



Jeepneys form a part of the congested traffic in Manila

Art on the move

A canvas of unimaginable colours and designs, it's the most lucid manifestation of the good cheer of the Filipino lifestyle. When in Philippines, do get a taste of the Jeepney artistry. SUPRIYA SEHGAL hops on a souped up beauty for a spirited jaunt

"DON'T

go by the surly expression of the commuters. They are bogged down by the harsh hand of daily life. Enjoy the wind," comes the advice from Juanito, whose bright but weathered shorts and a comfy vest are a perfect mirror to Filipino fashion. Accompanying this affecting recommendation is a toothy grin and a tenor of wild abandon. I swing my head further away from the door, till my left arm strains from balancing my weight on the cold steel handle along the edge of the door and let the wind flutter my eyelashes into a frenzy.

We must have been doing a 70 km per hour, supersonic speed for a diesel chugging, smoke-spewing metal contraption. We snake past the clogged streets of Cagayan de Oro and are now on a smooth steel grey road, winding our way to a rafting spot just outside town. I deliberately choose the front seat to chat with the driver while a group of friends settles down at the back of Philippines' most popular local transportation. Clinging onto the contours of the hills throughout the ride, I educate myself on these characterful beasts and the self-proclaimed "kings of the roads" — Jeepneys.

Despite the deliberate march of development in the bigger cities of Philippines, the locals have not been able to stave off the Jeepneys and replace



them with more eco-friendly wheels. One has to rewind back eight decades to understand the origin of these bright set of wheels. The US army had camped in the Philippines during the World War II and employed Hardy Willys and Ford jeeps to get around or carry goods. As the war ended and the US troops retreated, the jeeps were as good as scrap. They were sold to local Filipinos or left abandoned in garages. The set of circumstances matched perfectly as Philippines was struggling to create a public transportation network and the US army had no use of their erstwhile rides. Unwittingly, the legacy of the Jeepneys was shaped and lived on in the form of a blend of van and Jeep. It was christened a "Jeepney", originating from the words "jeep" and "knee" because of the crammed seating arrangement which made passengers sit knee to knee. The US army would have never imagined leaving a vehicular imprint that would live on for nearly a century. Instead of having a jaded relationship with these pairs of wheels, the ever-smiling Filipinos stripped the jeeps from the back, added more seating to accommodate passengers with two parallel benches, gave it a metal roof and complemented this with their brand of art — the most distinct thing about the Jeepneys. Having turned the look of the vehicle around, it's been easier to adapt it to their lives.

(Clockwise) The financial hub Makati in the Metro Manila region; different strokes of Jeepney artists

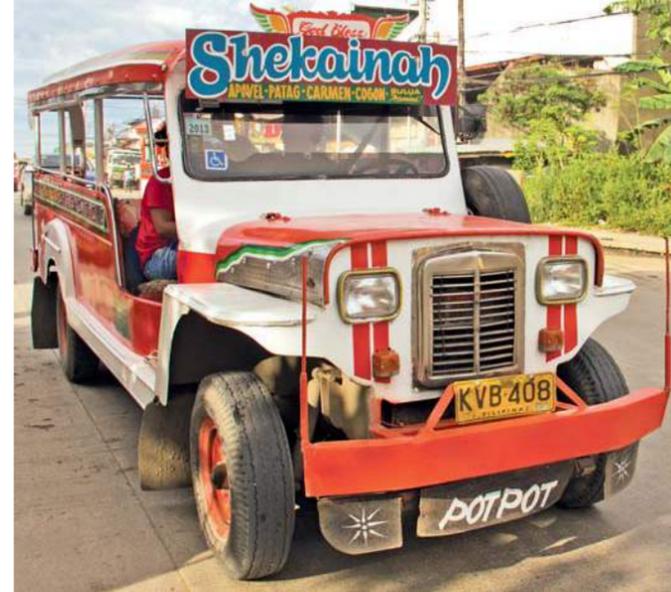


STAND at the corner of a street and you will see at least 10 vibrantly painted Jeepneys zip past you in a matter of minutes. Here, Donald Duck could meet Salma Hayek on the same metal body, or a message from Jesus could be paired with a scene from a beach, complete with bikini-clad sirens. The brush of Jeepney painters promises nothing short of bewildering art and is full of surprises. There seems to be a definitive stroke of Spanish or Mexican *joie de vivre* in the festive colours and emblems made on these ingenuinely hand-painted Jeepneys.

Whatever the inspiration might be, one thing is for sure; the designs resonate the constant hurrah of the Filipinos. Though no two Jeepneys look alike, there is one common aesthetic — the chrome-plated ornaments on the hood. Expect an elegant silvery horse, glistening in the sun to lead the way from the top of the hood.

I strip myself from the deliriously windy ride and slump back into my chair for a more audible time with the driver. “So, are all the Jeepneys that old? How do they still run?” I’m curious about the fate of this iconic vehicle in the future. The driver tells me that not all the Jeepneys go back in time to the mid 40s. Many of them, like the one we are on, have a “Made in Philippines” stamp. Once the first generation of Jeepneys saw success, many locals started producing their own with alterations in engines, mostly imported from Japan.

They kept the aesthetics same by sourcing the bodies from scrap yards and garages but made them relatively more efficient. Sarao Motors, a 1953 established company, was at the helm of local production at a point of time and was able to spew some 18-20 Jeepneys a day from the Manila-based factory. Though the owner, Leonardo Salvador Sarao Sr, was not the first to alter the Jeepneys, he was certainly the one who saw potential in mass production of these odd vehicles. The company that started with a meagre 700 Peso metamorphosed into a multi-million dollar organisation with its business peaking in the 1970s. But the corporation came to a screeching halt in 2000 when the cost of production hit the roof. A watered-down



Jeepneys in Cagayan de Oro

GET AROUND IN PHILIPPINES



TRICYCLE: It is essentially a small hooded sidecar that seats 4-6 people and is bolted to a bike. Sometimes, commuters can also ride pillion on the bike if there is no space inside the sidecar.

PEDICABS: They are push tricycles with no motorisation. These are good for short trips since the driver needs to pedal your weight. Pedicabs also go by the name of *put-put* or *padyak*.

HABAL-HABAL: It's a cheaper version of the tricycle with the same system of a sidecar attached to a bike.

KALESA: A tourist magnet, it's a two-wheeled horse-pulled carriage that is found only in a few areas of cities; Manila and Cebu are two of them.

MOTORELA: Motorised tricycles where the driver may sit inside the hooded sidecar. The moniker was conceived by Raphael Floirendo, a mechanic from Cagayan de Oro in 1964.



version of Sarao Motors is still limping along till date. What lives with it is the legacy of the first formal public transportation in the country and the memory of notable occasions: Pope John Paul II hopped into one of its creations during his visit in 1981.

“But there are many other smaller companies that have come up since. You’ll find backyard factories with ample Jeepneys lined up for production, painting and repair,” the driver reassures me with an encouraging grin. My face must have fallen at the mention of the dipping fortunes of Sarao Motors and the bleak future of the Jeepneys.

Since these are privately run vehicles, there are no incentives from the government and the drivers and their assistants have a voracious appetite to cram as many people as possible for a minimum of an eight-peso ride. Naturally, maintaining traffic order and environment standards is not top priority for them. Given that the unprecedented growth of Jeepneys and their popularity has fuelled extreme traffic congestion, there has been a wide

push for electric vehicles to counter the toxic fumes and lethargic pace of the Jeepneys. “They are still being produced in large numbers and are never going to go out of fashion,” adds Juanito. According to him no fleet of electronic Jeepneys held a candle to the classic, characterful ones. After all nothing can match the economics and convenience for 18 customers at a go for short spurts of journeys.

RAFTING is fatiguing business and after a few hours in the water, I come back to our Jeepney and plonk on the seat. The ride back is punctuated with nodding off and occasionally looking at the other Jeepneys zipping by. When we are nearing the hotel, I look at Juanito and yell ‘para’ over the noisy engine. It’s the local word to let the driver know that you want to be let off. With that I add a rap on the side of the door with a coin. Juanito laughs uproariously. I have been watching other Jeepneys and learning the etiquette diligently.