

Filgrimage: A Trip like No Other | by Lauren Bumatay

An extension to the 2019 Very Important Pinoy (VIP) Tour, Filgrimage is a transformational experience that connects the next generation Filipino Americans to their rich and proud heritage.

For more information about Filgrimage, email them at filgrimage@thefilipinoschool.com or you may visit their website at www.filgrimage.com.

I honestly do not know where to begin when it comes to describing how the trip went for me. It was everything I expected it to be plus so much more.

Before going on the Filgrimage, the last time I visited the Philippines was in 2014. Back then, I wasn't able to fluently understand Tagalog or speak simple phrases, I relied on my mom to translate everything. Back then, I knew there was poverty, but didn't acknowledge it. Back then I had no clue of what it meant to be Filipino.

After moving to San Diego in the summer of 2016, I became more involved in the Filipino community as a way to make new friends. I took the offered Filipino classes and even joined the Filipino-American club. Through those activities, I felt myself becoming more curious about my culture and wanting to learn about it. There, my journey of discovering what it means to be Filipino began and I realized that it means much more than just the food and the big families. By the time my senior year rolled in, I became Co-President of the Fil-Am Club, could fully understand Tagalog, and even speak some phrases. I had become awakened and my sense of identity grew stronger. However, I felt like I was still missing something and I didn't realize what it was until going on this year's (2019) VIP Tour and Filgrimage trip.

As soon as we arrived (in the Philippines), I felt it was hard to take my eyes off of all the poverty I failed to acknowledge before. I realized that poverty in the Philippines was still a very real and relevant problem and everything our parents talked about were true. The spark inside me that wanted to make a difference and help our fellow Filipinos, grew stronger. Big or small, any action, as long as it makes a difference in spreading awareness and improving the situation I want to do it. During and after the Filgrimage, I became motivated and inspired to work hard in everything I do in the future. I realized that I was blessed by being born and raised in the states and I did not want to waste the opportunity I've been given by the people who put me here. I want to make my family proud. I want to put myself in a position to give back to them just like how Kuya Tony (Anthony Olaes, Founder of The Filipino School and Filgrimage) does. It has now become one of my life goals, and I look up to Kuya Tony because of all that he has done for the Filipino community here at home as well as in the motherland.

As stunningly beautiful as the various islands of the Philippines may be, the Filgrimage made me realize that the true beauty of the Philippines lies within the Filipino people. Wherever we went, our fellow Filipinos embraced us with open arms and always took care of us. They even went further into offering us whatever they could despite having very little at all. Instead of offering us physical things, they gave us something that has more value than any material goods could; their hospitality, personalities, hard-work, kindness, jokes, laughs, smiles, and company. The spirit of *bayanihan* was prevalent in almost every area we went to and it was touching and heartwarming to see. Yes I saw the beauty of the Philippines in El Nido, Palawan

and other destinations, but I also saw even more beautiful things in our people. That's when I realized that despite its many flaws, the Philippines is very beautiful inside and out.

One of the most unforgettable moments for me on the Filgrimage, is when we went to Bataan and visited an elementary school. All the children were excited and happy we were there and they probably would've played with us all day if they could. Seeing them so happy made me very happy as well. As I put my Tagalog learning to test and began to speak with them, I realized that I was actually having a mostly fluent conversation with the little kids. They understood me and I understood them. This is the reason why I became so emotional and cried because I was finally able to connect with my people through the Filipino language, something I wish I could've done back when I last visited in 2014, and something I worked hard to do ever since taking Filipino classes at Mt.Carmel. I continued to cry because it made me reflect back on my journey into becoming the Filipina I am today. I've come so far and I've grown so much but I still have so much more I want to learn and do for my culture.

El Nido, Palawan was the "touristy" highlight for me. Thankfully we were blessed with sunny skies during our stay, which really maximized the Palawan experience. Island hopping was amazing and I even had the chance to play basketball with the locals on an island named "Papaya Island." Playing a game I love with my fellow Filipinos was humbling and truly unforgettable. Their commentary while we were playing was super funny and they even tried giving us the ball so we had chances to shoot. Once again this showed how selfless Filipino people can be. Seeing the attractive islands and clear blue, warm water surrounding them, left me in awe for most of the time we were there. It's so so beautiful!!

I'm also thankful that I was able to become close with the other scholars (participants) and members of the trip. We've created life-long friendships and bonds because of our first time experiences on the Filgrimage trip and for that, I'm very grateful. We still keep in contact and we're like a family! I love them all very much and I hope we can all return back to the Filgrimage together again and continue to create more life-long memories and experience more life-changing things.

To conclude this napakahabang (very long) testimonial on the Filgrimage 2019, I just want to sincerely thank Kuya Tony and The Filipino School for allowing me to have gone on the trip. It truly was such a blessing to have been selected for this trip and I can't express how very grateful I am for everything that I was able to experience. I'll try my hardest to inspire and motivate others just how the Filgrimage did for me. I most definitely will never forget this trip and will always advocate going on it because of how amazing it was.

Once again I'm very thankful to have been on the Filgrimage. It truly was life-changing, humbling, eye-opening, touching, motivating, inspiring, heartwarming, and the list goes on. I will definitely be taking everything that I've experienced and learned with me into the next chapter in my life, college. Thanks to the Filgrimage, I realized what I was missing was the experience of going back home to the motherland and seeing and experiencing everything with my own two eyes rather than through the words and pictures of others. It's something priceless.