

Batanes

The Batanes Islands are the northernmost islands of the Philippines. Y'ami is only 100 km from Taiwan. The little island Balintang is the most southerly of the group and is located 40 km south-east of Sabtang Island, in the middle of the Balintang Channel that separates the Batanes Islands from the Babuyan Islands. The biggest and economically most important islands are Batan, Itbayat and Sabtang. Dinem Island is uninhabited.

The climate of the Batanes Islands is fairly changeable. Compared with other parts of the Philippines all ten of these islands, with their population of 17,000 souls, are hit relatively frequently by typhoons between June and September. From October to February or March it is often wet and stormy. The best months to visit are April and May. The Batanes appeal mostly to those who are not looking for luxury, and love nature - those who like to hike around with a tent on their back.

Geographically isolated from the big important islands and archipelagos of the country, the Batanes Islands are surprisingly unspoilt and different. Many houses are built of solid rock and have roofs thickly thatched with cogon grass to resist the weather. They are low, with few windows, and are usually found in small groups in niches protected from the wind. If you know your Asterix, you sometimes feel here as if you had been transported back to a village populated by stubborn Gauls. You would probably not be in the least surprised if around the next corner you came across a venerable druid brewing his potions.

People here protect themselves from sun and rain with a *suot*, a head-covering made from *abaca* and *voyavoy* leaves which reaches right down the back. The leaves are first processed into a rough, straw-like fibre, which is then used to make the hats. (In some villages this protective headwear is also called *vakul* or *bakul*.)

Goods which aren't produced on the islands are slightly more expensive here than they are in Luzon, as they have to be flown in or shipped on the occasional freighter. The main crops are garlic, onions, taro, yams and camotes (sweet potatoes). The main occupations are cattle farming and fishing.



Getting There & Away

You can get to the Batanes Islands from Manila and Tuguegarao (see the Getting Away from Luzon section of the Manila chapter). Travel in and out depends first and foremost on the weather. Note: During storms and on days with heavy rain, some flights may be held up. Delays may even also occur in the summer months of March, April and May.

To Luzon

Air

From Basco to Laoag

Sky Pasada flies Wednesday.

Cyclone Airways plans to fly from Basco to Laoag and back. Further information from Cyclone Airways, Cauayan Airport, Cel 0917-6187078, Tel (078) 6520913, @.

From Basco to Manila

Seair flies daily. Sky Pasada flies Wednesday and Sunday.

From Basco to Tuguegarao

Batanes Airlines (Cyclone Airways) flies Tuesday, Thursday Friday and Sunday. Flights depend on the season and number of passengers. Sky Pasada flies Tuesday, Friday and Sunday; on other days of the week it depends on the season.

Batan Island

Don't expect very much in the way of sensational attractions or important sights; in fact, this is part of the island's charm. About the only activity is the Sunday cockfight. There are a couple of white beaches on the western coast; the southern and eastern coasts are rocky. To the north the 1008m high **Iraya Volcano** dominates the raw beauty of this green and hilly island. The volcano can be climbed in about five hours from Basco.

A seldom-travelled and only partly surfaced road runs from Basco to Diura (via Mahatao, Ivana, Uyugan and Songsong) and then straight across the island back to Mahatao. It's a good track for walking and you come across lovely little villages inhabited by friendly Ivatan, the natives of Batan Island. The road is at its most impressive along the coast between Basco and Uyugan.

In **Mahatao** you can savour the beautiful view of the jagged coast and the sea below from the View Deck, which has steps leading up to it, and from the lighthouse (built in 2004). The most prominent building in the town itself is the San Carlos Borromeo Church, which was completed in 1873. Two km to the south-west you'll find White Beach.

From **Ivana**, 14 km by road from Basco, small boats ferry people over to Sabtang Island. Nervous travellers can pop into the San Jose Church before making the crossing and put in their request for a calm sea and safe arrival. In the eccentric, unstaffed **Honesty Coffee Shop** at the side of the road not far from the church, the customers serve themselves by writing their purchases into an exercise book, working out the amount they owe according to a pricelist, and throwing the amount into a payment box. On the other hand, the pleasant Vatang Grill & Restaurant provides conventional service and methods of payment.

Songsong, on the south-east coast of Batan Island, is also known as Ghost Town, as there are only ruins left after a catastrophic flood wave there in the early 1950s. Five km north of Songsong nestles the little fishing village of **Diura**, where in the summer months from March until May they are kept busy during the day catching dorado (sea bream) and drying them in the sun.

About halfway between Diura and Basco, in the middle of so-called **Marlboro Country**, the abandoned US weather station Radar Tukon sits on a hill. The panorama from the little tower is really quite impressive. Not far from there in the direction of the coast, houses belonging to the politician Florencio 'Butch' Abad and his late sister, the painter **Pacita Abad**, grace the scenery as if they had just been dropped in there by magic. The artist's property is open to the public and also functions as a hotel (Fundacion Pacita).

On foot, it'll take you less than an hour from Basco to **Valugan Beach** on Batan's east coast. The main attraction on this beach is its myriad big boulders, worn smooth by the incessant splash and crash of the Pacific surf.

Basco

Pop 8000 / Postcode 3900 / Tel (078)

Basco is the capital of the province of Batanes, which is the smallest in the Philippines, both in area and population. Next to the big Santo Domingo cathedral with its beautiful façade, are numerous governmental buildings which dominate this neat town at the foot of Mt Iraya. In the same area is the National Commission on Indigenous People Building with the Batanes Heritage Center, where historical and cultural objects and pictures can be seen in addition to art works by talented Ivatans.

There's a gorgeous view of the surrounding Naidi Hills from the gallery of the roughly 20m high lighthouse near the cemetery at the north-west end of the beach.

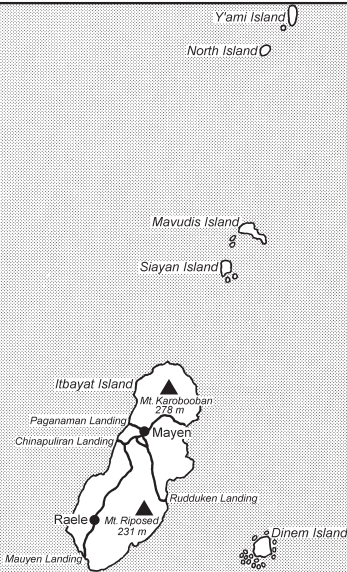
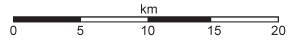
Places to Stay

Ivatan Lodge, National Rd, Cel 0908-8824510. SR/DR/fan P300/400. Basic, not particularly inviting accommodation, but the rooms are clean and OK for the price.

DDD Habitat, Lopes St, Cel 0908-4641319, @. SR/DR/fan P600, SR/DR/ac P1200 (four people). The building has two sections, with a roof terrace and practically furnished, squeaky-clean rooms. The roomy, aircon ones have TV. In-house Lunch-box Restaurant and Rex Bookstore.

Pension Ivatan, Cel. 0929-2074643, @. SR/DR/ac/bath P1000/2000; including breakfast. Basic, but quite good, clean rooms. Located at the airport, and home to the Therese Coffee Shop, a well-known restaurant. The Kayaluga-

Batanes Islands



Getting There & Away

- 17 Seair
- 26 Airport, Batanes Airlines, Sky Pasada

Places to Stay

- 8 Brandon's Lodging House
- 10 Mama Lily's Inn
- 14 Novita House
- 15 DDD Habitat
- 20 Iraya Lodge
- 22 Ivatan Lodge
- 23 Shanedel's Inn
- 25 Pension Ivatan
- 28 Seaside Lodge (200m)
Batanes Resort (1.2 km)
Dive Batanes Lodge (1.8 km)

Places to Eat

- 1 Bunker's Café
- 5 St Dominic College Canteen
- 13 North Spirit Café
- 15 Lunchbox
- 18 Doque's Grill House
- 19 Hiro's Café
- 23 Shanedel's Café
Zantan's Canteen

- 24 Casa Napoli
- 25 Therese Coffee Shop
- 28 Seaside Restaurant (200m)

Miscellaneous

- 1 Naidi Hills Lighthouse
- 2 Basco Cathedral
- 3 Batanes Heritage Center
National Commission on Indigenous
People
- 4 Police Station
- 5 St Dominic College
- 6 Town Hall
- 7 Batanes General Hospital
- 8 LBC
- 9 Provincial Capitol
- 11 Post Office
- 12 Land Bank
- 15 Rex Bookstore
- 16 Batanes Travel & Tours
- 17 Batanes Cultural Travel Agency
- 19 Hiro's Travel & Tours
- 21 Batanes Connect Internet Station
- 27 PNB
- 28 Dive Batanes (1.8 km)

nan Hometel, only a few steps away, also belongs to the Pension.

Shanedel's Inn, National Rd, Cel 0920-4470737, @. SR/DR/ac/bath P1200 to P1800 (three people). Pleasant, family-run place with decent, clean rooms with TV, the more expensive ones have hot water. Restaurant. Tours. Handy location, a few metres off the road.

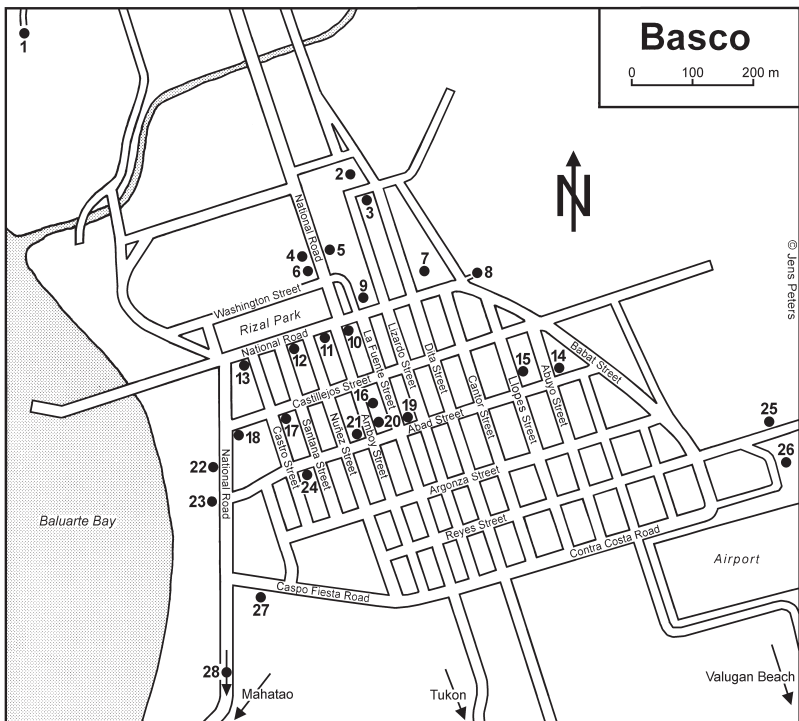
Batanes Seaside Lodge, National Rd, Cel 0921-2290120, SR/ac/bath P1100, DR/ac/bath P1200 and P1500. Friendly accommodation with quite good rooms with TV. Modern building with roof terrace. Right on the water, about 500m south of the centre. Restaurant. Billiards.

Brandon's Lodging House, Babat St, Cel 0919-3662158, @. SR/DR/ac/bath P1200/1800; including breakfast. Hospitable, well-kept accommodation with alight rooms, some with TV, in two buildings on a hill. From the view deck of the higher of the buildings there's a beautiful view of the town and the sea. Use of the kitchen and both living rooms (with TV) possible. Restaurant.

Novita House, Abad St corner Abuyo St, Cel 0927-5158167, Tel (02) 5648305, @. A whole house with room for up to eight people; P1700 a day for six, each further person P200. No luxury, but well-maintained and pleasantly furnished. Bedroom (aircon), living room with TV, dining kitchen with refrigerator, as well as a bathroom and veranda.

Batanes Resort, National Rd, Cel 0927-5829078. Cottage/ac/bath P1800. Friendly rooms with TV in stone houses typical for the islands, at the foot of the Tamulong Hill about 1½ km south of Basco (tricycle P40). Restaurant.

Fundacion Pacita, Chanarian-Tukon, Cel 0927-2902404, @. SR/DR/ac/bath P5000 to P12,000; including breakfast. Bookings for a minimum of two nights' stay. Comfortable, stylishly furnished rooms with refrigerator and terrace; some in the main building, others in nearby buildings. Not located in the town but near Radar Tukan on the east coast, about three km south-east of Basco. The magnificent location, on a cliff with a view onto the Pacific Ocean below, is frequently com-



pared with the opulent historical drama *Wuthering Heights*.

Places to Eat

You can eat inexpensively at the **St Dominic College Canteen** diagonally across from the Town Hall. At **Doque's Grill House**, as well as in the restaurants belonging to the various places to stay you can also expect some culinary delights for very little money, especially from March to May when the fishermen have an easier time of it. Specialties here are coconut crabs (*tatus*), flying fish (*dibang*), dorado (*arayo*) and lobster (*payi*), served with yellow rice (*sopas*; rice boiled with turmeric). It's best to order in good time beforehand, eg at the highly recommendable **Therese Coffee Shop** in the Pension Ivatan at the airport, that has a good name for providing a wide range of food, including the

sumptuous house speciality, the Ivatan Platter for several people with lobster, coconut crab, uvod balls and lots of other tasty bites of the region.

Or you could choose the cosy little **Shanedel's Café**, which in addition to its excellent cooking offers a beautiful sea view. The pleasant **Zan-tan's Canteen** right next door is like the local McDonald's, with Basco Burger made with organic beef from Batanes and camote fries (sweet potatoes).

The aircon **Hiro's Café** in Abad St corner La Fuente St mainly serves standard Philippine fare. If it's Italian you're looking for, then the **Casa Napoli** in Abad St serves surprisingly good pasta and freshly baked pizzas (closed on Sunday).

A great place for a sundowner is **Bunker's Café**. You can't miss the white building with its vividly

coloured interior, below the Naidi Hills light-house. They serve snacks in the afternoons, dinner from 6pm. They also offer cocktails such as Mai Tai, Red Eye and Weng Weng. The **North Spirit Café** on National Road near the plaza is more a pub than a restaurant and serves inexpensive drinks, wine and beer; only open in the evenings.

Miscellaneous

Festival: Fisherman's Festival in the third week of March. Batanes Day on 26 June. Palo-Palo Festival on 4 and 5 August.

Money: No ATMs on the islands, bring enough cash.

Online: Batanes Connect Internet Station, Abad St.

Travel Agency: Batanes Travel & Tours, Amboy St, Cel 0929-4826486, @. Hiro's Travel & Tours, Abad Street/Ecke La Fuente Street, Cel. 0999-5531952.

Divng: Dive Batanes, Cel. 0929-1312051, @, offers diving, diving courses, tours and accommodation in the attractive Dive Batanes Lodge about 2½ km south of Basco (SR/DR/ac/bath P1700).

Getting Around

You can hire private jeepneys (P1800), vans (P1600 to P2200) motorcycles (P1000) and bicycles (P250). A whole-day island tour by tricycle should be doable for P500 to P600; for a few hours, you could pay up to P150 an hour.

Getting There & Away

By Air: Basco Airport is to the east of town. A tricycle to one of the hotels costs from P30 to P50.

Note: Flights with Batanes Airlines and Sky Pasada depend on the season and number of passengers, so make sure you enquire by telephone first.

Batanes Airlines (Cyclone Airways), Basco Airport, Cyclone Airways Cauayan Airport office: Tel (078) 6520913

Destination: Tuguegarao.

Seair, Batanes Cultural Travel Agency (BCTA), Castillejos St, Tel (02) 5461197, Cel 0919-4131808, BCTA Manila office: Tel. (02) 6354810.

Destination: Manila.

Sky Pasada, Basco Airport, Cel 0919-5701911.

Destinations: Itbayat Island, Laoag, Manila, Tuguegarao.

Sabtang Island

Apart from a vehicle belonging to the government and two or three jeepneys, multicabs and vans, there are no cars on Sabtang. It's worth making the effort to go around the island on foot and visit the villages of Savidug, Chavayan, Nakanmuan and Sumnanga. Especially the first two, with their traditional houses, are really picturesque. For a bit of variety you could check out the white **Nakabuang Beach** with its natural rock arch formation.

It can be done in a day, but if you take your time and take lots of breaks, a few days will pass before you know it. The mayor will place at your disposal a guide who knows the paths and the shortcuts. With his help you will find it easier to get to know the villagers and to see how things such as *suots*, typical headwear on the Batanes Islands, are made. Sabtang Island is also well-known for its traditional boat-building.

On the eastern coast of the neighbouring island of **Ibuho**s there is a largely intact coral reef. You can get there by boat from Nakanmuan or Sumnanga.

Places to Stay

There are no hotels on Sabtang, but it is possible to stay at the School of Fisheries, Cel 0921-7154919 (three basic, clean guest rooms, shared bathroom, cooking facilities, P100 per person).

Getting There & Away

Boat: A boat goes once a week from Basco to Sabtang Island. If you don't want to wait, you will have to go to Ivana by jeepney, leaving early in the morning. From there, if the weather's good a boat (either a *falowa* or a *sarao*) leaves at 6.30 or 8.30am for San Vicente (Centro) on Sabtang Island (there can even be further crossings at 1 and 4pm). The trip takes 45 min.

Note: Owing to the possibility of a rapid, unforeseen change in the weather, it's not advisable to schedule a detour to Sabtang for the end of your Batanes trip and risk missing your return flight.

Itbayat Island

Itbayat is the largest island of the group. It has few beaches and a rocky coast. A feature of the island is the *tatus*, the coconut crab, which is so

fond of coconuts that it will climb trees to get them. You can stay the night, and eat, at the mayor's place.

Getting There & Away

Air: Sky Pasada flies Monday and Thursday from Basco to Itbayat Island and back (15 min). East of Raele, about 10 km south of Mayan, the main town on the island, there's a landing strip for light aircraft.

Note: Flights are liable to be cancelled because of bad weather or lack of passengers.

Boat: The boat service from Basco to Paganaman Landing or Mauyen Landing on Itbayat leaves daily at 8am. Travel time is about four hrs, however the boats only go in good weather and are fairly unpredictable - not really suitable if you are on a tight schedule.

