

The Mayor's City

NINA UNLAY returns to a familiar place with new questions, including one that has been on the mind of the rest of the country. What is great about Davao City?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **FRUHLEIN ECONAR**



The Agdao market is bustling with life—stacks of fruits, lanes of people, and the energy that comes in the early morning dragged on to late afternoon. Davao City feels alive, that much is certain. The atmosphere can almost be described as homey; to me, it's at least familiar. My senses are picking up on subtle tones of my childhood, the Davao from my past, and there is comfort: the smell of ripe pomelo in the air, the wide, dustier roads, and the warm disposition radiating off the passersby calling to each other in Bisaya. They easily identify me as a “taga-Maynila,” and let me know that I don't need to grip my bag or phone quite so tight, a common habit for city girls. Safe diri. Safe dito, they say.

This place used to be a ghost town. There are stories about it, and the few I hear are in reference to its old, infamous nickname, “Nicaragdao,” with the light brush of a hand that usually accompanies a funny memory. One story begins with an ex-soldier. It was his first assignment, he said, and Davao is where he met his wife three years after. “[Her family] had a gasoline station [here], which became a war area during the 80s. The partisan units killed people, an average of five civilians per day. Our neighbors were killed. Mindanao was not safe. Not for so long.”

He tells me this story while standing in a cold, dark room, in front of a white wall that projects a video stream of Davao today; the Agdao



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him. One hundred and seventy-three cameras worth of real-time footage. I can see close enough to know what a stranger is currently having for his lunch. These

Market, the same streets that I had walked earlier that day, so familiar, are all projected on a screen behind

units can zoom in up to one kilometer. Davao is under a careful, watchful eye. But not for long. I catch General



Francisco Villaroman on his last day as head of the City Public Safety Command Center.

“We have to use technology in a developing country like [ours]. But I think Davao will be okay,” he says, and his tone is confident, steady. “Everything is in good hands. Everybody is trained. We expect more of this will be set-up in the rest of the country. I may be of help soon.”

The wall is staring back at me—I can see faces, plate numbers, sandwiches. Sitting stagnant behind a long gray desk, video operators are rapidly zooming in and out, moving right and left, screening for anything in their city that is out of place. Gen. Villaroman adds, “This is very important. Peace and order; the safety and security of our people.” Peace and order, the words echo wherever in Davao City you go. Safe dito.

THERE IS A STORYBOOK QUALITY to Davao that’s not easy to pin down. My grandmother, a Davaoeño herself, used to tell me anecdotes about her childhood when I would come to visit. There were stories about the demons, different kinds of aswang, that lived next door. They stole her sister’s spirit, before her mother pounded on the door and demanded for it back.

As a little girl, I stayed up nights listening, frightened, to the trees







sway outside her bedroom window, playing out her stories in my head, and wondering how people in this place got any sleep. But time passes, fears change. The things that scare grownups are different. In place of demons, there are criminals, vigilantes and punishers

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that make this place far different, and far more foreign, to anyone who has not lived in it.

Davao City borders Davao del Sur, which is bounded by other provinces: Davao del Norte, Occidental, and Oriental. But once you step into

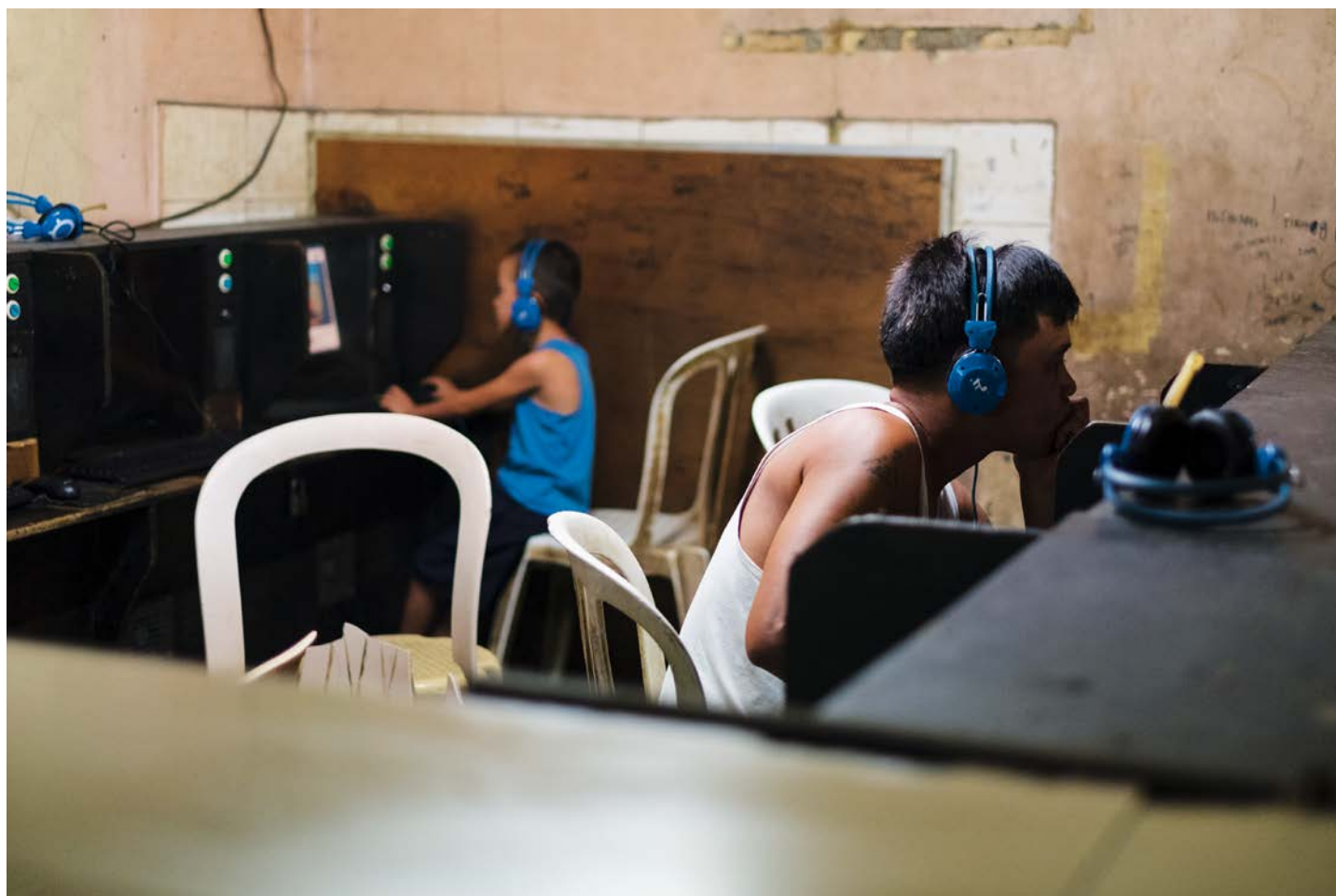
Davao City, you will hear in the way the people talk that it is its own land entirely, distinguished by rules, ordinances and regulations that mark them and their experiences. Life is quieter, slower. “Life is here,” reads the tagline of Davao City, it welcomes

you at the airport gates. These are the less obvious things, almost boring things to listen to—but there is a ferocity in the way Davaoeños talk about Davao City, their voices

adamant. And again and again the stories tend to spark a question: But what is so great about Davao?

“Why are some Davaoeños so rabid, you mean?” Benjamin Lizada rewords my question, a bit dryly, amused. For Benjie, the story of Davao began a long

time ago. There is a street named after his family. He is a restaurateur, a well-established businessman. The Lizadas have founded and managed restaurants, like the Harana Native Restaurant and Sarung Banggi, that have sustained so long they have become landmarks. These are his roots; this is his home, and he has seen it through. The original settlers of Davao were his ancestors, he says, as the story goes. “They came here in 1848, back when Davao was still known as ‘killing fields’. But I was born here. Eight generations na kami. We’re a big family, and we never left. Most of the people [in Davao City] now are from different places. In other words, when you ask ‘ano ba ang Davao?’, you have to differentiate it from the old families at sa mga nandito ngayon. The old families and the new migrants, the newcomers—there is one thing that brought us together. Si mayor. Ninety-six percent of Davao voted for him,” he



says, “But don’t worry. Not all of us are rabid.”

Mayor—he’s still fondly called—and now president Duterte colors the streets of Davao. Some are happy to spend the day wearing a cartoon of his face on a t-shirt. Sari-sari stores that line the streets sell them like snacks. “The Punisher” is written below in flashy font, promoting him like a WWE wrestler or a superhero. It is near impossible to go to Davao City without escaping Duterte’s presence, almost as difficult as it is to tell the story of its history without a mention of his name. “Peace” and “order” are two words that have dictated the temper of Davao City for decades, advertised like a slogan, or a tourist attraction. In a residential village, a sign hangs outside a private house that reads, “The good lord is watching you,” with a drawing of a shotgun underneath. The talk of peace and order is almost always followed

by a conversation about Duterte. Some have hailed him as the turning point between Davao’s dark ages and what it is today. “You have to understand,” Benjie says. “The ’80s, ’70s, magulo talaga ang Davao. And then suddenly this mayor comes in, and he cleans up everything.” Online surveys have ranked Davao City as one of the safest cities in the Philippines, and although the authority of those surveys are questionable, there are a few “rabid” fans who will stand by that result, proudly. And even just one is proof enough that Davao has an inspiring characteristic about it. It arouses loyalty; it inspires pride.

WE ALL WANT TO PROTECT Davao, says Olive Puentespina. During a conversation over cheese and a bottle of red wine, she talks about what she considers life’s pleasures, and it seems that we are simultaneously enjoying

Opposite Page. Locals dine at the Mandarin Tea Garden while the Roxas Night Market continues on the streets. **This Page.** An internet gaming center in the heart of the the Bangkerohan market.

them. In these moments, time almost crawls to a stop, and I’m suddenly aware that the habits and nuisances of city life I’ve hardened myself to are gone.

At times, Olive precedes the word Davao with “my.” My Davao, followed by a laugh.

When she’s prodded to explain, she answers that it’s alright by her that others don’t seem to want to understand so she doesn’t have to share her Davao. Olive is a farmer, a cheese maker, and an artisan. The cheeses

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GRID RECOMMENDS DAVAO CITY

A GUIDE ON WHERE TO DINE,
SHOP, AND STAY



Previous Page: The daily trip by ferry to and from Samal Island, a quick fifteen minutes from the port.

This Page: The breezy interiors of Koi Café, one of the dining options at Malagos Garden Resort. **Opposite**

Page, from top: Alexander Le Neindre, taking his father's place behind the kitchen at Claude's; hot tsokolate from Bangkerohan market.

With its rapid surge in popularity, Davao City is gaining its fair share of guests, notwithstanding those who aren't really sure what they should expect. If you're planning a visit anytime soon, be sure to hit at least a couple of these staple go-to's to complete the experience.

MALAGOS GARDEN RESORT

Malagos, Baguio District

There is a creek that runs through and traverses the 9000 square meter property of Malagos Garden Resort, and the story goes that the baranggay of Malagos was named after it: "malakas na agos." To be one with nature is the resort's mantra, and it is alive in every little nook and cranny, from its organic, single origin tablea to the open-space bird show.

This isn't your typical hotel. Originally popularized for their assortment of local orchid varieties, Malagos Garden Resort now offers what they have branded as a "unique farm experience," and the modest resort resides nearby the Puentesquina farms, where it sources its produce. From farm to resort, the entire process is closely monitored and cared for. The result is an organic, energizing, and unassuming experience that is difficult to find elsewhere.

The attraction is fairly simple: Life here is good, from the food you eat to the environment that surrounds you. *Find out more at malagos.com.*



GARDEN BY THE BAY

Maryknoll Drive, Lanang

A trip to Davao is incomplete without tasting the freshness of their seafood, and there's hardly any place better to do that than right by the water. Located by the seaside of Pampanga, Garden by the Bay offers a rather classic experience: eating fresh seafood on banana leaves, washing it down with a sweet and frosty fruit shake, all while enjoying a cool breeze and acoustic jams. *Call (+63 82) 221 9021 to make a reservation.*

CLAUDE'S

2/F, Oboza Compound, C. Bangoy St., Poblacion

Claude's began as a passion project, but it has turned into a longstanding affair. The idea began in 1966, with chef Claude Le Neindre, a frenchman with a love for the food and beverage industry and extensive experience working in five-star hotels, searching for

a place to direct his passion.

Today, Claude's is a staple in fine dining, serving the best and most authentic in French cuisine with small accents of Philippine flavors, as embodied in their dessert crêpe with hints of durian. While the food is more than enough reason to add this to your itinerary, there is much to be said about the ambiance of the full-service restaurant, settled in the well-maintained Oboza Heritage House. The warm lighting adds much to the cozy experience, although the kicker is the level of attentiveness of the staff. The homey vibe is not without reason, and Claude and Tess Le Neindre will always be the first to proudly announce that today, Claude's a well-maintained family affair; their son Alexander taking his place in the kitchen and their daughters, Celina and Clarissa also joining them in the business. Don't worry if you aren't coming by any time soon. Claude's is here to stay. *More information at claudescavedavao.com.*





**HUCKLEBERRY
KITCHEN & BAR**

*1/F, Oboza Compound,
C. Bangoy St.,
Poblacion*

A late-night curfew doesn't always have to dampen the party, and Huckleberry Kitchen & Bar makes a good case for it. On a regular night the place is packed with people looking to make the most of their happy hour, and Huckleberry does more than satisfy. A row of bottles of their own flavored liquor lines the bar, in odd flavors like pineapple, chili, cacao or mango. If that's a bit too much of a kick for you, don't worry, they have comfortable booths that you can wait the ride out on. With its brick walls, wooden bar and red accents, Huckleberry looks every bit like the place where cool kids hang out. Located on the floor right below Claude's, it also makes it easy to go from dinner to after-party, with time to spare. *Call (+63 82) 285 2586 to reserve a table.*

ROXAS NIGHT MARKET

*Junction of C.M. Recto St.
and Quezon Boulevard,
Roxas Avenue*

If your idea of a great night out is cheap food and a wide selection for secondhand shopping, the only place you need to be at is the Roxas Night Market. A nightly affair, the streets of C.M. Recto and Quezon Boulevard are filled with stalls selling every kind of street food you can imagine and piles of pre-loved clothes (ukay-ukay) ripe for the picking.

**ALDEVINCO SHOPPING
CENTRE**

C.M. Recto Ave., Poblacion

This is one for the travelers who need to bring something back home. While the public markets are great for bringing home boxes of fruits, there isn't any place better to go than the Aldevinco Shopping Center if bags and cloth-based products are more your fancy. The entire space is occupied



by different stores that sell all kinds of products inspired by native designs, including some handwoven materials. Bring home a malong or two.

HARANA NATIVE RESTAURANT

F. Torres St., Poblacion

Harana Native Restaurant is not a new kid on the block. A constant since the 1970s, it remains a popular go-to for its barbequed specialties, grilled seafood and Filipino dishes. Not to mention the added bonus of the backyard garden and playground for those looking for a family-friendly atmosphere. If you want to dine like the locals do, this one is definitely a favorite.

Call (+63 82) 221 9021 to make your reservation.

SEDA ABREEZA

J.P. Laurel Ave., Bajada

Since its launch in 2013, Seda Abreeza has prided itself on being the first urban lifestyle hotel in the city. Located at the heart of the city, guests aren't likely to run out of things to do in its vicinity. Situated right across Seda Hotel, and just a short walk away, is the Abreeza shopping center, where they can enjoy a complete shopping experience and a range of dining options. Although the walk doesn't need to be much more than a quick elevator ride to the ground floor. Miso, the restaurant located on the ground floor, is open all-day. Our one rule: if you have to sleep in, do it after breakfast. Their selection, including cheeses from Malagos, is worth getting off those super soft pillows for. *Make your reservation at sedahotels.com/abreeza.*

