

Fiesta in Zamboanga City!

La Hermosa Festival commonly called the Fiesta Pilar



One of the best traditions that the Spanish brought to the Philippines is the celebration of Catholic Feast Days, or simply Fiesta!

A fiesta these days can mark any occasion or no occasion. And there are lots of them on many scales, from big public ones to small private ones. Some are planned events, and some develop spontaneously.

Fiestas are wonderful! All you family and friends show up and everyone brings food to the party. Lots of it! Rose will even let me eat some lechon (whole roasted pig with crispy skin with attached fat) at these things. Plenty of San Miguel (beer) and Tanduay (rum) is usually present, and somebody always brings a karaoke machine. And unlike karaoke in the United States, most Filipinos can actually sing. In fact, they can sing American Country & Western better than most Americans.

October is a big month for fiestas in Zamboanga City, Rose's hometown. October 12 marks the The Zamboanga La Hermosa Festival commonly called the Fiesta Pilar. This fiesta celebrates Zamboanga City's Patron, Nuestra Señora del Pilar (Our Lady of Pilar). This tradition is tied up with the long, eventful history of Zamboanga City and its entwinement with Spanish history. One of the main highlights of the festival is Regatta de Zamboanga, a race of the colorful sails called vinta. The Regatta in Zamboanga City started in 1974. Historically, the colorful sailboat was designed by old tribes in the peninsula to show to the world the very rich culture and heritage of Zamboanguenos.

Zamboanga City is home to Fort Pilar, built in 1635 as a defense against pirates and raiders of the sultans of Mindanao and Jolo. Over the centuries Fort Pilar has seen many fierce battles, and has withstood attacks from some powerful enemies including Dutch and British forces. It has been occupied by Spanish, American, Japanese, and joint American-Filipino forces before it was finally turned over totally to The Republic of the Philippines in 1946.

This history is interspersed over the years with eyewitness stories of Marian apparitions in defense of the fort and the city. One of the most striking accounts is described in this Wikipedia narrative: On September 21, 1897 at 1:14 PM in the afternoon, a strong earthquake struck the western region of Mindanao. The Virgin Mary made an apparition, according to the people who witnessed it, they saw the virgin standing mid-air over the Basilan Strait, she had her right hand raised to signal the onrushing waves to stop, saving the city from a tsunami.

In addition to this city-wide fiesta, Rose's home barangay of Baliwasan celebrates its own fiesta in honor of the same Patron each year on the last Sunday in October. (The term barangay refers to a smaller administrative district of a city or town, much as U.S. cities are often divided into wards. However, a barangay usually has much more of a sense of community than a ward.) On this day Rose's mom prepares a huge spread for all of the extended family. Family and friends spend the day visiting one another in their homes, and of course, eating. In fact, Rose's mom usually begins planning for the festivities weeks ahead of time for her growing extended family and in recent years she's had to hire cooks to assist. Her family wasn't always that big. In fact, Rose told me stories of how, in the early days, her dad would go out in the street and round up strangers to come in and celebrate with them because no one else came!

Although I've been to Zamboanga City many times over the years, I've never managed to be there for its finest displays in October. But I've celebrated Fiesta Pilar virtually with Rose and her family every year since 2002. Someday soon I'll see it in person!