

A weekend with

In the remote highlands of northern Philippines, **Carl Thompson** comes face to face with a tribe even the locals fear - and then the games begin

To be honest, I nearly didn't bother. The night before my ferry into the uplands of Luzon, the second-largest island in the Philippines, I stop over in a village at the foot of the Cordillera Central ranges. I'm the guest of an old friend, who's just built a bungalow in this forest clearing with the money she earned working as a housemaid abroad. Amid the stacks, it stands out like a sore thumb - as do I, this is a place that doesn't see many visitors. A crowd that wouldn't dream of a second division football match surrounds me as I outline my idea.

The plan, I tell them, is to head for the remote tribal heartlands and meet a few of the 60 million people from 40 indigenous groups that still follow a traditional lifestyle on this archipelago of 7,107 islands. This is the cue for the curiosity on the faces of my hosts to cloud into concern. No, they haven't actually been to these places, but still... don't I realise the natives are "savage"? Awful! I've read about getting kidnapped! Haven't I heard about the headhunters?

I brush aside their fears with an unconvincing straggle, then spend a troubled night formulating a strategy. I don't know how to get to the highlands. By the time a hundred chickens start peeping at 4.30am, I still haven't thought of a way to stop out without being here. Instead, I draw some water from the pump well, wash from a bucket and board the Mountain View Limos - a grand name for the rattling bonashah that's supposed to get me to the Kankay settlement at Sagada.

"God Help Us", somebody has painted in large red letters above the drive, and it's a sign clear why the road lapses to a single track that endlessly twists back on itself as we make our way up steeply, bouncing out of potholes and skidding over hot-blasted rocks. As we flirt with the brink of limestone gorges, heavy sacks of rice in the back of the bus slide precariously from one side to the other. Thankfully, the scenery for the next six hours is as majestic as the route is exhilarating, as one tiny blue vista gradually overlaps with the next. Wild swallows vividly carpet the gaps between craggy red rock and forest-belted villages, beyond which every olive-green mountain is studded with rice terraces. Having ascended the staircase in an ear-popping altitude of 4,000 metres, we finally step down into the terraced at-least-thousands-of-hectare country.

During the Seventies, Sagada could claim to be the Far Eastern outpost of the hippie trail. Today, despite a trickle of tie-dyed travellers, it's still a conservative community. A lot of the old and the new is headed out by the tourist office insists on "proper attire" and prohibits "embracing" outside of set routes. There's even a "no-cupping" sign, somewhat forcefully, by a valley of gaudy scenic viewpoints. After the jarring journey, I'm more than eager to shower it, and check in to a deeply faded five-patched cabin at St. Joseph's Resthouse.

Next day, I step out into a still and dazzlingly clear Cordillera morning and wait. I'd brought my camera. At first sight, this could be any remote village - a single, somewhat more staid building with a thatched roof and the familiar coat of bearded women, basket-bounding children and endless old men. However, the details that

distinguish the locals from the lowlanders are apparent on closer inspection. For one thing, the different tribes wear different headgear, some of them even made of woven bamboo. Moreover, many people are a few miles from here. Moreover, many people are chewing intently on betel leaves, a habit peculiar to smoking. And there's a dog most for sale on a street corner - something else that makes me feel a long way from home.

Perhaps it's like going to Scotland and expecting to see a kilt, but I'm not in Scotland, and instead see the sign of a tribal dress code, and instead plenty of jeans and baseball caps. Traditional dress, I'm told, is reserved for special occasions. By pure coincidence there's one this morning, the air suddenly grows with the sound of snare drums and xylophones, and a school local marches into view. Bearing flags and dressed in crimson Kookaburra berets and caps, they're followed by a striking line of fellow students in immaculate uniforms. Curious to find out what's going on, I track them down a forest path and out into an overgrown playing field, where they form into neat ranks.

This, it turns out, is a sports day for the schools of Mountain Province, aimed at identifying the stars of the future. Before the fun can start, upwards of a thousand schoolchildren solemnly raise their right hands and sing the national anthem as the Philippine flag is hoisted up a bamboo pole. Then, in an inspired flourish, a flaming torch is relayed round the field to rising cheers, and the Sagada Olympics is declared open.

At the games begin, I embark on a different form of exercise - a trek through Echo Valley in the company of Arturo, a local guide. Here we find the most striking evidence of a unique way of life, or rather death, although most indigenous groups share the bulk of the overwhelmingly Catholic majority. Customised customs can be radically different. High above us, suspended on wires in swirling clouds of fog, are a dozen or more "hanging coffins" - exposed to the elements, as Arturo explains, "to allow the spirit to escape to the next world".

We find 157 more tree-trunk coffins stacked like totem in the peeping mouth of Lanting cave, where Arturo explains me by dragging me into the light and coolly flipping off the lid. The occupant, partially wrapped in red and white woven fabrics, is tucked into a fetal position, hands raised in apparent horror at our intrusion. I can't help noting that he or she has remarkably well-preserved hair. This particular body was mummified according to the tribal method of being placed in a high chair and smoked over a fire for 12 days. "Mummification is adequate apologetics, we replace the ash plank."

The truth with mortality reminds me of headhunting, the method by which young tribesmen were appealed in potential brides. "People intermarry these days, so it's not a problem anymore," Arturo assures me. "However, it can sometimes occur. There was a case here about 10 years ago."

So much for how native people live. To see how they die, next day I visit the pleasantly surprising town of Bontoc, where the impressive Kadugan are skilfully showed up with headhunting to remember. I arrive just as the vendors are returning from the fields, and accompany a few to the inevitable barista bar.



the headhunters

David Greenly/Getty Images



TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

GETTING THERE
There are no direct flights between the UK and the Philippines. Airlines such as Qatar (020 7896 3636; www.qatarairways.com), Cathay Pacific (020 8634 6666; www.cathaypacific.com) and Gulf Air (0870 777 1717; www.gulfair.com) fly to Manila via their hub cities. Sagada is about 270km north of Manila and can be reached by bus from Baguio.

To reduce the impact on the environment, you can buy an "offset" from climate care (01865 207 000; www.climatecare.org). The environmental cost of a return flight from London to Manila is £24. The money funds sustainable energy and reforestation projects.

STAYING THERE
St. Joseph's Resthouse, North Luzon (00 63 918 559 5934), cabins from \$27 (£12).

MORE INFORMATION
Embassy of the Philippines (020 7605 1100; www.owpphilippines.co.uk).

Philippines are the undisputed crooners of Asia, and competition for the microphone is keen. No-body can sing, nobody cares and everyone has fun. There's more evidence of the easy familiarity between people in this region on the ride back. It's packed as usual, and I'm struck by the instinctive manner in which people scoop up and take responsibility for each other's children. Just as I'm remarking how everyone seems to belong to one big family, an apple-cheeked two-year-old boy underlines the point by loudly insisting I'm his father. It's the embarrassment of his mother and the amusement of her seven other children.

The return journey to the lowlands involves another long bus journey, and this time I step off at random in the Bontoc village of Sagayan, perched near Mount Tabor. Having put away a large plate of steamed vegetables, salad and glass, both for about £1, I decide to stroll around the farms that dominate the slopes overlooking the village. In a nearby field of cabbages, I meet a group of women coming back from church in shades of olive or (best red) and black jackets and skirts and very traditional waders. They ask me where I'm going and I tell them Manila. "Oh, you don't want to go there," they advise me. "It's like another world altogether." I have to agree they're absolutely right.