

MV Iloilo Cebu to Calbayog, September 2016

At six PM we arrive at Pier One in Cebu City with our van load of suitcases, food, toys, hardware items and so many other things that you cannot buy, in a small coastal city in the Philippines. My wife sends a text message to Rodolfo our trusted porter, the one who can get us through smoothly and quickly onto the ship. He soon appears and takes charge. I stand by idly and take in the scene. Forklifts moving around like mechanical rats, sniffing here, picking there, transferring loads to ships. Buses ply people to the waiting ships, each person clutching stuffed plastic bags, bottled water, swollen suitcases, children and takeout food. Thank goodness hand-carry baggage limitations do not apply to ship travel. Not yet anyway. The air is still and warm, with the promise of an easy passage over to Calbayog City, our destination, about 13 hours sailing time away. It's about 180 km away and with a top speed less than fifteen knots it takes time.

Our ship of the line, is the MV Iloilo, a roll on, roll off (RORO) ship. Not rollover as some would say referring to the shallow hull and flat bottom. She rides quietly to her moorings, with dirty black smoke belching rather frequently from her insides. Painted in the uninspiring custard yellow across all decks, with a pale blue water line marking, and the red letters of Cokaliong shipping line. She can carry officially 653 persons, mostly in economy class. And when they say 'economy' class they really do mean that. Steel framed double bunk beds, with fiberglass-like mattresses, flow through air conditioning (courtesy of nature), and a toilet to passenger ratio that is challenging. Tonight we are traveling with 18 others in the business class section. This is air conditioned, with doors that separate it from the tourist class section, also air conditioned and capable of accommodating 156 passengers. With a much better toilet to passenger ratio. On top of the official human cargo, from my observations she can carry at least 100 roosters (which never stop crewing), several hundred week-old chicks, a few hardy cats and probably a 1000 rats. She is 78 metres long, 15 meters wide and about 2770 tonnes, built in 1978.

But this is not my first trip with this ship, nor my first time to travel from Cebu to Calbayog. In the past 20 years I have made the trip at least 50 times. And on much worse ships than the MV Iloilo. In fact I have to say that overall that the MV Iloilo is a reasonably comfortable and clean ship, and safe and reliable. For the price of Php1250 per person in business class, it's good value.

Soon we are underway and making way, as we ply the waters of Cebu harbour and pass under the Marcelo Fernan Bridge, into Magellan Bay then finally out to the open sea. It is a dark night, cloudy with no moon and a few stars visible. Our thoughts and stomachs think of food and eating, and we find our way to the dining room. The room is a large cafeteria style layout with about 50 diners and others inside. Not crowded at all, which is both surprising and pleasant. At one end the galley and serving area is laid out ready to serve its extensive menu of boiled eggs, steamed rice, potato chips, chorizo sausage, cracker biscuits, soft drink and beer. And yes water as well: for drinking, for noodle soup, or for the exotic three in one, or five in one coffee blends. As in much of the Philippines the food pyramid concept of nutrition is missing a couple of layers, especially the fruit and vegetable parts.

At the other end of the cafeteria two televisions are mounted to the wall, separated by about six feet. They are competing with each other for people's attention it seems to me. Why else would they both be

on full volume, on different channels and producing noise that is akin to the high pitched screaming of slaughtered pigs or an imminent invasion by aliens from outer space. Next to the two TVs sit two banks of games slot machines, with spinning symbols, flashing lights and over excited youths doing their best to murder as many people as they can (on screen of course) within 60 seconds.

And last but definitely not least into this cacophony of sound and light comes the masterpiece. The Karaoke machine with its own sound proof or privacy chamber. Except it's neither sound proof nor private, and the occupants are doing their best to let everyone else in the room know that they should be on the TV show 'Pinoy Got Talent'. But it's an impossible mission with people eating, people talking, TVs blaring and video gamers gaming. And to be heard you have to shout of course.

I close my eyes and take in the sounds, trying to separate them, decipher them. It's like listening to a short wave radio broadcast at peak time on a crowded frequency. Lots of hisses, squeaks, gongs, laughter, booming, smashing, and other really strange sounds. Bam bam, whoosh whoosh, rat tat tat. From the Karaoke chamber a women's voice straining to reach the high notes of a love ballad (if you love me too) floats over the top of it all for a brief moment, before the tinny, raucous shouting of a frantic TV reporter drowns her out. Behind me kids screaming, noisy scraping doors opening, TV adverts flashing video clips and making lots of undecipherable noise about hair products, laundry soap, minute noodles, magic pills and miracle financial plans.

If you could taste this mixture of sounds I would call it sweet, sour, savory, chunky, lumpy, tart, acidic frothy, and indigestible. It used to be hard for me to eat in this atmosphere. As if my stomach muscles were cramped up. But now I can as I am conditioned to it, able to eat and adapt to this cultural trait of shipboard travel. As I finish my meal I close my eyes again briefly and this time pick up even more disturbing noises. Yep... sounds like the aliens have landed on our ship, and making their way now to the cafeteria. Time to head back to business class and close the doors.

The next morning after a cold and cramped sleep, we awake with the sounds of the ship's speaker, with a man's voice in a heavy Visayan accent. 'Standby, standby, standby. Man your stations for and aft, for docking maneuvers.'

In the confusion of sleep and waking up in a strange bed, I almost kid myself into believing that I am back in the Royal Australian Navy. Getting little sleep and being awoken at all strange hours. Happily I realise that I am a civilian again, and fall back into my bunk. We arrive at 0730 hours into the picturesque port of Maguino. Long before the ship has completed docking, the porters are aboard. 'Porter Mam, Porter sir?' My wife spots the ones she wants and tells them to come back when the exodus has slowed to a trickle of passengers.

Soon we are in our car, heading back to our house and home in Calbayog, about 15 km from the port. It's a beautiful sunny day, full of hope and promise. We look forward to a good night's rest in our own bed. Well I hope that this article was entertaining and informative for you. If you want to read more of my writing and novels please visit my website and novels section at <https://www.nkrichards.com/about-me/author/novels-short-stories> Cheers for now.