



## Stairway to Heaven

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Viewed from the rim of the basin, the rice terraces of Batad look like a natural amphitheatre. The little village sits snugly in the centre of the basin with plots of green paddies cascading towards it.

Hewn out from the mountain slopes with primitive tools by the Ifugao tribespeople since about two millennia ago, Batad's rice terraces are certainly a great engineering achievement. Every plot of paddy field is irrigated by little bamboo aqueducts that channel water from rivulets running down the mountain. Little spillways in the stone retaining walls allow excess water to flood the terraces below.

Free of landslides and erosion, Batad's rice terraces are a magnificent testimony of sustainability, i.e. nature need not be destroyed to satisfy man's needs.

The Ifugaos call their rice terraces "stairway to heaven", and UNESCO

added the rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras to its list of world heritage sites in 1995. The irony is, the Ifugao farmers of Batad can only eke out a meager living from their famous paddy fields which tourists from far and wide like me come all the way to admire.

It was mid-July last year and I had flown alone from Kuala Lumpur to Clark Field in northern Luzon of the Philippines. After spending a night in the adjoining Angeles City, I hopped onto a motorized tricycle (a motorcycle with a side-car) to get to the nearby Dau Bus Terminal to catch the early morning bus to Baguio, a former summer capital and a popular hill station for the Manila people but merely a stepping stone for my exploration further north.

I took the 0730 hrs bus on the third day for Sagada, a Igorot village hidden in the Cordillera Mountain Range in

Mountain Province. There I did some trekking and looked at some hanging coffins in the Echo Valley.

The fourth morning saw me travelling in a jeepney to Bontoc, 18 km away. The journey took 40 minutes. After a quick visit to the Bontoc Museum, I jumped onto another jeepney heading for Banaue in Ifugao Province. The journey took a little more than 2 hours.

In Banaue I teamed up with two German tourists to charter a jeepney to take us to Batad in the following morning. The road was narrow, winding and in bad condition. After 50 minutes of travel, we were blocked by a landslide and our jeepney could go no further. We walked quite a distance before meeting another jeepney. The road ended at a cliff. From there it was a long trek to the rim of the basin overlooking Batad and its rice terraces. ■

