

Sacred Destinations: The Philippines' Tropical Passages

It is a sweltering hot evening in January on the high seas. I am passing through the Bohol Straights somewhere between Mindanao and Cebu islands. Never heard of such a place? Neither had I until last month when I was plotting my course across the Philippines. This same sea passage was also traced by the eminent explorer Ferdinand Magellan on the first recorded circumnavigation of the earth.

I can guess that both Magellan and I looked out at the seven thousand plus islands that make up the Philippine archipelago with the same sense of awe. White sand beaches ring emerald green islands, contrasting wonderfully against the turquoise and cobalt blue sea. The main difference to our mutual trips is that I'll be sleeping on a large ferry that seems like a cruise trip, tucked away in an air-conditioned stateroom. Oh, and I'll survive the trip. Magellan was not so lucky.

When you think of religion in Southeast Asia, iconic images of Buddhism and Hinduism usually come to mind. But the region is also host to Islamic and Christian countries. Truly, Southeast Asia is a melting pot of many overlapping civilizations spanning many centuries. One of the most interesting amalgamations of culture and people is the Philippines, a religiously diverse and tolerant nation. Because of its early Spanish influence it is the only predominantly Catholic nation in Asia.

Southern Knights

Nearly 100 years before the Spaniards arrived the Islamic religion was already established on the southern island of Mindanao and had started to influence groups as far north as Luzon Island.



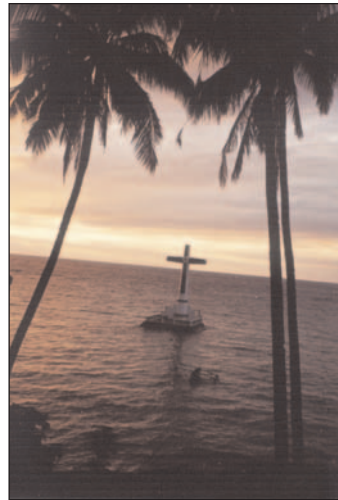
by Brad Olsen



ABOVE: Magellan's Marker. TOP RIGHT: Magellan's Cross. RIGHT: Sunken Cemetery.

Yet the country's modern history is generally regarded to have started on April 24th, 1521 when Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese seafarer in the service of Spain, arrived in Cebu and claimed the islands for Spain. About a week later Magellan waded ashore on nearby Mactan Island with 48 men in full armor and was promptly killed in a skirmish with warriors led by Chief Lapu-Lapu. These warriors of Mactan Island were the early Muslims who were also hoping to influence their own new converts. They were obviously threatened by the arriving Spaniards and their foreign beliefs. Recreating a drama that would be played out over many centuries to come, two organized religions were jostling for position in one of the farthest corners of the world.

Despite Magellan's early demise, Cebu City holds the distinction of being the birthplace of Catholicism in



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY AND COPYRIGHT BRAD OLSEN

the Philippines. It is also the oldest city in the country. The spiritual center of Cebu City is an unassuming circular gazebo that houses the Cross of Magellan. The gazebo ceiling is beautifully painted with several scenes depicting Magellan's landing in 1521, their planting of the original cross on the shore, and the first baptism. As the first of the conquering Spaniards to set foot in the Philippines, Magellan wasted no time in proselytizing his religion. Magellan founded a colonial and religious rule that would last for nearly four hundred turbulent years. The long saga began in the shadow of the cross where Magellan and his priests performed the first baptism on the Cebuana Queen Juana and 400 of her followers. The cross which stands here today, however, is a modern, hollow

reproduction said to contain fragments of the famous conquistador's original.

Second Coming

It would be another 44 years before the Spaniards returned to the Philippines following Magellan's sudden death. The second conquistador was Miguel Lopez de Legaspi who set his sails directly for Cebu. He successfully re-captured the city in 1565, built Fort San Pedro, and went on to reign in the rest of the archipelago. He named the new colony *Philippines*, after Spain's King Philip I.

Subsequent Spaniards followed, all passionately introducing Christianity everywhere they ventured. The Spanish were successful in converting much of the archipelago without military force, instead relying on their tenacious missionaries who impressed upon the native people flashy displays of pomp, clerical garb, iconic images, prayers, and liturgy. In time, Catholicism was accepted in the Philippines with the special emphasis on ceremony, fiesta, and the miraculous powers of the many saints.

Old Spanish documents indicate that Ferdinand Magellan and Miguel Lopez de Legaspi passed by tiny Camiguin Island on their way to Cebu. The volcanic Camiguin Island would have become a footnote in history had it not been for a small Spanish settlement in 1598 that did a remarkable job in converting the natives to Christianity. The new religion thrived, especially when the second Spanish settlement oversaw the construction of the large Catarman church, belfry, and convent.

An unexpected eruption of Vulcan Daan in 1871 destroyed the church and surrounding buildings, along with dropping a Catholic cemetery into the sea. A large white cross

now marks the sunken cemetery. It is a popular diving and snorkeling site with tourists. Still today thousands of Catholics visit Camiguin Island during the annual holy week celebrations called Panaad. The objective of the faithful is to walk around the 38-mile (64-km) circumferential highway as a form of sacrifice, either in fulfillment of a vow or in penance for past sins. The pilgrims congregate on Good Friday at the Old Vulcan to pray. The walkway up the volcano is lined with life-sized sculptures depicting the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The ruins of the old Catarman church on Camiguin Island are somewhat metaphorical of the old Spanish colonial rule throughout the Philippines: crumbling, covered with vegetation, and mostly forgotten.


Getting to Philippine Sacred Sites

The Cross of Magellan is located in the old section of Cebu City near

Fort San Pedro on the busy Magallanes Street. Magellan's Marker and the Monument to Lulu-Lapu, both memorials to the battle that ensued when Magellan landed here in 1521, are located on Mactan Island on the northern shore near Magellan Bay. Practically across the street from the famous shrine is the Mactan Shangri-La Hotel, a five-star resort with an outstanding spa village called Chi. Check www.shangri-la.com for reservations and directions. On Camiguin Island the Sunken Cemetery and Old Catarman Church Ruins are located in Bonbon, 10 miles (16 km) from the modern town of Catarman. Mactan (Cebu) International Airport has flights to Camiguin two or three times per week, or it is possible to take the tropical passage on the many ferryboats crossing the Bohol Straights. ☰


© 2006, Brad Olsen, prepared especially for *Heartland Healing Magazine*.

**INTUITIVE ASTROLOGER
AND PSYCHIC**



LORI SASSEN
(402) 968-0925
lsassen@aol.com

Getting in Touch
with Your Soul
Defining
Your Strengths
Knowing
What You were
Born to Do
Manifesting
Your Desires
Having
Abundance



It is all within
your reach.
(402) 968-0925
www.holystars.com



BODY IN MOTION

CHIROPRACTIC CLINIC

4638 DODGE ST
OMAHA, NE 68132
402-341-2216
WWW.OMAHASPINE.COM