I'm assuming that you're a citizen of an industrialized country with a perspective that could be classified under the category of, for want of a better term, Western. If I am correct, then sharing a dinner of live maggots with Amazonian tribal residents could be considered as a fairly radical thing to do. Right? OK. Now, perhaps we here in Cebu can't offer you live maggots for dinner, but we also have experiences that we take for granted in our everyday lives which would probably considered fairly radical by your standards. Right at the top of the list is riding a habal-habal.

Habal-habal (sometimes spelled habal2x or habalhabal) are motorcycles for hire, which routinely ply routes into the interior highlands. In most cases, a habal-habal is the only form of public transportation available within and to the hinterland.

Habal2x ply such routes for several reasons. One, due to the nature of the terrain, the area is difficult to access by four-wheeled traffic, especially in wet weather. Second, helmet laws are not enforced beyond the inner city. Thus, the habal2x are barred from operating in the city, but act as feeder arteries to jeepney nodes located on the perimeter of the urban public transportation network. Third, rural economies do not support capital investment in expensive four-wheeled vehicles; bikes are cheaper and it is easier to scrape together the money to start a habal2x business than a jeepney route. This is especially true in the far-flung provinces. Lastly, habal2x are entirely unregulated; since no LTFRB franchise is required, a habal2x service can be started relatively easily.

Habal2x stands are easily recognized. Multiple motorcycles will have been neatly parked alongside each other, usually near an intersection, and their owners will be doing nothing but waiting, either standing around chatting or seated astride their bikes. If they consider you a potential customer, they will offer you their services by calling out or a making a quick hand gesture. Fares start at about 20 pesos (about 50 cents in US money).

Now, riding on the back of a motorcycle may not sound that radical. But consider this: First of all, habal2x typically carry 2-4 passengers at a time, in addition to the driver (don't call him a "rider"). One on occasion - in Badian - I counted 8 persons, though that included one infant and two children.

Second, due to propriety, passengers do not clutch the driver nor each other; balance is maintained by holding on to the bike seat, one's own knees, or nothing at all. Often passengers are perched precariously on the bike - in the case of passengers with tight skirts, sidesaddle with both legs to one side - and miraculously manage to stay on top.
Third, passengers rarely have their hands free. Cash-poor peasants usually need a good reason to justify the expense of a habal2x ride. They may either be carrying bags of produce - such as vegetables or live chickens - for sale in the market, or they could be clutching bags of commodities - such as animal feed, rice or sugar - purchased in town.

Fourth, the roads traversed by the bikes are mostly dirt roads paved with mud and gravel. Even if they are asphalted, the blacktop is usually paper-thin, narrow, extremely bumpy, and riddled with potholes.

Fifth, for some reason the habal2x drivers rarely travel at less than full speed. Is it an ego thing between young men with motorcycles, or because of passenger demand for speedy service? I don't know, but in any case I can guarantee you that you will never see a habal2x traveling at a sedate pace.

Sixth, habal2x travel in rain, in which case some passengers sport umbrellas, and at night. The dirt roads in the mountains are lit sparsely, if at all. The bikes themselves often lack lights.

So if you can picture yourself on the back of a motorcycle with three other passengers clutching live chickens and sacks of rice, hurtling through the rainy night over muddy dirt roads while the unlicensed teenager who bought the Chinese-made bike with a $50 down payment last week races another similarly beladen bike, you'll get an idea of what a habal2x ride is like.

Perhaps it's not surprising that many passengers, particularly women, cross themselves before getting on the bike. And that is, indeed, the only possible way to ride a habal2x: by placing your utter total faith in the driver and in whatever deity you believe in. You get on, close your eyes, and do not deviate one iota from the conviction that the driver knows exactly what he is doing and that you will arrive at your destination unscathed. And you will be right; accidents are rare, and the riders, for the most part, do a superb job, smoothly gliding their machines through the mountain roads, and - as Filipinos so often do - making up for the failures of governmental infrastructure with immense skill and determination.