IN FOCUS

THE TAJ MAHAL OF NEGROS

... ONCE THERE WAS A LOVE DEEPER THAN THE SEAS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAYMUND JAVELLANA AND TRONCO PHOTOGRAPHY
It’s a story that must be told – the bittersweet love of Don Mariano Ledesma Lacson (1865-1948), owner of the mansion in Talisay City, Negros Occidental, now famous among tourists as “The Ruins.” It’s gaining renown so fast for its haunting grandeur especially among Negros’ foreign visitors that Raymund Javellana, direct descendant of the Don and current proprietor of “The Ruins,” obliged us with an exclusive audience for this story.

Mariano was living a sweet life. He was the young, dashing and bachelor baron of a 440-hectare plantation in Spanish colonial-era Talisay City. As much as he worked hard, he was enjoying his young life to the hilt. One of his passions was seeing the world, and he often did so in the company of an equally wealthy friend.

On one of his meanderings abroad, Mariano caught sight of Maria Braga – a beautiful, young Portuguese lady from Macau – in old Hong Kong. “Struck-by-lightning” in love, he did not hesitate meeting her and her father, a captain of his own vessel. He thought, “Mariano and Maria – a match made in heaven!” So smitten was he that it did not take long before he asked for Maria’s hand in holy matrimony. They got married and lived in Mariano’s ancestral house in Talisay.

Mariano and Maria’s married life was blissful. They were blessed with ten siblings – Victoria, Rafael, Mercedes (who later married a Javellana; they were Raymund’s grandparents), Natividad, Sofia, Felipe, Consolacion, Angelina, Ramon and Eduardo. But it was not fashionable to have a small family in those times. The number of children a couple had also formed part of a family’s wealth. Maria became laden with an 11th child.

Suddenly… the cruel hand of fate dealt a tragic blow. In some nasty twist of events, the pregnant Maria slipped in the bathroom and began to bleed. Her condition was so precarious that she couldn’t even take the rigors of travel to the nearest available full-fledged physician in the next town, now Silay City (site of today’s international airport).
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A two-story mansion of Italianate architecture with neo-Romanesque columns.
So Mariano had no choice; he frantically summoned his horseman to take what at the time was the fastest mode of transportation, a horse-drawn carriage, for fetching the physician who can attend to Maria.

At the time, a horse-drawn carriage took two days to reach Silay. Mariano had to suffer the four-day wait for the arrival of the carriage as he tended his wife. Sadly, both Maria and the baby passed on even before the doctor arrived. Mariano was devastated and heartbroken – the love of his life gone, taken by a freak accident. No mortal would have been able to fathom the depths of his grief.

But he had to move on for the sake of his children. In one of those healing moments, he thought of a way to immortalize Maria in his memory for the rest of his life: build a mansion adjacent to his ancestral home. He wanted to dedicate it to Maria’s love, especially to their 10 children. He touched base with Maria’s father and told him of his plan to erect a grand palace in honor of Maria, where he and the kids would live as well as desert the scene of Maria’s tragic mishap. Mariano’s intention was well-received by his father-in-law, who not only provided some finances but might also have given Mariano the design of his very own mansion for reference.

Construction of the Don Mariano Lacson Mansion went in earnest. Mariano entrusted the design and building specifications to a local builder, Engineer Puentevella, and asked son Felipe to supervise the construction and make certain that the A-grade mixture of concrete was precisely poured. It was finished to perfection, upon which the Don told his children the mansion was theirs to live in for as long as they were unmarried. The family cherished in the new mansion the loving memory of Maria. And life went on beautifully for them all from then on...

The two-story mansion was of Italianate architecture as evidenced by its neo-Romanesque columns all around. Since the engineer was a Filipino, it is believed the design came from that of Maria’s ancestral mansion which was given by her father to Mariano as sample. The imprimatur of
Maria’s father, a ship captain, is now clear from the shell-inspired décor all around the top edges of the mansion – the same ones that identified the homes of ship captains in New England at the time.

Tell-tale signs of Mariano’s adoration for Maria abound. There’s the two “M” letters molded in reclined positions onto each and every post around the mansion’s exterior – symbols that stand for Mariano and Maria. The final touches to the concrete walls and posts were made with egg whites mixed into the cement for a fine, marble-like touch, representing Maria’s alabaster skin characteristic of Mediterranean women. And the load-bearing pillars were reinforced, not with ordinary metal rods, but with the thick, dense metal columns used to build railways for long-lasting ability – an edifice for Maria that can last “forever.”

In this magnificent mansion, three of Mariano’s daughters lived to the max and never married. On Mariano’s arrangements, the daughters stayed on the upper floor while the sons occupied the ground level. Victoria, Consolacion and Angelina stayed single and enjoyed every moment in the mansion. It is surmised that, because the females stayed on the upper floor, their suitors were not lucky or brave enough to get past the brothers on the lower level, thus failing to court their lady loves and win them over to married life.

But all good things must come to an end. During the early part of World War II, the guerilla forces under American command were constrained to raze the mansion to the ground so as to keep the occupying Japanese forces from using it as headquarters. The resulting inferno brought down the roof and the two-inch wooden floors, but the framework remains intact to this day.

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Now, ‘The Ruins’ is a majestic sight to behold. Its huge, ornately designed fountain reminiscent of those in piazzas around Italy stands proud by the entrance, backed-dropped by the Simborio – a structure outside where the ancestral palace used to be, which actually was the vent used for milling line mascovado sugar at the plantation. Its grounds sprawl verdantly all around the mansion, with picnic and lounging areas, a mini-golf course, and even a small grotto with an intimate shaded rendezvous for two beside it. The ground floor has been transformed into a restaurant area where one may experience fine dining and bar treats at the very heart of the mansion. When there, don’t forget to sample Raymund’s Brazo de Mercedes cake from his grandmother Mercedes’ original recipe. There’s nothing like it in the entire world for its exceptionally rich flavor and consistency. And another Mercedes original, the Callos alla Madrid, is the house specialty that’s to die for.

As a tourist spot, “The Ruins” today enjoys the patronage of 4,500 visitors a month, 600 of whom are from foreign lands. It reaches its peak during the famous Masskara Festival in October when, for the week-long fest, tourists number 700 a day. In fact, its growing reputation did not escape the attention of former president Arroyo, who recently visited with an entourage of 200. Also, it has been the location for two movies shot by noted director Peque Gallaga, and a concert by matinee idol Piolo Pascual. Special events – weddings, receptions, pre and post-nuptial shoots, debut parties, family reunions, educational tours, concerts and plays, conferences and meetings, and many other social occasions – now form part of its constant hive of activities.

See “The Ruins” for you and your friends and families, and experience Don Mariano’s everlasting tribute to his undying love. Immerse in the glory of the past at this pride and joy of Negros, its very own Taj Mahal.

Getting There:

Hop onto one of Zest Air’s big Airbus A320s. It flies out to Bacolod from the Old Domestic Airport at 7.40 a.m. every Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday, and at 2.45 p.m. every Monday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. This takes you to the international airport in Silay City. “The Ruins” is in the next town before Bacolod, Talisay City, about a 20-minute ride from the airport by taxi or van shuttle.

Take the turn at the Pepsi bottling plant in Bata Subdivision towards the mountains. Enter the narrow road leading to Rose Lawn Memorial Garden, then turn right and navigate the main road to Goldcrest and Octagon Villages. This will lead you all the way to “The Ruins.”