

Islands Primeval—Batanes



There is a mystique, an aura, a sense of something inexplicable, intangible, in the very atmosphere. It is more than the picturesque land and seascapes, though everywhere you look is a picture. It is rather like the Tao—those who know what it is do not speak; those who speak do not know. And yet...why else would an internationally known artist such as **Pacita Abad** choose to build her hide-away studio (right photo) on her home island of Batan and request burial on its shores? Her A-frame studio-home, an architectural poem of space and materials, is now the center of a foundation which carries her name. Although some young people leave, why do so many choose to either return or remain in so remote an area with so few modern innovations? There is one small electricity generating power plant, and a wind farm consisting of three windmills.

And, the cleanliness is pervasive—not only in the sea and air but in the lack of visible trash. The litter we saw is more easily attributable to visitors than to residents, and may be a reason why many islanders would like to see tourists and tourist activities limited.

As with most of the Philippines, Batanes has a rich and interesting history.

The first Spanish missionary arrived in 1686 to find an impoverished, illiterate seafaring people living in small communities, engaged in boatbuilding, fishing, hunting, farming, and the raising of root crops. Due to climatic, government, and missionary conditions it was not until 1782 that Governor General Jose Basco y Vargas, from whom the capital city of Basco derives its name, sent an expedition to Batanes to gain the consent of the Ivatans to become subjects of the King of Spain. The first governor was appointed in 1783, but it was 1855 before the Spanish actually moved in.



Basco's first stone church constructed from 1787-1796 was destroyed by a typhoon. The current church utilizes (left photo) the front and north walls of the original, while the rear and south walls were erected inside the ruins of the original walls. Today it shines white and strong between the harbor and the bay.



The Spanish brought the Catholic religion and a centralized form of government under Spain, narrow roads, a church, a municipal hall, and connecting bridges. There was a thriving trade relationship between Ivana and Cagayan, and a weaving loom for cotton in virtually every household. There was a schoolhouse in Ivana for the teaching of the four Rs—reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion.

In September of 1898 the Katipuneros from Luzon hoisted their flag on Ivana and Batanes came under the Republic for about eighteen months.

(group photo in front of San Vicente Ferrer church, Sabtang)

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With the arrival in 1900 of the Americans on the USS Princeton came education. During the 41 years of American government, a larger schoolhouse with two wing annexes was constructed and the curriculum expanded (at one time Batan had the highest literacy rate in the Philippines); roads were widened; the town hall reconstructed. The church, three seaports, and health and sanitation methods were improved. There was a wireless telegraph tower and station, and an airport, all destroyed by the Japanese military after they landed in 1941.

Although we only saw schools that served students through high school, I learnt upon return that there are universities in Basco and that mainlanders from Cagayan and Ilocos Norte on northern Luzon sometimes send their children to "keep them out of trouble." There is a hospital in Basco, but no emergency evacuation procedures, although medical patients do receive priority on the four weekly flights between Basco and Manila. There are also small clinics and even smaller pharmacies. From the healthy look of the people and the abundant amount of greenery, one would suppose herbal medicines and the individuals who know how to use them are readily available.

The people still live in small clusters on narrow, winding streets in homes made of cane and grasses with thatched roofs frequently one foot thick, but today there are also houses made of stone, sometimes painted white, with roofs of galvanized iron as well as thatch. There may or



may not be a separate kitchen but virtually every home has either a fireplace or a fire pit. Without any evidence of a chimney the interiors are free of the smell and residue of smoke. There is a small market in the city proper but most householders tend to bargain directly with the tradesmen—the fisherman, the vegetable farmer, the butcher. Celeste and Nonoy, intrepid food hunters they, discovered a "Strangers Bakery". After treating us to their purchase of warm, freshly baked breads there was a "run on the market", and bread became, for us, a staple. And, Sony was able to conjure up a source capable of producing a cake with which we surprised Celeste and Nonoy on their wedding anniversary!

We were taken to a "Ghost Village" which was abandoned in the mid-1950s after a tidal wave destroyed the area. Today the remnants of some of the stone houses have been repaired, the roofs re-thatched, freshly washed laundry hangs on lines, and some 15 families are again calling it "home". Is the rebirth of the village a testament to the durability of the people, the stone houses, or both?



cluster of traditional houses on Sabtang Island



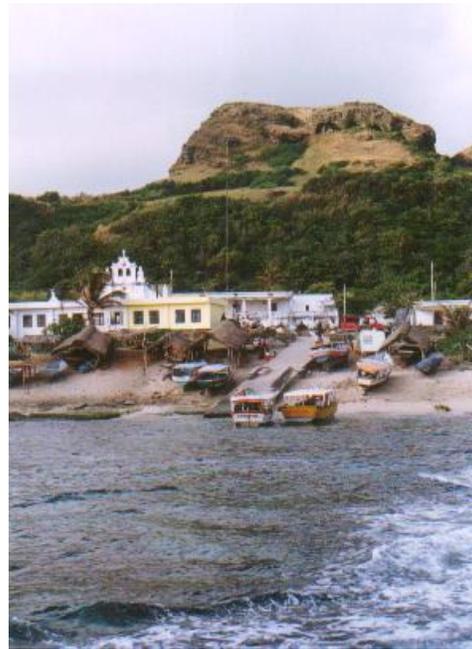
"Ghost Village" on Batan

It was not until our last day, Sunday, that the sea was sufficiently welcoming to allow boats to move between Batan and Sabtang, a picturesque island 35 minutes from Ivana. The trip had been planned for Saturday but the weather had refused to cooperate. The Saturday flight from Manila to Basco had to be cancelled. Three Cathay Pacific airline hostesses we met had spent Friday night on Sabtang in a dorm-like guesthouse as their boat was not able to make it back for them. Being of a cautious nature we insisted that should we go on Sunday our boat had to wait for us—no side trips if you please while we were on the island.

Those of us who set out on Sunday morning (six of the group remained in Batan for beach and picnic) may have had some trepidations, but the venture was quite worth it. The wind, waves, and rain must have decided we had had enough, for although it was a bit of a challenge getting in and out of the boat and the sea somewhat rough coming back, the island and lunch became a memory to cherish. In addition to the wonderful land and seascapes there were pre-Hispanic fortresses, Idjangs, from which we understand the people rained stones down upon the heads of would be intruders, and sand dunes, rising about 100 meters high. The houses here, too, are mainly of stone with thatched roofs, the seascapes magnificent, the beaches beautiful, the people as lovely and friendly as those of Batan. One difference we noticed is that the thatched roofs do not have overhangs as do the ones in Batan. With only one small strip of arable land the people of Sabtang are less affluent than those on Batan, so they conserve roofing materials and costs by roofing their houses only from wall to wall, no overhangs.

Monday morning when we said goodbye to the stone cottages with their ocean view, our wonderful guides, and the helpful resort staff—each of us carrying a complimentary box of the garlic for which Batanes is famous—we felt we were leaving friends.

Would we go back? I would and I am sure the other 15 members of the group share my feelings.



the pier at Sabtang



an Idjang



Sabantang house above, Batan house below





sunset from Batanes Resort