

Quezon City is distinct for having the largest ecological parks in an urban setting. It is a balanced urban center with about 300 parks, including the renowned Quezon Memorial Circle and Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife. These parks provide more than just a cozy ambience of trees and grass lawns. They were developed as recreational areas with facilities that the public can freely enjoy.

### **Balara Filters Park**

One of the City's oldest parks is the Balara Filters Park. Back in the 1950s, the 60-hectare park (almost as big as the Rizal Park) used to be a popular entertainment and recreation site where legendary artists performed and families spent lazy afternoons.

Neglected for decades, it was renovated in 2003, through the initiative of the Quezon City government. It joined forces with the Ayala Foundation, Maynilad Water Company, the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System, and the Billion Trees Movement to revive the park's former grandeur.

New and revived amenities include three large swimming pools, a kiddie playground, a 3,000-sqm elevated picnic grove with a 200-meter circumference oval and the Windmill Park. Art deco buildings and vintage structures found in the locale include the Italian-style chapel; Orosa Hall, an open ornamental house; Escoda Hall, a white and red pavilion dominating the pool complex; and the baby terrace named after First Daughter Zenaida Quezon. The old Anonas Amphitheater housed the performances of renowned artists including national artist for music and theater, Atang Dela Rama. Near the pool entrance is the bathhouse once referred to by the Americans as the "Widow's Walk" because the structure reminded them of that building by the pier where wives of sea captains waited for their loved ones who never returned.

Also found in the area are the "Bernardine" statue of a nude water bearer; the Lion Head from whence spills forth the filters' backwash; the replica of the Carriedo fountain in Sta. Cruz, Manila; and the Worker's Monument commemorating the NAWASA employees who died in the construction of the filters; among others.

### **Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife**

An 80-hectare zoological and botanical garden situated just along the Elliptical Road, it was created and named "Philippine Parks and Wildlife" under the Marcos era. The park houses different species of trees and animals including crocodiles, snakes, peacocks, deer, even the famous monkey-eating eagle. Aside from the mini zoo, the park maintains a wildlife rescue center that adopts certain species of animals that have been abandoned, confiscated or donated. The park also boasts of a vast playground, cottages, picnic groves, the Our Lady of

Peace grotto, a tea house, a rock garden and a 2.5-hectare man-made lagoon for boating and fishing. These amenities make it a favorite hang-out spot among families, animal lovers, and idle visitors looking for a quiet oasis in the middle of the city.

### **Quezon Memorial Circle**

The central park of the City, the Quezon Memorial Circle is best known for being home to the shrine, museum, and the remains of former President Manuel L. Quezon and First Lady Aurora Quezon.

The park used to be much larger. Back in 1949, President Quirino approved the master plan for the new capital city, reserving 425 hectares for a central park. But a series of Presidential Proclamations later, the park was reduced to the Quezon Memorial Circle, the portions occupied by the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife, and a small nearby forest.

Construction of the Quezon shrine began in the 1950s but proceeded slowly, in part due to the cost of importing Carrara marble, which were brought in blocks and carved on site. The monument consists of three 66-meter (Quezon's age when he died) vertical pylons symbolizing Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, on top of which are three mourning angels holding sampaguita wreaths crafted by Italian sculptor Monti. Quezon's catafalque was modeled after Napoleon Bonaparte's in Les Invalides, France. The shrine was finally completed in 1978, the centennial of Quezon's birthday. The following year, President Ferdinand Marcos mandated the site as a National Shrine.

In 2007, determined to transform the park into its intended position as the central point of the national government, the City government took over the management of the 25-hectare park, which used to be administered by the Quezon Memorial Circle Foundation. Thus began investments to make the park the central landmark of the City.

Since then, several renovations and upgrades have been introduced, including the renovation of the promenade, the entrance arch, paved walkways, the theater, playground equipment, cycling and walkable areas and water fountains. There are several multipurpose halls where lessons like taebo and disco dancing are offered at reasonable rates. Visitors can find plenty of fun things to do, like rent the mini electric cars for a leisurely drive around the park, and shop at the

stalls selling food, medicinal plants and various knick-knacks. On Sunday mornings, senior citizens and fitness buffs flock to the plaza to attend free aerobics sessions.

QMC prides itself as a repository of history, boasting of two museums – one devoted to priceless Quezonian items and the other memorabilia of Quezon City mayors. To further highlight its cultural role, the park will be the site of the new, modern Quezon City Museum, which will showcase the City's historical and cultural heritage.

### **UP Arboretum**

This is a man-made forest park found within the grounds of the Diliman campus of the University of the Philippines. Established in 1948 by the Department of Agriculture, the 16-hectare arboretum is the only remaining rainforest within Metro Manila where exotic and endangered species of trees, along with diverse flora and fauna, can be found. The park has a man-made pond that hosts various aquatic and humid-loving plants, which also serves as a favorite picnic spot among visitors.

### **La Mesa Eco Park**

A popular tourist spot right at the heart of East Fairview is the La Mesa Dam Eco Park, a 33-hectare ecological park that provides natural amenities where people can retreat to and recharge their batteries. La Mesa Eco Park is part of the 2,700 hectares of the La Mesa Watershed, a water reservoir more than 70 feet deep, and the principal source of Metro Manila's drinking water. The park maintains the only salt-water pools in Metro Manila that are open for public use. For a small fee, visitors can enjoy clean and healthier (chlorine-free) water.

The park had been neglected for years due to lack of funds, illegal settling, poaching and logging. In 1999, the ABS-CBN Foundation created Bantay Kalikasan (Nature Watch) and, in partnership with Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS), undertook the Save La Mesa Watershed.

In 2003, the City government infused over P5.5 million to revive the park into the biggest eco-tourism destination in Metro Manila, beginning with the pavement of the surrounding road system to make the park more accessible to the public. The multi-sectoral effort continued over

the years, with more partners including Aboitiz, Super Ferry, Shell, Petron and the Lopez Group.

In September 2004, it was renamed La Mesa Ecopark and reopened to the public. This tree-lined paradise is now teeming with opportunities for adventure seekers like hiking, mountain-biking, horseback riding, rapelling, zip-lining and fishing. The fish caught can even be purchased and cooked in an open grill for a satisfying lunch under a canopy of trees. Folks can also enjoy a paddle boat ride in the beautiful lagoon without having to trek all the way to Baguio's Burnham Park. To escape the heat, a refreshing dip can be taken in the large salt-water pool unique to La Mesa Eco Park. Salt granules are used instead of chlorine making the pool's water safer and less toxic.

Other innovative attractions in the park are the Eco-Trail, a place to enjoy the beauty of nature and learn about the dynamics of the forest ecosystem, and the Ecomuseum, a museum solely dedicated to environmental education and biodiversity conservation. There is also the Pilot Organic Farm that ventures in vermin-composting, vegetable growing and bee-keeping for honey production.

A biodiversity assessment made by the University of the Philippines-Los Baños indicated sightings of rare bird and plant species in the Ecopark. Avid bird watchers can catch a glimpse of white-eared brown doves, black napped orioles, brown shrikes and white collared king fishers, to name a few. For orchid and flower lovers, there's a two-hectare shell flower terraces and an orchidarium with rare species of orchids from the Philippine Orchid Society and other donors.

### **Garden Venues**

In search of a garden wedding and party venue? Quezon City is host to some of the most charming wedding venues where couples and their guests can enjoy the ambience of scenic outdoors without having to forego the comforts of modern conveniences, a celebration without the rain, mud and other hassles that often come with traditional outdoor destinations.

**Fernwood Gardens** has the distinction of being the only garden wedding venue with 40- and 60-foot high translucent sky domes. It has four majestic rainforest-type gardens, namely, Fernwood 1, Cycad Garden, Coral Tree and the Courtyard. Each garden is air-conditioned and comes with its own special features, like landscaped trees, lagoons, waterfalls, exotic birds and

fishes, and a glass dance floor with lights underneath. There's even a horse and carriage for those who want a grand entrance. What makes this venue a top pick among wedding planners is the added convenience of having its own church in the premises, the St. Francis of Assisi Nature Chapel, where wedding rites can be held.

Those who prefer the exotic ambience of the East choose **Solea**, which means "under the Sun," for its beautiful Balinese backdrop of large, exotic trees and flowering shrubs. Located in the San Francisco Del Monte, the place is romantically lit at night, thanks to the strategically placed lights of different hues. The sprawling garden can accommodate up to 500 guests and provides efficient shuttle service between the garden area and its extended parking lot. What's more, Solea's policy of one event per day ensures a feeling of exclusivity and solemnity, so couples need not worry about disturbance from other affairs.

Aside from its meticulously landscaped surroundings, **Gazebo Royale** is well-known for its lush gardens, creative ceiling fixtures and soothing water features such as waterfalls, ponds, fountains and lagoons teeming with Japanese koi and other fish varieties. Want an intimate gathering or a bash for hundreds? The Bamboo Grove can accommodate up to 60 guests, while the two halls—Phoenix Avenue and Champagne Hall—can house up to 300 and 700 guests, respectively. The grand gate provides a dramatic entrance lined up with trees that seem ablaze with tiny bright lights at nighttime. The bridges, which are made up of elegant Piedra China, adds to the splendid ambience of the gardens.

Want to feel like royalty during your wedding? **Blue Gardens** claims to be the only wedding venue in the metro with beautiful English gardens similar to those found in Europe. Located in Commonwealth Avenue, just a few minutes from St. Peter's Cathedral, this landscaped venue is filled with blooming flowers, ornate bird houses and butterflies. The function rooms in the three-storey Chateau provide a panoramic view of the gardens. Other European-inspired facilities are the splendid white gazebo inspired by Castle Versailles of France, and the stone wall entrance with pillars and carvings reminiscent of the 17<sup>th</sup>

century Chateau de Brecy's majestic gate in Normandy.

Other notable venues for wedding and other special events include **Grand Terrace** in Commonwealth Avenue;

**Patio Ibarra**

in Quezon Avenue;

**Plaza Ibarra**

in Timog Avenue;

**Windmills and Rainforest**

in Scout Borromeo St. South Triangle; and the

**Big Tent**

in Holy Spirit Drive.