

TRYING TO describe Manila is rather like hoping to pick up mercury with chopsticks, and, during my first year in this Far Eastern city, I have found that life can be strange and intriguing.

Approximately 17 hours' flying time from London, Manila is situated on an island named Luzon. It is the capital a clutch of over 7,000 tropical islands collectively known as The Philippines.

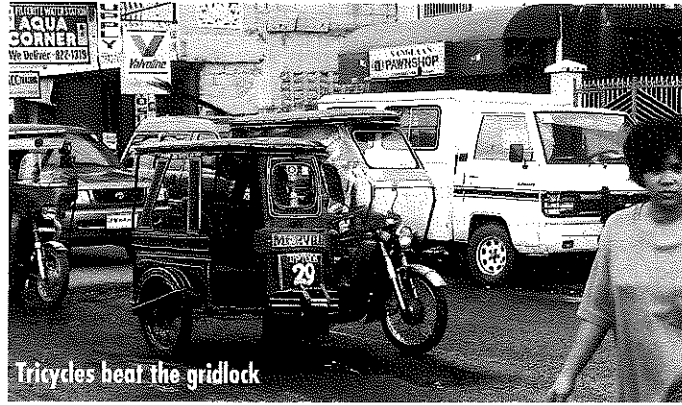
Although an Asian city at heart, Manila has succumbed to its Spanish and American colonisers. English is widely spoken and Western dress predominates; over 90 per cent of Filipinos claim to be Christian and over 80 per cent are Catholic, making it the only Christian country in Asia.

Everyone will tell you about gridlock, searing heat-humidity, confusion and frayed tempers; that Manila is not a city for the faint-hearted, which is true. But it is also a world of smiles bright enough to light up Oxford Street in December and take away the despair caused by the traffic. Here, it often seems that life in all its pain, and occasional glory, is taken lightly. *Bahala Na ... Tagalog* ("what will be will be") is the idea that sustains Filipinos in times of fortune or despair.

As I sit at a table in a noisy café in the city centre near a busy roundabout, the sound of cicadas, whining like telegraph wires, is just audible above the revving engines and impatient car horns. Neon signs, scattered, chaotic, misspelt and wildly confusing, hang in profusion from small shops and concrete tower-blocks rise like monoliths, the ugly step-sisters of the skyline.

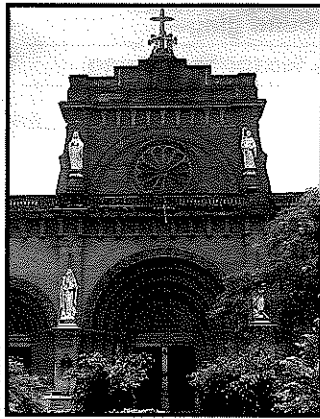
I long for the old Manila I have seen in faded sepia photographs – grand old Manila, Pearl of the Orient; but I know I have arrived too late for the unpolluted rivers, streets of ancestral houses and languorous scenic views.

Much as I had hoped to find women in beautiful Spanish *pina* dresses and horse-drawn *calesas* clip-clopping down tree-lined



Tricycles beat the gridlock

Flavour of MANILA



© J Castro

Manila cathedral

streets I now understand that these, together with the blankets of green fields, rice paddies and plodding carabao, can still be found in the "provinces", places where we spend weekends away from the crush of the city, where waterfalls, coconut plantations, beautiful seascapes and fresh air breathe life into our jaded city psyches.

Tropical islands such as Boracay, Palawan, Mindoro and Bohol are the stuff that exotic holidays are made of. As yet uncrowded and untouched by large hotels, they offer native bamboo hut accommodation (ranging from basic to luxurious) on white sandy beaches, with snorkelling and scuba diving available at most beachside destinations.

Although the coral has suffered from dynamiting and cyanide fishing over the past few years, it is still pristine in many places, along with enough tropical marine

After spending a year in Manila, **Johanna Castro** feels she is beginning to understand some of the complexities of this bustling Far Eastern city

life to make your heart sing.

Back to the urban cityscape – and life revolves around Metro Manila which consists of 14 distinctive districts. These range from the modern, affluent shopping and business area of Makati to the slums of Tondo (once the centre of Spanish trade and merchant life). There is Intramuros, the Spanish walled city, with its grand old churches and places of historical interest – those that survived the Second World War bombings – and closer to Manila bay, Malate and Ermita that compete as tourist hot spots. Here there are hotels, curio shops and restaurants where international dishes are served along with the local *Sinigang* (sour vegetable soup with fish or pork) or *Adobo* (pork or chicken cooked with vinegar and garlic), *Lechon* (suckling pig), or *Pancit Canton* (a thick noodle dish).

Many expatriates choose to live in suburbs, known as

"villages" which have guards at checkpoints (but no village pubs or post offices).

Here, houses range from mediocre to Hollywood lavish, although the veneer of opulence can never hide reality. A scant distance from the suburban sub-divisions nestles the full spectrum of underprivileged life; shanty hovels along the railway line, fruit, fish and vegetables for sale alongside polluted roadways and street children begging among the traffic.

There is little shape to Manila. Construction and expansion of the city since independence in 1897 seems to have been haphazard – as if someone swept a brush across a piece of canvas and said, "There, that will do for starters. We'll add some more tomorrow."

The future, however, looks more promising. At Fort Bonifacio, previously a major military base, a new "global city" is being built with its roots entrenched in an environmentally friendly, architecturally pleasing, modern satellite city.

Until then, busy roads pump towards Makati like clogged arteries. Jeepneys (the jeeps introduced by the Americans, now customised to a Philippine design) are big, bold and colourful, stopping at random to pick up people who have queued patiently for hours.

It has taken me a year to be able to look beyond the half-built tides of rubble strewn without landmark or signature, to smell the frangipani and seek out the magnolia or hibiscus.

These days I can admire the oppressive solitude of the American War Cemetery where more than 17,000 white crosses mark the graves of military dead in a park-like setting which oozes peace, tranquillity, sadness and the occasional flame tree. I am, at last, beginning to understand the rumbling life-giving volcanic forces which imbue the Filipinos with their fervour, sudden joys and instant sorrows. I still have much to learn and to see before life in Manila loses its mercurial implications. ☺