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Filipinos flock to the mall, but sometimes just for window shopping

By Marnette Federis Reuters

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MANILA: In the Philippines, the act of going to a shopping mall and whiling away the hours is so popular, it has its own term: "mallng."

The country has three of the world's 10 largest shopping centers, two of them in Manila. Scores of others, ranging from modern glass and steel structures to older, fading buildings, dot cities across the archipelago.

Although more than 40 percent of the country's 90 million people live on \$2 or less a day, malls here are crowded at all times, especially on weekends.

About 80 percent of the Philippines' population go to shopping centers and about 36 million people visit shopping plazas once or twice a month, according to Nielsen Media Research.

"People just come to the mall to stay cool," said Chris Balberona, a driver for a bank, who was at Manila's Megamall watching ice-skaters on an artificial rink. "Life is hard right now so we don't really come here to shop."

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The air-conditioned malls are a boon in this steamy tropical nation. But shopping plazas in the Philippines have also become a place to pay bills, meet or watch people, eat or see a film.

Catholic masses are held in the corridors of some malls. While the faithful sit on plastic chairs, less religious folk continue to browse the stores nearby.

With inflation hitting a near 17-year high of 12.2 percent in July as gasoline and food prices soar, Filipinos are spending less these days for non-essentials like trips to the cinema.

Private consumption is the lifeblood of the Philippine economy and a drop-off in spending is expected to cut economic growth this year to 5.1 percent from a three-decade peak of 7.2 percent in 2007, according to a Reuters poll last month,

Economic growth skidded to a seasonally adjusted 0.8 percent in the first quarter compared to 1.3 percent in the fourth quarter of last year

SM Prime, the largest mall operator in the Philippines, said 2.5 million people continued to visit its 30 shopping centers across the country.

"There has been no noticeable decrease in this number primarily because the 'mallng' lifestyle has become a way of life for the Filipinos," said Cora Guidote, vice president for investor relations at SM Prime.

But with the cost of travel spiking because of high oil prices, some Filipinos said they were

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restricting themselves to window shopping.

Cita Foronda, an executive assistant who goes to a mall once a week with her four children, said the visits were now almost entirely to kill time.

"We only shop on a need basis now," Foronda said. "Even with the sales, it's not attractive anymore."

With very few public parks or other public amenities in Manila, and high pollution levels, she said that the small play areas for children were a big attraction.

"If you have small kids, of course, you go to the mall," she said. "You want your kids to be happy because you hardly see them during the work week."

Almost all utilities bills can be paid in malls, banks are attached and a fairly inexpensive meal at a fast-food eatery is always an option.

"It's like they give you everything just so you go," Foronda said.

Another factor keeping malls popular is the large inflows of remittances sent home by millions of Filipinos who work overseas.

These remittances, estimated to reach a peak of nearly \$16 billion this year, support the retail sector even amid the economic slowdown.

Every few years a new mall emerges in Manila or one of the larger cities, bigger and more extravagant than the last.

One of the newest is the Mall of Asia, the world's third-largest shopping center. It is almost as big as Vatican City.

Two other malls in the Philippines, SM North Edsa and SM Cebu, also made the top-10 list in the study.

But for those hardest hit by the recent economic crisis, the family pastime of "mallng" is becoming increasingly rare.

"Before, it was a regular family day for us to go to the malls, even if we went there to just eat or walk around," said Romeo Castillo, a taxi driver who has two children. "Now, it's really impossible even for that. It's just out of our budget."

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