

Philippines: Post-quake Bohol Refocusing the Local Tours

Only few months after the devastating 7.2 magnitude earthquake leveled much of the scenic island of Bohol in the Philippines last October, there is growing optimism among local officials and the business community that believes that the local tourism industry will not only recover but will reach new heights of economic success.

The church across the scenic Loboc River is in ruins and half the roof of the river's docking port is gone. Sections along the river showed some terrain landslides. But this did not deter locals and visitors from going on a holiday cruise, taking part in the festive and popular luncheon tours sailing across the tree-lined Loboc River.



Nature lovers have also returned to marvel at the rare tarsiers at New Corella Tarsier Sanctuary where the smallest monkey species in the world can be observed in their natural habitat on a protected one-hectare preserve. The recent Christmas festivities proved that Boholanos have the indomitable spirit to bounce back. Add to this the natural geologic formations that remain a tourist attraction despite undergoing drastic quake-induced changes.

Rehabilitation in Full Swing

Bohol Governor Edgar Chatto believes that the province will recover with tourists taking their holiday vacation to the island. He notes that tourism has always been a thriving economic activity that is enjoying a sure-footed revival as a major part of the rehabilitation program of the province.

In an interview, Chatto recounted his days in the Philippine Congress as chairman of the tourism committee. He visited Bali a month after the bombing incident crippled its tourism industry and studied their recovery initiatives. He also studied the Phuket rehabilitation after the devastating tsunami experience. In all cases, the former Bohol congressman said there's always a recovery period and assured that "the tourism industry rebounds quickly" especially with the recovery lessons learned from these equally devastated places.

The local government is not alone. The rehabilitation effort is getting a boost from several tourist operators whose properties were mostly undamaged and made efforts to help rebuild devastated areas.

The resort island of Panglao, for instance, survived unscathed and continues to take in tourists and guests.



Lucas Nunag, the head of the Provincial Tourism Council is likewise optimistic as international consultants arrived in January to help in the provincial tourism recovery with a focus on "re-branding and developing new attractions." Bohol is receiving assistance from the USAID in the planning process, inviting media groups to check on the rehabilitation progress, while helping rebuild schools damaged by the quake. The Australian government has pitched in to repair the roads while a Singaporean donor has provided for an operating room as half of the hospitals were partially or completely destroyed in the quake.

Repositioning Bohol

The earthquake managed to give Bohol an opportunity to scale further up its tourism image with a repositioning focused on environmental and cultural heritage. Nunag said that reconstruction is being done with a unifying theme. It is easy enough to look like Bali or Phuket, "but we have our own architecture and landscapes to take tragedy into an opportunity." Indeed, the new reconstruction blueprint aims to rebrand Bohol as a geological tourist attraction. It plans to offer geoscience tours showcasing what is uniquely Bohol and the changes that have transformed the island into an even more interesting destination, both for leisure fun and scientific exploration.

Bohol is world-famous for its signature Chocolate Hills. The quake-induced landslides turned large parts of the hills into what locals now describe in zest as "white chocolate", after the grass covering the hills fell to reveal high-grade limestone. Chatto adds that there is now clear geologic evidence of "sea life where the ocean once covered these hills millions of years ago."



This had made the Chocolate Hills not just a tourist attraction, but also an excellent site for geological study. Chatto also intimated that the rehabilitation plan considers building a Bohol Geological Museum "that will showcase the destruction and new geologic formations that rose out of the earthquake."

Nunag mentioned the Punta Cruz tower, a popular destination locals and tourists used to visit as a natural diving platform straight to the sea. After the quake, the shallow part of the sea moved up,

permanently exposing 18 hectares of what is equivalent to a reclaimed area. With several corals and sea shells revealed, geologists around the country and the region have started visiting the place.

Changes in the seascape are also expected as most of the shoreline trees wither and die as the sea water that inundated the coastal shores receded. Chatto said that mangrove trees will soon be planted to replace them.

Back in Business

The quick response of Chatto's staff right after the devastating earthquake has put the basics of community life back to normal within a short period. The governor is happy to say that this has allowed Bohol to be "back in business."

Typhoon Yolanda coming just less than a month after the quake complicated the recovery effort but this has not stymied its rehabilitation plans.

Chatto has a vision of transforming Bohol into a "more beautiful...province than what it was before the devastation." While there remains a lot to be done, Boholanos are lucky to have the resolve, optimism, and a local government that looks beyond the tragedy as an opportunity for improving the local tourism infrastructure. And the world has become even richer for the new geologic formations shaped by the earthquake, enabling Bohol to reposition itself more as a geologic tourist destination.

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