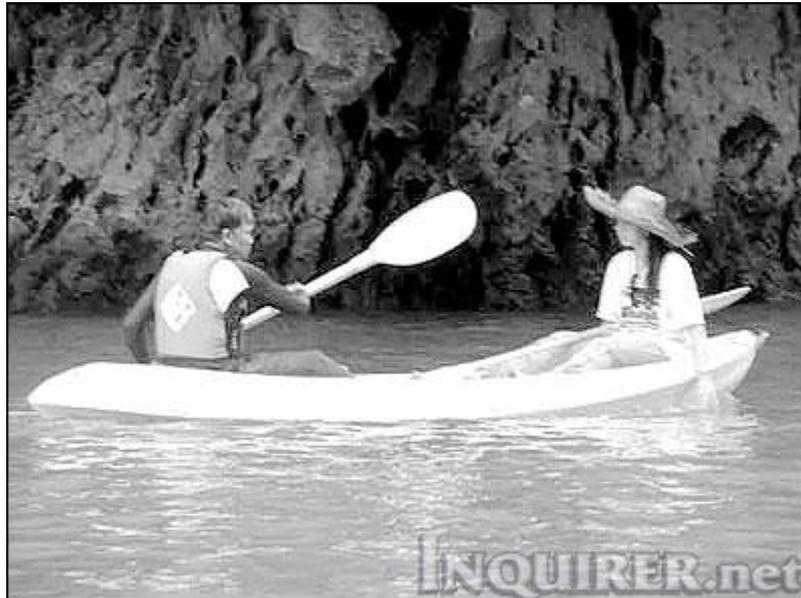


Cruising the 'Golden River' of Basey, Samar

By Vicente Labro

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KAYAKING from the village of Inuntan to the Sohoton Caves. INQUIRER VISAYAS/Ven Labro

BASEY, Samar, Philippines? The Cadac-an River has played a significant role in the history of the ancient town of Basey in Samar province.

It got its name from being the biggest river in the area, with the mouth currently measuring about 500 meters.

Basey was originally located near the river's mouth, in a place now known as the village of Binongto-an. Like other early coastal settlements, it was not spared from plunder by the Moro marauders, which resulted in the poblacion being moved a few kilometers north of Binongto-an to its present site.

Because of the Moro raids, people living in villages along the river bank had to move deeper into the uplands, some of them venturing into caves now known as the Sohoton Caves. Archaeological diggings in the 1960s uncovered graves of early people inside one of the Sohoton caverns.

During the Philippine-American War, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Filipino revolutionaries established a camp atop a cave, now called Panhulugan, at the confluence of the Cadac-an and Sohoton rivers. From their vantage point, they would throw bamboo spears and drop boulders into the river where an enemy boat was passing by.

The Americans, however, were able to eventually overrun the camp in the late 1901.

The Cadac-an River has also been a mute witness to the environmental destruction of the mountains of Basey by a commercial logging firm, which, according to the mayor, had enriched itself and left nothing to the poor municipality. Thousands of logs were floated on the river and dragged to the outside world from the 1960s until the early 1980s.

It was probably the logging operations that caused the siltation of the river and changed its color from clear to light brown. The locals, however, saw a golden hue and started calling it the Golden River.

Protected area

In 1935, in a move to preserve the natural beauty of the area between the villages of Inuntan and Mabini, the farthest upstream village, the government declared protected the 840-hectare Sohoton Bridge Natural Park, which could be reached through the Golden River.

The national park boasts of caves with magnificent stalactites, stalagmites, and other rock formations, and of a natural bridge, an arch-shaped rock that connects two ridges over the river below.

Hundreds of tourists visit Basey every year, lured by the beauty of the park, particularly the spectacular Sohoton Caves.

The number has kept growing through the years such that the Sohoton Caves would eventually become the most frequently visited place in Eastern Visayas, according to the Department of Tourism regional office.

The growth in tourism prompted the DoT to train locals to become professional service providers to visitors.

Skills training that included cave guiding, kayaking, and food preparation were conducted last year, participated in by members of people's organizations, such as the Sohoton Services Association (SSA), Basey Tourism Association (Batosan), and the Rawis Community-Based Resource Management. Each group has about 30 members.

The idea was to create a pool of service personnel for tourists and provide more income to the community.

While in the past, tourists had to take a one-hour tedious motorboat trip to reach the national park, today they travel in style and take a leisure ride by boat—an open pavilion on top of two outriggers—that serves food, provides entertainment, and allow them to see the landscape.

The river cruise is run by the municipal tourism office, in coordination with people's organizations whose members were trained to become professional guides under the DOT's Ecotourism Product Development Livelihood Project, with the support of Basey Mayor Wilfredo Estorninos.

The cost

For the cruise, municipal tourism officer Evangeline Ritaga said a P600-fee is collected per person for a group of at least 20 for the trip to the caves, inclusive of food and guided tour inside.

Ritaga said the number of local and foreign tourists who took the river cruise from May 18 to July 17 alone had reached 215. "This did not include the passengers on the maiden voyage of the river boat during its soft opening on May 11, which numbered 67," she said.

Tourists not going to the caves can also take the cruise at P400 per person for a group of similar size. The package still includes a meal, but the passengers had to disembark at Sitio Rawis, from where they could go either to the Balintak Falls Nature Park or to the Rawis Cave near the wharf. Separate charges are collected for either destination.

People who want to paddle their way to the Sohoton Caves from the village of Inuntan can rent kayaks. The package includes a guide and free use of life jackets.

On August 9, no less than President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo visited the area, took an adventure cruise, and explored the magnificent Sohoton Caves.

In 2006, she declared the Central Philippines as the premier tourist destination in the country under her super regions program. It comprises of Palawan, Western Visayas, Central Visayas, Eastern Visayas, Bicol, Romblon, Siargao, and Dapitan/Dipolog.

Central Philippines boasts of unique natural wonders, white beaches, vast forest reserves, and diverse ecosystems, among others.

Ritaga revealed that her office is providing free guide services to tourists who want to go to other places in Basey, especially in the town proper where visitors could see mat weavers working in houses or go to the century-old stone church of Basey and other places.

Improvements

Karen Tiopes, tourism regional director, disclosed that the DoT plans to put up a modern jetty port at the village of Binongto-an to best serve the tourists. The port would include a jetty terminal with a ticket booth, souvenir shop, and comfort rooms.

There will also be a river promenade, tourist center, and parking space.

Two small jetty terminals will also be established in the village of Inuntan and at the Sohoton Caves area. The terminal in Inuntan would have eco-lodges where tourists could stay overnight or for days. The one at the Sohoton Caves entrance would serve as rest stop for tourists.

The Sohoton Caves would also be lighted and the trails inside improved, according to Tiopes.

Basey, a coastal town about 35 kilometers away from Tacloban City, could be reached from Tacloban by a 45-minute land trip passing through the picturesque San Juanico Bridge. Tacloban, on the other hand, is just an hour away from Manila by plane. Flights from Cebu to Tacloban are also available.

Ref.: <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/features/travel/view/20090820-221155/Cruising-the-Golden-River-of-Basey-Samar>

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