





**Clark AB, buried and closed by the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991, is now a lavish Philippine resort.**

# Clark Digs Out of the Ashes

By C.R. Anderegg

*Plumes of ash from Mount Pinatubo form the backdrop for a helicopter at Clark. Until 1991, the volcano had not had a major eruption for about 500 years.*

ONCE, Clark AB in the Philippines was a place so beautiful that many thought of it as “the jewel of the Pacific.” That was the case until June 15, 1991. On the next day, Clark was in a shambles, buried in volcanic ash spewed from Mount Pinatubo, shaken by earthquakes, and battered by sheets of rain from Typhoon Yunya.

Then, Clark seemed finished. Now, less than a decade later, most of the base is as beautiful as ever.

Five days before Pinatubo’s cataclysmic eruptions, some 15,000 Americans had evacuated the base, so only a small band of security forces remained to watch and listen to the devastation caused by the volcano’s first eruption in 500 years. More than 100 buildings collapsed in thunderous crashes. Drainage and sewer systems quickly filled with mud as flash floods of wet ash swept through the base. By mid-afternoon, total darkness engulfed Clark, while Yunya swirled airborne goo like a mixer swirling pancake batter.

Later, those who stayed would call themselves the “Ash Warriors,” but that day, the one most refer to as “Black Saturday,” the volcano and typhoon drove them off the base, too.

They returned the next morning. Air Force civil engineers quickly did a triage of facilities and utilities. Their estimates to resume operations on the base exceeded \$500 million. Even if the price had been acceptable, the situation on the ground was not. Pinatubo continued to erupt daily. On-scene US Geological Survey scientists thought the volcano might cook for years, its ash plumes constituting an ever-present threat to aviation.

## **After 93 Years**

The Defense Department and Air Force acted promptly and announced on July 17, 1991, that the United States was putting an end to 93 years of continuous US

military presence in the Philippines. The Air Force was abandoning the devastated base.

Though the Americans considered Clark useless as an air base, others considered it an opportunity. Some Filipinos dreamed that the revival of the abandoned facilities would inject new life into the local economy. By 1995, President Fidel V. Ramos had pushed through the Philippine government legislation that declared the Clark site to be a special economic zone. Essentially, the new laws made the zone duty-free and tax-free.

Immediately, investment capital from Asia started to flow toward the former air base, and today the effect is nothing short of remarkable.

The centerpiece of the development is a new, \$64 million resort that occupies the central part of the base north of what was the parade field. It comprises what had been the historic housing, called “barns,” officers’ club, Chambers Hall, junior noncommissioned officer housing around the golf course, and the course itself. Within the resort, the base is even more beautiful than when the Americans lived there.

Clark’s main temporary and bachelor officers’ quarters, Chambers Hall, is now a Holiday Inn—and a five-star model at that. The entrance lobby features marble floors, mahogany walls, and several spectacular chandeliers. Reminiscent of times past, the cocktail lounge displays a sign over the entrance declaring it

the “13th AF” bar. (Clark AB was the headquarters for 13th Air Force.) A steady stream of Asian, American, and Australian businessmen and -women flows between the lobby, the lounge, and spacious conference rooms. Former residents who paid \$6 for an overnight stay will be surprised to learn that the rooms now go for \$110.

The resort’s owners have transformed the officers’ club, once filled with mud and ash, into a first-rate casino, complete with bright carpet, red walls, and a full complement of

Las Vegas-style games. Clark’s golf course has been totally restored. The developers bulldozed the ash into sweeping mounds with which they sculpted new fairways, tee boxes, and greens. A second course has been added and a third is under construction.

Perhaps the most striking central-base restorations, however, are those that have remade the small houses around the golf course. What had been two-bedroom junior NCO houses now have been converted into golf bungalows that rent for \$250 per night.



*Even on color film, the landscape was nothing but shades of gray after the volcano erupted and Typhoon Yunya’s winds and rains spread the ashes. Above is typical of the damage to Clark’s housing areas. Fortunately, almost all of the Americans had evacuated from the base five days before.*



*After USAF closed down Clark, it became a special economic zone that attracted Asian investors. The base’s transformation included a makeover for Chambers Hall, once the bachelor officers’ quarters, now a five-star Holiday Inn.*

Some of the old barns near the casino and Holiday Inn have been modified into theme restaurants. One is German. One serves French cuisine. Another provides Italian fare, and yet another features Chinese and Japanese food.

### **Once in a Lifetime Treat**

The most unusual place to dine, though, is the new Four Seasons restaurant, where several varieties of fresh meats are on display deli style. Patrons choose their cut then are seated while the chef prepares their entrees. The food is delicious, but military old-timers might flinch at the thought of eating there. The restaurant occupies what had been the Clark mortuary; its big refrigeration systems now keep meats fresh in the tropical climate.

The new Clark is more than a

bustling resort for golf, gambling, and dining. Over 200 businesses dot the base, many of them large computer assembly and manufacturing companies, and most operate in new buildings. A behemoth Yokohama Tire factory sits near the location where the Ash Warriors huddled on the far reaches of the base near the Dau gate. Many smaller businesses have moved to Clark as well. The street along the north side of the former base exchange, once a nondescript avenue, is now a bustling commercial venue for more than 20 duty-free stores such as Nevada Discount Golf. For size and product selection, some of the stores rival Wal-Mart outlets. Hungry shoppers can dine at Kentucky Fried Chicken or McDonald's and have dessert at Baskin-Robbins.

Although many visitors drive to Clark from Manila, a significant number take charter flights. The airfield, covered in ash when the Americans departed, is fully operational, with all-weather instrument landing and navigation systems. Passengers enter through the newly refurbished terminal, the former Clark aerial port, which was the focus of a \$1.2 million renovation.

The Philippine air force occupies a large chunk of the base near the flight line where an overhead sign welcomes visitors to "Air Force City" and announces that the base won "Best in PAF" honors for 1997.

During the last two years the Americans ran Clark, they constructed about 1,000 new military family homes in the lower part of the base and near the parade field. Filipino families who work on the base now occupy all these new homes, and they are well-maintained. The Mactan housing on the western hillside of Clark did not fare so well after US security forces left. Looters ransacked most of the units, stripping them of plumbing, doors, fixtures, and windows.

Outside the gates, Angeles City bustles with business and activity, and only an astute observer might realize that the city had been subjected to the world's second largest volcanic eruption of the 20th



**Clark Museum hosts busloads of visiting schoolchildren each week. The building used to be 3rd Support Group headquarters. Along with resort facilities, more than 200 businesses now operate at the former base.**

century. The areas near the base have changed noticeably. Most of the small, family-owned shops that catered to American appetites for handmade cotton goods and furniture are gone. In their place are many small businesses and stores that cater to Filipino customers. The Nepo Market, a large bazaar familiar to American shoppers, continues to thrive, its many stalls teeming with buyers.

Nearly 2,000 US military retirees live near Clark. A well-organized Retiree Activities Office welcomes American newcomers and helps them settle in. A computer system tied to key locations in the United States allows the RAO, staffed totally by volunteers, to solve most pay and personnel problems. A local hospital, newly refurbished with modern equipment after the eruptions, accepts Tricare payment.

The retirees constitute a tight-knit community and are delighted that US military forces are once again operating on a small scale out of Clark. Recently, the governments of the United States and the Philippines signed a visiting forces agreement, similar to a status-of-forces agreement, that established the jurisdictional status of DoD personnel who are in the Philip-

pine temporarily for exercises and other activities.

So, US aircraft are again flying through Clark. Some retirees have taken Space-Available hops out of Clark. The industrious RAO has set up a Space-A office in the Clark terminal.

### Flags Still Flying

Although the Ash Warriors lowered the Stars and Stripes at the parade field when they left Clark in 1991, an American flag still flies at Clark—at the veterans' cemetery, near the main gate. Four years ago, resident retirees, dismayed at the shabby condition of the cemetery after the eruptions and PAF neglect, collected enough money to restore the cemetery that holds the remains of several thousand US and Filipino veterans. The local Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Angeles City spearheaded the effort, and it raises \$8,000 annually to maintain the cemetery, keep US and Philippine flags flying over it, and put flags on each grave site every Veterans Day and Memorial Day.

Mount Pinatubo no longer erupts, and the crater, which is over a mile wide and several hundred feet deep, holds a peaceful lake. Hikers trek up O'Donnell Valley to camp near the shoreline and explore the crater walls. The devil that once ravaged Clark and the Philippine countryside is quiet now—maybe for another 500 years. ■

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