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About 2,000 words

THE IFUGAO EXPERIENCE

by
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BANAWÉ, The Philippines -- Climbing carefully upward through the maze of mountainside rice terraces, I paused, balanced and looked back to absorb the panorama. Hundreds of feet below and well above me, a stone terrace labyrinth ran like a rippled, elongated checkerboard. Seen from across the valley, they resembled one giant, irregular stairway up the steep mountain. Occasionally interspersed between were islands of villages, amorphous clusters of brown straw huts and trees among the patterned fields.

My six months in Southeast Asia were almost over, and I was taking one last adventure. The mountain I was climbing, in the rice terrace country of the Philippines' north-central Luzon Island, had not seemed overly formidable the day before. I was following a route known only to the locals to reach the valley on the other side.

The Philippines are comprised of many ethnic groups and this region is inhabited by Ifugaos. Generally friendly and accustomed to Westerners, they have seen successive waves of Spanish conquerors, American missionaries and now international tourists. Even though I was one myself, I hoped to avoid the latter -- at least for a while.

Following for an hour the worn, compacted mud on the terrace tops, I found my way into the highest village. I stopped for a moment to chat with the villagers and they asked where I was going. When I said "over the mountain" they asked about my guide. When I replied that I had none, they appeared surprised. Some chuckled, some were doubtful but a few took a moment to point out the correct trail.

I assumed that since the villagers trade with each other regularly, every path had to lead somewhere. As long as I reached another village by nightfall, I should be safe. So I told the villagers not to worry; I was really not crazy. For their part, they informed me that I had anywhere from a four- to 10-hour hike awaiting. I certainly hoped it was the former.

Continuing to ascend, I looked back one last time before being swallowed by the forest, which bordered the top-most terraces. There the trail turned damp and muddy, and water droplets rained down from wet branches as I brushed past.

The steep, slippery climb was not the worst part. That honor went to the many clinging, thorny vines hidden along the narrow path at ankle level, ready to rip at the skin of dumb tourist hikers. My boots had given out in Borneo and now I had only jogging shoes.

It was gratifying to reach the top of the ridge and have visibility enough to see roughly where I was in relation to the surrounding mountains and forest. The path trickled on along the crescent ridge, narrowing but never disappearing completely.

The uncertainty of the hike was not an issue until 90 minutes later, when I ate the last of my food. That was when it became clear that I had better find the right path, unless I wanted to spend a hungry, cold night in the mountaintop forest. Would the night creatures be edible?

Fortunately I had packed my Malaysian parang (a stubby, jungle machete). A few times it was needed to chop through fallen trees and other debris. After three hours of trudging along the ridge, dodging hungry vines and whacking at branches, the mountain began to taper downward, soon to descend sharply into the next valley.

I know now how the sailors of old felt upon first spying land after a long sea voyage. Sighting distant huts during my descent, I was relieved to know I would not be overnighing under some ferns in the mud. It was only six hours since I left the last small set of huts on the other side of the mountain. Pondering other fates along the way made it seem longer.

Leaning on some abandoned logs along the path was a definitive walking stick. Long, sturdy and lightweight, this obvious gift from my guardian angel was perfect for the steep, slippery incline I was about to descend. It was difficult enough with the seven-foot staff; without it I would probably have tumbled, bumped and slid down several feet at a time on the slick, hard, black mud.

The first living things I encountered were a pair of pygmy pot-bellied pigs trotting along the upper-most series of rice terraces. They ran off in a panic as I emerged from the forest: I hoped the locals would not be so distressed by my appearance.

Following the path the pigs had taken through the high grass, I descended onward and came across two huts with, thankfully, friendly native faces and curious smiles. Their first question to me was where I had come from, and why I had come along a path that had been demolished by the last typhoon. I realized then why so many people had looked at me questioningly at the outset, and why so many trees and bushes were across the path. I looked at my muddy, bleeding, vine-scratched ankles; live and learn.

The family invited me to have a rest, adding I could stay with them until the morning. I had intended to go on to the nearby village, but as I was tired, muddy and well scratched, I was happy to agree. Our conversation bore out one peculiarity of the Philippines; out here in remote villages, English is the second language (the legacy of the many years of American missionaries). The local dialect is the first with the national language, Pilipino, coming in a distant third. The father and I spoke English as he told stories of past visitors, including invading Japanese, unwelcome typhoons and some interesting tourists.

The compound was typical for an Ifugao village family. Two facing straw huts on sturdy lumber stilts stood four feet off the stone-paved yard. Each hut had a steep grass roof which enclosed a living area of about six feet square. Inside was an overhead storage compartment for drying rice, which is placed there at the end of the harvest by a special village member. The walls of the little room were made from two-inch-thick pieces of solid timber. Obviously there had once been some huge trees in the area.

Under the outside roof overhang, the walls were decorated with photos. Hanging from the rafters were baskets, tools, animal skulls and other interesting odds and ends. A few pots and pans rounded out the family's meager possessions.

During the cold mountain night they pulled the sturdy door closed and lit a small fire, creating warmth enough for nearly the entire night. A hole near the top of the roof let out most of the smoke.

I felt rather luxurious with my sleeping bag and foam mat. The family had spread out a thin straw mat with a thin blanket for cover, although they did have body heat to share as they all huddled together against the cold.

In the early morning, everyone dutifully climbed over their sleeping guest, since I took up much of the floor space with my relatively large body. They went about their morning chores with quiet cooperation. Breakfast was the same as dinner; rice with black-eyed peas, and rich coffee. They obviously were not wealthy, yet they were willing to share everything they had with a stranger. The hospitality of the rural Asian villagers never ceased to amaze me. (I could also have bathed in the cold mountain water shooting out of the rocks nearby, but I decided a freezing dawn bath was not the best day-opener.)

As I left, I tucked a 100-peso note (about \$4) in the mother's apron pocket and they seemed pleased by the gesture. Despite my assurances they sent their 16-year-old son to help me through the valley maze towards the next village.

It is invigorating to be a part of this giant puzzle, a valley-sized maze which is the lifeblood of hundreds of rural villagers. Up and down we went, zig-zagging along the terraces. I must admit I would have come to many dead-ends without the son's guidance. At times ravines cut through the fields, and being at the wrong crossing point meant much backtracking.

After 90 minutes, we reached the next village and called in to a one-table cafe operated by the boy's aunt. I bought him tea and gave him 10 pesos as a gesture. He looked distressed.

"He thinks you should give him more," the aunt told me, and I felt a twinge of sadness at myself, knowing that even in this remote area, the locals were already tainted with the taste of tourist dollars. I gave him 15 pesos more and his face brightened considerably.

As I wandered around among the huts, I realized the village must get its fair share of tourists, because the locals demanded money or a bottle of the local gin to have their own or any picture taken. I put away the camera. My mind went back to other remote areas in Asia where children would squeal with delight to have their photos taken, and adults showed a modest pleasure to be photographed at their daily tasks. It had cost me only courtesy before.

I had not counted on the many tourists who flock to the next village of Batad coming farther on to this village. They take a jeepney (a unique Philippine concoction, made from old US Army Jeeps) around the other side of the mountain instead of climbing over as I had, and from there take a relatively short hike to Batad, a well-known rice terrace village. Some occasionally come on to this village, as the open palms demonstrated.

Alone I continued towards Batad. From where I approached, the valley bulged into a sweeping amphitheater, and faithfully following its contours were the stone terraces. This spectacle is what draws the tourists. Hundreds of years, hundreds of thousands of man-hours, and a few simple hand tools built these terraces over the centuries. They are passed from generation to generation through the families, and the rice and other crops they provide comprise about 80 percent of the local diet. Most tourists spend an hour or two here and return via jeepney or bus to the village of Banawe.

I stood at one end on a sort of point and decided to climb up for a photo. Near the top I found a woman of about 50, cutting weeds out of the rock walls on her family's section of terrace.

I greeted her and watched her work, and began to do the same. I fetched the parang to help cut the thicker weeds. She seemed puzzled and delighted that I was there helping with the drudgery. We went on up to the very top terrace and she pointed to where her daughter ran a guesthouse. Several times she said I should stay there, and after getting our hands dirty together, I could hardly see how I could have stayed anywhere else.

At 5 p.m. we descended and wound our way along the narrow pathway. Reaching the guesthouse, she introduced me to her daughter and I put my pack into a small but cozy room. Then I went for a well-needed shower. This was from a bamboo gutter which diverts cool spring water from the terrace irrigation system into a four-foot drop. It was rather cold, but refreshing, especially on my scratched ankles.

There were only two German tourists at the house and we had a nice night of chatting together with the family. The next morning the parents posed for photos in their native garb, complete with the seven-foot spears from the head-hunting days. I also got into the act and donned a woven loincloth with the father's help. One size fits all.

After more photos, the father took me down to the lower village to see a funeral celebration. Sitting under his hut, the guest of honor was upright in a freshly made chair, with elderly women chasing the flies away. He was quite dead, and had cotton stuffed into his mouth, nostrils and ears to keep the juices from flowing out. (Or to keep the demons from coming in?) At his feet, young men played cards and demanded my entry fee of two bottles of gin. I paid, took grisly photos, and we returned up to the higher village.

During our walk, the father talked incessantly about how he was in debt and needed to secure another section of rice terrace. I made the mistake of passing him a couple of small bills for his guide services. I knew the women should always receive any gifts or payments but I suppose I misread his appeal. He acted surprised but accepted nonetheless.

I kept wondering if I was helping to corrupt the natives, or doing what was unspoken yet expected, or simply repaying a favor the only way I could at the moment. Having previously avoided tourist areas, this was a rather new experience in Asia for me, this expectation of tipping. I still don't know for sure what is best.

I fetched my backpack and trudged out on the well-beaten path over the pass. I passed several groups of tourists, mostly daytrippers and one-nighters, heading the other direction to stay in the lower village. They looked very clean, as I pondered my own rumpled clothing, muddy shoes and torn ankles.

There were no vehicles along the 12 kilometers back to town, so I walked the entire winding, dusty road. On the way I passed a few groups of local schoolchildren. They were shy yet curious, having generally experienced tourists only as the latter bounced past in buses. They grinned widely at being photographed, and did not ask for money. I got their addresses and sent them print copies instead.

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