

**Ang buhay ng Manila: reflections on our 18-month sojourn in the big smog
Maria Cameron**



In early 2008, my partner Edwin and I left for the Philippines as much for adventure as for our respective work and study. Our plan was to live in Manila for a year – Edwin to conduct his PhD field research and me to work as a volunteer at an NGO based at the Ateneo de Manila University. We hoped we'd be able to make a life in the seemingly chaotic, and on first appearances unnavigable, world of Manila. Little did we know that one day we'd look back on it as such a rich, memorable episode of our life.

Edwin trail-blazed the way a couple of months ahead of me. He settled into our *pinoy*¹ family-to-be who we'd organised to live with through a close family friend here in Melbourne, in a semi-formal *looban* (an intricate network of lanes and alleys too small to register on any map, set back from the main thoroughfares). Edwin also had to create a social life almost from scratch. I remember him telling me about going into a bar, ordering a San Miguel and literally waiting until someone struck up a conversation with him. Seemingly by magic, however, by the time I arrived he seemed to have developed a veritable social web with friends from many different walks of life. Me, I got it easy; I just slipped full swing into the life he had begun.

But better than to describe our earlier impressions of Manila life through the hazy lens of hindsight is to share an email I composed for loved ones after a whirlwind first month in Manila. Looking back, it was definitely written in the heat of the oft-named 'honeymoon' period of most sojourns:

It's stinking hot and humid here, and only going to get more so as summer really sets in. But with lots of showers (only cold water, scooped with a little bucket over our bodies from a big bucket), fans (electric and hand-held), we're surviving.

Thanks so much to everyone who's already been in touch. What with Skype, mobiles, web albums, Facebook, email and, least we forget, good old snail mail, I feel like I'll have no problem keeping up with the latest back home. Keep it coming!

¹'Pinoy' is to 'Filipino' as 'Aussie' is to 'Australian'.

So I've survived two weeks of work at the Ateneo Center for Educational Development here in Manila. More significantly, I've survived two weeks of getting up at 6am, catching one tricycle and three jeepneys to work in peak traffic, a total of 1-1.4 hours each way. I'm already having a lot of fun with everyone at work, especially after a few late nights in the office last week, which are always good to bond over.

At first I wasn't sure what aspect of a particular project I'd be working on, but it has now turned out that I will be the project coordinator for this 2-year educational development project for all the public schools in Quezon City which is about to kick off. Quezon City population-wise comprises about a quarter of Metro Manila, I'm told – so it may have a population of about 5 mill. At least I know that there are about 10,000 public school teachers!

This means (for those of you interested in the work I'm doing) that for each of the 144 schools in Quezon City we will (1) conduct both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews, observations, focus group discussions) research into the current situation faced by the school; (2) get the school (teachers, principal, students) and community (parents, local government) together to plan and prioritise what they need; and (3) help them with what they identified as their priorities for improvement by providing teacher/principal training, developing curriculum materials, and using our networks to support them in finding resources to maintain/build school infrastructure. At least that's what we hope to do – I'm sure the reality will be quite different. As you can imagine (knowing how excited I get!), I feel as if I couldn't have dreamt up a more perfect project for me to work on than this if I'd tried. I also think that they have very high expectations of me and I'm not sure that I have the experience needed to pull it off. But with such wonderful colleagues and such an inspiring supervisor, how can I go wrong in my role?

Aside from work, Ateneo (the uni the Center is based at) – one of the most affluent universities in the Philippines – has many luxuries (in my eyes, anyway) on offer. We have free access to basketball courts, badminton courts, a swimming pool, table tennis tables and yoga classes! I've just come home tonight from my second yoga class, which cost me 50 pesos (about \$1.20). It was fantastic. Edwin and I have also played basketball and table tennis and hope to keep it up a couple of lunchtimes per week – it was so much fun, jumping and running around like kids. This way, we will hopefully counteract the less healthy forces of living in a very polluted environment (we are spending over two hours inhaling fumes in very heavy traffic each day) and living largely sedentary lives, which the heat and humidity only encourage.

Most of my free time has been spent meeting new friends, discovering new places to eat, seeing live music and going to contemporary art exhibit opening nights (an excuse to catch up with a bunch of Edwin's friends). There is so much for us to discover here – so many new tastes, new experiences – and I still haven't even left Manila! Edwin, on the other hand, left tonight for Kalinga Province in central Luzon, about 12 hours' drive north of Manila. He will spend almost one week in a mountain village that a friend of ours happened upon a while ago and made friends with some people there. No electricity, no roads to get in. I'll get there one day, but for the moment I have to work.

On the Tagalog (= local language) front, I've at last started my official classes at the same place Edwin goes. I really need to pick it up – at least to understand, if not to speak – as soon as possible, as it will make a world of difference in my work. Already, at a planning day last Friday I could understand a lot of what was said (the fact that people here speak in 'Taglish' – a mix of English and Tagalog – helps a lot). I'm even now receiving work-related emails entirely in Tagalog (which I have to laboriously translate – but what better way to learn??).

If you've got 2 minutes to kill, Edwin and I have made a little clip of our home and the surrounding streets (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sanhiIKpWH0>). Someone's already asked about the 'big truck' in it which says 'Duck Raising' on it: this is actually one of the 'jeepneys' which are one of the main forms of public transport here (converted US military jeeps – although they are now produced purely for public transport), but the one in the movie has grills on the window is used for ducks not people. I catch a total of six jeepneys per day to work and back, plus two tricycles. The yellow room in the house is our room – yellow keeps the mozzies away, apparently – and the shop front you see is at the front of our house.

Time to close the laptop and get some sleep under our super-fan! Please keep the stories, photos, letters coming. It is so nice to share a slice of life from you out of the blue!

'Til next time.

It wasn't until two months later that I found time to pen another account of Manila life for family and friends back home. By then, I had spent almost a week in hospital and faced a number of difficulties at work. But home life was good and we were always busy with more places, people, tastes and sounds to get to know. And I was managing to make use of my extremely long trips to and from Ateneo.

Ok, dear family, here it is: the update I've been promising for a while now. Some stories from Manila.

I spent almost one week in hospital following my birthday (thanks everyone for birthday texts, parcel, emails, movies, facebook messages! They were perfect!). I'd had nausea intermittently for about 7 weeks prior, so I went in to get some tests to find out what it was, encouraged by a particularly bad bout of nausea. To visit a doctor here in Manila, the most straightforward way is to show up at a hospital ER. So that's what I did; but instead of taking 2 hours and 1 blood test as I'd expected, it took 5 days, 4 blood tests, 3 specialists, a CT scan of my brain, 2 ultrasounds and a gastroscopy (for those that haven't been initiated, a tube with a camera on its end was put down my throat. I wasn't sedated, as I'd been told I would be. Avoid at all costs, is my advice!). It turns out I am not pregnant, nothing is wrong with my brain and all my internal organs are ticking away happily. That is, except for one little muscle, the Lower Esophageal Sphincter, which usually stops stomach acid from entering the esophagus ('food pipe'). Not mine, apparently. Turns out I have Gastroesophageal Reflux Disorder.

This was good news, even a blessing in disguise, as I can hopefully manage it by adjusting my diet (no alcohol, chocolate, caffeine or spicy foods, and limited citrus, tomato, and fatty foods) and my sleeping habits (no more snacks as I climb into bed!). Being such a sweet tooth, this is sad news for me. Well, I say this all slightly in jest, as I'm really just glad to know that nothing serious is wrong with me – and the lifestyle/dietary changes are only going to be for the best in the long run.

A nasty virus was the hospital's parting gift to me. I've now been resting up at home for just over one week, waiting for it to pass. I've watched lots of movies and have read almost half of *El Filibusterismo* (know as *Subversion* in the English translation), one of the novels by Jose Rizal, the Philippines' official national hero. It's a great read, I highly recommend it – it reminds me of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. And, needless to say, Edwin has been an absolute knight-in-shining-armor (housemaid-in-dirty-apron may be more apt), caring for me and responding with incredible patience to my whims for the last two weeks!

Life on the home front in general is wonderful. Living with our 'pinoy family' here brings daily laughs and surprises. It also brings rhythm and a sense of family and place. The layers of friendship and understanding between us and the various

family members deepen as time passes and we know already how sad we will be to leave next year.

We'd planned to invite all the family around to celebrate my birthday pinoy-style: the person with the birthday puts on a feast for everyone at their own cost – we had visions of karaoke, pancit, leche flan, Red Horse, and even chicken feet done adobo-style on the menu. Sadly it had to be cancelled at the last minute as I was in hospital, but maybe we'll do it for Edwin's birthday...

A couple of weeks ago we bought a basketball and Paul (who we also live with) made a portable hoop with a backboard from nails, wood, string and wire which we can hang up in the street. The idea was to get some exercise ourselves and to get the kids to play outdoors a bit rather than only on the video game machines and PSPs. But I've been sick and there's been a lot of rain, so we've only had one game so far... but I'm still hopeful.

One night, I did something I'd been planning to do since I first decided to come to the Philippines: I ate balut. Now balut is a food that most non-Filipino's stomachs lurch at the thought of: it is a fertilized duck egg with the duckling's fetus already formed, maybe about 3cm long (I didn't actually eat the fetus itself – I just had the yolk, which was hard enough to overcome my cultural conditioning for!). The egg is boiled and then eaten with salt. Edwin made a little clip of that night (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI_IDZRiA2g), so enjoy if you are game to watch.

Outside of our little home, Manila still amazes me, still makes me smile at the oddest times. I still love my long commute to work (I get in a regular 30 minutes of Tagalog homework on my first jeepney – that is, if I'm not so tired as to nap along with many of my co-passengers); Edwin now joins me at yoga; we are still discovering new bars, new musicians, new restaurants, new friends, new foods; and we are understanding more and more about what is going on daily around us. We have learnt that what we'd first heard as a uniform 'bayad po' (= payment, sir) from passengers to jeepney drivers as they hand over their fare or pass it on to a fellow passenger can range from 'bayad daw' (= she/he said 'payment') to 'bayad ho' (=payment, sir – 'ho' is an alternative to 'po' as a term of respect) – but we are still not sure if sometimes passengers are saying 'bayad ito' (= this is the payment)... And I still have a long list of places to explore in Manila, written into my little Moleskin notebook.

All is well on the work front. I did have some fleeting 'growing pains', but luckily they seem to have passed. I'm really enjoying the work itself and am learning a lot through it – about myself and about Filipino versus Australian workplace styles and culture. I love everyone I work with; a couple of people in particular have become really good friends. And after being away for two weeks, I'm itching to get back to it!

Also, in the last month we've begun to discover 'the Philippines' (i.e. the world outside of Manila). I've discovered fresh cashew nuts at the Bolinao market (attached to pear-shaped fruits), spent a glorious afternoon at an organic farm in Pangasinan, eaten some of the best Italian pizza in my life (truly!) at a restaurant right on the beach in Mindoro, traveled on the roof atop sacks of rice for a 3-hour bus trip in the breathtaking mountains of Kalinga, tasted freshly picked and roasted coffee spiced with ginger in Chananaw (we brought some back home and roasted it in a pan on the stove, but we haven't yet worked out how to grind the beans)... it is these small pleasures that are so wonderful! But more than the sensory experiences, it is the friends we've made along the way which have made the greatest impression on me. Lucky for us, at least a couple of them come from Melbourne, so we'll get to see them back home. As for the rest, I'm trying to just make the most of every second we share.

Speaking of sharing seconds, it has been wonderful to be able to chat and see so many of you via Skype. I'm so thankful that it is so easy to keep in touch with people back home and elsewhere. And please – no apologies needed if you don't get in touch for a while! Everyone is living lives which are bursting at the seams, so I don't expect to hear from you often. Quality not quantity, I say.

I hope this finds you healthy, happy with your lot, and hopefully not too overloaded with whatever your days contain.

Ah, my pocket-size notebook. It was vital to settling into life in Manila. I took it everywhere, whipping it out over dinner or a drink to write down new Tagalog words – especially slang I wouldn't learn in my formal classes – and to list good restaurants, bars and music spots which friends had discovered, note down new acquaintances' contact details, record recipes. Everything went in, and I pulled it out to look up some obscure detail as often as to add one.

Life continued. The doctors decided I didn't have Gastroesophageal Reflux Disorder after all, but Temporal Mandibular Joint Disorder instead. We moved house to be closer to Ateneo, since the huge distances travelled each day were apparently contributing to my health problems. Again, by magic, we landed in another pocket of vibrant community life in Dela Costa (just down the hill from the Ateneo priests). Slowly we got to know most of the folk in our streets (a process sped up by a good *pinoy* friend of ours moving in with us), discovered the pleasures of walking and jogging along the Marikina River north of Riverbanks Mall, and frequented the Ateneo gym as an alternative to our yoga classes.

Immersed in the richness of life Manila had ended up offering us, it wasn't until six months had passed that I wrote my final email back home, by which time the Philippines had truly got under our skin to the point that we'd decided to stay on an extra six months:

It's almost December, almost the end of the year!! Golly, how time flies, huh? I've been here for almost 9 months now, Edwin 10. Since my last group email (maybe back in June?) I've been up and down at times, but life is wonderful all in all (well, would you really expect me to view it any other way??)

In true Filipino style, I'll give you my 'top 3' of the 'best' and 'worst' of the last 5 or so months.

The best:

1. Our patchwork of friends from so many different walks of life – I'm amazed at how quickly we developed social ties to the point that we already don't have enough time to see all our friends here (a perennial problem we have in Melbourne which I was expecting to escape this year in Manila).

2. La vida Manila – people everywhere; unpredictable rain (I love it!!); jeepneys; our little home 'bluey' only 15 minutes' walk to my office and temporary home to various friends/family/travelers; the food (tropical fruit shakes, 'leche flan' – think crème caramel made with condensed milk; our favourite restaurants; good live music; ever-changing street life (Edwin is just now shutting our front door because something just blew in from the kids' firecrackers in the street – apparently firecrackers are a popular means of celebrating the Christmas season... I've been hearing more and more little explosions these last few days and expect them to intensify to a crescendo at New Year); the view from the trains; playing cards; the different parts of the city each with their distinct character...

3. My work – it's been so rewarding to complete some projects and see the fruit of my work be used already by colleagues; I've also been incredibly fortunate to have my work really appreciated by my boss and my workmates – definitely not to be taken for granted!

The worst:

1. Being sick so much of the time – my body just doesn't seem to cope well with Manila life. I've had all the typical traveller's sicknesses (colds, fevers, tummy bugs), plus insomnia, infected wisdom teeth and Temporal Mandibular Joint Disorder!

2. I'm not fluent in Tagalog yet! – I'd hoped that after 9 months I'd be dreaming in Tagalog... not so! It has been much harder than I'd anticipated to learn the local language here, especially because most people speak really English really well. But I am continuing my Tagalog classes, and am really enjoying learning it still – I get the same pleasure from learning it as I did from studying Maths at uni. But I guess I'll have to be content being able to read books gauged as being at an 8-9 year old's level (as are the kids' books I've been painstakingly reading lately in Tagalog).

3. Sorry, can't think of anything else that hasn't been great...

So now all that remains is to give you a quick update on what the future holds for Edwin and me next year...

Once upon a time, (last April, in fact) Edwin and I became friends with some of the members of the Ichananaw, an indigenous tribe living up in the mountains in Kalinga Province, Northern Luzon. Their village, Dananao (population ~700), is a 2-3 hour hike from the nearest road accessible by vehicles. They largely subsist on rice grown in irrigated terraces and legumes and vegetables grown slash-and-burn style.

After a couple of visits to the village, in August our friends – one tribal elder in particular – asked us if we would like to live there with them for 1 year and help them document in writing their 'life system' so that future generations of the Ichananaw will know about their history, politics, customs, etc. This request was largely motivated from the elder's fear that village life is likely to change rapidly with the inevitable encroachment of the global economy in the years to come.

I had already decided I wanted to stay on in the Philippines until Edwin had finished his fieldwork on Manila (i.e. until June instead of returning in March as originally planned), so I offered to live in the village for 5 months and help with the documentation from February until June next year.

After talking about it with our friends in the village and then discussing possibilities with lots of other friends/colleagues, this is what we've decided so far: I will live in the village and 'gather data' (mostly through long chats with tribal elders over sweet, black coffee spiced with ginger, I imagine) on aspects of the Ichananaw's 'life system'. A bit like conducting a mini ethnography, for those of you familiar with the anthropologists' tricks of the trade. Edwin will join me for some of the time (maybe my last and first months), but will be based in Manila continuing his research – although he'll definitely be helping out with the project as well. At the moment, we are applying for funding for the project from VIDA, a sister volunteer program to the one I'm currently on, which is also funded by the Australian government. But we'll be doing the project regardless of if we get the funding, which gives us a sense of freedom as to how we design and carry it out.

Well, time to say good night and wish you a happy Christmas and New Year...

As it turned out, Edwin suspended his PhD research to join me wholeheartedly on the project with the Ichananaw community – me based in the mountains, him in Manila. The project surpassed all our initial expectations (we *did* end up getting the funding from the VIDA volunteer program, along with support and involvement from several other people and organizations across the Philippines and Australia) – see our project report here for the tale of this chapter of our Philippine experience.

Our Manila life ended in true Filipino fashion: with a big *despidida*² at our Dela Costa home, replete with loads of food (mostly prepared by Tita Gina next door, renowned far and wide for her delicious pancit), drink and music, and a goat roasted on the spit in our communal back yard (under the capable guidance of one of our friends who happened to be a local butcher). The patchwork of friends and now-family who made their way to our little home along the ambiguously marked streets³ that night to farewell us struck me: somehow, we had managed to not only survive Manila, but to make a life as rich and meaningful as that back home. The Philippines definitely *did* get under our skin.

Maria and Edwin are always happy to share more stories from their time in Manila with others tempted or already planning to visit or live in Manila. They can be reached by contacting PASC.

² Farewell party.

³ Instead of giving a street address to friends coming to visit us, we would give the following directions: “Make your way to Riverbanks Mall, go to the Barangka Barangay Hall and ask a tricycle driver to take you to the Dela Costa Covered Courts; as you approach the courts, take a right turn up the hill; we are the blue house two doors up from the courts on the left”. This seemed to be more effective than giving our official address (which would confuse them since our official street number didn’t match the number displayed on our front gate, and our street wasn’t labelled at the entrance most people would use). In Manila, it seemed that few people used maps, and when used, they would often lead to confusion since several streets would be marked on the map with a different name to the street labelling, which was often different again to the one by which the street was commonly known!