

# North Luzon



Generalisations fall short when describing this vast region of misty mountains, sprawling plains and endless coastline, whose population is as diverse and unique as the landscape.

The central mountain range known as the Cordillera is the region's trophy piece, with lush green forests blanketing vast areas of gloriously crooked earth. Isolated sandy beaches ring almost the entire coastline. In the rice terraces of Banaue and elsewhere, humans and nature have collaborated on one of the world's truly sublime displays of beauty and ingenuity. Off Luzon's northern tip, the grassy hills of the Batanes islands possess their own austere beauty.

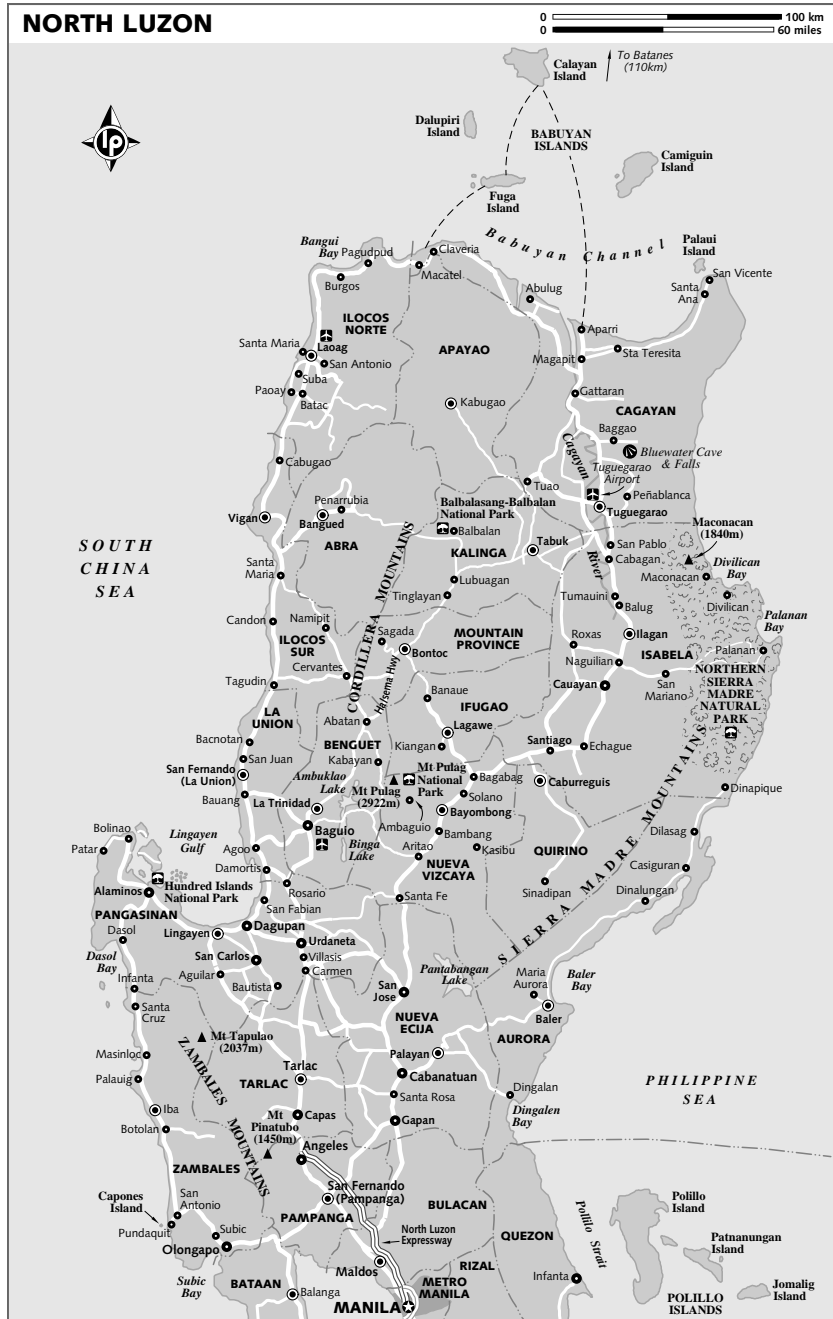
The region is an adventure-lover's paradise, with mountainous networks of ancient walking trails perfect for trekking. Many of these trails lead to remote villages where tribespeople live much as they have for centuries. There are endless caves in Cagayan province, endless white-water rapids on Kalinga's Chico River and endless surf breaks around the island. If you have your own kayak, windsurfer or surf board, undiscovered breaks, beaches and rapids await.

North Luzon offers plenty to more sedentary types as well. Culture aficionados can get their fill in Vigan, where old Spanish colonial mansions line the streets of the old town, and history buffs can follow MacArthur's men on the wide beaches around Lingayen.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Feasting your eyes on the awesome rice terraces around **Banaue** (p170), **Batad** (p173) and **Bontoc** (p167)
- Taking a step back in time in the lovely Mestizo District of **Vigan** (p145)
- Chilling out for days – or weeks – in **Sagada** (p162), aka backpacker HQ
- Discovering a brave new world in **Batanes** (p180), the Philippines' final frontier
- Braving the wild rapids on the **Chico River** (p169) between Tinglayan and Tabuk
- Taking in the ubiquitous acoustic guitar music and cool mountain air of **Baguio** (p153)
- Watching thousands of bats make their early-evening pilgrimage over **Pinacanauan River** (p179), near Tuguegarao
- Getting up close and personal with the mummies of **Kabayán** (p161)
- Surfing in **San Fernando (La Union)** (p142) or at the breaks around Baler, including famously fickle **Charlie's Point** (p176)





## Climate

Lowland areas of North Luzon adhere to the standard Philippine monsoon climate, with a long dry season from November to May and a shorter wet season from June to October. December and January are the most pleasant months, with centigrade temperatures dropping into the low 20s and getting cooler and drier the further north you go. The April-to-June period is brutally hot throughout the lowlands. Typhoons start storming up the Pacific in July but usually only make direct hits on the northeast and Batanes. Beware: you could get stranded for days in Batanes when a typhoon gallops through. The rains are most intense in August and September.

The highlands are a different story. The Cordillera is liable to get rain any time of the year, but the rains are particularly intense from May to September and the higher the elevation, the more intense the rains. Landslides often disrupt travel on the spectacular dirt 'highways' of the Cordillera during this time. Between November and February it can get quite cool in the highlands; around Christmas, night-time temperatures can drop into the single digits at elevations over 1000m.

## Language

There are myriad languages spoken in North Luzon, with dozens of dialects heard

in the Cordillera alone. The language jumble is most confusing in Kalinga, where just about every village has its own dialect. In the Cordillera, people are more likely to understand Ilocano or even English than the country's national language, Filipino.

In the lowlands, the principal dialects are Filipino and Ilocano, which is the predominant language not only in Ilocos but also in Cagayan, Isabela and La Union. Other common dialects include Pangasinan, common in the Lingayen Gulf area, and Sambal, the language of the Zambales people.

## Dangers & Annoyances

There are sporadic shootouts between the government and the New People's Army (NPA) in mountainous areas of North Luzon. Such violence usually occurs way off the beaten track in provinces like Aurora and Isabela, and rarely, if ever, affects tourists.

Tribal wars occasionally break out between villages in Kalinga and Mountain Province. Not even the Philippine government bothers intervening in these squabbles, some of which go back centuries. The last thing quarrelling tribes want to do is involve tourists in their affairs; still, before heading to Kalinga you may want to check with the police in Bontoc to see if there are any hot spots you should avoid.

## UNDERGROUND MONEY *Michael Grosberg & Mic Looby*

It's more than likely that before Japanese General Tomoyuki Yamashita was captured and executed in 1946, he organised the burial of billions of dollars worth of gold and other treasures plundered from all over Southeast Asia during WWII. The story goes that the speedy American advance prevented the Japanese from withdrawing their treasure. There are supposedly 172 'documented' burial sites, the majority in North Luzon.

As if the public coffers were not enough for him, some people say that ex-president Marcos also supplemented his fortune by locating many of the sites. In 1998, a group of middle-aged Philippine soldiers filed a claim in California and Zurich against the Marcos estate for their efforts in unearthing an estimated 60,000 tonnes of gold and gemstones between 1973 and 1985. A joint affidavit, signed by around 100 soldiers, accompanied the claim. These men were apparently members of 'Task Force Restoration', ostensibly formed to fight communist rebels, but primarily engaged in 'massive diggings and excavations'. This in turn spawned a secret government industry involved in melting down the gold to remove all traces of its origin, all helped by Marcos' martial law.

Even recently, a Japanese delegation allegedly searching for the bones of relatives in Isabela were discovered by the government to actually be on a treasure hunt. No doubt there are many amateurs, hucksters and con artists involved, but there are 'professionals' as well, and enough validity to some of the claims to keep them coming. The Philippine government isn't likely to discourage them either, since the law stipulates that it's entitled to a hefty chunk of any findings.