

Xtreme spotter

BUS SPOTTING is a popular pastime in the Philippines where it has distinct advantages. There are thousands of buses and hundreds of bus companies, some large with extensive fleets, some small with just a few units and they operate throughout this tropical archipelago of some 7,000 islands although bus spotting is usually carried out on the main island of Luzon, especially in the big cities such as the capital Manila.

Strangely, out of a population of 90 million, there is just one known girl bus spotter. I first met Janis Manalastas in the mountain resort of Tagaytay, some 2 hours south of Manila after we had been communicating online following a comment she had seen on the photo sharing site Flickr. My picture of an old bus interested her as it was probably taken before she was born. Accompanied by her mum Jennifer, both agreed to make the trip to meet me on the first day of the Chinese New Year, a public holiday of sorts. 'Bhe' as she is known on Flickr is a slim youngster of 19 and dresses in a smart but casual manner considering herself a little bit 'goth' especially when it comes to chunky bracelets. Inside her bag are albums full of photos and notebooks with an incredible amount of detail recorded as to which bus she has seen, where and at what time, body numbers, plate numbers, etc., all in her very neat and tidy penmanship. She is a bus statistician and concentrates on one specific bus company - San Agustin's buses. This company run mostly provincial buses and she knows many of the crews who operate them. Janis started photographing buses with a camera borrowed from her aunt but now has her own and is never without it although her cell phone is also used and is a reliable backup. In the course of a year she expects to travel about 10,000 kilometers on San Agustin buses and has become an amazing unpaid ambassador for the company. Being the only girl bus spotter in the Philippines she is totally unique. There are hundreds of boys and young men of a similar age who worship buses and the bus staff and crews are all males so why is this girl so fascinated not just by any bus but specifically the San Agustin buses?



As a young child, life was not easy for Janis who was born several weeks prematurely and for two years was in and out of various hospitals as doctors and specialists tried to sort out her health problems resulting from such an early birth. The family were at one time involved in the running of several businesses but just 6 years ago, her father died suddenly at the early age of 45 leaving her, a younger sister and her mother to cope on their own. Consequently, about four years ago, her mother Jennifer secured a job which entailed travelling daily by bus for an hour each way and the buses she used were invariably operated by San Agustin. Janis would always travel with her and it was through observation that she began to learn about the transport company they were using. She liked the kind and friendly way they treated their passengers and also the efficient manner in which they ran their buses so to kill the time she spent travelling, she started recording the details and times of each bus they travelled on in considerable detail, a hobby which she continues to this day. Body and plate numbers, type and signage, she is a walking encyclopedia of San Agustin's bright red and yellow bus fleet.



Janis is far from the stereotype spotter, often known in Europe as 'anoraks' since they are forced to wear a hooded coat to protect against the cold and wet weather. The warmer Philippine weather permits her to dress stylishly and look anything but a bus spotter.

So what else does this girl enjoy doing? Well, she clearly spends a lot of time not only taking photos of buses but post-processing her pictures on her computer then posting them on the internet. She taught herself a lot about image manipulation and enhancement etc., and before his untimely departure, her father taught her a lot also. Her records are kept up to date and information contained in her notebooks is transferred to index cards to be filed. Unsure of her long term objectives in this field, she also has other interests and like most Filipinas, she enjoys meeting up with her friends, loves her food and can be seen in the most fashionable malls of Manila but if you ask her what she's rather be doing, she will tell you that she would be happier standing outside photographing the passing buses.

You can see Bhe's photosteam on Flickr here: www.flickr.com/photos/agustina76/ also www.flickr.com/groups/busesinthephilippines



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