

THE MUMMIES OF KABAYAN

Before Kabayan there was Baguio: a small city in the mountains where I slept for two nights in a rebuilt fertility hut; wandered through a market with wares including strawberry and carrot keyrings, garlands of dried flowers, tinned foods, brooms, the tiniest chillies I've seen ("Chillies, you want?" "Haha, no." I would not touch those with my fingers, let alone my tongue.), rice, pink-shelled eggs and piles of exotic broccoli; saw several pretty churches; discovered sticky rice with chocolate sauce is beautiful and needs to feature more often in my life; resisted the urge to buy a big possibly-antique wooden shield; had my iPod stolen while I was listening to it.

(And before Baguio there was more of Manila than its churches and markets: lunch at a funky cafe with menus on CD cases, where I ate sisig, a pork dish containing cuts like cheek, ear, brain; visiting 5,000-year-old petroglyphs on a hillside; art galleries; riding jeepneys to another part of the city with fishing boats and a view across the lake and another market, dim and full of plastic ware and recycled notebooks; shopping at [Papemelroti](#) and drinking bitter hot chocolate for the first time; walking along part of Intramuros, the old colonial wall, and eating bits of pork on a stick grilled at a roadside (avoiding the intestines curled whitely along their own sticks); and eating dinner another night on a hill overlooking the hazy city with the distant red circles of Independence Day fireworks blipping on the horizon.

Some of the petroglyphs:



The one that is fat and tailed and clearly a lizard? I thought it was a pregnant woman til Ju corrected me.)

But, Kabayan. I got there on an open-windowed bus from Baguio, operated by A Liner – the company that keeps its timetable a careful secret. No one working at my accommodation knew its departure time(s) and, when they phoned the bus station, no one there knew either. One guy

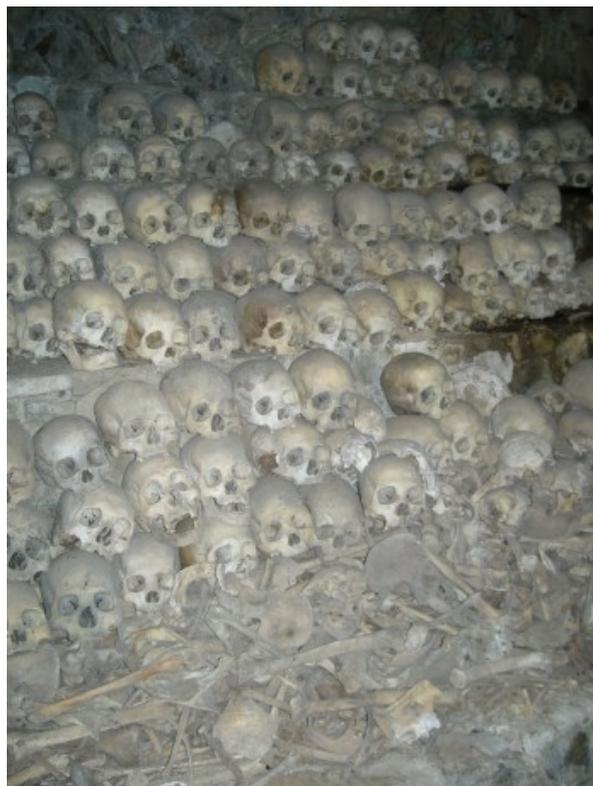
thought they ran hourly and/or at 8am/9am or something that turned out entirely wrong. I arrived at 8am and was told by a guy standing in front of an A Liner bus to another destination that the Kabayan bus left at 10am. Away I went to the city centre, to eat more sticky rice with chocolate sauce, and returned at 9.30am to get a window seat – wedged it open with tissue, as its clip was broken – and spent the 4 hours of the journey thoroughly enjoying the breeze and the mountain views. The windy road was sometimes paved, sometimes not, and was the kind of road that gives you a glimpse of your destination an hour before you reach it. Kabayan, that destination, was pretty but very small: village among terraced fields, only one place to stay, its major eatery a minimart with a menu. It's visited for the mummies.

At school, I only ever got taught about Egyptian mummies. I wish someone had mentioned that other cultures practised forms of mummification! In Australia I read an article about Korean mummies (which seem to be accidental). In my \$5 Philippines guidebook, photocopied by a man in Vietnam, I opened to a random page with box-text about the mummies of Kabayan. Away I went.

That afternoon in Kabayan I visited Opdas burial cave – not a cave, really, a space under a rock full of skulls and other bones – and the museum, small but excellent, as it gave information on the mummification process and descriptions of some of the mummies. (There are many caves in the mountains around Kabayan, mostly protected from visitors.) These descriptions ventured into the curiously affectionate: *“The legbones are pretty”* said one, of a male mummy.

This route took me through all of the village, so I spent the rest of the day staring out the window and playing Zelda on my DS, and I arranged my hike for the next day.

Opdas burial cave:



See, the mummies are close to Kabayan, but not *very* close. To get to the mummies in the Timbac caves, I had to walk for 5 hours uphill from 3,900 feet to over 8,000 feet above sea level (that's 1,200 to 2,500 metres) with my bags. That's hard work for a person acclimatised to sea level. (Good thing my suitcase stays in Bangkok!) Good thing, too, the temperature stayed cool and I carried plenty of snacks.

It was worth it. Beautiful views all the way up: overlooking mountains with terraces cut into their sides, multicoloured with crops ranging from rice to potatoes depending on altitude, houses of corrugated iron shining like scattered silver among them or coloured with rust or paint, farms on isolated outcrops as we climbed, sometimes accompanied by the part-fox dogs common in this region. We followed steeply climbing roads and even steeper shortcuts among pine trees and, higher up, tree ferns. (Apparently the highest peaks have oaks growing on them. *Oaks!* I saw none, sadly.) The mountaintops get frost some years, which is bad news for the farmers. We drank mountain water stored in a tank near a farm and my guide, the excellent Albert, lamented the lack of mushrooms on this mountain.

Eventually we reached the top.

The caves, like Opdas in the village, are not caves in the way I usually define the word; they're cramped spaces in the hillside, shaped by a few rocks. The wooden coffins containing the mummies are stacked inside. Padlocks in varying stages of rusting decay kept closed the gates, preventing further theft of the mummies or their parts. (Some are missing jawbones because of medical students.)

This is Albert opening up a coffin inside the first cave:



Its contents:



I'm used to seeing the interestingly preserved dead and/or their artifacts through glass or from behind a barricade. Crouching in the cave, inches from the dead, was strange in a mostly pleasing way.

The preservation of some feet, especially the toes, was a bit creepy. I could imagine painting those nails. I could imagine the toes then wiggling. Worse was the woman who died of childbirth and had a large cavity in the appropriate area, and I was a bit too grossed out to ask if that was coincidence. They didn't smell, exactly; there was a smell of not just earth and stone, but not a bad smell. I couldn't describe it. In the second cave, as Albert and I crouched in the tiny bit of space among coffins, he shifted aside the lid of a bigger one so I could peer inside at the family inside, and I was angled so I breathed in only coffin air. Still not a strong smell, but definitely *there*.

In the museum, I copied the following text about the mummification process:

"Before the last breath of the dying person a large quantity of salt is dissolved in water and the person is made to drink this. The body is undressed and bathed with fresh water, then sat on a chair* to help dry the body and preserve the tissues. When the body begins to bloat a jar is placed underneath to catch the fluids. The fluid is sacred.

During noontime the body is brought out for sun drying. The outer layer of the skin is removed by the elders to help the drying process.

Juices of the pounded leaves of diwdiw, besodak, kapane and native guava are continuously rubbed gently throughout [on, I assume] the body. Tobacco smoke is also blown into the body through its mouth to help preserve the internal tissues and drive out worms.

When the body is already dry and can be lifted up the mummified body in crouch position purposefully done [the body's put in the folded-up position], is carried to the cave by one man."

*In Bontoc's museum, days later, I saw photos of this. The person is bound to the chair, cloth over their mouth like a gag. It's bordering on horrifying.

Some mummies were tattooed, a process that could take up to a month. Here's a torchlit glimpse of the most famous tattooed mummy in the second cave:



Unfortunately, that's white mould eating his hands. Preservation is difficult, especially since many mummies were removed for museum exhibits.

I left with several lingering thoughts: the intensely personal experience of hiking up a mountain to crouch into a cave and see these preserved people; the accompanying creepiness of it; the knowledge that this one is going to emerge one day and eat our souls.



From the caves, we climbed 260 steps (not one of my favourite things at >8,000 feet above sea level) and walked down to the "highway", where I caught a bus to Sagada.

Ref. <http://alankria.livejournal.com/165489.html>

Look more on www.Burial.PhilippinesHeritage.ph