AIRASIA INFLIGHT MAGAZINE

travel 3sixty°

NOV 2016
ISSUE 112

POCKET ME NOT.
READ ME ONLINE!
www.travel3sixty.com

Urban Art, Chiang Mai

SOULFUL STREETS

AUDIT BUREAU OF CIRCULATIONS MALAYSIA

CHECK-IN

CONTENTS
NOVEMBER 2016

88

Navigator

78
THE FRENCH CONNECTION
Pondicherry, India

88
CLEVER CATCH
Harvest from the Sea

98
SOULFUL STREETS
Chiang Mai, Thailand

108
MOULDED IN FIRE
Camiguin, Philippines

118
COCKPIT CHALLENGES
Pilot's Perspective

122
IN THE PRESENCE OF BEAUTY
Travel Log

MOULDED IN FIRE

Through destruction and rebirth, the tiny Filipino island of Camiguin carries its fiery history with pride, as its spectacular volcanic activities have shaped the landscape, influenced the weather and changed destinies over the centuries.

WORDS: SHARON CROWTHER PHOTOGRAPHY: JACOB MAENTZ

Camiguin's circumferential road is 64 kilometres long and winds along the island's spectacular coastline.

IMAGE: GETTY

LAVA IN THE VEINS "This isn't an easy place to make an emergency landing," says pilot and founder of Camiguin Aviation, Captain Sean Clarke, before our flight, "but not impossible." He is referring to Camiguin's steep volcanic contours, which first attracted the aerobatic pilot to the island, but Captain Clarke admits the rugged landscape is also one of the biggest challenges of flying here.

The second smallest island province in the Philippines, just 23 kilometres long and 14 kilometres wide, Camiguin is located in the Bohol Sea, 10 kilometres off the northern coast of Mindanao, the second largest island in the country.

Camiguin is a quiet isle and home to 70,000 locals who work predominantly as fishermen and farmers, but with more volcanoes per square kilometre than any other island in the world, this 'Island Born of Fire' – as it is popularly called – is also a veritable topographical wonder and a geological powerhouse. From as far back as the locals can recall, the island's seven volcanoes have shaped its silhouette, altered its coastline and infused the history of its people with tales of terrifying tremors and devastating eruptions.

In 1871, the west coast barrio of Catarman, along with the town of Old Catarman, was entirely submerged by lava that spewed from Mount Vulcan, situated in Camiguin's north. The town's sunken cemetery, which is marked by a white cross protruding 20 metres from the water, is now a well-known dive spot. Today, only Mount Hibok-Hibok in the neighbouring barrio of Mambajao remains an active volcano, and some of the oldest residents on the island still remember its last eruptions in 1948 and 1951.

Despite Camiguin's scorching history, the island's volcanic magnetism seems hard to resist. Its population has never waned, with loyal locals always returning to its shores after being temporarily relocated to Mindanao for shelter and medical care following eruptions.

And lately, newcomers have also fallen in love with the charms of Camiguin, bringing new business and tourism to the island, which is now home to the only advanced flight manoeuvre camp in the Philippines, Camiguin Aviation.

FLYING BY INSTINCT "The island has this incredible micro-climate," says Captain Clarke, a Canadian geophysicist turned aerobatic pilot, who has set up home on the island with his wife and young family. Interestingly, it is his geophysics background that provides him the valuable insight he has on volcanoes and weather systems. "Hot air rises up from the base of the volcanoes and turns into clouds. Pockets of rain form here and there, but the weather can change so quickly. The volcanoes

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

A 20-metre high white cross, one of the island's most photographed sites, marks the location of Old Catarman's sunken cemetery where snorkellers now enjoy exploring the headstones submerged beneath the Bohol Sea.

Captain Clarke, who moved to Camiguin from Canada with his family almost a decade ago, enjoys taking tourists on aerobatic flights high above the volcanic island he loves so much.

Camiguin Aviation also provides pilots and tourists comfortable accommodation in the aircraft hangar.

make their own weather and we always fly on their terms."

Established in 2007, Camiguin Aviation was originally a facility offering pilots exposure to aerobatic flight manoeuvres, and they recently branched into adventure flights for tourists. Captain Clarke explains some of the physics behind aerobatic flight while we prepare for takeoff. "An aeroplane is just like a paper plane: if you let it go, it will fly," he says. "Aerobatics is all about knowing when to give up control in order to gain control. It's an exercise in trust and feeling. It's about learning to let go. When you start to fly by feel, that's when you become a good pilot."

Camiguin is one of the few places in the world where those who are able to hold their nerves can experience a heart-stopping aerobatic flight over volcanoes. If it isn't for the fact that Captain Clarke has been flying planes for more than 20 years, I might be nervous. Before every flight, he provides his passengers three key items: a parachute, a life vest and a sick bag. "You won't need the parachute or the life vest," he quips. "You might need the sick bag, but let's hope not!"

WHERE ONLY EAGLES DARE On our flight, we begin by skirting the island's coastline, viewing its sea level sights from the air. The sea, which was inky blue from the ground, is now a vibrant aquamarine, and the canopy of lush jungle framing the shoreline becomes a kaleidoscope of green. It's Camiguin in technicolour!

On Mantigue Island, a tiny tropical oasis just a few minutes' boat trip from Camiguin's east coast, parasols pop with colour and day-trippers turn their faces skywards and wave to us. "Let's wave back," says Captain Clarke, and tilts the plane's wings from side to side! As we head inland, Captain Clarke's canary yellow plane spirals upwards, not unlike the crested serpent eagles found in Camiguin and other parts of Asia, which ride thermals of warm air up the volcanic slopes. The eagles use the air thermals to gain a better perspective from which to hunt prey, and following their lead gives us a spectacular bird's eye view of the island's volcanoes.

After gaining some height, Captain Clarke asks how I'd feel about a Cuban Eight. For a second, I think he might be offering me a cocktail. He isn't, but as the aerobatics begin, I am both shaken and stirred!

As we accelerate into the manoeuvre, which involves making the figure eight in the sky, the horizon flips, and with it, my world literally turns upside down. Volcanoes and sea appear

MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Meet Camiguin's volcanoes – the seven fiery craters that have moulded the island's history and continue to write its present, and future.

MT HIBOK-HIBOK At 1,240 metres, this is Camiguin's most popular hiking destination. It is the only active volcano on the island today and is part of the Pacific Ring of Fire.

MT MAMBAJAO This 1,552-metre high volcano takes its name from the words *mamahaw* (meaning to have breakfast) and *bajao* (meaning left-over boiled rice) in the Visayan language. Mambajao is also the name of Camiguin's capital and the island's largest municipality.

MT GUINSILIBAN The southernmost volcano on the island, its name originates from the old Kinamiguin word *ginsil-ipan* that means 'to watch for pirates'. Sharing the name of this 571-metre volcano, Guinsiliban town was the location of the first Spanish settlement on Camiguin in 1598.

MT TIMPOONG Standing at 5,294 metres, this is the tallest of all of Camiguin's volcanoes. Timpoong comprises multiple cinder cones and peaks.

MT VULCAN Despite being called The Old Volcano, this 671-metre volcano is actually the youngest on the island. During Holy Week, pilgrims hike to its summit to visit the Stations of the Cross, which depict the 14 events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

MT BUTAY Also known as Mt Uhay, this volcano stands 679 metres tall. It is located between the towns of Guinsiliban and Mahinog.

MT TRES MARIAS This 731-metre volcano has a unique structure as it consists of three identical peaks, all of different heights. It takes a two-hour hike to reach the highest peak, which opens into the Itom crater.

Captain Clarke's canary yellow plane soars above White Island, a sandbar located to the west of Mantigue Island.

and disappear from every window. Somebody is screaming and I'm pretty sure it's not Captain Clarke, which means it must be me! My screams turn to hysterical laughter and a jolt of adrenaline courses through me. Captain Clarke asks how I feel and I have to resist the urge to clap my hands and say, "Again, again!"

It's like riding a roller coaster – terrifying and a little nauseating, but just try and stop me from getting back on for another go! Thankfully, Captain Clarke needs little encouragement to accelerate into another move, and another and another. And high above Camiguin's volcanoes, I fall in love with aerobatics.

INTO THE MOUTH OF HIBOK-HIBOK-

During my flight with Captain Clarke, Mount Hibok-Hibok's 1,240-metre summit had been peeking through pockets of clouds, teasing me with its promise of glorious views. Giving in to temptation, I decide to hike up the volcano for a better look.

It takes between three and four hours of steep ascent to reach the summit, and a further hour to hike down into the crater. My guide Baebot, like most guides on the island, also works as a fisherman and a farmer. He has lived on Camiguin all his life and fondly calls it 'Come Again' because, he says, "people always do."

Coffee beans grow on the lower slopes while palm trees are cultivated on the higher gradients. A recent seven month drought, followed by heavy rainfall, has grown thick waist-high vegetation, which we wade and scramble through to reach the summit. From here, we observe the weather systems Captain Clarke described in action. Clouds begin to form around the middle of the mountain and become denser as they rise upwards, before breaking apart and dissolving, leaving momentary glimpses of the breathtaking coastline.

As we hike down into Hibok-Hibok's crater, Baebot tells me stories of the island's volcanic eruptions and the devastation wrought. My heart rate quickens and I almost expect a fiery pit of boiling lava to appear below, but the deeper we hike, the cooler and wetter it becomes. Farther down, we climb into the crater, where the trail becomes steep and thick jungle swallows us until we emerge, blinking in the sunlight, into a large clearing.

The core of Hibok-Hibok teems with life; here, wild guava trees grow, frogs croak and bees thrum loudly. Baebot even points out a tree that chirps with hundreds of yellow love birds. Far from being the inhospitable place I imagined it would be, the live volcano of Hibok-Hibok is actually a rather generous host, and as we hike out of its crater, I'm sorry that I have to leave its tranquility.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

The horizon flips when Captain Clarke performs a Cuban Eight manoeuvre.

The distinctive mounds of Mt. Hibok-Hibok form a spectacular backdrop for Captain Clarke's aerobatic flights.

Fishermen in Catarman inspect their nets. Their evening catch often includes tropical fish which is eaten raw on the beach.

OUT OF THE ASHES... On our hike, Baebot tells me that in 1948, the entire town of Ilihan, located high on Hibok-Hibok's slopes, was engulfed in lava and ash. All 200 of the townspeople perished, save for one small boy who had been sent down the mountain to buy sardines. The volcano also claimed the lives of 3,000 others on the island.

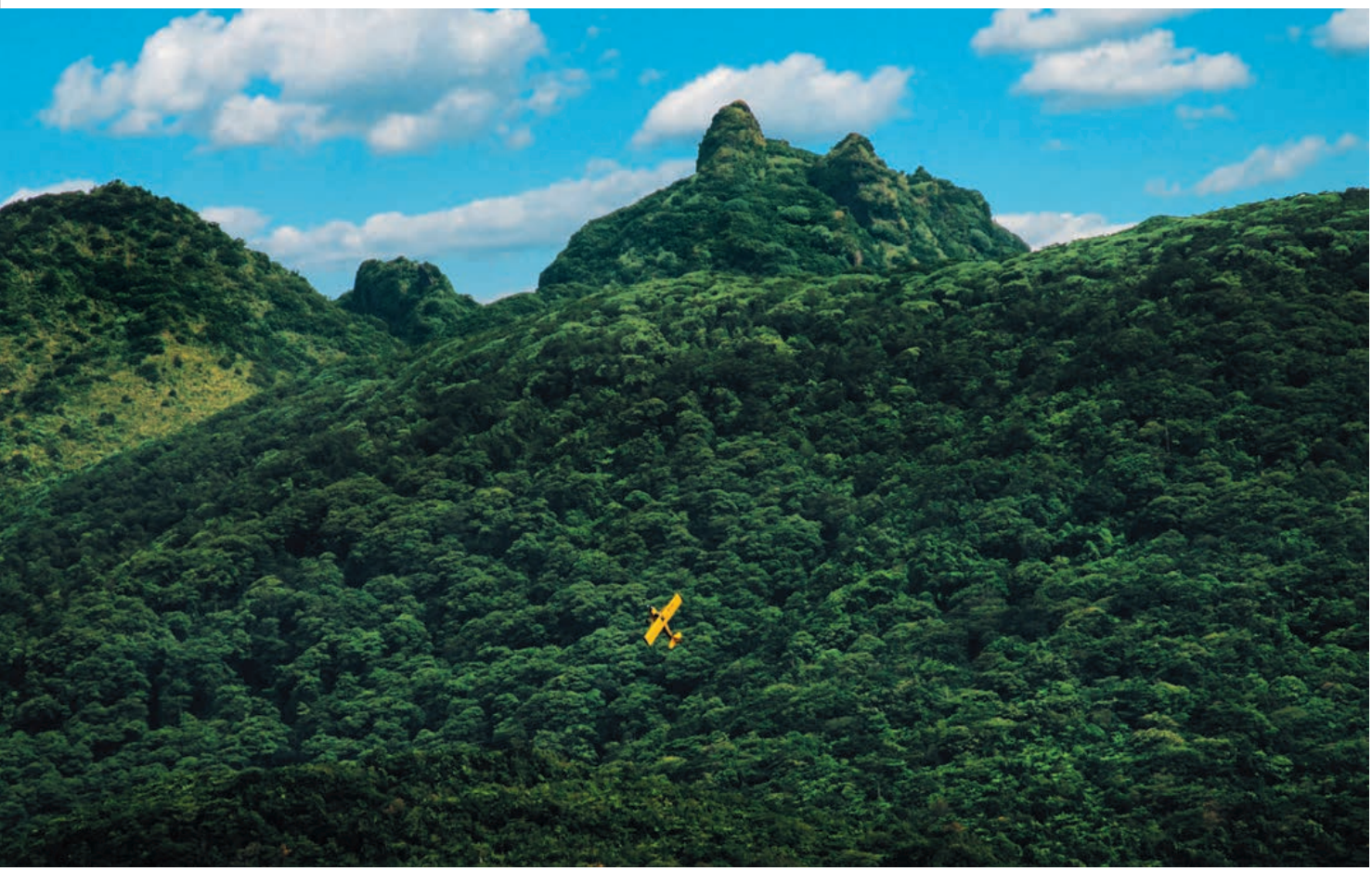
When we return to the foot of Hibok-Hibok, Baebot takes me to visit that lone survivor of the 1948 eruption. Now 79, Benito Aclo lives in a small house on the north coast of the island, just a couple of kilometres from where we leave our hiking trail, and still carries with him the nickname 'Sardine Boy'. Although he says he struggles to recall his age, he remembers the morning Hibok-Hibok exploded like it was yesterday. His grandson, Jerome, translates as I ask Aclo about his experience that morning back in 1948.

"I had 11 brothers and sisters; I was the middle child. We lived with my parents who were farmers. I had been sent to the town at the bottom of the mountain to buy sardines when it happened. I knew what was going on, everybody knew… people were panicking and it was terrifying. I was only a boy. I instinctively tried to return home to my family but on the way, I met my uncle and he stopped me, saying it was too dangerous. Even when I could see the lava flowing everywhere, I still hoped my family might be alive, but sadly they were all gone."

Afterwards, Aclo's uncle took him to Davao where he stayed until he was 16, though he still thought of Camiguin every day and wanted to return. When he did return, he met and fell in love with a local girl named Gloria, and settled down in the shadow of Hibok-Hibok. Married for over 60 years, the couple had seven children. Sadly, Gloria passed away earlier this year, but Aclo keeps a lit candle by her photograph in his living room.

I ask Aclo if, after all that he has been through, he feels afraid living so close to Hibok-Hibok, but he calmly replies, "No, I am not worried," his face conveying nothing but wisdom and peace.

VOLCANIC IMMERSIONS Bubbling, steaming, flowing and falling, Camiguin's rich water sources are where volcanic complexities reveal themselves. In the mountains, cold springs and waterfalls offer bathing pools and shady retreats from the humidity, while at Tuasan Falls, water cascades 30 metres down a narrow chute with a ferocity that seems to make the air vibrate. The spray is a refreshing hiatus from my Hibok-Hibok hike, but the roar of the falls is a reminder not to get too close.



Tuasan Falls is a popular spot for day trippers and tourists. The powerful spray from the 30-metre drop is refreshing after a long hike.

WINGING IT

Here are some popular aerobatic manoeuvres to look forward to on an adventure flight.

LOOP-THE-LOOP The most well-known of all aerobatic moves, a Loop-the-Loop involves accelerating, lifting the nose of the plane until it is entirely inverted, before releasing and allowing it to soar back into its original position and direction.

CUBAN EIGHT This twirly manoeuvre requires a full figure of eight, with a rotation in the middle. It was first executed in public by pilot Len Povey, an American pilot who had served in the Cuban Air Force in the 1930s.

HAMMERHEAD After rapid vertical acceleration, the pilot stalls the plane, allowing it to turn and then free fall back into its original position. You'll feel heavy on the way up and weightless on the way back down.

AILERON ROLL As its name suggests, this manoeuvre sees the plane doing a full 360 degree revolution along its latitudinal axis.

IMMELMANN A bit like making a U-turn in a plane, the pilot accelerates, pulls the nose up until the plane is inverted before rotating the right way up and flying in the opposite direction. This move was named after German pilot Max Immelmann.

The sunken cemetery of Old Catarman is every underwater lover's paradise, as snorkellers explore the headstones submerged by Mount Vulcan – an altogether different sort of underwater experience. On the beach where fishermen catch and eat raw fish – a rustic take on the Filipino fish delicacy, *kinilaw* – I ask about a local legend I've heard about ghosts from the cemetery haunting the waters here. Between fishy mouthfuls, the fishermen laugh. "Yes," they say, pointing to a group of snorkellers, "there are some ghosts over there." I'm glad to have amused them, and it strikes me that in a place where stories like Benito Aclo's – tales of survival in the face of catastrophic natural disasters – exist, ghost stories and superstitions might seem foolish.

However, one story that is definitely not a folk tale revolves around Camiguin's hot springs, which used to draw troops of weary hikers looking to soak their tired feet. Locals tell me that since the devastating Bohol earthquake in 2013, some of the springs have gone cold. It seems Camiguin's internal thermostat is having a little trouble. "Nobody knows why," says Baebot. I ask if he thinks that perhaps, in time, the hot springs will return to the island, but he shrugs and sums it up perfectly, "That is not for us to know. Only the volcanoes know."

That's the beautiful thing about Camiguin; it is a land governed by volcanoes. And over people and pilots, weather and water, superstition and ghost stories, the volcanoes will preside.

GETTING THERE AIRASIA FLIES TO CEBU AND TAGBILARAN FROM VARIOUS DESTINATIONS. *www.airasia.com*