

Trip to Ilocos Sur & Central Cordillera

San Juan, Vigan, Sagada, Banaue & Baguio

We left on a Thursday morning, and stayed one night at Thunderbird Resort, at Poro Point in San Juan, a drive of around 4 hours. The road leading to the Hotel is being upgraded (under construction) but we were impressed with the initial look of the residential houses dotted around the hotel and the 18 hole golf course - named The Cliffs, for obvious reasons and our game was enhanced by the lovely views. The hotel and houses are painted in a pristine bright blue and white - reminiscent of the famed Santorini.



Resort and the hotel terrace looks down onto the sea shore where there is a beach. The pool area is quite big although the free form pool is not very deep for long legged folks like us. There were large parties arriving constantly but they

seemed to melt into the place and service was surprisingly quick and very good - a big draw for visitors seems to be The Casino, however we, surprisingly enough, avoided going in. The restaurant has its own pizza oven and is nice but if you prefer to eat outside, a cool breeze will ensure comfort out on the L shaped terrace. I did however have to ask the waiter to turn off one of the two music systems which seemed to be on but I should know by now that this is a very common Filipino custom - one song for each ear and both loud!

Our deluxe sea facing room had a large balcony and everything inside worked perfectly and was very comfortable.

On then to the Heritage town of Vigan, approximately 4 hours drive



north. We were to stay two nights at the home of friends and were meeting them and some other guests there and we arrived before them so just made ourselves at home with their staff! They took the easier route from Manila - by flying to Laoag and having their driver come and pick them up which is just a one and a half hour's drive away. We ate at a very good, busy restaurant in the heart of the old town near

the famous poetess's statue called Leona Florentino. You can sit inside or outside and our friends took over the ordering, delighting us with typical Vigan specialities including their Longganiza sausage and special Sisig - everything was delicious and fresh. Later, we were escorted through the well lit back streets, which by night were quiet except for one bar, but by day are alive with craft shops, cafes and tourists. Motor driven vehicles are banned from a few of these heritage streets with their uneven cobbles - only calesas (horse drawn carriages) are allowed to be used.



Next day we visited a pottery and walked around town, looking at a beautifully renovated building which had originally been a house and after extensive sympathetic renovation, is now a lovely hotel called Ciudad Fernandina Hotel, 26 Mabini. Not far away from here, we were lucky to be given a rare insight into one of the oldest homes of the town which is still inhabited by my friend's parents. The original features throughout the home date back a century or more and include the original capiz shell decorative partitions, one of which is extremely rare in the form of the old Filipino flag and which has been featured in a book.



A fairly newish feature in the town centre is the water park, which is where they hold a nightly "Son et Lumiere" show starting at 7 - this is not very well advertised which is a shame as it is a very good show and lasts for about 45 minutes - all courtesy of the mayor of the town.

Next day we bade farewell to our friends and set off towards Sagada which took around 6 hours - and this is not a road for the faint hearted - this is a phrase which I will probably repeat again and again! Apart from the "kamikaze" type travellers.





The scenery is spectacular as you rise higher and higher until eventually you reach the area of Sagada and the town itself is almost like an alpine village. Houses of many storeys seem “hung” on the mountainsides in a precarious fashion. You have to “register” as tourists and pay the princely sum of 20 pesos for the privilege. There is a night time “curfew” for the youth of 10pm. and I would imagine any unsuspecting tourists are also included in that! Our recommended hotel, for just the one night called The Masferre (pronounced Massferry) Inn was roughly 50 yards or so down the hill so no problem to find. This is not a big town as there are only two streets and everything that happens is right there within walking distance. We checked in and despite the initial impression of the reception and the decor – it turned out to be fine, and we found that the room was small but clean and had a/c, although we didn’t use it. It is quite cool in the evenings at this altitude but not cold. It also had a small balcony from which we could view the valley – and at least it came with a private shower and CR but no toiletries. Young Filipinos were draped over an odd assortment of chairs in the corridor, watching the only TV and looking a bit bored. The restaurant is open plan within the reception area and seemed quite busy in the evening and morning, however we were swayed by the “Trip Advisor Gods” to try the “Log Cabin” for dinner which was good. Seemingly, their Saturday night buffet is legendary so it’s a pity we missed that. It has only one lovely guestroom which on request, we were shown and had we been staying longer we would have been tempted to move to it but were told it was fully booked for weeks – there was no sign of anybody having checked in at 10 p.m. (ooh, curfew, better run !) and beds were not made up, so that was slightly strange.

In the morning we again tried another place which was very busy – The Yoghurt House – just yards downhill from our hotel and sat out on their “balcony” which was about a foot and a half wide with slices of trees as the tables, meaning that we had to pass along the plates and cups to the other diners! Their homemade yoghurt was divine, the omelette wonderful and the local homemade honey was spectacular but we were quite stunned to find that they didn’t actually sell it there but we found it elsewhere. We went exploring after breakfast and walked through St. Mary’s churchyard and endeavoured to find Echo Valley and the Hanging coffins – we did find a cemetery with some very interesting names on the headstones and what looked like a Valley but disappointingly there were no signs – the idea is that you use and pay for their guides to take you to these places! So I think we missed a lot of the hanging coffins - however undaunted we decided to drive to the other end of the road and at a bend in the road – I spotted a very discreet signpost – “Viewpoint of Hanging Coffins and free CR” - and there they were!

They are called the Sugong coffins and now blend into the granite coloured rocks which point skywards in a jagged formation – nothing like the brightly painted ones found on the postcards but I am sure they were the same. We drove on down the road and stopped at the Right Turn Café with amazing rice terraces views and had some wonderful hot chocolate and brewed coffee. They had several pieces of local weaving for sale so I bought a very fetching hat which, due to its size, should keep the sun off of most of my body at high noon and not



just my face!! A bit further down the road on the left are the long steps down to the Lumiang Burial Cave where over a 100 coffins are stacked, some of which are believed to be 500 years old or more. The latest ones are about 80 years old. Probably the custom has died out (excuse the pun) because the eldest child is supposed to hand carry the stone coffin with parent inside, down to the cave and it’s a very, very long way!! There’s a handy notice saying “Do not open the coffins or try to get inside....” Excuse me??

Some young tourists more intrepid than us were readying themselves to go “spelunking” – following a guide and delving deeper into the caves....we declined their invitation to join them saying “ On you go fellas – take a hike” (nicely of course)...



Continuing down the hill almost to the end of the road, we walked down steps to another cave called Sumaging but this time no coffins, although there were people again readying themselves to delve deeper with the aid of a guide. If it’s your kind of fun, slipping and sliding around in wet, cold and muddy places – then go for it !!

Back onto the road and now another mountainous road journey to Banaue begins... after four hours of spectacular rice terrace views, ear popping and heart stopping bends and dips we arrived and paid another 35 pesos “visitor registration” fee.





We decided to take a meal break – this was not the best idea – the only decent looking place was already “busy” with 6 people hence it took nearly an hour to fry a small chicken leg and chips and open a couple of beers! There would seem to only be three places you can stay at – The Banaue Homestay which is in town next to the ominously named Endtime Apostolic Faith Assembly hall, the Banaue Hotel and Youth Hostel (not great reviews) and The Native Village Inn.. The signposts to this admittedly were on the main road and vaguely pointed to a smaller road but as we travelled along the signs looked more and more ripped and illegible then disappeared altogether. We had already been driving along this track, mostly muddy, narrow - single track in some parts, for 45 minutes and were beginning to think we were completely lost when my better half looked up and spotted some thatched roofed structures! Eureka! We found it!! The signpost had been demolished by a drunken construction worker seemingly and was still to be replaced – not very handy for tourists though I had texted the Australian owner to say we were on our way and he did reply with instructions as to how to find the place as he was not there ... Again it was fully booked, mostly French and Polish tourists and the only place for miles around – but luckily we had arrived before sundown to catch the wonderful views over the terraces from the communal seating area and also from the sliding wooden slats in our “bedroom” – a typical Ifugao native village hut on stilts – what you might call minimalist décor – just a mattress on the floor with pillows and bedding. The night was filled with the forest sounds so I can’t say it was the best sleep I’ve ever had at possibly no more than three hours.



Food and wine was good and staff delightful. We went back along this torturous road to Banaue and onward to Baguio, note there are no cafes at which to stop so best to bring your own drinks and snacks – I must say though I wouldn’t like to drive any of this as apart from the twisting and snaking up and down and round and round - you would miss seeing the fantastic views and breathtaking scenery. We were very, very high up and saw the Ambuklao Dam along the way but were

very glad to make it to Baguio finally after 6 and a half hours at around late afternoon ... We were booked into The Manor at Camp John Hay or two lovely, luxurious nights and I had a relaxing massage and Coffee scrub spa treatment including a dip in the very hot Jacuzzi pool – such a pity there is no swimming pool at CJH or even an area where you can sit in the sun. Perhaps they think it is too cold! It is the only place to stay apart from Baguio Golf and Country Club but you must be a member or a guest of a member to stay there. You can rent a lodge in the grounds of CJH, however to make it economic you really need to be in a crowd of 8 or more. We’ve been to Baguio town before so didn’t go again but if you do go – then a visit to the Easter Road weaving room and shop is a must as they have wonderful woven mats and other souvenirs – but there’s not much else to see.

All in all, a wonderfully diverse holiday and a look at a beautiful part of the Philippines – has to be done at least once during your stay!



Thunderbird Resort at Poro Point, San Juan Province
Tel: +632 6355099
Deluxe double rm. inc. b/fast/ free wifi -Php6,000++

Cuidad Fernandino Hotel, 26 Mabini, Vigan
Tel: +63888223765 – Deluxe double rm. inc. b/fast kids 0-12 free, -Php 4,295

The Masferre Inn, Main street, Sagada.
Agoda website – Standard twin room with b/f –USD32 + 22.6% hotel tax

The Log Cabin, Sagada - Dinners only, Saturday night buffet, must book!
Only one room – no rates - but it looked nice.

The Native Village Inn, 9 km from Banaue - \$54 a night+ for native cottage.

The Manor at Camp John Hay - call to book direct as no rates on Trip advisor or Agoda – Room rates differ according to view, specials on 2 and 3 night stays or “theme” times eg Graduation packages, Romance night etc.

By Diane Ross