

© 1992 by Terry Redding

All Rights Reserved: No part of this article may be cited, published or distributed without consent of the author.

About 980 words

SAGADA SIDETRIP

by
TERRY REDDING

The winding, mountain dirt road on which I am standing offers a distinctly different panorama on either side.

From the valley floor on the right rise stone rice terraces, row upon row forming an ascending patchwork of green fields stacked upon the mountainside. Two farmers work to repair a wall with mud and grass.

Across on the left, limestone pinnacles rise atop the hills, as jagged as broken glass. In a notch among the pinnacles are a few wooden coffins, a burial site for local family members.

It is a strange contrast. But that is Sagada, a small town in the north-central part of Luzon Island in the Philippines. In Asia, you will find few combinations as interesting as those here.

Sagada is only a 12-hour bus ride from thriving Manila, but as the bus bumps along you feel the clock slow down, then stop. When it seems to be going backward, you have arrived in Sagada.

Not that the community is backward. There are some tidy accommodations and good food. The people are generally friendly and helpful. But they still till the rice terraces with sticks and water buffalo, and many continue to bury their dead in caves or in hanging graves.

From the town center you can walk through the St. Mary's Church yard, up the hill and through the cemetery (which is a relatively new town feature). Just behind the cemetery you can look across Echo Valley and try to spot the hanging graves which have been placed among the natural rock notches over 100 feet off the valley floor. Looking up from below, it is nearly impossible to find them, which was the intent; the families did not want the coffins looted or otherwise disturbed.

There are also several caves in the area which have served as burial sites. No one is certain when the tradition started, but in the oldest burial cave, Matangkib, the oldest existing coffins have been dated as being about 400 years old.

It is something of a jolt to the Western system to walk into a semi-lit cave and be surrounded by dozens of decaying wooden coffins. Some are completely rotten, and some have long since tipped over, spilling their contents. A femur poking out here, a pelvis fallen out there; this might be a difficult visit for the squeamish.

On the other hand, a local woman told me that she robbed a skull once for use in a school science project. Even though they are not supposed to, she said, students do it from time to time. She did not say if she eventually returned the skull to its proper resting place.

If you prefer your caves without bones, there are several others of geological interest, with underground rivers, colorful stalactites, stalagmites, and other intriguing rock formations. The area is well-known by Luzon spelunkers. It is advisable to seek out a guide in town and bring a good flashlight to explore the larger caves.

If caves of any nature are just not your thing, explore some of the area's tiny villages to observe the daily life of the local mountain tribe, the Igorots. The traditional straw huts, with their steep, pointy roofs, are now a rarity. Most have been replaced with modern wood and tin homes, but a few can still be found. Almost all the villagers are farmers, tending to small, family plots in the terraces, where they raise rice, corn, and various vegetables and fruits. If you are in town on the weekend, visit the public market on Saturday mornings.

A 90-minute walk from Sagada are extensive rice terraces at Fidelisan Rico, a nice place for a picnic. Maintaining these terraces is a year-round job. You may see farmers out with their water buffalo plowing, or perhaps repairing the terrace walls, or flooding the fields in preparation for planting. You may even get lucky and arrive for a "begnas", a feast to celebrate the harvest.

If the weather is hot, stop at the Bokong waterfalls on your way back and have a cool dip in the fast-flowing pool at the base of the falls. There is also an adjacent, covered picnic area; just ask locals for directions.

To get a better idea of native life, stop in at the studio of photographer Eduardo Masferre, a few minutes walk out of town. Now in his 70s, Masferre has been hiking through the region's mountains for decades, taking black and white photographs and capturing a way of life that is rapidly disappearing in villages across the mountains. Well over 100 of his photographs are available for few cents each; they make excellent post cards.

On the way back from the studio, stop in at the Sagada Weaving shop and see the colorful displays of bags, purses, skirts and other products. You can buy a number of woven products, which are hand-made as you watch.

There are several guest houses in the town. I liked the St. Joseph's Guest House, across from the church. A former convent, the guest house offers tiny but cozy rooms for about \$3 a night, plus some of the best meals in the town. Try the local red rice and native coffee.

The guest houses can recommend local guides to show you the caves, rice terraces, villages or other sites, as well as explain the area's culture and traditions. Make sure to get a local map and ask about Sagada fact sheets. If possible, try to get information in Manila or in Baguio City before coming to Sagada. The town has only recently become known to tourists, and you can not count on the availability of tourist information once there.

One thing you can count on, though; with its beautiful scenery, interesting culture and strange burial customs, a visit to Sagada will never get boring -- even if you avoid the caves.

-end-

(From Manila, early morning buses depart daily for Banawe and Baguio City. From there you can catch smaller buses on to Sagada. Banawe is close enough to make the Sagada visit a daytrip.)