These island women’s quilts have traveled abroad

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FIOMENA Guardiana shows her quilt to tourists in Barangay Caohagan, Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu. CRIS EVERT LATO

CAOHAGAN ISLAND, Lapu-Lapu City—On a small island off Lapu-Lapu City, a group of women is making world-class quilts.

Some of their quilts are exhibited at the Peace Museum in Kyoto, Japan, and at the International Quilt Center and Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

“Good for our quilts, they have traveled abroad,” said Filomena Guardiana, 64. “Most buyers do not know that the makers are simple women living in an island,” she added.

The women are from Barangay Caohagan, a 4-hectare island that is part of Lapu-Lapu City and can be reached by boat in one and a half hours.

Guardiana said they didn’t know how to make a quilt, a bed covering made of layers of fabric sewn together with artistic designs and layout.

But 15 years ago, a Japanese woman arrived on the island and taught the women how to make quilts.
Her name was Junko, wife of Katsuhiko Sakiyama. The couple arrived in Caohagan in 1997 where they eventually settled on the island and run a resort.

Before she and her husband moved to the Philippines, Junko taught quilting in Japan. It did not come as a surprise that Junko decided to also teach the women from Caohagan about the craft that she loved so much.

One of those women was Guardina, who was only 49 at that time.

“We did not have any idea but it was Junko who taught us how to do it. It was quite easy for us to do it, especially the women, because most of us can sew either by hand or with the aid of a machine,” said Guardiana, a mother of nine and grandmother of 12.

Guardiana said Junko gave them the materials and showed them the designs that they needed to follow.

It didn’t take long for them to learn the art of quilting.

“From then on, our quilts have been exhibited in Japan; something that we did not think will happen to us island women,” said Guardina.

Inside Guardiana’s humble hut are news articles in Nipponggo and some framed certificates displayed on the wall announcing the acceptance of Caohagan quilts in different museums in Japan.

One article said that Caohagan quilts are exhibited in the Peace Museum in Kyoto, Japan.

Guardiana said one quilt also made it to the International Quilt Center and Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, and is now part of its permanent collection.

Guardiana said there are 60 to 80 quilters in Caohagan, either working as part-time or full-time.

“These quilters can perhaps make between 100 and 150 quilts in one year but that depends on their speed,” she said.

A quilt measuring 210 cm by 150 cm costs P9,500 while a 210-cm by 210-cm quilt is sold at P15,000. Depending on the size, it will take three to six months to finish one quilt. That is, if the women work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Of this amount, Guardiana said they get between P3,000 and P5,000 per piece.

Most of the quilts produced by the women are exported to Japan, said Caohagan barangay captain Ranilo Abayan.

The Sakiyama couple buys the quilt who then displays and sells them in Japan. Most of the time, the couple comes back with more orders for the women.

The rest of the quilts are sold locally in Cebu whenever there are orders.

Although low key, Abayan said Caohagan is considered as the city’s quilting capital.

Aside from quilts, residents of Caohagan also earn a living by fishing and from the tourists who go to the island to frolick on the white sand beach and clear blue waters.
Caohagan is also known as a day-use beach for tourists staying in Bohol and Cebu. July to August is considered as the peak season for visiting tourists mostly Koreans, Japanese, Chinese and Americans.

Each tourist pays an entrance fee of P70. Cottages are also available for rent at P100 per day.

Abayan, 28, said quilt-making is a unique attraction of Caohagan, whose 600 residents are mostly fishermen.

Abayan said he was about 12 years old when tourists started coming to Caohagan.

“Fishing, tourism and quilt-making are our main sources of income and I think these really helped us improved our lives. Actually, almost all families here have their own pumpboat although you can get here from the mainland at P35 per person, but the pumpboat operators are not from Caohagan but from the nearby Pangan-an Island,” he said.

The entire island is powered by a generator. Water is scarce and needs to be sourced from the mainland at P3 for a 6-gallon container.

Big drums are also installed in each household to catch rainwater, which can be used for washing clothes, watering of plants and even, drinking.

Abayan said they are grateful to neighboring resorts and hotels such as Movenpick Resort and Spa Cebu (formerly Cebu Hilton Hotel) and the Lapu-Lapu City Government for introducing Caohagan to tourists and guests.

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