

Tagaytay: Highland Haven in the Philippines

By Kirsten Raccuia

The road winds its way up tree-lined slopes. Here, the hustle and bustle of the Philippine capital, Manila, seems a world away. As you breathe in the cool mountain air, you can already feel the heat and humidity easing off.

But it's the scenery that leaves a lasting impression. Below you, the forested hills descend to a massive blue lake with small islands jutting from its basin. Rising from the lake's centre is a volcano, whose crater holds yet another small lake. There are views you can tire of...but this certainly isn't one of them.

Just 65 kilometres from Manila's big-city conveniences, Tagaytay is where the who's who of the capital have their weekend homes. It's where they come for a quiet weekend in the country.

But despite its reputation as a rich-man's getaway, neither Tagaytay nor its people have an air of pretension. This is definitely a place where expats can find a happy, chilled-out lifestyle in mountain surrounds without a hefty price tag. In fact, a small but tightknit expat community already has.

Best of all, you enjoy the most expat-friendly climate in the entire country. Most people don't associate mountains and cool, temperate weather with the Philippines, but that's exactly what Tagaytay offers. While most of the country is extremely hot and humid, here the temperature hovers in the low to high 20s C year round. And the average humidity of 78% makes it far more bearable than most Philippine cities. This is why most expats here have chosen it.

Sitting at an elevation of around 701 metres on the island of Luzon, Tagaytay is handy for beach lovers, too. Within an hour you can be swimming in the clear-blue waters most people associate with the Philippines.

Living in Tagaytay is perfect for the budget-conscious, as well as for those willing to spend a little more. Expat Jim

Archibald rents a large three-bedroom, three-bathroom, two-storey house on the outskirts of town for only \$460 a month. In the town centre, an unfurnished five-bedroom, three-bathroom house within a gated community rents for \$1,240 a month. A maid or gardener is normally paid less than \$14 a day, so you can hire one or both without breaking the bank. All told, \$2,100 to \$2,800 a month makes for very comfortable living here.

Tagaytay is most famous for the spectacular views of Taal Lake and volcano. The volcano lies in the middle of the lake, on an island called—not surprisingly—Volcano Island. This island also has a crater lake with its own small island, Vulcan Point. The complex makes up one of the world's largest lake-within-a-lake systems.

“Here the temperature hovers in the low to high 20s C year round.”

Though officially home to around 62,000 people, Tagaytay is more like a little hamlet, where the neighbours are friendly and everyone wants to know about you. The locals are curious about the expats, so making friends won't be difficult.

Foodies will find plenty to like about Tagaytay. Eating out at the local restaurants is inexpensive. The temperate weather is perfect for growing local produce, and Tagaytay has a few restaurants that provide excellent organic cooking.

Recently named one of Asia's 50 best restaurants, Antonio's sources all its produce from its farm next door (see: *Antoniosrestaurant.ph*). Another great option for farm-to-table food is Sonya's Garden—a favourite with expats—where



From Tagaytay, you'll have great views of the volcano at the heart of Taal Lake.

you can have a four-course meal with a drink for \$20. (See: *Sonyasgarden.com*.)

The outdoor Mahogany Market in town is the best and freshest place to buy your fruit and vegetables. It's also a great place for local food. It's where everyone goes for a delicious but very cheap meal. The many food stalls cater to every taste, so squeeze yourself into a shared table at the busiest stall and know that whatever you eat will be good. If you aren't sure what to eat, just ask the people next to you.

This area of the Philippines is famous for *bulalo*, a clear beef and bone-marrow soup. The best place to eat it is the Bethcay & Vic Canteen stall. It comes piping-hot in a cauldron big enough for a family of four, with a side of local limes, fiery-hot chillies and rice, for about \$11.

For all your shopping needs, you can make the 45-minute drive to Alabang, where there is an S&R (the Philippine equivalent of Costco).

On any given day, you can find a big group of expats having a couple of beers and catching up at Giligan's Restaurant in Robinson's Plaza (*Giligansrestaurant.com*). You'll also find movie theatres playing English-language films, and at least six golf courses to choose from, giving you plenty of opportunities to get out and about in the cool mountain climate.

At the centre of Tagaytay is a hospital that serves local residents' basic healthcare needs. Most doctors work out of the hospitals, so you can visit them during office hours there. Otherwise, there are walk-in clinics, no appointment needed, which are useful for minor health problems. You don't need insurance and the costs are usually less than what they would be in Australia. For more serious health concerns, there are several private hospitals in Manila, about an hour's drive away. ■