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Etiquette for Expats, Tourists and Other Visitors to the Philippines

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Welcome to the Philippines! You've probably noticed that Filipinos are friendly, accommodating, and nice all around. For starters we are always smiling. It is not true that we are always smiling, but it is likely we do it more than your people. This is because it is so much more pleasant than frowning or scowling.

And people generally look better when they're smiling, no? Here in Manila there is so much aggravation to put up with. It's sweltering even when it's rainy, the traffic is horrendous, it's noisy and poverty is widespread. Smiling is the last thing one feels like doing under these circumstances. If you think about it, smiling in these conditions is a form of protest. It is a way of rising above the situation. It is not, as you might think, a rapid reflex.

Your people probably have a lot more to smile about than we do. They should smile more, it would make them look younger.

Right now we're smiling at you because we are curious as to what you, a foreigner, are doing in our country. Are you a corporate executive, a chef, a diplomat? A retired soldier fetching your fiancée whom you met online, or a Brazilian model? A Peace Corps volunteer or an NGO worker? A tourist drawn by our famous beaches, or just looking to get laid? Filipino curiosity is insatiable. We have to be in the know. We don't even have to do anything with the knowledge, we just have to know.

No doubt you have been told that we pride ourselves on our hospitality. Our hospitality is not a PR thing; it is genuine. We are glad that you've come all the way here—we like having guests. You are someone new to talk about. Entertaining others entertains us. And since you've taken the trouble to come all this way, we figured the least we could do is prepare this basic guide to help you get acclimatized.

1. Our beaches are renowned the world over for their powdery white sands, brilliant sunshine, and the spectacular biodiversity in the water. Beaches, as far as we know, are on the seashore. When you are more than ten kilometers from the sea, say, in the shopping and office complexes of Makati and Mandaluyong, don't feel compelled to dress for the beach.

We assure you that we natives won't feel ill at ease if you don't wear your loosest tank top, ratty board shorts and crumbling flip-flops while walking around the mall. Don't dress down on our behalf; we do like to dress up. We think it is a way of showing respect not just for the occasion and the setting, but for yourself.

2. It is hot and humid in Manila so we sweat a lot. In order to stay cool and refreshed we take baths or showers every day, if not two or three times a day. If those of us who were born and raised here find it hot, it must be positively infernal for those of you from America, Europe, Australia-NZ and the temperate zone!

You must shower every day, if not several times a day. For maximum refreshment we recommend generous applications of soap, shampoo, and antiperspirants. Just dousing yourself in cologne is not enough to cool you down. Take a shower every day, you'll feel so much better.

We insist.

3. The Philippines is a former colony of the United States, and English is taught in our schools. We watch Hollywood movies and American television programs, sing popular songs in English, and visit websites in English. Plus millions of us have relatives in English-speaking countries, and we are the world number one in voice-based call centers.

So there is no need to express profound surprise when we speak to you in English. Please don't tell us, "But your English is so good!" Yes, we have English. And indoor plumbing, electricity and wi-fi, and we don't actually live in that treehouse, it's decorative.

4. From childhood we have been trained to do things for each other. We do this without thinking—our programming is so thorough. For instance if the friend of a friend is looking for a particular type of bread that is not available in stores, and we know someone who lives near a baker who produces that bread and sells it at an organic market, we will obtain that bread for the one who's looking. It's no big deal, it's the way we were brought up. We are not currying favor, we are not sucking up, we are just being helpful. It's our culture.

So if we go out of our way for you, it's not because we think you are the Big Kahuna or because we want something from you or we think you are wonderful. We do it because we were brought up to be caring and considerate, and it is considered selfish and unfriendly for us not to do it. Plus if our mothers find out that we did not help when we could have, we'll never hear the end of it. If you are suspicious about accepting our generosity, know that we're really doing it for ourselves. It is not a sign of weakness; it is one of our strengths.

5. If you consider the Philippines a shithole cesspit backwater, please do not feel compelled to grace us with your presence. Certainly we will miss the pleasure of your company, but we will manage somehow. We were born here and have lived here all our lives; this is our home. We presume your homeland is not a shithole cesspit backwater, so we are mystified as to why you would choose to be here when you could be there. Surely someone of your magnificent qualities and impressive qualifications would be appreciated and rewarded in your own country?

6. It is true that lots of Filipina women prefer foreigners over their own countrymen. For some it is a matter of true love triumphing over ethnic and cultural differences. For others it is a matter of economic necessity. It may be useful to remember this when you are swarmed in red-light districts by exotic women cooing at your manliness. We are bound by very strong family ties—children are duty-bound to give financial support not just to their parents but to entire villages of relatives.

7. Your dollar/pound/euro/other foreign currency goes a long way in the Philippines, allowing you to enjoy a higher standard of living than what you would have back home. You can afford a lifestyle that is luxurious compared to the average Filipino's. We hope you will not confuse the foreign exchange rate with personal merit. Unfortunately the Philippines is not a meritocracy.

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