

From 1758 to the 19th century, Vigan was known as Ciudad Fernandina, after Ferdinand, son of King Philip II of Spain.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY SANDEE SIYTANGCO-MASIGAN

Burnay jars

Northern Exposure

SANDEE SIYTANGCO-MASIGAN'S FAMILY ROAD TRIP TO ILOCOS WAS AN EYE-OPENER. SHE THOUGHT GOING NORTH MEANT ROUGHING IT, AND REALIZED OTHERWISE

I didn't think there was much to see up north. Vacations to me mean great accommodations, lots of things to do, beaches, and fabulous places to eat—things I didn't think I'd find north of Manila. But thanks to my husband's prodding to try something new, my family set out at 2am one morning for Vigan, the capital of Ilocos Sur province in the Philippines' northwest portion.

The difference between the north and south of Manila is like the Basque border of Spain and France—basically night vs day. On the south end, there are endless smooth roads with pockets of civilization and countless subdivisions sprouting like mushrooms. On the other end are vast plains of rice paddies and corn fields, narrow highways, and centuries-old provincial towns.

Prior to our trip, someone warned me that going to Ilocos Sur would be unbearably long and that there would be very few places to stop in. No such thing! We beat the traffic and managed to get to the province of Pangasinan by 6am and by 9am we were in Ilocos Sur, a few towns away from Vigan.

Vigan is colourful, historic, provincial, and chock-full of delicious food. Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in December 1999, the city is now revitalizing its master plan with the help of the Spanish government. I'm not from Vigan, but I felt a wave of pride and awe as we drove through the well-preserved streets and Spanish colonial structures.

Vigan Plaza Hotel, where we stayed, is the premier hotel of Ilocos and it couldn't have been better located. Situated near Plaza Burgos right in the heart of the city, it's a hop to the major sights like the Arzobispado, Vigan Church, and the shopping area around Heritage Street. It's set in an old mansion and most rooms are air-conditioned—a big plus in the sweltering heat of Ilocos. There's a bar and grill, and an overstaffed coffee shop that serves excellent *tsokolate eh!* (thick chocolate drink made from cacao cakes). The interiors are sparse, but in keeping with the architectural traditions of that era. My favorite places here were the second-floor balcony fronting the plaza, and the carriage house at the back. The balcony is a great vantage point for watching the locals' daily routine and the parade of colorful *karitelas* (horse-drawn carriages).

While we settled into our rooms, my husband Andrew, ever the foodie, walked around the block looking for some action. He returned with a dozen Vigan *empanadas* (turnovers), crunchy on the outside and sinfully juicy and savory within. The *sukang* Ilocos (Ilocano vinegar) perfectly complemented the *empanadas'* flavor.

Most Vigan *empanadas* are made of handmade dough, mashed *longganisa* (local sausage), and vegetables, plus a whole egg that cooks as the whole delicious packet is fried. Every other corner in the city sells *empanada*—each with a unique flavor, depending on who made it—but all are sold and fried streetside with jugs of *sukang* Ilocos ready for dipping. *Ukoy* (deep-fried shrimp and vegetable patties) is another common street food here. The Vigan version is large—usually the size of a small plate—and thin. Crunchy and shrimpy in taste, it's also perfect with local vinegar. Having wolfed down all



Life in the old Ilocos

Travel Troubleshooting Tips

- The easiest way to book accommodations is through a travel agency. Only larger hotels like Vigan Plaza have working websites for online booking. For our trip, we used Casa Belrina Travel Consultants, tel (2) 842-7000/807-0278.
- The best time to trek up north is in summer—April to June—as the weather is fairly constant, even if it's warm.
- Bring slippers and light clothing, especially during the summer months. Bring sunblock and bottled water when walking around.
- Road trips are fun but for the less adventurous, Philippine Airlines flies to Laoag everyday. From there, it's a short ride to Fort Ilocandia Resort, a half hour to Curimao, and an hour and a half to Vigan.
- The best Vigan *longganisa* can be found in the markets at much cheaper prices. Garlands of onions and garlic, and *kornicks* (popped corn) loaded with toasted garlic, are also great buys.
- For serious shoppers, some choice buys include wooden chests (just be sure you can transport it) and Abel Iloco woven cloth. Some merchants of antique furniture provide delivery service.



The atrium at Fort Ilocandia

the *empanadas* and *ukoy* my husband bought, we ventured out onto Heritage Street and braved the midday heat.

Heritage Street is lined with cobblestone and picturesque old Vigan houses on both sides. Wooden seats with *karitela* wheels appear every few blocks for tired shoppers seeking shelter from the sweltering Ilocos sun. The shops cater mainly to tourists, with



Majestic Paoay Church stands tall despite revolutions and earthquakes

everything from antique *bauls* (wooden chests) and crocheted tops for sale. The best buys are woven mats in a myriad of colors for under P100 for a set of six and comes in a *bayong* (woven tote bag), native handbags for P80 to P200, and wooden spoons, which are perfect for cooking and baking, for P5 each.

Also on Heritage Street are small hostels run by residents who open their homes to budget-conscious tourists and students on holiday. The Gordion Inn located two blocks off of Heritage Street has a small but cozy living room that doubles as a lobby decorated with antique mirrors and wrought-iron candelabras. In the afternoons, you can while away the time in their courtyard, eating delicious *halo-halo* (a local dessert made with fruits, ice-cream, milk, and crushed ice).

The streets perpendicular to Heritage are just as interesting. I found a photography shop that specializes in taking “turn-of-the-century” photos in sepia, replete with Spanish-era costumes and backdrops. Most shops hardly have signages so as not to mar the colonial façade, but it’s fun to go in and out of them and browse through the items on offer.

We had our first meal at Café Leona, a local coffee shop at the end of Heritage Street. Café Leona is named after local poet Leona Florentina, whose likeness sits atop a chair in the pocket-sized



Delectable halo-halo

plaza fronting Max’s restaurant. Stepping into the café, which is also the poet’s old house, is like traveling back in time. Stucco walls in pale blue and yellow, mismatched furniture, old wooden long tables, and even 8oz Coke bottles add to the impression of returning to the past.

Lunch was an educational and delicious treat for my husband and daughter as we sampled local fare *pinakbet*, *paco* salad, *mihaw na bangus*, Vigan *longganisa*, and *lechon kawali*. *Paco* is a seaweed that looks like a bunch of small green grapes on the vine. Crisp and juicy, they go best with onions, tomatoes, a vinagrette of local vinegar and sugar, and chopped salted eggs. It’s a refreshing break from the salty and savory flavors of *pinakbet*, the Ilocano vegetable stew—a one-pot dish of eggplant, bittergourd, string beans and squash, with flavors coming from fermented fish or shrimp paste and chunks of crispy fried pork. And talking about pork, Ilocos’ pride are the *longganisa* (small garlicky pork sausages) and

bagnet, known in other regions as *lechon kawali* (crispy fried pork belly). Both are often “exported” to Manila.

After lunch, our hosts brought us to a factory that makes *burnay* jars, which are handmade from clay by Ilocos artisans. The jars have little imperfections and variations in color, ranging from dark brown to pale beige, that make each one unique. Locals use these jars for condiments, *basi* (local sugarcane wine), and *bagoong* (fermented

fish paste). They’re also perfect for storing food and water (like the old Ilocanos used to do) since the materials are porous and do not contain any metals or trace elements that could taint the food and water.

We rounded out our first day in Vigan with a visit to Baluarte, former Governor Chavit Singson’s private zoo, which is one of the best zoos on Luzon island (if not in the Philippines). With more animals than Manila Zoo, it’s a must-see and a cheap adventure for young and old alike.

The next day we drove north to Cabugao, about an hour away from Vigan. Cabugao is undiscovered country dotted with small resorts, most of them with beautiful beachfront properties. We settled into Cabugao Beach Resort, a small resort with ample amenities to suit beach bums and finicky guests. The sand in Cabugao is not as white as that of Boracay, but it is smooth and fine nonetheless; and the calm waters are safe for kids. But the best thing about this beach was that it was peaceful, serene, and easy to explore.

Walking around, we came across a local fisherman sewing colorful fishing nets under a makeshift lean-to. His nets were strung atop wooden poles like heavy gauze blankets. Manong, as we took to calling him, finishes one net a month. His hands were swift and precise despite his age.

“*Mas matibay po talaga ang lambat na gawa sa kamay, taon ang tintagal nito* (Handmade nets are much sturdier and they last for years),” he said when asked about his craft.

From Vigan, we made our way up the coast to Laoag, Ilocos Norte. The terrain in this area is more rugged with ragged bushes and tumbleweed by the roadside. Our hotel Fort Ilocandia Resort is 20 minutes away from Laoag airport and it’s now a major destination for Taiwanese and Japanese tourists. It was built specifically to house guests during

the lavish wedding of Irene Marcos, youngest daughter of former president Ferdinand Marcos, to Gregg Araneta. Even today, Marcos family photos line the hallways of the resort and the Iron Butterfly’s Imeldific touches are evident throughout. As we lunched at the Chinese restaurant on the second floor, our group felt out of place, as Filipino customers here were the minority. The food was excellent, though, with three Chinese chefs overseeing the kitchen

and a multilingual Chinese-Filipino staff recreating the authentic Chinese dining experience for guests.

Ten minutes from Fort Ilocandia is a branch of the National Museum, a must-see while in the region. It offers world-class exhibits of early Ilocano living for a downright cheap entrance fee of P25. In spite of a minimum government stipend, the museum has managed to elevate the quality of its

exhibits and now attracts both tourists and locals alike. The museum’s gift shop sells Ilocano products, curios, and beautiful fabrics.

At dusk, we stopped by the majestic Paoay church. Built by the Augustinian missionaries, the church has one of the longest aisles in the Philippines. Buttresses line its length on the outside, giving it a grand and formidable silhouette. The best view of Paoay church is from the plaza and restaurant across the street, seated on mismatched old wrought-iron chairs, and eating *halo-halo*. The church’s massive façade and towering belfry effectively block out the rest of the city and the market beside it. According to a local guide, Katipuneros (Filipino revolutionaries who fought the Spaniards) and *guerilleros* (guerrillas who fought the Japanese during World War II) used the belfry as a watchtower.

“Last chance for pictures,” my husband said as the wrought-iron streetlamps around the church were lit. We all crowded into the van and drove back to Vigan in silence, tired but certainly not hungry, and in awe of the northern country. ■



Calle Crisologo corner Heritage Street

Ilocos Cheat Sheet

Baluarte Mini Zoo Has a mini-zoo, skeet shooting range, and free Palomino rides. Entrance is free. Tel (77) 722-7186

Café Leona Restaurant and Videoke Bar Mena Crisologo St., Vigan City, tel (77) 722-2212

Cabugao Beach Resort Pug-Os, Cabugao, Ilocos Sur, tel (+63915) 487-7717. Rates start at P2,500/day

Fort Ilocandia Resort & Casino Barangay 37, Calayab, Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, tel (77) 772-1166, fortilocandia.com.ph

Gordion Inn Bed and Breakfast V. delos Reyes St. cor Salcedo St., Vigan City, tel (77) 722-2526/65, gordioninn.co.nr

Vigan Plaza Hotel Mena Crisologo St., tel (77) 722-8552, viganplazahotel.multiply.com



Café Leona on Heritage Street