

# DISCOVERING BOHOL



SAMPLING THE DELIGHTFUL  
CHOCOLATE HILLS OF THE PHILIPPINES.

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Over the past 10 years I have visited almost every country in Southeast Asia, from Laos to Indonesia. But until recently the Philippines had eluded me. To be honest, I had never really considered traveling to the Philippines, mainly because I knew very little about it.

Then, after finding a cheap promo ticket through AirAsia, I suddenly found myself boarding a last-minute flight to Cebu City. As the archipelago was uncharted territory for me, I was clueless about where to go, other than visiting the world-famous beaches of Boracay. I spent

a week lounging on White Beach, asking Filipinos for suggestions. The answer was surprisingly unanimous: Bohol. With promises of dreamy tropical beaches, cuddly miniature primates and surreal landscapes, I was sold.

Frankly, I had never even heard of Bohol before my trip to the Philippines. Located a stone's throw from Cebu City, the tropical island is wildly popular with domestic tourists. Despite remaining under the international tourist radar, it is actually one of the most frequented destinations in the country. The few foreign visitors who venture there do so to explore the pristine coral reefs that surround the island and give Bohol its





reputation as one of the top 10 dive spots in the world.

Because I'm not a diver, I came to check out the island's other attractions. My goal was simple: I wanted to play in the azure waters of Alona Beach, spot a Philippine tarsier in the semi-wild at the tarsier sanctuary, and gaze at the otherworldly Chocolate Hills. Made up of more than 1,200 conical and symmetrical limestone formations, the hills are touted as one of the most beautiful landscapes in the country. For most of the year the rolling mounds are covered by a dense layer of green grass, but in the dry season the sun roasts them into a chocolaty brown color, hence their name.

I have to admit I was a little skeptical about Bohol; I couldn't help but wonder if the island would live up to the hype. If this

place is so great, why had I never heard of it before? And why don't more people visit it?

I booked a hotel room in the quaint resort town of Alona Beach. After scoping out the beach, I quickly decided that my first day in Bohol would be a dedicated beach day. Unlike the hyper-touristy beaches of Boracay, Alona Beach was far less presumptuous. It only took 15 minutes to walk the length of its shore, but despite its small size there was no questioning its beauty. Fishing boats bobbed in the cobalt water, the sand was a powdery white, and the shore was fringed with windswept palms.

The beachfront was peppered with dive shops, hotels, and modest eateries, where I sampled traditional Filipino dishes and purchased fruity cocktails.

Despite being the high season, there

were surprisingly few tourists. Strolling along the shore, I quickly spotted an isolated patch of sand, laid out my sarong, and nestled into the sand. I spent the day alternating between sunning on the beach and cooling off in the bathtub warm water.

The following morning I was tempted to spend another day lazing around Alona Beach, but Bohol's interior beckoned. While it's simple to arrange tours to see the tarsiers and Chocolate Hills

through most hotels, I was craving a bit of adventure. So I rented a scooter and set out to explore the island's attractions on my own. After a 30-minute jaunt, I felt like I was worlds away from Alona Beach.

#### LITTLE ATTRACTIONS

As I snaked along the windy mountain roads, the temperature dropped dramatically and I was surrounded by the vibrantly green jungle. Although my face was thwacked by a few bugs, my hair





## IF YOU GO ...

**Getting there:** There is no international airport on Bohol, but the airport receives daily domestic flights from Manila and Cebu City. Another option is to take the 1.5-hour ferry ride from Cebu City.

**Touring the island:** Tours are incredibly affordable. It's possible to book a tour through most hotels and tourist shops, or you can arrange private tours with the local guides who hang out near the entrance to Alona Beach. Feel free to haggle on the price.

**Renting a scooter:** Scooters can be rented from any of the island's residents. If you're staying near Alona Beach, locals will approach you about rentals.

**Seeing the tarsiers:** There are numerous tarsier sanctuaries in Bohol. It's best to avoid any "sanctuary" that allows tourists to hold tarsiers or confines the animals to cages. Tarsiers are an endangered species and should not be mistreated in this way.

**Where to eat:** The Bohol Bee Farm boasts some of the best food on the island. Located on Panglao Island, the restaurant incorporates homegrown organic produce into their delicious culinary creations.

was a tangled mess from the wind, and my clothes were damp from sporadic rain showers, the ride was spectacular and I was grinning from ear to ear when I pulled up to my first stop, the tarsier sanctuary.

The sanctuary itself is a simple place. It houses about a dozen of the endangered creatures in a forested area. Tarsiers are mistakenly known as the world's smallest primate, a title that actually belongs to a lemur in Madagascar. Still, they are so unbelievably tiny they could easily curl up in the palm of your hand. With their comically large and bulbous eyes, adhesive froglike hands and long rat-like tail, they look more like an alien species than something that's native to this planet.

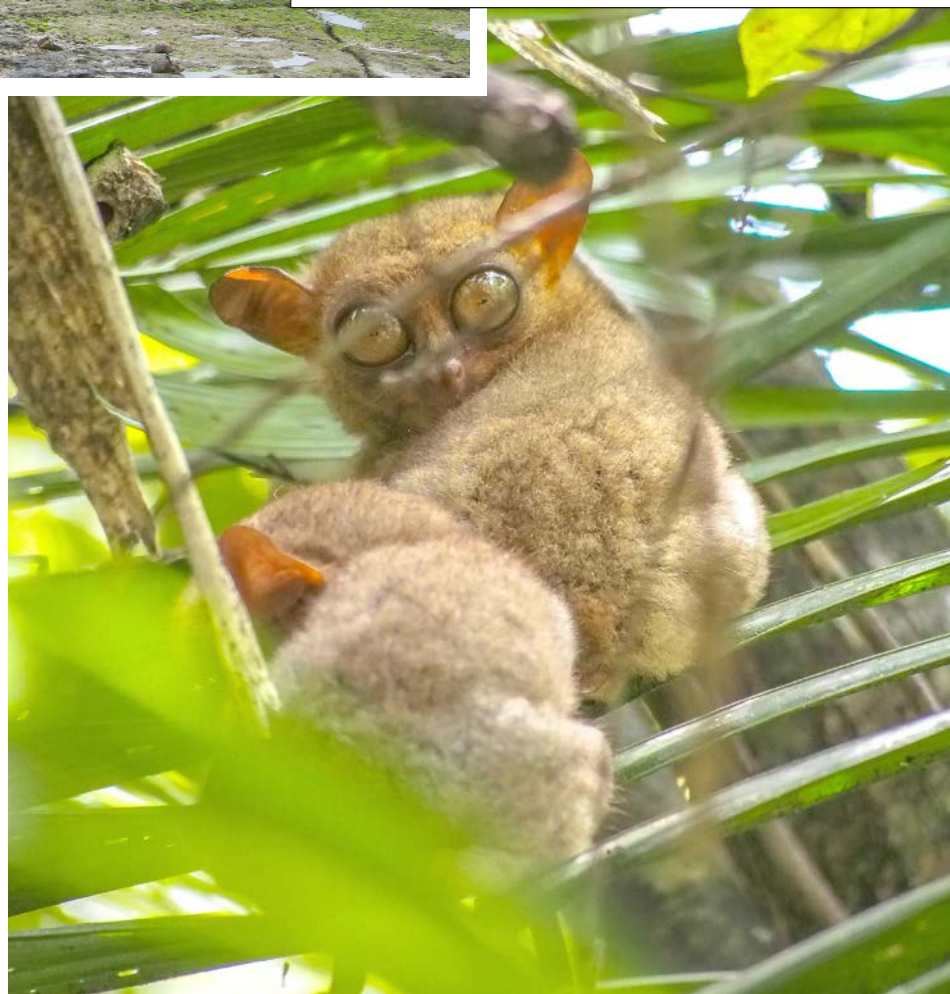
Inside the sanctuary, I was accompanied by a guide whose primary purpose was to protect the tiny primates. Tarsiers are extremely sensitive creatures, physically and emotionally. And the sound of tourists chattering, the flash of a camera, or the touch of a human, are all things that can stress these guys out to such a degree they are known to commit suicide. As my guide happily pointed out the hard-to-spot tarsiers, I was perfectly content to quietly observe the funny looking animals.

After I had my fill of the adorable tarsiers I hopped back on my scooter and made my way up the road to the Chocolate Hills. Soon enough I found myself coasting alongside lime green rice patties which were framed by a sea of perfectly conical hills. I decided to park my scooter and hike up to the designated viewpoint.

The second I reached the top, I instantly understood why everyone had raved about the Chocolate Hills. The symmetrical mounds rolled as far as the eye could see, creating one of the most magical and surreal landscapes I have ever laid eyes on.

Not only did the Chocolate Hills live up to the hype but Bohol exceeded my wildest expectations. It only took two days for Bohol to become one of my favorite destinations in all of Southeast Asia. This island really does have it all, from beautiful beaches to magical Chocolate Hills to world-class diving.

After traveling there, it shocks me that Bohol has managed to remain relatively undiscovered by international visitors. Bohol might be well known by Filipino tourists, but if you ask me it's still one of the best kept secrets in Southeast Asia. 🇵🇭



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