had a heck of a time finding my way out of there, and the whole time I was

uncertain whether I had turned down genuine hospitality or not. Two weeks later I discovered the truth when I found the miniature Philippines park, which they had said was across town. It was only 50 yards from where I had met them.

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