

THE PHILIPPINES

IN GOOD TASTE

From visits to remote villages and markets to great wining and dining experiences on and off the ship, one exciting new cruise programme is proving there's no better way to get a feel for a different culture than by sampling its food.

WORDS BY CARLA GROSSETTI

Bringing a spoonful of soup to her lips, Nicole Ponseca lets out an appreciative sigh. “It’s not too salty. It’s not too sour. It’s perfect,” she beams. The Filipina-American restaurateur is standing alongside local women on ancestral grounds belonging to the Calamian Tagbanua tribe – the indigenous people of Palawan in the Philippines.

Tagbanua derives from the Filipino term ‘*tiga banua*’, meaning people of the village, and today the village people have gathered in their open-air hall to present a small group of Silversea passengers with a vivid snapshot of their culture.

The soup Ponseca sampled is sinigang – made from tamarind leaves, fish, salt and water. She invites our small group to gather around the table, much to the delight of the villagers and travellers alike – they are eager to share their fare, and we can’t wait to try it.

Venturing to this remote indigenous village is one of the highlights of the innovative new culinary enrichment programme Silversea Cruises has dubbed S.A.L.T. (Sea and Land Taste). To say the village is located in the province of Palawan – known for its limestone landscapes and emerald-hued seas – is about as specific as we can get. The islanders keep the exact location secret, in the main, as they don’t want visitors arriving unannounced.

ADDING S.A.L.T. TO THE MENU

The fact that Silversea’s immersive culinary experience has created economic opportunities for the village is one of the reasons Clang Garcia, president of the Culinary Historians of the Philippines, agreed to get on board.

“These people are not part of a museum exhibit. They’re a living treasure because they want to preserve the original way of life and carry on the old traditions of planting and harvesting,” says Garcia, who helped Ponseca research her award-winning cookbook, *I Am a Filipino*.

“I want to convey the idea that luxury tourism is about the enrichment of experience you get from immersing yourself in a new culture and meeting the Tagbanua – one of the oldest tribes in the Philippines,” Garcia adds.

As Garcia introduces each dish, every bit of unoccupied space on the table is claimed by cashew fruit and nuts, sea cucumbers, chicken cooked in gata (coconut milk), kapari (a local rice alternative made from a root crop), mangoes and kurot – a poisonous tuber that must be rinsed in seawater before it’s safe for consumption. Outside the hut, a group of men sit on their haunches around an open fire roasting



coffee beans, which are then ground using a mortar and pestle, and brewed into a deliciously rich beverage that’s poured piping hot into a hotchpotch of cups.

The ingredients for this banquet were all foraged from within 100m of the colourful bamboo huts the villagers call home. After lunch, the village takes on a festive feel as the local men dance to the beat of a drum wearing loincloths, while the women and children giggle along with our group.

FROM MANHATTAN TO MANILA

This experience of ‘travelling deeper’ with the Tagbanua tribe is one of many culinary journeys incorporated within the S.A.L.T. programme, which has been curated by journalist Adam Sachs. As a three-time James Beard Journalism Award winning food, lifestyle and travel writer, Sachs is well-placed to steer Silversea passengers in the right direction on their culinary voyages. And while you may be lucky and catch him onboard making a cameo when the programme is officially rolled out on the luxury cruiser *Silver Moon* in August 2020, enjoying his ideas through the itineraries is more likely.

“Going to restaurants can be a lovely way to travel, but real travel is about having food that’s distinct to a place and has some essence of a place, so you feel like you’re there, as opposed to having what I like to call ‘international fancy food’,” says Sachs, a native New Yorker.

“I’m not going to return home to Brooklyn knowing everything about Filipino food. But I will remember forever that I know there’s this island and if you go up the hill and make a left there is this family there doing amazing things with fish and coconut,” he adds.

Silversea’s ambitious culinary programme also celebrates the Filipino food tradition of *kamayan* – which Ponseca reinvigorated at her NYC restaurant, Jeepney, and we experience at The Funny Lion Resort in Coron, Palawan. This shore excursion sees Ponseca preside over the intimate communal banquet, where a river of rice is laid out over banana leaves on a long table.

The fragrant rice is then studded with a colourful variety of Filipino dishes, such as chicken adobo, lumpia (spring rolls), shrimp braised in 7-Up, barbecued prawns, flash-fried fish, charred ears of fresh corn, heaps of steamed vegetables and green mango. This special occasion banquet is completed with the addition of pork and chicken cooked over charcoal – a perennial favourite at Pinoy parties.

As Ponseca explains, ‘*kamay*’ literally translates to ‘hand’ – and ‘*kamayan*’ refers to the Filipino tradition of forgoing cutlery and eating with your hands. A kamayan meal is served family style, without plates or utensils, and usually over banana leaves. This sort of communal feast is nothing new: in fact, it has its roots in the country’s military history. Soldiers would gather around the table, regardless of rank, and all dig in together.

While the old ways still beckon, Ponseca has given the kamayan feast a contemporary twist that reframes the flavours of Filipino food – which she says includes Malay, Mexican, Chinese and Arab influences. “Filipino food is a simple cuisine that is best eaten with your hands ... like a savage,” says Ponseca, with a lusty laugh.

“Take a little bit of rice and push it together. Only use your right hand, tear off a piece of meat, scoop it up with the rice and push it into your mouth,” says Ponseca, before unceremoniously sucking out the contents of a prawn head. “There is no decorum with Filipino food. The kamayan is a shared meal that has evolved with the times – much like Filipino cuisine itself. I am proud of my culture and the history behind our food,” she says.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Learning about the local food is a great way to get a true taste of the culture; Silversea executive chef Anne-Mari Cornelius shopping at a local market; So many vibrant flavours are brought to the plate; A local Malaysian delicacy; Passengers deep-dive into regional food cultures under the tutelage of expert local chefs and industry experts; Chillies add a punch of spice; It’s hard to find room on the table for all the delicious dishes.



SAIL AWAY

The new S.A.L.T. programme will launch with Silversea Cruises’ new ship, *Silver Moon*, in August 2020. The new ship will be restructured to accommodate a S.A.L.T. Lab and restaurant. There are also plans to roll out the programme on their existing ships *Silver Muse* and *Silver Spirit*, which will be retrofitted in line with the S.A.L.T. brand. [silversea.com](#)

A cooking class at Kokol Haven Resort at Kota Kinabalu in Borneo, and a visit to the Kota Kinabalu Fish Market, are two more stand-out shore excursions on the Manila to Singapore cruise – part of our preview of the S.A.L.T. programme. Sachs is in his element at the market – inspecting piles of silvery fish and coral-coloured trout, crabs with their claws rubber-banded together, and trays of purple squid. He watches as a fishmonger trims the fish and then lifts its head so its glassy eye stares directly at him. “*Selamat pagi*,” says the stallholder, bidding us good morning.

Sachs says the vision for S.A.L.T. is that Silversea passengers experience different destinations through the local food, and then come back onboard the ship to enhance their learning at workshops and lectures held at the S.A.L.T. Lab – an immersive space on the ship for cooking classes and food-focused talks.

He has tailored the itineraries to incorporate both ship-based and shore-side ‘enrichments’ – which range from winery visits and cooking classes to demonstrations with local chefs. There will also be a dedicated S.A.L.T. restaurant serving cuisine that honours each destination.


“What I love about the programme is that passengers have the option to build on the experiences they have had onshore that day. After finding a story that is distinct to a destination and sharing that with passengers, they can then geek out in the Lab and go into the cooking side,” he says.

In addition to the village visit in Palawan, the S.A.L.T. programme is peppered with shore excursions that include dinner at Toyo Eatery in Manila – the brainchild of Jordy Navarra, who is part of the city’s new vanguard of young, talented chefs; lunch of tom yum bee hoon (rice vermicelli noodles fried with a hot and sour paste) at the legendary Seng Hing Coffee Shop in Kota Kinabalu; and a barbecue dinner on the beach at Manukan Island in Malaysia.

AN APPETITE FOR ADVENTURE

The chefs onboard Silversea ships also complement the land-based component of the S.A.L.T. programme by adding context to each destination during sea days. Participants in the programme attended a talk on cultural influences on Filipino food with Ponseca, who then showed them how to make kinilaw (a raw seafood dish) and chicken adobo. They also watched a documentary about Filipino food and sampled a range of wines with the ship’s sommelier.

On the final leg of the cruise, the culinary programme featured ship-based talks by Singapore-based food writer Annette Tan about the cooking traditions of the Peranakan people of Singapore and Malaysia. It also included a shore excursion to a Singapore hawker food centre and a cooking class and *tok panjang* (long table lunch) at Allspice Cooking School in Singapore.

In between all these eating adventures, there is ample time to just wander around the ship, enjoy an unhurried breakfast on your balcony, sample the new caviar offering in Atlantide restaurant, and watch the night fall like spilled ink over the sea. But in terms of finding joy beyond the cruise itself, it’s the food-focused jaunts that allow you to find the real flavour of each destination. And by using food as a way to connect to locals, the world becomes that little bit smaller. 

VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

Thanks to its delicious food, tropical beaches and abundant wildlife, many travellers are heading to the Philippines. But much of this nation remains a mystery. We share 10 things you probably never knew about this country. [mindfood.com/10-things-philippines](#)