

Vibrant Dumaguete—A Colonial Haven at the Heart of the Philippines

By Kirsten Racquia

From the air as your plane descends, you see banana trees of every shade of green stretching as far as the eye can see, flanked by cobalt-blue waters dotted with fishing boats.

Lots of foreigners have landed in Dumaguete before me. This quaint ocean-side town of about 120,000 locals is home to 4,500 expats.

The town is famed for its energy and vibrance, thanks to seven universities and colleges. You'll find the first private U.S. university in Asia here—Silliman University. This in turn houses the best private hospital in town, where for \$56 a night you can get a private room, if need be.

And that's perhaps the biggest draw for expats...a seriously affordable cost of living. You can eat out for less than \$5 and rent for under \$350 a month.

The province of Negros Oriental, on the island of Negros, is right in the heart of the Philippines. It's the third-largest island, and you'll find Dumaguete in its southwest corner.

In the local Visayan language, the name Dumaguete means "to snatch." Legend has it that pirates used to raid the area and abscond not just with the treasures of the land, but also with all the beautiful, unwed ladies.

Thankfully, there are no more pirates today in Dumaguete, but that doesn't mean it's lost its Old World feel. In some ways it still feels like a Spanish town, with its wide, tree-lined promenade, old churches, and bell tower. You'll find old colonial-era buildings around town, too.

Of course, a lot has changed since the Spanish ruled here.

Not the weather, though. This has always been a tropical island; summer highs average around 91 F, and even in winter temperatures rarely fall below 73 F.

It seems as though no matter where you are in the Philippines, the people are always delightful. So

"This area is a nature-lover's paradise."

when I heard that Dumaguete was called "the City of Gentle People," I wasn't at all surprised. From the moment my husband and I stepped off the plane, we were welcomed with smiles.

The airport is only about 15 minutes from the downtown. There is no need for a car or scooter; it's an easy town to explore by foot. The real hub of downtown is only about eight blocks long by five blocks wide, so if you can take the afternoon heat, walking is the best way to see it all. If not, just hail a tricycle, or scooter with a sidecar, to take you around for a nominal fee—you can negotiate, but it never costs more than a few dollars.

At the heart of town is Rizal Boulevard, with its wide, waterfront promenade and beautiful old trees arching toward the ocean. The old, white lampposts light it up at night, perfect for a



RENT FROM \$350 A MONTH

Life in Dumaguete for an expat can be pretty budget-friendly. You can easily rent a three-bedroom, two-bathroom condo in the heart of town for as little as \$100 to \$350 a month, although the quality and furnishings may vary.

You can also find unfurnished three-bedroom, two-bathroom houses about a mile outside town for around \$400. If you'd like the landlord to furnish the place, it's just a matter of negotiating the rental price, but be very specific about what you want.

The most expensive—but by far the nicest—places I saw were beautiful, new townhouses just north of town. They had four bedrooms and three bathrooms, with about 2,000 square feet of

space. They came unfurnished for \$560, but they are well worth the money if you need a large space and want something modern. Another option is to travel about 15 minutes away, to the ocean town of Dauin, where a big beach house will set you back around \$900 a month.

Real estate agents in Dumaguete are not the most reliable, and so the best way to find property is simply to get there and talk to both locals and expats (especially the latter, as they can recommend or might even have property that would be closer to North American standards). Chicco's Deli is a great spot to meet expats, some of whom post ads for property on the notice board.



Dumaguete's promenade is one of the best places to meet expats. You'll also find some of the city's best restaurants, too, where you can dine for less than \$4.

very talented. I'm pretty sure they have an extra music gene that no one else has in the world. It seems as though everyone is always singing, from the tricycle driver to the waiter at a restaurant. So it's no surprise that whenever you see a stage, people start to gather, because they know that some good entertainment is coming their way. At times, I wasn't even sure who was actually in the band, because new people kept getting on the stage and taking over the microphone.

Like all towns in the Philippines, Dumaguete has a bustling public market with over 900 stalls. You can find anything here. Really, anything: pots and pans, tools, DVDs, and jewelry. All the locals, as well as most expats, shop here. It's the center of life for shopping and daily socializing. You can get your hair cut at the barber for 90 cents or get an old-fashioned shave with a straight razor for 78 cents.

After getting your manicure, pedicure, and your hair colored, you can go shopping at the very next stall to get your garlic for dinner for less than \$1 a pound. If you are looking for fresh, local fruits and vegetables, there is no better place to buy them than at this market. There are so many competing vendors that you can—and even should—haggle for a better price on everything. For chicken or fish, go to the local Robinsons grocery store, where you can buy chicken breast for \$1.64 a pound or snapper for \$4.50 a pound. It will not only be cheaper, even more so if you drive a hard bargain, but it will certainly be fresher as well.

In addition to the local markets and Robinsons Grocery Stores, the chain S&R—the Philippines' version of Costco—is only \$15 a year, and it's well worth it. The nearest store is in Cebu, which is a four-hour ferry-ride away or a 35-minute flight for about \$50, so it's worth going there once in a while to stock up.

Rent will be your largest expense in Dumaguete (see sidebar), and almost everything else is extremely affordable. A cleaning lady is \$3 to \$4 a day, and a gardener for that nice beach house will only be about \$4 to \$5 a day. With all that left-over money, it would be a shame not to indulge in a massage or a facial at the spa for \$5.50 and \$4.50, respectively.

This area of the Philippines is a nature-lover's paradise. The rainforests of Negros are home to some of the Philippines' most endangered species, including numerous kinds of colorful and exotic birds. Some of the province's best diving sites are within a 30-minute drive of the Dumaguete Airport.

If you'd rather see wildlife from the comfort of a boat, a 45-minute ride will take you to the town of Bais, where you can spot as many as 10 different species of whale and dolphin. (May through September are the best months for this.) Or you can island-hop to nearby Siquijor, which is known for its mysterious world of witchcraft and shamans.

Or if you prefer, just go to the movies and see films about that kind of stuff on the big screen. The laidback lifestyle in Dumaguete allows you to be as adventurous as you want. ■

stroll along the water or to just sit and watch the boats come in. As you saunter down the boulevard, you feel transported to an old colonial town that could be anywhere in Spain, but not typically in the Philippines. It is perfect for a picnic, and that's what many of the locals and expats do; they just laze about and enjoy life's simple pleasures. It's the kind of place where you mosey, you meander, but you don't hurry. There is just no need.

To add to the area's quaint, Old-World charm are brightly colored, horse-drawn carriages called *kalesas* that you can take a ride in for between 20 and 40 cents and really get a feel for what life was like there centuries ago.

Many expats meet in the restaurants and bars along the boulevard. It's the best place to take advantage of the cool ocean breezes. This is where you'll find some of the town's best restaurants for local and international food.

You can step into Chicco's Deli for imported salamis and cheeses, as well as for a selection of homemade bread and pastry that changes daily (*Whynotdumaguete.com*). Or simply sit outside, have a beer and a salad, and watch the people walking by on the promenade. Chicco's has a great notice board for rentals and secondhand cars, so it's a good place to check out.

If you feel like Mexican food, head over to Coco Amigos for a good selection of beer, tequila, and tacos (*Cocoamigos.com*). Tacos and burritos range from \$2.50 to \$3.90 a plate, and a local San Miguel Pilsen will cost about 90 cents, while the most expensive beer is Corona, at \$3.60. If you are there for dinner, definitely stay for the nightly entertainment, when local bands play covers of bands like ABBA, the Bee Gees, and Adele.

The Filipinos take their music very seriously and are generally

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