



PHILIPPINES TOURISM

The Emerald of the East

Pristine and unspoilt, the Philippines is a jewel in the Pacific Ocean. There is no better time than now to visit this lush green archipelago as it has yet to become a mainstream tourist destination. The Chief Operating Officer of the Philippines Tourism Promotions Board, DOMINGO RAMON ENERIO III, speaks to us about the exciting new developments taking place in the country's tourism industry. *By RASHMI PILLAI*

Enerio has the enviable job of introducing the world to the vibrant and welcoming nation he calls home. It helps that the current president of the Philippines, Benigno Aquino III, is a proactive leader with ambitious plans for the nation's tourism industry. His government has supported the effort to boost the international presence of the Philippines with an expansion of the tourism budget by an impressive 91% in 2013. To polish the rough edges, extensive plans are also in place to upgrade local infrastructure and international airports.

A Longstanding Friendship

Those from Hong Kong and Southern China are well placed to discover the unique experiences the Philippines has to offer, but the two regions share much more than just proximity. In fact, the first Philippine flag was crafted in Hong Kong in time for its independence from Spain in 1898.

"It is the most natural place to visit because there is so much interaction and history between Hong Kong and the Philippines and there are so many Filipinos working here. It's a matter of getting people to know more about the country. We have the right kind of attractions to satisfy every busy Hong Kong person's craving for adventure, culture, and relaxation," says Enerio.



Domingo Ramon Enerio III: "Foreigners leaving the country have said time and time again that yes, it really is more fun in the Philippines and we would love to come back."

Growing Tourism Initiatives

Travellers that overlook the Philippines in favour of the usual suspects like Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore are missing a valuable opportunity. "It appears that awareness of the Philippines is not too high and we have perhaps been remiss in promoting aggressively in different markets. But under the new administration, we are pouring more resources into making people aware that the Philippines is an exceptional tourism destination," notes Enerio.

One outcome of this tourism push is a colourful new marketing campaign called "It's More Fun In The Philippines", which hopes to attract 10 million tourists by



2016. The concept is based on the Filipino people's fun-loving nature and *joie de vivre*. Enerio says, "We didn't really have to invent the tagline. Foreigners leaving the country have said time and time again that yes, it really is more fun in the Philippines and we would love to come back. The message behind the campaign is that it is the Filipinos that make the trip more fun."

The campaign has been a resounding success, effectively bolstering national pride and capturing the essence of the Filipino way of life. The Tourism Promotions Board has also reached out to the private sector, including the Philippines' most popular fast food brand,



Jollibee, where a proportion of the chain's restaurants double up as 'tourism information centres'. With the beloved Jollibee mascot acting as the national tour guide, the Board hopes to inspire locals to be proactive in the tourism effort and help realize the 10 million target.

All the effort is certainly paying off. "The Philippines is attracting an increasing amount of international recognition as a destination of choice," says Enerio. "In the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Index (2013), the country has jumped 12 places higher from its previous ranking." It currently stands at #82, on par with popular holiday destinations like Morocco, Peru, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Ecuador, and Egypt.

A Promising Future

The private sector is also doing its bit to raise the stakes in the capital city, Manila, with the ongoing construction of

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a gargantuan luxury hotel and casino complex to rival the likes of Las Vegas and Macau. "The 5000-room development which is going to be known as Entertainment City involves 4 different locations in the Manila Bay area, all offering different lifestyle options," says Enerio.

"The first phase, which is just 10% of the development, opens this month and is made up of gaming facilities, theatres, restaurants, retail space, and 500 rooms.

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The complex is set to generate a great deal of job opportunities and revenue for the Philippines. Undoubtedly, it will add a sparkle to Manila, making it a more attractive destination for both business and leisure travellers. ■

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