

## **The Great Churches of Bohol**

Posted: 01 Aug 2011 10:30 AM PDT

This post is part of a series about the great beautiful churches in Bohol, a province just beside Cebu but separated by the Bohol strait. Bohol used to be a part of the archdiocese of Cebu. It shares a common language and culture with the Cebuanos.

Bohol is an island province located southeast of Cebu. It is an interesting place to visit since it offers various natural and man-made attractions. It is one perfect rustic place that urban dwellers will find attractive as it offers a number of things for a truly rewarding experience. Interestingly, for lovers of church art and architecture, the province is also home to some of the finest and the most well-preserved Spanish colonial churches in the country. Spared from the ravages of the last world war and the modernizing efforts of those who misinterpret the glory of Vatican-II, the province's colonial churches are virtual museums that house precious relics of a past that is so rich in the highest levels of the form of art.

I have been itching for so many years to go back to this province and do a church heritage tour of my own but time and money have always been a hindrance. It was only when I was invited by a priest who wanted to celebrate his birthday there to join him and a group to tour some of the best well-preserved churches in the province that I did not hesitate a minute or two. The original idea was to visit all the churches that dotted the coast of the island including those in the interior such as Sierra Bullones, Carmen, and Sagbayan. However since we lacked time we trimmed our itinerary and focused only on a few very old churches starting from Tubigon going all the way to Jagna and of course including two old churches in Panglao Island. In all we were able to visit twelve beautiful marvelous churches.

## **The Great Churches of Bohol**

Posted: 02 Aug 2011 09:01 AM PDT

Located beside Cebu and separated by a straight, Bohol boasts some of the finest colonial churches in the country. It used to be a part of the archdiocese of Cebu, separating in the 1940s to become a diocese of its own. This post chronicles my journey to this wonderful province — to its great and magnificent houses of worship.



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*The spires of San Vicente Ferrer Church in Calape.*

The church of San Isidro Labrador in Tubigon can be sighted even when the ship that we were on was still approaching the port. Built right on a hill overlooking the town and the sea, much of the church interior is already modern save for the ceiling frescoes that depict various biblical scenes. The architecture of the church is neoclassical and its cruciform layout is basically original. A half-dome, conveniently termed *media-naranja* in Philippine colonial-church terms, caps the crossing. The church in Tubigon was actually not on our list but since the ship docked at Tubigon port then we decided that we might as well make use of the opportunity to visit it.

### **Spires Piercing the Sky**

Riding on a chartered bus we proceeded next to Calape where a neo-gothic church dominated the skyline of the town with the spires of its twin belfries. Although not really that old, the concrete church dedicated to San Vicente Ferrer is so stunning enough that one gets uber excited to explore it immediately. Built in 1933 and completed in 1954, the church's architecture was said to have been inspired from the old Sto. Domingo Church in Intramuros. It is one of the only two true neo-gothic churches existing in the country in its strictest form and essence aside from the San Sebastian Church in Manila. Spires dominate the upper part of the church exterior starting from the facade all the way towards the main body and then to the cupola at the crossing and ending at the apse.



*A masterpiece of Domingo de Escondrillas, the church of Loon is the largest in Bohol.*

Entering through the main door, one gazes in awe at the vastness of the interior. The floor to ceiling height seems like a tribute to the heavens. At the very end, at the sanctuary, is a neo-gothic retablo of wood where various images of saints including that of San Vicente Ferrer are enshrined. At the transepts are also neo-gothic side-altar retablos of wood although in a smaller scale. I read somewhere that in one of the belfries of this church hang a bell dated 1690 that originally was from the defunct San Juan Bautista Church in Pari-an, Cebu City. I was not able to climb the belfry though as time did not permit me.

### **Biggest Church in Bohol**

Calape served as a teaser and from that I knew that Bohol was beginning to unravel her treasures. Our next stop would be the church of Nuestra Señora de la Luz in the town of Loon. Designed by Domingo de Escondrillas, a Spanish architect who also designed the churches of San Fernando and Pardo in Cebu, this church is described as the biggest and the most beautiful in Bohol. Built in 1853, it is the most beautiful because it was built according to a plan and the church's carefully-built structure and well-planned cruciform layout with three naves in the interior is evidence of this.

True enough it is a large church. There is plenty of space in the interior and much natural light penetrates it. The ceiling is painted with biblical scenes. A neo-classical retablo in the sanctuary houses the venerated image of the Nuestra Señora de la Luz. Actually, pilgrims can climb up to the retablo through a narrow flight of stairs at the back of the altar to pay homage to the image.



*Interior of Loon church.*

The choir loft at the narthex contains a pipe organ touted to be the biggest of all the historic pipe organs outside Manila although it is unplayable since majority of the metal pipes are missing. I was told however that there are plans by the National Museum to restore it if a local counterpart would be willing to help in shouldering the cost. Opposite the pipe organ is a four-sided *facistol* or lectern which is used to hold the antiphony.

### **Neo-Gothic Altars**

From Loon we proceeded to the church of Santa Cruz in Maribojoc. This church badly needs rehabilitation since plants have already grown in the facade and in the belfry threatening the integrity of the structure. In fact, the coral-stone cladding at the base of the belfry itself has already peeled off. Although the exterior is not as attractive compared to the previous churches that we have visited, the interior is very promising if it will be properly rehabilitated. The main attractions are the large *estofado* neo-gothic retablos in the main altar and in the transepts, the ceiling frescoes depicting various biblical scenes, and the pipe-organ at the choir loft which although unplayable is very much intact and easily repairable since all the metal pipes are still complete.



*An intact pipe organ in Maribojoc church.*

At the back of the main altar at the second floor of the sacristy is a large room that has been converted into a museum where various items from the church's past are being displayed albeit in a somewhat chaotic manner. Visitors would be stunned at finely-embroidered chasubles being displayed in a rack like in a department store, different kinds of finely-carved wooden tabernacles for use on a particular event or season, altar crosses, antique images of saints, candle stands, a processional cross made of silver, and many more.

### **Cathedral of San Jose**

It was already past lunchtime when we arrived in Tagbilaran, the capital of the province and the seat of the diocese. The cathedral dedicated to San Jose was disappointingly modern in look outside although the interior is ironically a somber classic. My attention was immediately focused to the sanctuary area where a very large retablo filled the wall of the sanctuary. At the transepts are wooden retablos in full baroque-rococo glory made alive in an explosion of "Bohol" colors – shades of red, blue, green, and gold found in almost all religious images originating in Bohol thus becoming synonymous with the place.



*Bohol's venerable cathedral.*

The cathedral was built in 1839, then just a parish church when Bohol was still part of the then diocese of Cebu. Across it is the capitol building, a classic structure that dates back to the Spanish times. At the back of this church is the Dauis straight. From Tagbilaran, one can conveniently proceed to Panglao Island where there are two Spanish-colonial churches although we decided to reserve it some other day and proceeded instead to Baclayon where we stayed for the night.

### **Oldest Church in Bohol**

The house where we stayed was just a few walks to the church of Inmaculada Concepcion. From a distance, one can surmise that this church was built as a fortress. The massive bell tower sits right beside the church, a bit to the front, and seems to have doubled as a watch tower. The church itself is quite massive, built with stone walls that are more than a meter thick. Attached from its back is a palatial L-shaped rectory, a part of which is now a museum.



*A play of light fantasizes visitors to Baclayon church, the oldest in Bohol.*

The church is regarded as the oldest stone church in Bohol. Facing the Mindanao Sea, it was built in 1727 by the Jesuits, the belfry in 1777. When the Jesuits were suppressed and eventually expelled from all Spanish domains including the Philippines, the Augustinian-Recollects took over and built another facade in front of the original as in the case of other Jesuit-run parishes in Bohol. The entire church complex was then fortified with a stone wall that rose to a height that was as tall as a two-storey house although it no longer stands and only a remaining part of it can be seen at the back of the rectory and the church.

Entering the cavernous interior, one is immediately drawn to the sanctuary where three large wooden baroque-rococo retablos dominate the scene. Intricately carved in wood are various curves and lines that make up a motif that one can describe as simply breathtaking. The ceiling is bereft of frescoes although it is certain that it used to have been decorated with such in the past. A finely-carved wooden pulpit is attached to the Epistle side of the interior wall.



*Baclayon church from the harbor.*

At the choir loft is a pipe organ that has been remarkably restored to its full glory. Amazingly it is used during masses all throughout the week unlike the pipe organs in Cebu that are used only on special occasions.

A few kilometres from Baclayon is the town of Alburquerque where the church of Santa Monica can be found. The church is also somewhat large although the interior is currently being restored and nothing can be seen except scaffoldings here and there. What makes this church unique is a stone bridge that connects it to the porticoed rectory beside it. The middle part of the church facade is a slender towering belfry that looks like a minaret minus the crescent moon.

**(To be continued.)**

### **The Great Churches of Bohol**

Posted: 04 Aug 2011 09:00 AM PDT

This is the continuation of my post about the old churches in Bohol. Located beside Cebu and separated by a straight, Bohol boasts some of the finest colonial churches in the country. It used to be a part of the archdiocese of Cebu, separating in the 1940s to become a diocese of its own. This post chronicles my journey to this wonderful province — to its great and magnificent houses of worship.



*Personifications of Faith, Hope and Charity tops the pediment of Loay church.*

Heading east along the coast, we proceeded to the church of the Santísima Trinidad in Loay. The contemporary porticoed facade of the church is very Roman, a design quite common to churches in Rome. Its pediment is topped with statues of the personifications of the virtues faith, hope, and charity. Beneath this facade is an older facade. Etched above the main entrance of the church is the year 1822. The belfry stands separate in order to spare damage to the main body of the church if – God forbid – the belfry will collapse during a natural disaster such as an earthquake.

Loay boasts of ceiling frescoes that are still intact, a wooden pulpit attached to the Epistle side of the interior wall, and altar retablos. The choir loft also has a pipe organ that has been restored and is currently being used everytime there's a religious service. Quite large, the pipe organ has similarities in form with the pipe organ in Loon. The side-altar retablos however do not look a bit attractive because the curve of the decorative scrolls seems to be primitive in form but nevertheless still charming. Outside the church, just within the plaza, are several other Spanish-era buildings some of which are still being used.

### **A Church with a Cemetery**

Continuing eastward we arrived at the church of San Nicolás de Tolentino in Dimiao. Built in the mid 19th-century, the church has a bit of a similarity with Loon because of the twin belfries that are attached to both sides of the facade. The neo-classical facade however is simpler although the decorative pilasters are embellished with floral relieves.



*Interior of Dimiao church.*

Unlike the previous churches, Dimiao's interior looks bright probably because of its whitewashed walls. The ceiling has frescoes which feature decorative motifs rather than biblical scenes. The sanctuary has baroque wooden retablos painted in dark brown giving it a somewhat natural look. The pulpit at the Epistle side also sports a dark brown shade with the carved decorative relieves accented in gold.

The choir loft contains a large pipe organ that again looks similar to Loon. The pipes however are missing although the internal parts are virtually intact according to an expert thus it is easily repairable as long as funds are readily available. Also at the choir loft is a narrow spiraling flight of staircase that leads to the top of the southern belfry where a huge bell dedicated to San Nicolás de Tolentino hangs.



*Beside Dimiao church is a cemetery that was built in 1800. These honeycomb niches (above) form part of the cemetery's stone wall enclosure.*

Outside the church, just a few meters from the Epistle side, is a cemetery which was built in 1800 and completed in 1815. Enclosed by a wall of stone are the ruins of what looks like a mortuary chapel. The honeycomb niches of the cemetery itself form part of the stone enclosure. The cemetery however is unused since there are no corpses being interred in the burial chambers. The theory is that when the cemetery was completed an order from the parish priest banning burials near the church for sanitary purposes had already taken into effect.

From Dimiao we proceeded to the church of San Miguel Arcángel in Jagna, the last church that we visited in this coastal part of the province before heading to the interior going back to Baclayon passing by the majestic Chocolate Hills in Carmen and the San Pedro y San Pablo Church in Loboc.



*A stone stairway at the back of a belfry in Dimiao.*

### **Jump off Point to Camiguin**

Just like the Cathedral of San Jose in Tagbilaran, the exterior of the San Miguel Arcángel Church is disappointingly modern. Cement has been plastered to the stone walls and painted with a light yellow color. The church faces the sea and on a clear sunny day it is said that one of the volcanoes of Camiguin Island in Mindanao is visible. Jagna actually serves as a jump-off point to Camiguin and a fastcraft plies the route from its port.

The interior of the church looks stunning however. The ceiling boasts of frescoes depicting various biblical scenes. The crossing in particular bears painted scenes of the Seven Sacraments. The sanctuary contains magnificent wooden retablos in baroque-rococo style. The retablos and the images of saints that are enshrined in it have actually been recently repainted since the smell of paint is still lucrid. Nevertheless it still looks charming in the usual “Bohol” colors.



*The interior of Jagna church comes alive in a play of colors.*

We were now heading towards the interior of Bohol passing by dirt roads and densely forested areas. A few minutes of a bumpy ride took us to a paved road going to Carmen and then to Bohol's famous attraction, the Chocolate Hills. We made a brief stopover at the viewing deck in Carmen to appreciate this unusual geological formation after which we headed to the church of San Pedro y San Apostol in Loboc.

### **Church by the River**

The church of San Pedro y San Apostol majestically stands beside the Loboc River. It is a fairly large church accented with buttresses at both its Gospel and Epistle sides and carved-relievs at the exterior wall of both transepts. Attached to the back of the church is a three-storey rectory, one of the very few of its kind in the entire country. A part of the rectory houses the church museum.

The church was completed in 1734 by the Jesuits and was taken over by the Augustinian-Recollects when the Society was suppressed. It is the second oldest stone church in Bohol. As usual, the Recollects added a porticoed facade in front of the original and even went beyond by chipping off some Jesuit relieves.



*Loboc's intricately-carved side-altar retablos and pulpit.*

It was already getting late in the afternoon that we had to negotiate with some altar boys in order for us to be accommodated inside the church, at least for a while in order to pray and to take some pictures. When permission was granted, we entered the church through a door at the sacristy.

The interior is perhaps one of the best that I have seen in Bohol. The side-altar retablos are in full baroque-rococo splendor. The pulpit attached to the Epistle side has a cupola decorated with neo-gothic spires. The ceiling frescoes depicting some biblical scenes are still intact. At the choir loft is a pipe organ that has been restored just like in Baclayon and Loay.

I was not really able to appreciate much of this magnificent structure as it was already getting dark and our presence was a bit unwanted since the church was already closed. I am planning however to go back to this church to shoot better pictures and explore more.

**(To be concluded.)**

## The Great Churches of Bohol

Posted: 06 Aug 2011 09:01 AM PDT

This is the conclusion of my post about the old churches in Bohol. Located beside Cebu and separated by a straight, Bohol boasts some of the finest colonial churches in the country. It used to be a part of the archdiocese of Cebu, separating in the 1940s to become a diocese of its own. This post chronicles my journey to this wonderful province — to its great and magnificent houses of worship.



We were now on our third and last day in Bohol so we decided to head to Panglao Island just off the coast of Tagbilaran. It was not too far and the distance was just kind of like Mactan Island from mainland Cebu. The island is connected to the mainland by a causeway and right from the approach of this bridge one can already see the towering neo-gothic belfry of the Nuestra Señora de la Asuncion church in Dauis.

The church is actually a mixture of styles with the upper part of the facade in Greek-revival, the portico in the lower part in Romanesque style, and the belfry, as mentioned earlier, in neo-gothic. Nevertheless, the fusion of various forms makes this church charming and a bit mysterious.



*Facade of Dauis church.*

### ***Artesonado Ceiling***

Entering the interior will make one's jaw drop in amazement. Being one of the last two churches in our itinerary, I can very much say that the ceiling frescoes are simply the best and the finest that I have seen in our entire sojourn to Bohol. A product of three masters during the pre-war years – Rey Francia, Canuto Avila, and Lito Arcaya – the frescoes cannot be compared with anything else in the province.

The ceiling over the main nave and the side-aisles are *artesonado* or coffered and accented with painted floral motifs that give the illusion of it being carved directly from wood. Surely this can rival with some of the best painted ceilings in Europe. Remarkably, the interior of Dauis church is very much well-preserved and unlike in the previous churches where you can see certain parts of the frescoes fading off or certain parts of the ceiling starting to show signs of decay, Dauis' was different in that it seems like the job was just done yesterday. Pretty much intact indeed and so stunning that no amount of words can really describe it.



*A skillfully-rendered ceiling awaits visitors to Dauis church.*

The plan of the church is quite complicated and seems to be a deviation from the usual cruciform type of layout. For example, the walls at the transepts are diagonal and on both sides of the sanctuary are hallways that lead to side-altar retablos and then to the sacristy at the back. At any rate, the interior is pretty much well-lit thanks to the high ceiling that gives the interior a basilica-like look. If there's one church in Rome that pops into my mind on seeing Dauis it would be the **Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls**.

Our last stop, the church of San Agustin in a town named after the island itself, was like the dessert after having eaten the main course of the meal. It is pretty much a simple church with a modern facade albeit with a worn interior with charming wooden retablos and ceiling frescoes needing a little bit of restoration. Just within the church plaza are the ruins of an earlier church and near the seashore at the back of the existing church is a towering belfry at four levels high. Its type of construction strongly suggests that it predates the existing church and may very well have been constructed around the same period as the ruins. Having an advantage near the coast, it may have doubled as a watchtower too.



*Interior of Panglao church.*

*Ref.: news mails from* **The Heritage of Cebu**