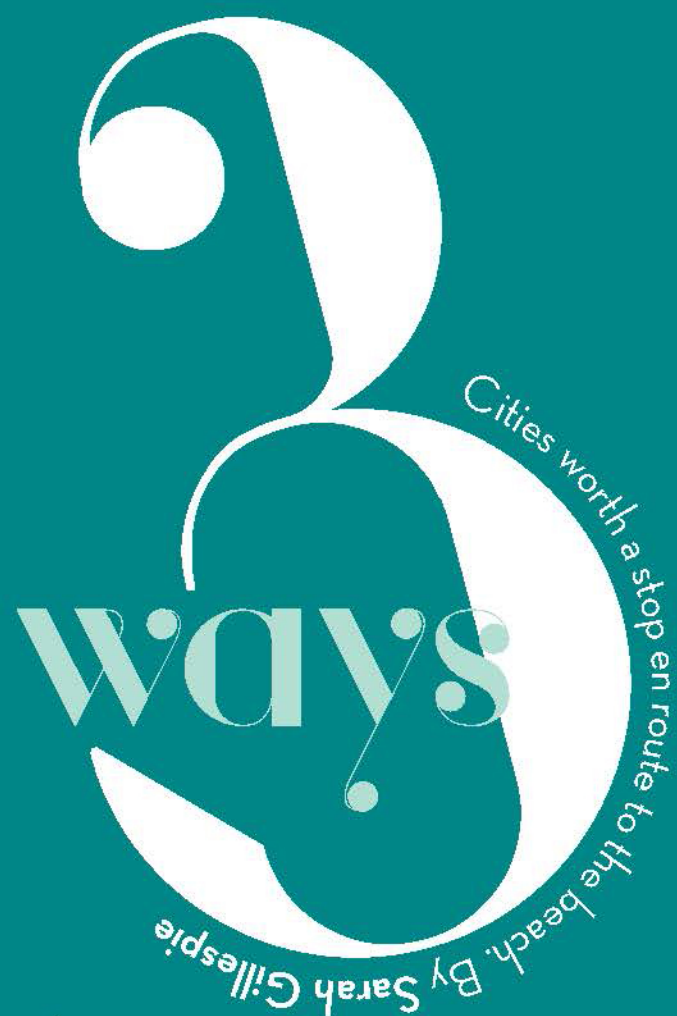


THE PHILIPPINES GATEWAY CITIES



1 The Philippines is rightly praised for its pristine beaches, but its cities – which reflect the island nation's mixed Indigenous, Malay, Spanish, Chinese and US heritage – are getting their moment in the spotlight too. Construction of a new airport in Manila is due to be completed in 2028, and operators including Wendy Wu Tours, Mercury Holidays and Regent Holidays have recently added Philippines options.

Most of these new itineraries add time in its cosmopolitan cities, catering for clients seeking authentic local experiences that go beyond beach resorts and offer extra cultural context. These might include coffee and chocolate farm visits, tours of local homes or jewellery-making with artisans. These buzzing cities also offer an introduction to the fantastic food scene of the Philippines, whose first Michelin Guide launched last October, recognising fine dining in Manila and Cebu. As a destination expert – and proud half-Filipina – here are three cities worth selling, each making an ideal gateway to the 7,641 magical islands of the Philippines.



Fort Santiago,
Manila

Manila

As the capital city, Manila is the most likely entry point for clients. Instead of sending them straight on to islands such as Palawan or Boracay, suggest a day or two to recover from the jet lag and explore what Manila has to offer.

In the centre is the small, walled city of Intramuros, the one-time Spanish capital, covering just a quarter of a square mile. Book a bamboo bicycle tour that pedals past the neo-Romanesque Manila Cathedral towards Fort Santiago, where writer and national hero José Rizal, who led the movement against Spanish colonial rule, was imprisoned before his execution.

Across the Pasig River is Binondo, the world's oldest Chinatown, where stalls sell fusion dishes such as *lumpia* (spring rolls) and *pancit* (stir-fried noodles). To the south of Intramuros is Rizal Park, surrounded by the National Museums of Anthropology, Natural History and Fine Art. Here, art-loving clients can view the country's most famous painting, the seven-metre *Spoliarium* canvas, by 19th-century painter Juan Luna.

Fans of life's finer things should visit Makati, Manila's financial district. By day, they can browse the Greenbelt 5 mall, where designers have reimagined traditional costume and craftsmanship into

modern fashion and homewares. Come evening, they'll find six of Manila's eight newly Michelin-starred restaurants here. The Poblacion neighbourhood is known for cocktail bars that put a twist on native ingredients, such as speakeasy-style The Spirits Library. **Book it:** G Adventures' nine-night Best of the Philippines tour starts with three nights in Manila, costing from £1,759 per person, based on two sharing. It includes breakfasts, some meals, domestic flights and listed excursions, but not international flights or transfers. Based on a November departure. [gadventures.com](https://www.gadventures.com)

Many Philippines trips begin and end at the smaller Mactan-Cebu International Airport, giving clients access to the scenic islands of Bohol and Siquijor in the centre of the archipelago.

Vibrant, culture-packed Cebu City and the adjacent island of Mactan offer clients an introduction to the 333-year period of Spanish colonial rule, a must for those keen to understand the country's history on their tour. Explorer Ferdinand Magellan first arrived on Filipino shores in 1521, but the colonial period began in earnest when Miguel Lopez de Legazpi established a Spanish settlement in Cebu in 1565.

Key historical sites in the city include Magellan's Cross, said to contain parts of the original cross planted in the ground by

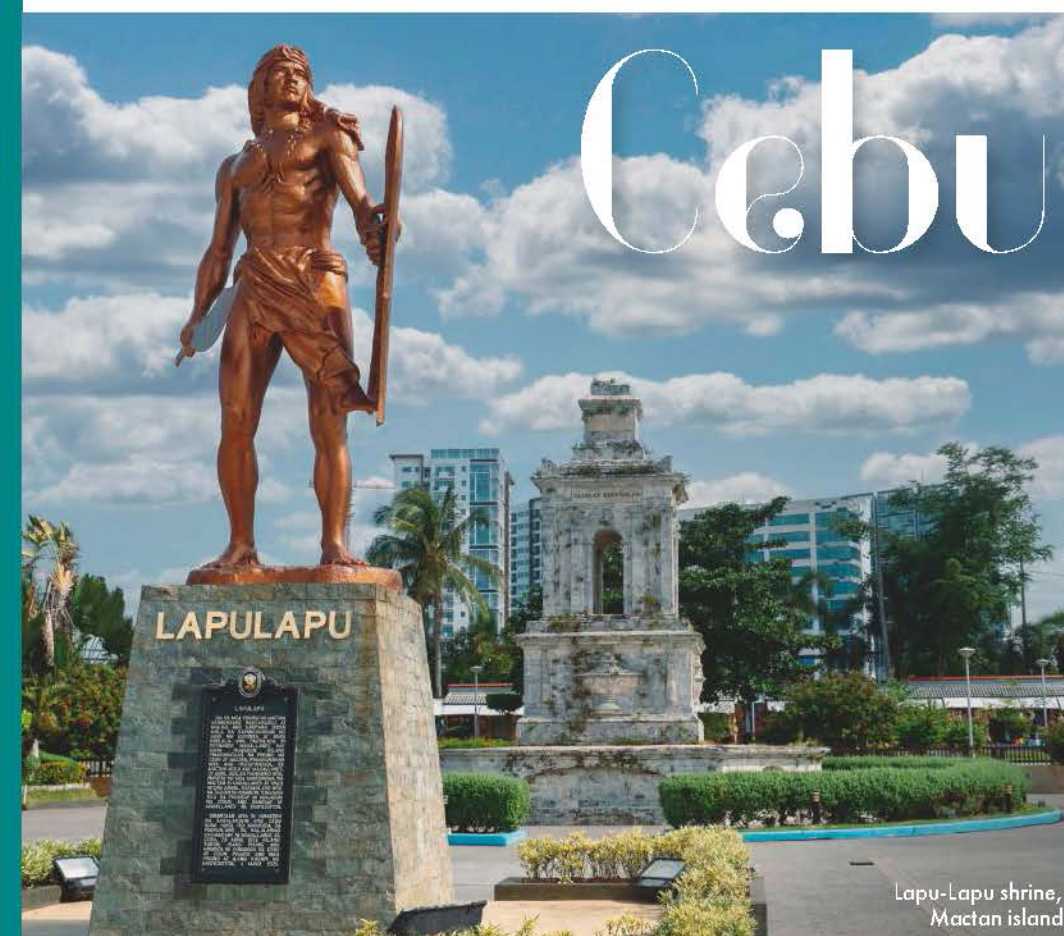
Magellan, marking the start of Christianity in the country, and the 18th-century Basilica del Santo Niño, which contains its oldest Christian relic. Fort San Pedro in Cebu's central plaza also dates from the earliest days of Spanish settlement, and was briefly seized by Filipino revolutionaries in 1898, before being reclaimed by the Spanish.

Mactan island, a half-hour drive from Cebu City, is home to the airport and a string of beach resorts, but it's also worthy of a short detour or day trip. Guitar heroes can explore local shops such as the Alegre Guitar Factory in Pajac, where native woods such as mango and jackfruit are handcrafted into musical instruments. Elsewhere, a shrine pays tribute to tribal chief Lapu-Lapu, whose men killed Magellan

when he tried to impose Spanish authority on them.

It's also the place to go for clients keener on diving under the water instead of into the annals of history – Kon Tiki House Reef is a rare shore-diving spot, where divers can stroll directly into the sea, making it both beginner-friendly and cheaper. Beneath the surface, expect to see green turtles and schools of sardines.

Book it: Intrepid Travel's nine-night 18-35s Essential Philippines tour starts and ends in Cebu, stopping in Bohol, Panglao and Siquijor. Prices start at £1,210 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes basic accommodation, some meals and listed excursions, but not flights or transfers. Based on a January 30, 2027, departure. [intrepidtravel.com](https://www.intrepidtravel.com)



Lapu-Lapu shrine,
Mactan island

Balay Negrense
museum, Silay



"Since relaunching our Philippines programme in 2024, we've seen an increase in enquiries and bookings. A lot of demand is from travellers who have experienced the likes of Thailand or Bali and want something more distinctive and less tourist-heavy. The Philippines is rich in culture, gastronomy and wildlife. It's unique in southeast Asia as the only country shaped by Spanish, Japanese and American occupation, alongside centuries of trade with China. This has all created a colourful culture that comes through in traditions and regional identities. Time spent in cities helps travellers to understand that complexity and makes the whole journey far more memorable."

Noemi Espinosa, senior product executive, Regent Holidays



Bacolod

Regent Holidays' new Culture and Cuisine of the Philippines tour includes seven nights in Bacolod, on the island of Negros. Overlooked even by local tourists, Bacolod is only an hour's flight from Manila, and offers a slower, more immersive Philippines experience.

The itinerary leans into the island's culinary heritage, starting with a Bacolod food tour to sample delicacies such as *inasal* (lemongrass-marinated chicken) and *Napoleones* (custard-filled pastries). The trip also takes in farm-to-table restaurants, coffee and chocolate plantations, plus some of the farms surrounding Bacolod. One fish

“Clients can still visit grand, colonial-era ‘sugar mansions’ in the cities of Talisay and Silay

farm, 7 Hectares, shows seafood being grown sustainably then cooked up in a 10-course lunchtime feast. After that, it's a quick drive to Silay for an art workshop and dinner at a family home.

On a day trip to the city of Sagay, travellers can try *kinilaw* (a ceviche-like, vinegar-cured seafood) prepared by a second-

generation chef from renowned local restaurant Enting's.

Tied into this culinary heritage is the Negros sugar industry, which made the island fabulously rich in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Clients can still visit grand, colonial-era ‘sugar mansions’ in the cities of Talisay and Silay, each with a story that goes back generations and combines Indigenous, Spanish, American and Chinese architecture.

Speaking of natural resources, the high-quality clay and natural weaving materials here have resulted in a profusion of craft shops, many with tourist experiences. On Regent's itinerary, guests can make their own jewellery and windchimes,

and paint bags handwoven from pandan leaves, to name just a few.

No trip to the Philippines would be complete without a beach stop, so suggest a visit to the Carbin Reef sandbar, where clients can snorkel to see giant clams. If one beach isn't enough, bolt on a visit to palm-fringed Guimaras island, accessible by ferry and local boat.

Book it: Regent Holidays' new 13-night Culture and Cuisine of the Philippines tour starts at £4,895 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes accommodation with breakfast, some meals, listed excursions, transfers and flights departing March 1, 2027. regent-holidays.co.uk **TW**