

BAGUIO OF the sun-flowers and green pines, Cebu of the Sto. Niño shrine and the Carbon Market, Zamboanga of the Pasonanca Park and the flaring minarets, even the Bicol with its soaring Mayon, and Tawi-Tawi with its colorful vintas register — *oh, so beautiful!* — in travel journals and tourist brochures. These beauty spots are surprisingly photogenic, all glossy and picture-pretty, seeming too good to be true.

And the writers who write about them — my, they seem rather breathless with all those glowing adjectives, singing hosannas to those oh-so-lovely places.

But Davao City, my nature-blessed, fecund, ever changing city, looks so drab in those brochures and travel magazines, it seems so unfair. Either the city registers not on the offset presses and glossy book paper, or the photographers and the writers who “did” Davao didn’t really know the city that I know and love. I know Davao like I know the palms of my hands, and I can say those things one reads and sees in the travel brochures aren’t all there is of my city.

And why, oh, why, do those travel journals keep on running that old photograph of San Pedro Street — Davao’s main thoroughfare, its Escolta and Makati Avenue rolled into one — that was taken eons ago, a picture that looks like a sound-stage scene in a spaghetti western, with one half-expecting Clint Eastwood to ride in at any moment on his reliable steed and start bang-banging away at the bad hombres. Because San Pedro Street isn’t *that* anymore. It’s sleek and it’s chic, in certain places real groovy, with high-rise buildings and mod shops and, well, big city traffic jams, too.

And Mt. Apo? It isn’t that coy mountain anymore, looking like a shy maiden coming out of the bathroom, draped in towels of fog, that you see in the tourist guide brochures. It’s a man-mountain — tall, erect and turgid (and I think horny, too), with three “heads” of pointed peaks and beside it the famed (but feminine) Mayon would look like, forgive me, a female mosquito. You’ve got to see Mt. Apo at ten o’clock of a sun-drenched September morning to know what the word “majestic” really means. It’s that majesty of Mt. Apo that lures hundreds of mountain climbers from all over the world and makes them return again and

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DAVAO NOT OF BROCHURES AND TRAVEL MAGS

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by JESUS MANUEL TORRENTO
Davao City

again and again to scale it.

That Mt. Apo is the tallest mountain in the Philippines is no tall tale: it soars to the sky, all of the 9,676 feet of it above sea level, and don’t laugh at the proud Dabawenyo who tells you that besides Mt. Apo there are other things that make Davao the “Metropolis with the Mostest” because, statistically or otherwise, he isn’t telling a lie.

To begin with, Davao City has the *most* size — it sprawls over 244,000 hectares and that makes it not only the largest city in the country but, believe it or not, in the world. It is, in fact, just about the only city we have that still has unexplored areas. When one thinks of those virgin forests, where no man has yet set foot on, and then thinks of the city’s mod downtown atmosphere, the with-it life-styles of its people and the jets zooming through its skies, it’s not surprising to hear of Davao being referred to as the “City of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.”

That my city is a “City of Promise” is an understatement. The National Police Commission-United States Assistance for International Development (USAID) survey report on Davao (coedited by this writer) in 1971 called Davao “the commercial, industrial and educational center of Mindanao” — topping all other cities hereabouts in its achievements in the three areas. Basically agricultural, Davao is the *most*, too, in agricultural production. It exports the *most* copra, the *most* bananas (in excess of \$155,000,000 annually), the *most* citrus and durian and the *most* of heaven knows what

else.

Total area of productive agricultural lands it has the *mostest* too: 104,681.62 hectares assessed as early as 1969 to be worth P26,073,510. Income from farm products now totals yearly P20,000,000 plus.

As though all that isn’t enough, Davao has the *most* people among the younger cities — 800,000 representing a cross-section of the various ethnic groups coming from all over the country. “Name any dialect in the Philippines and it’s spoken in Davao,” to say the Dabawenyos. In fact, Davao is a city of a thousand dialects: from the languid Hiligaynon of the Ilongos and the sharply clipped Dabawenyo-*nativo* to the “neuter” twang of Cebuano-Visayan and the masculine Tagalog, among others. Because of this marvelous mixture of the country’s different ethnic groups, Davao is aptly called “Instant Philippines.” CAA statistics say that there are “500-600 passengers arriving daily in Davao” — and that’s by air alone.

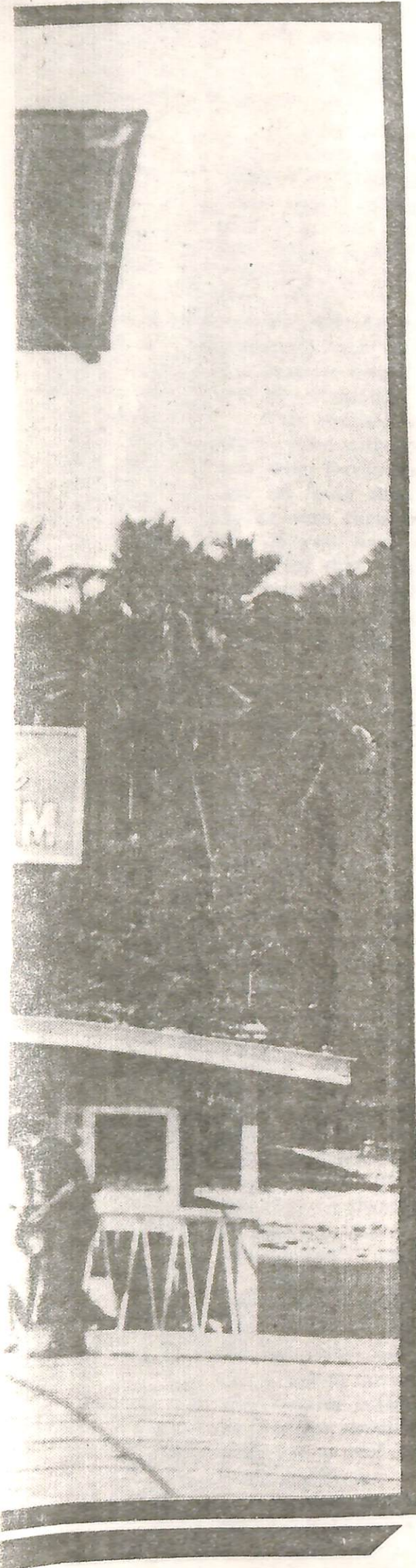
Davao is a “City of Tourists” and they come in all shapes and sizes, colors and persuasions, some bulging with travelers checks, others counting their dollars.

Only 90 minutes by jet from Manila, Davao’s one other lure is its bracing climate — never too “soggy” that is Manila’s during the rainy season, nor hot and humid like Cebu’s in summer. The city is lush and green — the kind of cool greenness brochure writers call “verdant.”

Davao, because of that

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Among other points of interest in that province, Davao has the Aguinaldo Pearl Farm to offer (shown below), with its aquaria and stunning collection of seashells.



climate, is a "mecca for plant lovers" and if you're one, a plant lover, I recommend — besides the 21 "points of interest" the tourism ministry has listed down — the Altese Gardens at Bangkal and the numerous other nurseries around the city where rare plants and orchids bloom. And the flower nooks at Bankerohan Market on Saturdays and Sundays where one could get at bargain prices a rare *polycarpus sinensis* and the dual-colored oak-nut bush or even the elusive flowering clover or get dazzled by honest-to-goodness *waling-waling* (still free of hybridizers) and the vanda and dendrobium hybrids contrived by science with flowers that come in unlikely tints and hues — from translucent pastels to blazing primaries — so endowed with preciousness they don't look real.

For those who travel merely to take in the sights (and even those who look for more), Davao has historical and cultural, religious and agro-industrial spots not found in other cities. There's St. Peter's Cathedral in the heart of the city with its unique icon: the *Birhen sa Barangay*, the Madonna in *saya't baro*, olive of skin, *Pinoy* of stance, besides the old prewar San Pedro, the patron saint, inscrutable on its pedestal, ponderous book in one hand, white cock poised to crow by his side — its patina of antiquity almost giving off a smell. Sprawling over one city block, the cathedral may yet be the biggest in Asia once completed.

The Po Lian and Buddhist Temples are other religious landmarks, both smelling of joss sticks, both done in the inevitable Chinese-Buddhist architecture, mandarin-red enamel on their facades. For "local color," the spots to see are the Muslim Fishing Village (houses on stilts, Muslim maids in malongs) or Malipano Island with its full measure of sky and sand and sea, both accessible from the poblacion. And, yes, the Parks and Wildlife Acclimatizing Camp and the Mt. Apo National Park where Davao's unique flora and fauna are in their "natural state." If you're lucky, you could get a rare glimpse of the monkey-eating eagle that the government is exerting efforts to save from extinction; or perhaps spot the floriferous *waling-waling*, 60 feet above the host tree, heavy with its "fans" of blossoms, each flower classic in its beauty, air roots hanging like the tentacles of some arboreal octopus.

Other points of interest are the Aguinaldo Pearl Farm, with its aquaria and stunning collection of Davao seashells. The farm is on Samal Island, lying just across Davao Gulf, and it's where those "Philippine pearls" are being cultured by experts. Samal has other sights for the visitor, including long stretches of white-sand beaches and coral gardens. From your banca, through clear water, you can have your coral fill of the gardens which look like giant canvas painted by abstractionist Lee Aguinaldo.

In downtown Davao, the Anda-Rizal Fruit Center evokes the ambience of a European city market, and this is where the odoriferous (but delicious!) fruit, the durian, may be found. And so are Davao's other exotic fruits sold here: marang and mangosteen, rambutan and ponkan oranges.

In Dumoy, Toril, there's the Nenita Stock Farm (of the Floirendos, the biggest piggery in Asia) and the Nieva's Shellcraft headquarters where one could buy inimitable shell-art "paintings" and chandeliers, each a masterpiece done by hand. The force behind Nieva's is *Ate* Eli Panuncialman, a registered nurse and wife of a surgeon, writer and artist who pioneered in the shell industry and was the first in the country to export shell-art items to markets all over the world.

To the religious, the Shrine of the Infant Jesus of Prague should be a must. The shrine, "a dream come true" for Mrs. Catalina Santos, wife of Davao City Mayor Luis T. Santos, has landscaped gardens and its come-on to tourists isn't just its religious atmosphere but also the view it provides of the city and of Davao Gulf: it stands on top of a hill whose rugged topography reminds one of the Mount of Calvary.

The Chinatown of Davao is in Sta. Ana district where one could get, besides *mami*, *pancit* and *siopao*, Chinese metal art and ivory chopsticks, mohair by the bolt or tropical fish by the hundreds. And of course one must visit the numerous shopping centers where the posh establishments are — if you're looking for blue-and-white Ming vases or celadon jars or Muslim artifacts or carpets from Iran.

If you're a disciple of the *Pinoy* national sport, *sabong*, you

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could get lost in the country's biggest cockpit: La Suerte Gallera at Matina where, Dabawenyos tell me, one could become rich overnight with a well-placed bet on one of the thoroughbred cocks in the game.

If your interest is fishing, Atty. Chuck Nuñez ("Dean of Davao City's editors"), who's as crazy about fishing as I am of gardening, says that Davao is a rich fishing ground — from "the vast open Pacific to the coves of Davao Gulf." A motorboat, so says the MOT-Davao Field Office guidebook, will take you to Cape San Agustin where "large marlins and tuna abound."

For tourists who like their nights laced with good food, wine and song, Davao has supper clubs and no fewer than six first-class hotels with their own night life. But if you have scrimped and saved for that "Davao vacation" and must count your money, there are less expensive entertainment, as well as hotels and boarding

houses where transients may lodge for reasonable charges.

The MOT brochure lists 14 top restaurants that cater to tourists with educated palates who want their chicken with mushrooms bland, their steaks bloody rare. But if your taste buds are, like mine, hitched to the hoi polloi, I recommend places the travel brochures ignore. Do you like *kare-kare* with honest-to-goodness peanut sauce or home made corned beef that melts in the mouth? The place to go is the 3-Sisters eatery. It's on Recto Avenue and is as old as Davao itself — owned by three lovely ladies, all still single, and the reason they aren't thinking of the alleged "joys" of marital life is that they are always busy thinking of new kitchen concoctions to tease customers' palates.

Want your coffee "native" and brewed or served the espresso way? There's a tiny café beside the San Pedro Cathedral, almost like a hole-in-the-wall, that serves that kind of coffee, tasting truly like coffee, smelling like coffee and, like a real good coffee, it keeps you awake.

Sinigang that's purely Tagalog? Go to Dencia's or Imperial

restaurants which aren't actually for the hoi polloi crowd. But the *Sinigang* is worth it. Neither strictly for the hoi polloi is the Molave Kitchenette on Legaspi Street, owned by Caloy (for Carlos) Millete whom everybody in Davao knows, a place known for its "greaseless fried chicken." Caloy is Davao's No. 1 humanitarian and just about the only thing he won't give away free to "lost" visitors is the formula for his "chicken wonder." That "wonder" has been written about in foreign travel journals but the tourism ministry has skipped it in its guidebooks.

For collectors of flowering plants and ornamentals, the Dalisay Village is the place to go. It has the best collections of Asian plants in the Philippines. Besides its fruit trees, aviary and a greenhouse, it also has an indoor chapel, golf links, a swimming pool, and a teahouse.

Davao City is of course no "paradise" of the Pacific. But it has the peace and quiet not found in the hustle and bustle of Metro Manila or Cebu. That peace and quiet do a lot to ease the tensions and tedium of big city life. Because Davao, despite the

fact that it has things to offer to visitors used to the life-styles of Metro Manila, Bacolod or Cebu, still has not lost its refreshing countrylike atmosphere.

You unwind in the shadows of graceful palms fringing the shoreline . . . found at the Times Beach and the other resorts . . . in the search for shells on Samal Island, in the unhurried exploration of the city's marine gardens, or even just in shopping at its many supermarts.

And, oh, yes, despite the zooming jets, the jeepneys and the PU-Minicas, and the taxis that will take you anywhere, the rising skyscrapers that are rapidly changing its skyline, the blazing neon lights at night and the supper clubs that never go to sleep, there is still in the ambience of Davao something of the well-remembered old, springing out at the most unlikely places, old town scents and sea sprays, lush fruit ripening in the trees, slender cogongrass bending in the gentle wind . . . that would make a perceptive visitor searching for the meaning of it all suddenly aware of the poetry of the world, indeed as one poet wrote, of how the yellow bells stole the color of the sun . . .