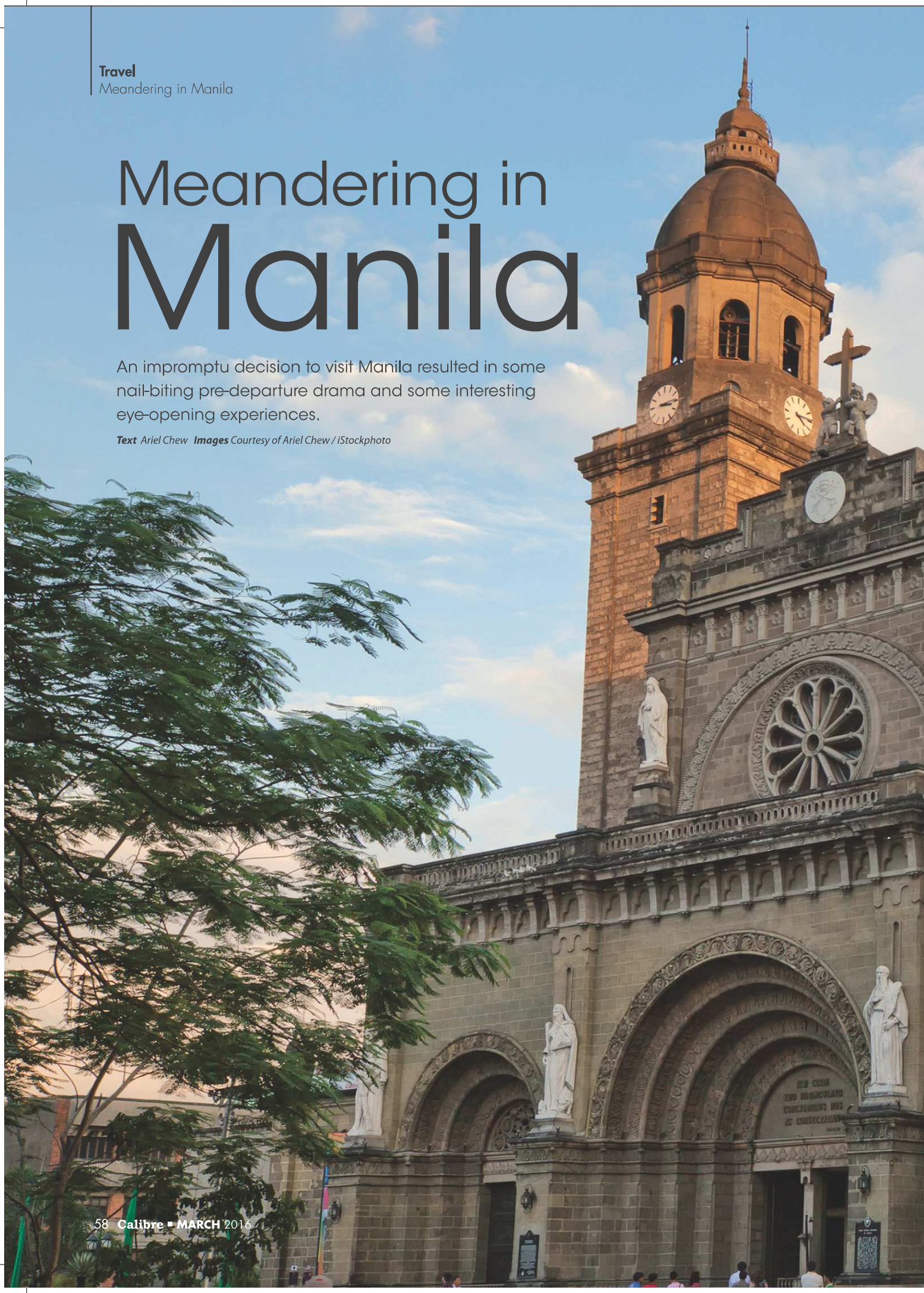
Meandering in Manila

An impromptu decision to visit Manila resulted in some nail-biting pre-departure drama and some interesting eye-opening experiences.

Text *Ariel Chew* ***Images*** *Courtesy of Ariel Chew / iStockphoto*

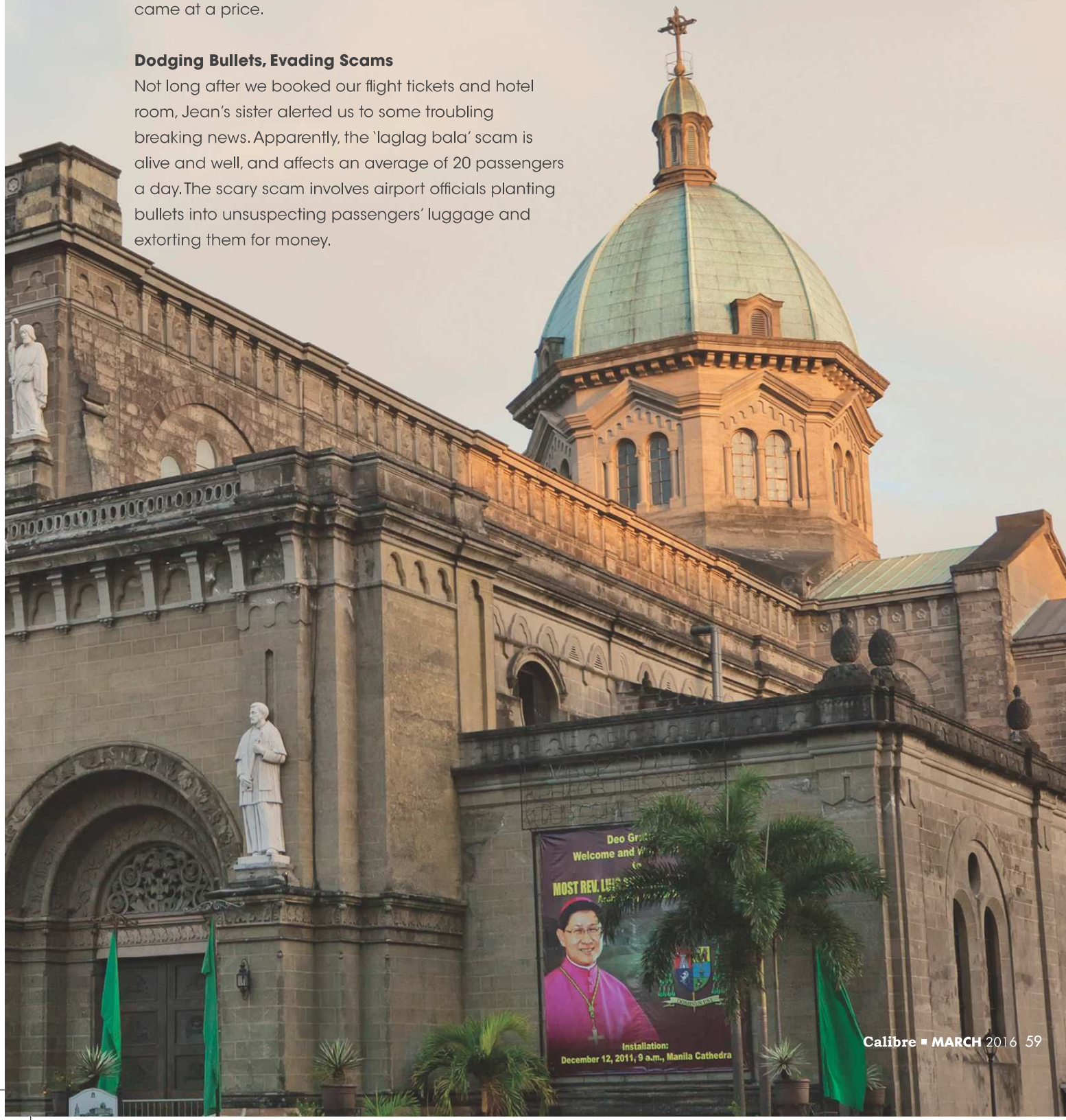


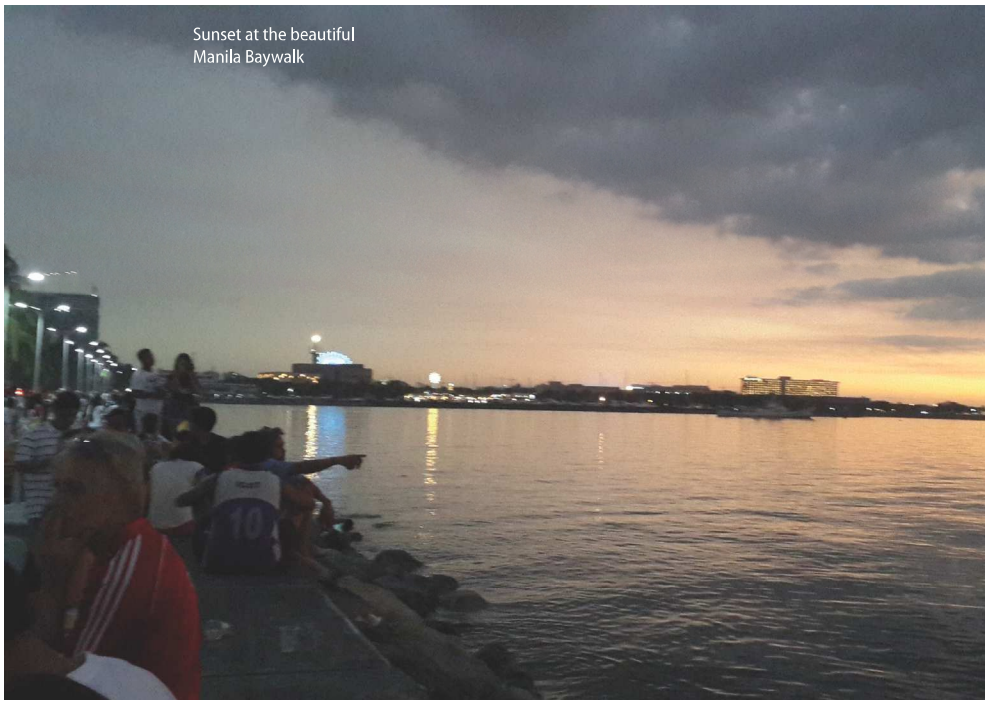
During lunch one day, Jean and I were toying with the idea of spending the long Christmas weekend in a foreign land. The criteria were simple: it had to be a relatively cheap place, not too far away, and somewhere both of us had never been before. Manila fit the bill but we soon discovered that, to our chagrin, peace of mind came at a price.

Dodging Bullets, Evading Scams

Not long after we booked our flight tickets and hotel room, Jean's sister alerted us to some troubling breaking news. Apparently, the 'laglag bala' scam is alive and well, and affects an average of 20 passengers a day. The scary scam involves airport officials planting bullets into unsuspecting passengers' luggage and extorting them for money.

I vaguely recalled reading about the scam during a brief research on Manila prior to booking the tickets but the last reported incident happened a few years ago. During my research, I also read that the use of jeepneys, a dirt-cheap mode of transportation, is generally discouraged for first-time Manila travellers as it is a hotbed of pickpockets and can be disorienting.

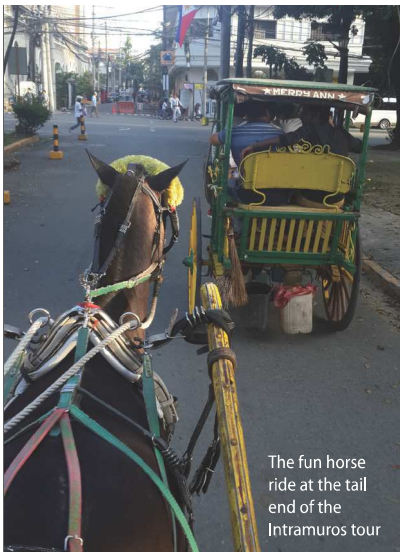



Sunset at the beautiful Manila Baywalk

Carlos Celdran brought us back in time with his witty and fascinating Intramuros tour

Then there's the countless reminders to ask the taxi drivers to use the meter to avoid being charged exorbitantly by them. One friend also cautioned me not to bring my handbag while walking on the streets of Manila due to the infestation of snatch thieves. Another friend wondered loudly why I chose to go to Manila. "There's nothing interesting there to see. Go to the islands instead," she advised.

With all the dire reportage of gloom and doom, Jean and I were in a quandary. What was intended to be a fun, relaxing holiday was rapidly turning into a stressful journey into a land filled with scams and unsavoury characters. Our over-active imaginations started churning out awful scenarios of us being held in prison for hiding bullets in our hand-carry luggage, being robbed blind as soon as we stepped out of the hotel and being turned away by taxis who refuse to use the meter. At one point, we came very close to cancelling the trip altogether.

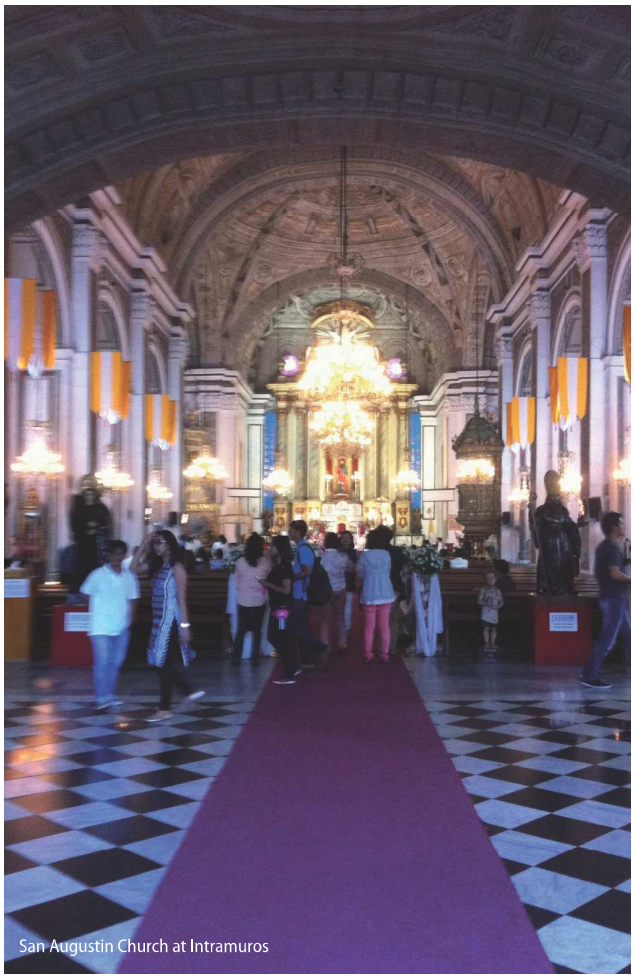

The fun horse ride at the tail end of the Intramuros tour

Thankfully, we decided to go ahead anyway, come what may.

Christmas in Manila

After a smooth flight to the Ninoy Aquino International Airport, we boarded a yellow taxi driven by a friendly driver who greeted us with a "Merry Christmas". He was the first of the many Filipinos who wished us "Merry Christmas" everywhere we went, this being that time of the year. It was also quite enthralling to see a Christmas tree being erected at unexpected public spots in the city. According to the cab driver, this would be a quiet evening in town as most Filipinos would spend Christmas Eve dinner at home with their families. We also discovered that many attended Christmas Eve services at their respective Catholic churches, when we visited the Malate Church that evening.

Less than half an hour later, we arrived and checked into our hotel, Red Planet Ermita. Staying there turned out to be a great choice. The hotel was modern, clean



San Augustin Church at Intramuros

and most importantly, was located along a quiet street and just a short walk away from the more happening town of Malate and Robinsons Place Manila, a big shopping mall. We found Robinsons Place and the Mall of Asia (a mammoth mall located at Pasay City, which is about a 20-minute drive away), to be filled with the international brands we have back home. The Mall of Asia was packed to the gills on Christmas Day by the locals who, like us, were clamouring for a cool air-conditioned space to chill out at. We decided to leave when the crowds thickened towards the afternoon and it was hard to find places where we could sit and eat. Besides, why should we jostle for lunch when we could have a sumptuous one in total comfort at the restaurants nearby our hotel?

Tasty Manila

The 24-hour Aristocrat Restaurant and Max's Restaurant, which opens at 7am till late, offer a wide spread of Western and local fare, which are decently priced. Since our hotel did not serve breakfast, our morning ritual was to take a short walk to either of these restaurants and enjoy their eggs and bread dishes. We visited them again during dinner for the famous Max's fried chicken, tasty grilled fish and meat cooked in the famed Adobo 'soy sauce' style. For lunch, we ate at wherever convenient and savoured dishes such as lomi, which we discovered was actually referring to the Chinese dish loh mee back home and tasted almost the same, sans the usual black vinegar. Needless to say, we did not miss our glorious Malaysian food at all as the Filipino dishes were prepared in a similar way.

The locally produced San Miguel beer was cheap and light, and it was all they served in most pubs and bars. On our last night in Manila, we stumbled upon Cowboy Grill Malate, a pub with a huge stage for live music bands to perform on. That night, we were entertained with long-forgotten songs of the 80s sung by talented singers in their early 20s, which was a surreal experience. By the time we left the pub at 10.30pm, it was nearly full house with the patrons ordering gallons and gallons of San Miguel beer. That stretch of street was a noisy hive of activity but just a short walk away, where our hotel was located, all was peaceful and perfect for a quiet night of rest. To us, that was the best of both worlds.

The popular Aristocrat Restaurant has been serving patrons 24/7 since 1936

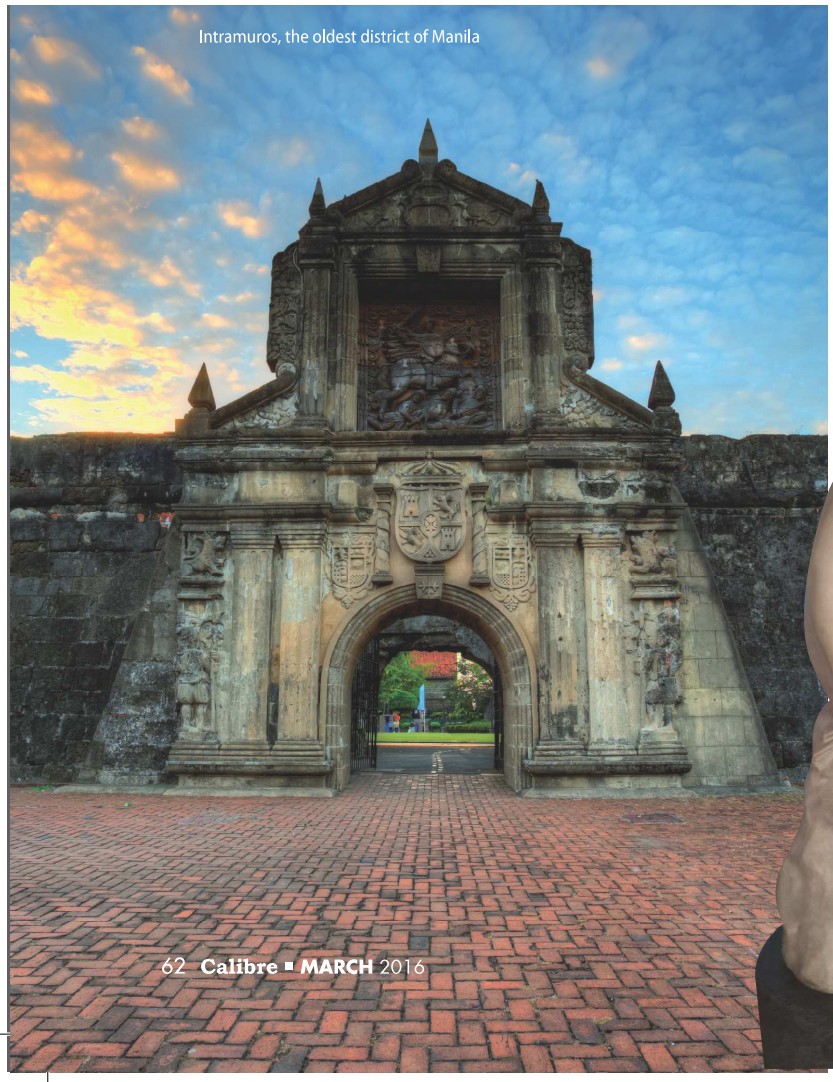
Sweet History

We visited Rizal Park, a huge space filled with greenery, sculptures of famous national heroes and strategically placed benches and tables, where Filipinos love to congregate during the cooler evening hours. The National Museum, which boasts of many beautiful art pieces by local artists, and Intramuros, a historical city and former administration centre of the Spanish government are also within walking distance of the park and must-sees in their own right.

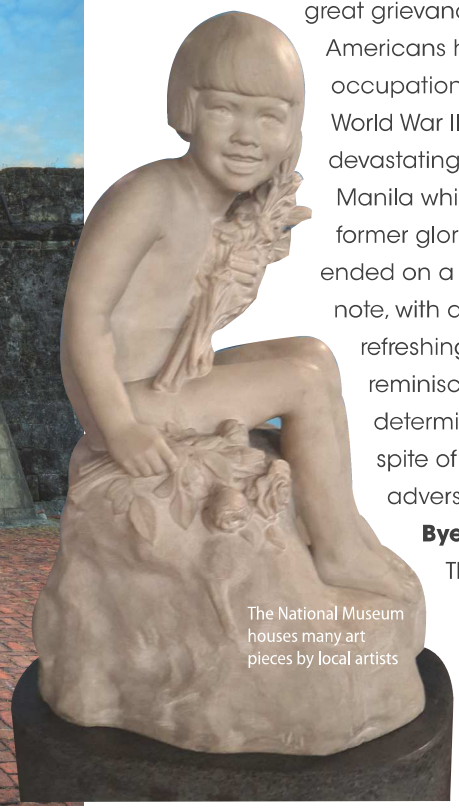
But the highlight of our trip came in the form of the buoyant and irreverent Carlos Celdran. His famed Intramuros tour is a definite must-go, and the 1,100 pesos tour fee is well worth the cost. For two hours, we strolled with and mostly sat around Carlos, who gleefully put on ridiculous looking hats and bellowed "Walk this waaaaay!" as he led us along. There were also moments where he would suddenly yell at shocked tourists during lurid recollections of Filipino history. Through him, we learned that to be Filipino is to be Catholic, even though they were all Muslims

The spot where Jose Rizal was shot and killed @ Rizal Park

before the Spanish colonisation in 1521. "Filipinos are also similar to our favourite dessert halo-halo, a delightful blend of shaved ice, evaporated milk, nuts and various other sweet delights," declared Carlos, who was trained in the performing arts, and liberally showered us with flower petals and their local product, Choc Nut, throughout the tour. "We are a delightful and complicated mix of cultures and traditions, thanks to our Spanish and American influences." He expressed great grievance at the way the Americans handled the Japanese occupation of the country during World War II, bombing and devastating the beautiful city of Manila which never regained its former glory to this day. The tour ended on a nice and memorable note, with a horse ride and the refreshing halo-halo, which is reminiscent of a country who is determined to find sweetness in spite of the many hardships and adversities it faced.



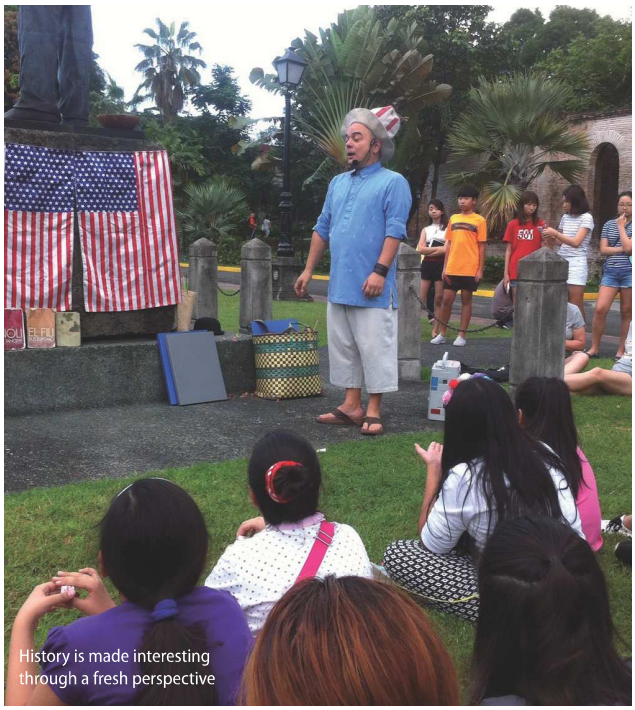
Intramuros, the oldest district of Manila



The National Museum houses many art pieces by local artists

Bye Bye, Halo Halo

The day before we left for



History is made interesting through a fresh perspective

home, several concerned friends messaged me over Facebook asking if I was alright. An alert was issued to warn travellers from visiting several islands in the Philippines due to the growing kidnapping-for-ransom activities. Ironically, Manila was not listed in those red-alert areas. And truth be told, in spite of our initial pre-departure misgivings, we actually felt very safe in Manila. Sure, we had to make do without our handbags or backpacks, and avoided the jeepneys like the plague. But we felt at ease walking about the streets and climbing aboard cabs which, for the most part, did not use meters. Even without using the meter, the charges were very affordable. You just need to agree on the price before boarding the cab and only pay when the cab comes to a stop and your luggage has been retrieved.

The customer service at the hotel and eateries were decent, and Filipinos are generally friendly and smiley by nature. Our four days in Manila went better than expected and we came back with nice stories to tell, bearing sweet gifts of Choc Nuts and dried mangoes for our dear friends back home. Even Jean remarked that she would return to Manila just for the food; she loved it so much! As for me, I would rather journey on to the many places I have yet to explore. But I'll always be grateful for our Manila experience; it has taught me that after we have done all that we possibly can to ensure our safety and peace of mind, it's best to relax, go with the flow and enjoy the trip.

Jeepneys in Manila