

SAGADA LAKBAYAN - 2

From Banaue to Sagada, we first had to get to Bontoc, which is the northern terminus of the Halsema Highway that starts 130 km further south at Baguio. The road actually meanders further north of Bontoc to the Kalinga-Apayao areas where it skirts the Chico river (of agrarian strife infamy). But it really isn't a highway, but rather a meandering road that follows the original pre-war name: Mountain Trail. My father used to tell us that his father, as a school superintendent, would travel for days on horseback along this trail from from Baguio to Bontoc to Lubuagan. The travel brochure says "Engineer Halsema supervised the widening of the trail and by 1931, it provided access to the mineral resources of gold, silver and copper in the area".

As for the Banaue to Bontoc road, it was a 22 km stretch over rough terrain that was being concreted, so that's why it took about 1-1/2 hours of travel. The views in route were both spectacular and scary. See the photos below.



Top: Rice terraces at Banaue. Middle: a possible mining town. Bottom: freshly concreted road lane. Some stretches had no shoulders with washed out edges still awaiting repair.

About 5 km south of Bontoc on the Halsema Highway towards Baguio is a spur that zig-zags steeply up to Sagada, about 10 km further into the mountains. And this was just a dirt road. Perhaps this was to discourage those not willing to trek to this Sangri-la. But when approaching



the town, it changed to a smooth concrete road above.



And from some vantage point we didn't get to, there appeared the town nestled serenely with rice terraces beyond. See above photo which I lifted off Google Earth.



Same for the photo of the waterfall on left. For a personalized travelogue, this seems like cheating, but the fact is, from the first day in town, we all knew that we could not possibly visit all the touted sites we had in our itinerary.

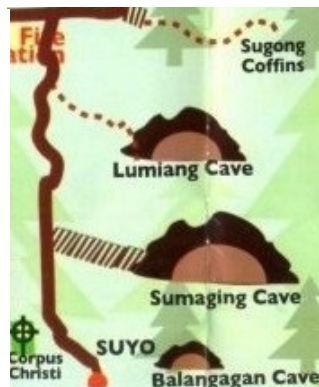
As it was turning out, our site-seeing trip was turning into a gustatory adventure as well. Remember the first day's meals while travelling?

We arrived at the Rock Inn at about 5:30 pm, and it was some distance away from the town center, about 3 km. Furthermore, it was almost a kilometer from the main road. But it was comfortable and seemed reasonable for the P1800 room rate for doubles. Right away we went to dinner, which was very sumptuous, especially when the "baons" started coming out: the bottles of wine, and the big slab of special cheese that Tony brought in from the States.



Next morning, we piled into the van and went to town. First stop was a mandatory registration at the Tourist Office. This is because there are many foreigners, and some indeed had met unsavory fates. I recalled right away my conversation last week with Mars Custodio wherein he said Sagada is very popular among young foreigners because it is the pot capital of the country.

We hired a guide to take us around. Photo below shows him pointing out the first stop: the Sumaging caves. It was

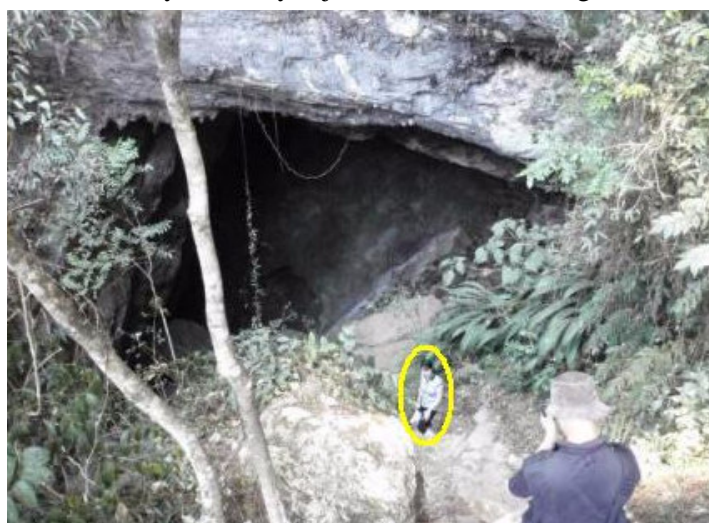


way down there. On left the group starts their descent. Above, the map shows the orientation.

But not all were gung-ho enough to go all the way. The



path got steeper after a concrete landing with handrails. Lisa and Tony said they'd just wait there. What goes down,



must come up. Finally there was the cave's yawning mouth much further below, as can be discerned from the encircled photo of a hiker. Mon, Jimmy, Bernie and I made it into the



cave where the 400-600 year old coffins lay. All of them were pine logs dug-out to accommodate the mummies in a fetal position. One of them had more elaborate carvings of either lizards or crocs on the top cover, and a big sign indicated not to open the coffins and get things inside. But the cave extended deeper down, into a river, and 3 French tourists whom Bernie had engaged in conversation earlier,



were braving it with their guide and a petromax lantern, all the way through the river to emerge at another adjacent cave after an hour or two. They were in their early sixties, and sure put us to shame. Mon had a hard time making it back up, and had to rest.

When we were all back on the roadway, we hiked a few hundred meters to view the terraces below. We noted many



brown areas indicative of recent fires, like the pine above. The guide said these are deliberate, so to forestall big fires.



The breathtaking view of what we saw. The settlements down there can only be reached by foot. No vehicles are allowed.

Next stop was the Sugong Hanging Coffins. See map above. It was already near lunch time, and the take-off point was on the main road in the downtown area, right across from the Yogurt Restaurant, which was highly recommended. So what did we do? Took out our cameras, zoomed in on the rock face with the hanging coffins, snapped away, then trooped into the restaurant.



Lunch was delicious. This made us think of supper. Ah, one of Mercy's friends had text'd about a French chef named Philippe, a long time resident, who was quite well known. According to the tour guide, he was an avid hiker, biker, ornithologist, and knew more about the local terrain than most locals. He actually had a local name of "Aclay" and had passed the word that if one day he doesn't appear, then nobody should look for him as he would be gone somewhere among the mountains he loves.

This is one person we had to meet, especially for French speaking Bernie. He had a restaurant halfway up the hill called "Log Cabin", exclusive and expensive. No walk-ins, reservations required. We went over and reserved for tonight. Aclay wasn't in but his Girl-Friday Joanne took our orders. We especially were fascinated by her text to Mercy a few days earlier admonishing us about what to wear "no winter jackets, madam, just light sweaters". English was very well spoken in these areas. The tour guide later said that the Episcopal missionaries years ago had been instrumental. Also true for the blind masseuse I had the next day.

Then we all went back to the hotel for an afternoon siesta. A little later, I ventured out on my own. On the map was a Matang Cave and Underground River that seemed very close to the hotel. After convincing Lisa that it would be safe, I walked back to the main road, attempted to wade through the sage and brush, but couldn't find anything interesting. The



next day, I asked the guide about it and he said the cave is closed because two years ago, 2 foreign tourists ventured in without a guide, and slipped to their deaths. Anyway, on left is a photo of yours truly with the hotel in the background. It's a good thing I didn't find the cave.

I also started formulating a plan about cutting the Sagada trip short. Instead of leaving on Friday early morning at 4:00 back to Manila via the same Banaue, Cagayan Valley route, why not leave Thursday for Baguio via the Halsema Road, stay overnight in Baguio, sight see a bit, then leave for Manila the next morning, at a less than unholy hour? Besides, there had been two earthquakes already. Last night at 4 a.m., it awoke Tony who promptly text'd his sons in the US, and got confirmation of a 5.5 magnitude quake off Laoag. Then at 11 that morning, news came out that GMA's speech in Tuguegarao was cut temporarily due to a tremor in that area. In my mind, as was in Tony's (I found out later), these earthquakes may have weakened the on-going road constructions at the Bontoc-Banaue stretch.

Dinner time came and we all went to the Log Cabin. We waited, and waited, and as the food trickled in, it wasn't what we ordered. Aclay was not there at all, and even Joanne suddenly made herself scarce. It was only after Edna ventured into the kitchen that we got things straightened out, but by that time, we weren't happy all, especially when the bill came up to about P360 for each of us, way above all the other meals so far.

Later, the jokes about food always revolved around Joanne: that she was holding seminars to spot grouchy tourists like us, etc. This was especially after we went to another restaurant the next day, and found her moonlighting.

My plan was approved by all. We leave for Baguio Thursday. Fortunately, the Manalpaz's had a vacant condo which could accommodate all. And Jimmy contacted his fellow National Artist friend Ben Cabrera to see the new Bencab Museum.

One more day in Sagada .. to be cont'd ...Danny Gil 4/1/10