

## **Cebu: An Ideal Retirement Destination**

The city of Cebu is known in the Philippines as “the Queen City of the South”. The appellation, “...of the South” simply means its location in the southern half of the Philippine archipelago. It is the fifth largest city in the country, with about eight hundred thousand citizens calling it home. Together with the neighboring cities of Lapu-Lapu, Mandaue and Talisay, it forms Metro Cebu, the second largest metropolitan area in the country after Metro Manila, with a population of about two million people. Although the inhabitants are predominantly made up of native Cebuanos, the city has become somewhat of a mosaic of nationalities made up of sizable Chinese, Spanish and Korean communities, with smaller numbers of many other nationalities from all over the world. Most inhabitants speak Cebuano, the native language of Cebu. English is the lingua franca of commerce and education, and it cannot be exaggerated that almost everyone in Cebu has a competent grasp of the English language. Filipino (the national language based on the Tagalog language) is also widely spoken and understood.

Then as it is today, it has remained one of the country’s most historically important, and most economically dynamic and fastest growing areas. Prior to Spanish colonization, the city was already an important concourse of trade and commerce in the southern Philippines. Chinese junks carried silk and porcelain and traded with the indigenous community for gold, honey, wood and spices. Traders from Indochina, Malaysia, India, Japan and other parts of Asia flocked to the city. The colonial period began when a Spanish expedition led by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan arrived in 1521 and established friendly relations with the native Cebuanos and converted many to Roman Catholicism. Magellan was subsequently killed in a battle with

the natives led by Lapu-Lapu of the neighboring island of Mactan. The survivors sailed back to Spain where they shared stories of their battle with the native “savages”, prompting further expeditions to be dispatched to the islands in a series of events that culminated in the colonization of what is now known as the Philippines. Cebu City served as the nation’s capital for much of the early Spanish period until the capital was moved to Manila, yet the city of Cebu continued to grow.

It cannot be emphasized enough that retirement in Cebu would be a bargain for retirees. The cost of living is inexpensive enough that one can get by with US\$600 to US\$1000 a month, though of course, living expenses still vary depending on one’s lifestyle. Almost everything is inexpensive in the Philippines relative to the cost of living in more developed countries. Food is reasonably attainable with a budget of US\$50 to US\$70 weekly, and you will be able to savor the plenitude of international cuisines and local delicacies (such as the popular Lechon and Sutukil) in the city’s many restaurants and dining establishments. Supermarkets and grocery stores are plenty, with many different market chains, and they include an ample inventory of fresh and processed products that should be sufficient to satisfy the needs of most foreign retirees. Some of the larger stores have international sections with a range of imported goods. Drinks and alcoholic beverages are cheap; for example, a bottle of San Miguel beer costs around 50 US cents. Water supply is reliable and water supply bills typically amount to US\$10. Landline telephone services are available for US\$12 per month, and cable television is attainable for a monthly subscription of US\$20, with the option of adding foreign channels for little additional costs. Cell phones are ubiquitous and broadband internet connections are widely available. Household help is prevalent, and the typical salary of live-in maids is about US\$65. Even haircuts cost 70 US cents.

Foreign retirees who want to own real estate in the Philippines will be hard-pressed to find that the Philippine Constitution prohibits foreign ownership of land. This is not to say that these prohibitions make it impossible for a foreign retiree to reside in the Philippines for the long-term. There are viable recourses. A foreigner may legally purchase and own a condominium unit. A 1,200 square-foot furnished condo with good amenities can be bought for around US\$100,000 or rented for US\$800. Rents are another good alternative. The cost of rent is cheaper than you might expect. For US\$300 a month, one can own a decent four-bedroom 1,300 square-foot home. There are many more condos and houses available for purchase or rental that have many amenities, including access to a private beach.

Foreign nationals who desire to reside in the Philippines indefinitely may apply for a special visa known as the *Special Resident Retirement Visa*, provided that the requirements for its obtainment are satisfied. One can acquire permanent residency if one is over 50 years old and able to deposit \$75000 in any short listed banks. Annuities and pensions are tax-free, and there are even retirement choices for those over 35.

Quality health care is readily available in Cebu, and the country itself is known for medical tourism. Cebu City boasts of modern hospitals that have many of the state-of-the-art equipment found in the hospitals of advanced industrialized countries. The Cebu Doctors' University Hospital, Perpetual Succour Hospital and the Chong Hua Hospital are some of the reputable hospitals. Highly-trained Cebuano doctors with many different specializations are professionally competent and capable of giving excellent health services. In terms of hospitality and kindness, however, they are far above the rest. Health care costs are reasonable; consultation and check-up fees generally cost around US\$10. There are affordable insurance plans available, though it is common practice to pay cash deposit of around US\$100. The advantage is that, once

you pay, you get to be seen by a doctor immediately. Prescription medications are a bit expensive, but pharmacies and drug stores allow you to have the option of buying only a few of the prescribed drugs at a time, enabling you to spread the costs evenly.

Cebu enjoys a relatively advantageous geographical position in the country, sheltering it from a myriad of natural hazards. The surrounding islands bear the brunt of tsunami impacts, sheltering it from tsunamis. There are few earthquakes, as the city is located far away from any active seismic belt. Better still, there are no active volcanoes near the vicinity. Its location in the center of the Philippine archipelago brings unique advantages that make it less vulnerable to tropical storms. The island of Cebu is surrounded by large islands, which means most storms never reach it, and the rare storm that does reach it is already weakened. Its climate is moderate and consistently mild throughout the year, with little to no discernible difference between dry and rainy periods. Condensation from the Pacific monsoon mostly falls on the surrounding islands. The rainy season is barely apparent in Cebu, in stark contrast to most places in the Philippines.

Cebu City has convenient transportation systems. There are highways and bridges connecting the city to different parts of the province. The city has more domestic air and sea linkages than Manila, making it very accessible. It functions as the home base for about 80% of the country's inter-island vessels travelling on domestic routes. The Mactan-Cebu International Airport serves as the city's international gateway. In addition, it has a deep water port able to anchor ferries or large cruise ships. From here, you can easily travel to other places in the Philippines. From Palawan, one of the most beautiful places in the country, to the world-renowned beaches of Boracay, charming Bohol and its Chocolate Hills, to the colonial vestiges

of Vigan; a world heritage site, the country is endowed with such stunning natural beauty that are hard to miss.

The city itself has an abundance of attractions and cultural landmarks. Among the notable cultural attractions are Magellan's Cross, the Minor Basilica and Cathedral of Cebu, and the Monument of Lapu-Lapu. Other places of noteworthy historical interest include the University of San Carlos, Asia's oldest university established in 1565 by the Jesuits, Casa Gorordo Museum in the Parian District, Fort San Pedro, the country's smallest and oldest triangular bastion fort, Colon Street, the oldest street in the country, and the Provincial Capitol of Cebu.

A few kilometres beyond Cebu City's shores is Mactan Island, the base of the international airport, guitar and mandolin factories that you can tour, and the Mactan Island Aquarium, the only one of its kind in the Visayas. Strewn along its coasts are world class hotels and resorts, bordered with pristine beaches and cerulean waters richly filled with aquatic life. It is connected to the mainland via the majestic Marcelo Fernan Bridge and the older Mactan-Mandaue Bridge. From *The Tops* on the apex of Busay Hills, you may get a splendid panorama of the city and the nearby islands. Other attractions are: the Taoist Temple, one of Cebu's main attractions, situated 300 meters above sea level, and an edification of the Chinese community's substantial presence and heritage, the Jumalon Butterfly Sanctuary, Cebu Provincial Museum, Heritage of Cebu, Xtreme Rides on Crown Regency Hotel, Olango Island and the famous Sinulog Festival which takes place every 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of January. Further south of Cebu Island are the Kawasan Falls near Badian.

Shopping malls are a staple of Philippine cities, and Cebu City has plenty of them. One of the world's largest shopping malls is SM City Cebu, a four-level 11.8 hectare shopping mall with over 700 shops. Another large mall is Ayala Mall, an upscale and chic mall catering to more affluent citizens. In addition, there are other, older and smaller malls all over the city. Cebu nightlife proliferates around Mango Avenue, where most of the popular nightclubs and bars are located. The Crossroads is another popular alternative nightlife venue.

Cebu enjoys the reputation as one of the country's safest cities. Stability and security has been at the forefront of Cebu's success, as evidenced by the establishment of several consulates and expatriate communities in the city. But perhaps the greatest wealth that Cebu has to offer is its people. They will be some of the friendliest and most hospitable people you'll ever meet. A foreign resident can quickly integrate and be warmly welcomed into the community, and one can make friends and adopt a new way of life just as easily.

The reasons for retirement are many. People start to think of retirement amidst the twilight of their long careers. They retire with the hopeful expectation of living the latter part of their lives in utmost comfort and luxury. Although retirement might preclude a sense that people are past their terms of usefulness, on the contrary, it simply means an abeyance from a lifelong labor, and the application of the fruits of those labors as investments in your pursuit of fulfillment and happiness, and not a retirement from life. One retires to begin anew.

If you are to live life in a new light, retiring in Cebu will infuse you with a newfound vigor for life that you will rarely experience in other places on earth.

Come and retire in Cebu. It's worth it.

## References

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