

HEART AND SOL

Head south of Manila for a tour of the eclectic establishments along the Laguna-Batangas-Quezon route known as Viaje del Sol



CASA SAN PABLO



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CHEF POL POBLADOR OF KUSINA SALUD

Viaje del Sol is the culture-culture itinerary of antique stores, artful inns, ateliers, nature adventure, homegrown restaurants, and eco-resorts that has attracted throngs of local and foreign tourists looking for a rejuvenating weekend sojourn. This brainchild of renowned Filipiniana designer Patis Tesoro and her friends Boots Alcantara, Ugu Bigyan, and Don Ado Escudero, is the most definitive travel adventure of Southern Tagalog to date. We pick 10 out of the 19 places in this two-year-old art-and-culture trail that should be at the top of your list. Proceed at your own pace...

1. Casa San Pablo, owned by couple Boots and An Alcantara, is a 14-room honeymooner and family inn dressed up in mix-and-match curios. Up close, Casa San Pablo offers a trip to cultural lane through its Laguna dining fare, Paete's iconic papier-mâché molds, 1950s retro pieces, parts of century-old Filipino houses, old railway tracks, and modern Filipino paintings by the likes of Eliezer John Cabangon, National Artist Bencab, and the late Ang Kiukok.

The rooms' interiors—a lovely mesh of capiz windows, earth colors, tribal fabrics, birdcages, clay fish and leaves, industrial lamps, and a framed Matchbox collection—are a sensory experience that will inspire and fire up your craft. Noted writers and artists are known to retreat to Casa San Pablo to recharge.

Meals are Laguna home-cooking at its best, including a native salad of onion and tomato, *adobo sa gata*, crispy fried *dillis*, and prawns in—dig this—a gingered 7-Up broth.

2. Kusina Salud started out as a French bistro in Baguio City, but it has since relocated to the home of Patis Tesoro. One must stop here to marvel at this funky Balinese-Bohemian country home, a testament to Patis's travels, roots, crafts, and textile artistry: It is full of "burloloys," which explain the Zen fountain, colored glass lamps, hardwood tables, big Buddha, and Ninay, her signature doll dressed in the most exquisite Filipiniana gowns.

Run by daughter Nina and her husband, chef Pol Poblador, Kusina Salud now serves "modern Filipino cuisine"—infusing French-cuisine techniques with traditional



CASA SAN PABLO

PHOTOGRAPHED BY WALTER C. VILLA

Filipino favorites. Every so often, they hold special "themed" buffets, such as *Kalayaan* (Independence Day), *Flores de Mayo*, and *Araw Ng Ama* (Father's Day). A true culinary trip.

3. Pillar Plants and Novelties is located by the entrance of Kusina Salud. This quaint thrift shop sells second-hand clothes, antique furniture, collectible glassware, ethnic woodwork, tribal costumes, and building pieces like old wood lattice frames and capiz windows. You can also stop by for edible *pasalubong*, like broas biscuits. Our best find here was a signed copy of Patis Tesoro's romance pocket book.



PILLAR PLANTS AND NOVELTIES

4. Ugu Bigyan: Potter's Garden is a haven for fans of this famous potter. This secret hideaway (there are no signs) is not just a showroom for Ugu Bigyan's handmade clay plates, cups, vases, and wind chimes—at practically half the retail price in Manila!—but also a place to learn the art of pottery from the master himself, and to have lunch.

Book for special pottery classes that include an overnight stay at his home within the property. And if you're there for the day, stay for lunch. Ugu's buffet includes grilled seafood and *liempo* (pork belly), *kulawo* (a native Quezon dish of banana blossoms with *gata* from grated coconut meat that has been grilled to yield a smoky flavor), and, by request, the sinfully good *kare-kare* (ox tripe in peanut sauce) or *dinuguan* (pork innards in swine's blood). Don't worry if you want to doze off right after: Napping is encouraged, thanks to daybeds and hammocks thoughtfully included in the huts. He even offers a *hilot* massage from the *manangs* (old ladies) of his town.



UGU BIGYAN: POTTER'S GARDEN



PANDIN LAKE

6. San Pablo City is known as the **City of Seven Lakes** (*Lungsod ng Pitong Lawa*) because it has seven lakes—Sampalok, Palakpakin, Yambo, Bunot, Pandin, Muhikap, and Calibato.

Sampalok, the biggest and most accessible, is on the road to rehabilitation thanks to a staunch campaign by *balikbayan* and true blue San Pablo son, Mandy Mariño. The lake, which used to be crowded with fish pens and girle bars on its coast,

has been cleaned to make way for nine lovely parks that now play host to family picnics and morning calisthenics.

If you have time, go on an hour side trip to Pandin Lake, San Pablo City's most pristine water body. Flanked by hills with thick greenery, Pandin's water sparkles like emeralds on a clear day. Manny will take you on a slow, lulling ride on the bamboo raft towards a small hill that separates Pandin from its twin Yambo. He will regale you with stories about the lake while you sip juice from a freshly picked coconut.

7. Villa Escudero is the famous resort that put San Pablo on the tourism map. Ever since the Escudero family opened part of its 415-hectare coconut plantation to the public in 1980, it has remained a perennial fixture in the Philippine travel scene if only for its showbiz pizzazz. For less than P1,000, visitors get to experience provincial life at its best, which includes lunch buffet at Labasin Falls (with your feet soaked in the cold stream), carabao and jeepney rides, coconut-harvesting demo, use of swimming pools, tour of a rural village and museum, and the famous cultural song-and-dance show.

Following a new open-air chapel and a first-class conference hall, the resort is currently under a 10-billion-peso redevelopment after a joint-venture agreement was signed between the Villa Escudero Corporation and real-estate giant Landco Pacific Corporation. The plantation and resort enters a new chapter in its colorful history with the building of a golf course, a retirement village, über-exclusive residences, and shopping and dining venues.

8. Kinabuhayan Café Bed & Breakfast is a sanctuary that reflects the mystical beauty and natural powers of Mt. Banahaw. Designed by well-known production designer Jay Herrera, this compound of two-story, open-



VILLA ESCUDERO



VILLA ESCUDERO

air huts and tree-dwellings offers views of indigenous flora and natural landscapes. Fresh-water streams flow underneath, providing a refreshing ambiance of soothing earth music that is quite transcendental. The Café serves a fusion of Asian and European cuisine with vibrant flavors. A must-try is their selection of fine coffee blends based on the locally grown earthy barako variety. The mountain teas and other infusions are imbued with invigorating and healthful properties. Mt. Banahaw's mystical reputation is known nationwide. There are many documented stories of people healed by visits to the area. The inn often has orientation talks that cover the folklore surrounding the mountain.



VILLA ESCUDERO

9. Travel writer Ross Harper Alonso describes **Casa RAP** as a place where life is simplified and garden artistry is created from people's castoffs, remnants of nature, and handcrafted accents. Casa means "house" and RAP stands for Restaurant and Alternative Products. Keeping a lifestyle that accentuates the viable co-existence between man and nature and that reflects the philosophy of its owners, Sr. Emma Alday and Mrs. Sonia Alampay, Casa RAP is a greenhouse café in the midst of an organic vegetable garden. "*Kasarap*" is actually a Batangueño expression which means very delicious, and that's what you'll say when you get a taste of their Batangueño comfort food, like wild mushroom soup, crispy or grilled *tawilis*, *kinilaw na tilapia* (brought in from Taal Lake), beef or goat *kaldereta* (to be ordered three days before), cassava-gabi *ukoy*, and San Jose pork adobo. Early morning travelers headed for Anilao, Lobo, Mindoro, or Metro Manila can stop for a rich breakfast choice of *longganisang hubad*, fish *longganisa*, lomi, *tapang Taal*, *tortang bangus*, or mushroom omelet, served with fried rice, *suman sa lihiya*, sugar-free pan de sal, and *barako* coffee cooked the traditional Batangueño way.

10. Tarawoods Estate is a 17-hectare farm and haven with a charming three-story main house and bungalow with modern amenities. Surrounded by a wide-open field of grass, landscaped gardens, and areas planted with coffee, corn, calamansi, mango, papaya, *langka*, black pepper, and peanuts, the property is also heavily wooded with narra, acacia, and mahogany trees. Tarawoods is a working farm with a full-time staff who tend to the fields. Fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables are available depending on the harvest schedule. —additional reporting by Boots Alcantara ■

VIAJE DEL SOL ADDRESSBOOK

Advance reservations are recommended

Carlito's Workshop, Sta. Ana, San Pablo City, Laguna, tel (49) 562-0351, mobile (+63919) 837-7755

Casa RAP, San Jose, Batangas, call Emma at (43) 726-2873 or (+63916) 212-6685

Casa San Pablo, Gomez Compound, Barangay San Roque, San Pablo City, Laguna, mobile (+63917) 526-8628, e-mail casasanpablo@pltdt.dsl.net, casasanpablo.com

Kinabuhayan Café Bed & Breakfast, Dolores, Quezon, tel (42) 565-6828 or call Winston (+63917) 327-1106 or Jay at (+63917) 368-0054, e-mail kina_cafe@yahoo.com, klar.us/kinabuhayan_cafe

Kusina Salud, 285 Barangay Sta. Cruz, San Pablo City, Laguna, tel (49) 246-6878, mobile (+63921) 772-6985, e-mail kusinasalud@gmail.com, kusinasalud.com

Pillar Plants and Novelties, mobile (+63915) 373-7851 (Kusina Salud branch)

Tarawoods Estate, Tanauan, Batangas, e-mail tara@info.com.ph

Tour of Sampalok and Pandin Lakes, care of Mandy Mariño, tel (49) 562-7404, mobile (+63917) 501-6694

Ugu Bigyan: Potter's Garden, 490 Alvarez Village, Barangay Lusacan, Tiaong, Quezon, telefax (42) 545-9144, mobile (+63917) 560-5708

Villa Escudero, San Pablo City, Laguna, tel (49) 562-3288, fax (49) 561-3808, email vespar@vasia.com, villaescudero.com