



## SOCIAL SECURITY NEWS

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### Read this if you plan to retire soon

Planning to retire in early 2011? It may already be time to apply.

Applying for benefits is easier than you think. Especially if you do it online at [www.socialsecurity.gov](http://www.socialsecurity.gov). The Social Security website makes the process easy and convenient.

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You can apply online for your retirement benefits from the comfort of your home or office. It can take as little as 15 minutes.

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Regardless of when you plan to retire, you should consider doing it about three months ahead of time. Then you'll know that your payments will make it to you on time.

If you are not quite ready to retire, but are thinking about doing so in the near future, you may want to visit Social Security's website to use our convenient and informative retirement planner at [www.socialsecurity.gov/retire2](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/retire2).

Here, you can find out just how close you are to meeting your financial goals and then "bookmark" the website to file for retirement benefits when you are ready.

From there, you can use our Retirement Estimator to get an instant, personalized estimate of your retirement benefits.

Remember that you're

always first in line when you go online. Learn more about Social Security by visiting our website at [www.socialsecurity.gov](http://www.socialsecurity.gov).

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## PHILIPPINES

(A study of the country and its people through the eyes of a non-Filipino)

Bob Boyer, Professor of English, St. Norbert College, DePere, WI.

### Puerto Princesa, Palawan: The Quick Tour

I had been wanting to go to Palawan, the fabled "last frontier" of the Philippines since my four-and-a-half month teaching stint at UP Diliman (the University of the Philippines main campus) in 1998. Finally, eleven years later, on my fourth trip to the Philippines, my wish became reality, and I was not disappointed.

It was a balmy December 1, 2009 when my older brother (Kuya) and I left from the PAL (Philippine Air Line) terminal at Ninoy Aquino Airport in Manila. A little more than an hour later, we landed in Puerto Princesa, the capital city and port of entry of the province of Palawan. Across a part of the South China Sea was Vietnam.

I have a photo of Kuya in front of Puerto Princesa Airport. The sky is smog-free and deep azure blue. The sun is brighter than it had been in Manila. I recall that the temperature was even balmy than it had been in Manila.

A driver from our hotel, Hotel Fleuris, stood outside the airport holding an identifying sign. We were on a pleasantly open-ended tour package (three days, two nights) promoted by the hotel. Filipino friends had made the arrangements for us ahead of time, which is probably a good idea since Palawan, especially Puerto Princesa, is an increasingly attractive tourist attraction in the Philippines.

After checking in and having lunch, we had our introductory city tour to help us get oriented for our stay. This is an amazing tour, not to be missed. Airport, seaport, and downtown make up only a fraction of the geographic area of the city.

Beaches, mountains, farms, suburban estates, parks, an alligator farm, a penal colony, and perhaps most important, forests make up the rest of the city. Much of the Philippines has suffered from deforestation, but not Puerto Princesa. Trees are protected by laws, promoted by the city's popular environmentalist mayor.

Our "Quick Tour" of the city actually took all afternoon and into the evening, but I didn't notice anyone complaining. Also, our last stop before getting back to the hotel was a bakery so we could satisfy our before-dinner hunger pangs.

The first stop was the government-operated crocodile farm. I have two pictures of Kuya from this stop. In the first, he is standing in front of a crocodile skin that was stretched out on the wall of the tourist center/museum. Kuya, I should mention is six-feet tall, and about two hundred pounds. He was dwarfed by the twelve-foot skin.

In the second photo, Kuya is holding a live baby crocodile. The animal's tail hung down to his knee while his snout (happily tied shut) reached Kuya's nose. Crocodiles would be probably be extinct in the Philippines were it not for their being raised here. Good for the tourists and good for the crocodiles.

From the crocodile farm, we bounced along a dirt road for about a half hour until we reached the penal colony. The largest building dates back to 1904, a couple of years into the American colonial era. This building had a stage for amateur performances as well as films (after the 1920s). It also had lots of room for dancing (prisoners' wives and families could live in the colony), as well as for ping-pong tables. It reminded me a great deal of resort pavilions from the Jersey shore or the Poconos of my childhood.

I found myself getting nostalgic in this now run-down structure in the middle of a Philippine penal colony. And as I looked out the windows (some still had bars on them), I was enchanted by the trees and, in the distance, the mountains. Our final stop there was the store where I bought one of the many mahogany carvings made by the inmates. Between the store and agriculture, the colony is self-sustaining.

Evening was descending. On to the hillside bakery. Then back to the hotel in time to wash up for an 8:30 dinner reservation. More to come next time.

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