

## Achtung baby - alone in Angeles City, Luzon, Philippines

*(Day 553 on the road)* How to write a blog entry about a place that has such an awful reputation as Angeles City in the Philippines? The place is possibly the sex capital of the world, with between 10.000 and 20.000 prostitutes selling their bodies every night. During the time of the U.S. airbase here, as many as 100.000 working girls were offering their services. I had a morning flight the next day from Clark airport just outside of Angeles, and decided to spend the night here instead of crazy Manila and see this place for myself.

I soon realised that accommodation in Angeles is definitely not geared towards backpackers, and after walking around for an hour in the afternoon heat with my backpack looking for an affordable place to crash I finally had to admit defeat. In the end I settled for a hotel far away from the "action", and spent the remaining afternoon enjoying the free wireless Internet by the pool writing the beginning of this blog entry.

And no, before anybody here gets any wrong ideas, I did quite easily resist the temptation all around me, though I do admit that I was curious and went



**Bored prostitutes inside one of the countless bars**

down to the red light district later in the evening. The main road is called Fields Avenue and is pretty much back to back full of raunchy bars with inventive names like "Coyote Ugly", "Pony Tail" or "Dirty Duck". Young female promoters in short skirts, tight tops and high heels are standing around everywhere, attempting to lure lonely customers into their respective bars.

I went into a few of them, somehow feeling pretty nervous. The scene was roughly the same in all three that I visited: There were maybe 50 scarcely-dressed women in each of them, some of them dancing on stages, most of them looking extremely bored. As one fat American guy I chatted to explained to me they are referred to as "Guest Relation Officers", or GRO, not prostitutes. Funny. On the other side of the spectrum there were the old and/ or fat Caucasian men, clinging to their drinks, also looking bored, or chatting with some of the girls.

Interestingly, prostitution is officially illegal in the Philippines, but that doesn't seem to bother anybody here. The guy I mentioned earlier explained the system to me: To get around this tiny legal problem, a customer doesn't



**Going home after a hard night's work - Deserted Fields Avenue in the morning**

actually pay the girl directly for her services. Instead, you pay the bar the girl is working for to get her released early from her shift. This is called a "bar fine". The girl gets a cut from this money and whatever happens next is then the decision of two consenting adults. Quite a clever solution I would say.

Sitting in another bar having an overpriced mango juice I had to think of a movie I saw a while back. In the movie an NGO camera team went around a red light district somewhere in Asia asking the old men with their 20-year old prostitutes questions like "Hello sir, is this your daughter?". Great question, I love it!

I also wondered what impressions the Filipinos living and working here must get about foreigners. Or, on the other hand, what image does all this give foreigners about the Philippines? I can only assume that most of the girls working here do so out of pure desperation with few alternatives available to them in this impoverished country. Then again, it must also be a cultural thing somehow, as I have been to many poor countries here in Southeast Asia, where



**Apparently Angeles is not quite the safest place to be - Security guard at my hotel**

prostitution was at a minimum. I guess I will never get to the bottom of it, the issue seems just too complex to comprehend, especially by an outsider and foreigner like me.

In the same bar I asked the waitress how much she earns working there. Her salary is 90 pesos per day (by the way, a value meal at McDonalds costs more than what she earns in a day), plus tips if she is lucky. That

is about one Euro and thirty cents for a nine hour shift. The dancers, who have to wear considerably less clothes and dance on the stages, get a bit more, 150 pesos a day, about 2 euros. If a girl goes home with a customer, she gets 600 pesos, roughly nine Euros. Most of the girls apparently send the money they earn home to their families, with many of them being single mothers working here to support their children. The waitress I talked to was 27 years old, had four children who are being raised by her parents, and an ex-husband who left her without giving her her any support for raising their children. She has never finished high school (her parents



**"Dancers" wanted everywhere**

had no money for that) and she told her family that she is working as domestic helper for a rich family near Manila. I am not sure, but I could imagine that this is a pretty typical story for many of the girls working here.

And to put the above figures into perspective: Before coming to Angeles about a year ago, the waitress I talked to used to work in a factory earning 800 pesos a month, about 12 Euros. This is roughly the amount of money I spent two days ago for a 30 minute boat ride to Taal Volcano and a few biscuits for my breakfast. Here in Angeles, she can make those 800 pesos in a single day if she manages to find a customer who wants to take her home for the night. But even if she only works as a waitress and assuming she gets no tips at all, she still makes about 2200 pesos a month, or 32 Euros, three times as much as she got in the factory. And if she is lucky and finds a customer regularly, she can earn a small fortune compared to her other (non-prostitution) options. Thus is



**Not a pretty city by far whichever way you look at it**

the sad reality.

In the last bar I went to, aggressive girls kept coming up to my table asking if I would buy them a drink. As I gathered they get a commission for every drink a customers buys them. But having ventured far enough into this alien and sad world I soon took my leave and walked back to my hotel through the rainy evening, wondering how many other male foreigners were sleeping alone in their beds that night.

The next morning, I caught a jeepney for the 20 minute ride to Clark airport. It was time to leave the Philippines after three weeks, as my visa was running out. Unfortunately, Angeles was definitely not the best place to say farewell to this beautiful country with its wonderful people, but the contrast with this utterly depressing place made me realise what an amazing time I have had in the Philippines. I hope to be back one day.

Next stop: Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia). Also have a look at my pictures at <http://pictures.beiske.com>.

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