

Developing The Cordillera Landscape into Agro-Tourism Sites

With some help from government, agro-tourism in the Cordillera can be improved to become a major livelihood source for the local residents.

For sure, the old agro-tourism sites in the region will continue to lure visitors and generate income for the local populace. But new environment-friendly agro-tourism ventures hold even greater promise in advancing rural progress and development in the region.

Agro-tourism, according to former Benguet Governor Raul Molintas, must be enhanced and promoted because it will lead to rural development. More importantly, the promotion of agro-tourism, in a way, could discourage the municipalities in the highland from building houses and commercial establishments anywhere.

In Benguet Province, the places that have benefited from agro-tourism are those that invested in the development of highly sought-after commodities that attract tourists and investors. However, better land-use planning and enforcement remain as a big challenge just like in all other settlement areas of the country.

Take the case of La Trinidad. After losing its title as the "Salad Bowl of the Philippines," it invested its resources in developing its strawberry, and cutflower industries. Today, it is known as the "Strawberry Capital of the Cordillera." It was also dubbed as the "Rose Capital of the Philippines" by former Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar, now secretary general of the India based International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT).

The local government of La Trinidad pioneered in developing and promoting organic vegetable production in the Cordillera. It organized the La Trinidad Organic Producers Cooperative (LaTop) on June 14, 2005. Since then, it has actively supported the projects of the Department of Agriculture (DA) on organic-based vegetable production in this town. And because the Benguet State University (BSU) is in La Trinidad, the LGU is actively supporting the bid of this institution to become a premier organic university in Southeast Asia. This is why it is not anymore surprising to know someday that this municipality has become the "Organic Vegetable Bowl of North Philippines."

So, how is agro-tourism in La Trinidad today? Good. In fact, there are many ways to enjoy the town's emerging agrotourism sites. Here is one way to do it.

FIRST, COME OVER TO THE TOMAY FARMS

From Baguio City, tourists with only a day to visit the town's agro-tourism sites may start at the Tomay Farms. The Tomay Farms is operated by lawyer Damaso Bangaoet. He once helped Benguet Province organize its Adivay Festival to lure people and thus, promote local, tourism and agricultural products.

By starting at the Tomay Farms, you avoid the old trails that can get you derailed in the center of town for hours. Move out early from Baguio into Tomay Farms, which is about a kilometer away from Camp Bado Dangwa. Here, agriculture and tourism are promoted to complement each other for the benefit of farmers and local communities. The facility serves as an outlet for ornamental plants grown and produced by local farmers.

SEE THE LOVELY ROSES AT BAHONG

If you're fond of roses, go to Bahong after visiting the Tomay Farms. Dr. Dar once called this place the "Rose Capital of the Philippines" in 2000.

Today, 152 farmers in Bahong grow cutflowers in 189 hectares. Roses are grown in 82 hectares, says Willy Padio, a chrysanthemum farmer. Since Dr. Dar visited the place, the farmers have tried growing other flower varieties like baby's breath, single and cluster chrysanthemums, anthurium, gladiolus, cactuses, and bonsai trees in greenhouses, says Fely Ticbaen, the town's municipal agriculturist.

Before World War II, the fields of Bahong and Tomay are planted with camote. The lower areas were later planted to Javanica Rice, but the whole area soon became vegetable gardens in the early '60s. Bahong became Benguet's rose garden in the '70s, following the success of a Chinese couple who immigrated to the area and started growing American roses. Then, it became an ornamental cluster production area when local residents shifted to growing Holland roses in the early '80s, Padio said.

To enhance the production of cutflower, the local government invested in the development of Bahong's farm-to-market road and intricate irrigation system. The LGU also trained farmers on cutflower technology, packaging, and marketing. More importantly, other LGUs in the Cordillera also integrated agricultural commodity clustering and agro-tourism with their community and municipal planning system.

RUN TO THE STRAWBERRY FIELD

From the rose gardens of Bahong, you may go back to the strawberry fields in La Trinidad valley and then meet the La Trinidad Organic Producers at Kilometer 5. If lunchtime overtakes you, don't just eat anywhere. Have brunch or lunch at the Maleng-ag Cafe just opposite the Provincial Capitol. Maleng-ag Cafe is among the enterprising food chains, in the area that specialize on organic food. The Cafe serves Maleng-ag, a mountain food. This is an organic meal which consists of pork, beef, sliced carrots, vegetable salad, and red rice as main menu. For dessert, they serve local fruits in season. Try also their lemongrass and fruit juice, tea, coffee, or yogurt.

VISIT THE MASTER'S GARDEN

Visit the organic producers at the Master's Garden in Longlong, La Trinidad, Benguet. The Garden is a training center on organic farming, which is operated by Pat Acosta. It is situated beside a small waterfall and also serves organic food to visitors. The house' special is an organic combo meal called "farmer's lunch." It consists of either beef, chicken, or pork, fresh vegetable salad, rice pasta or potato dessert, minted juice and tea or coffee. By serving organic cuisine from cheap and nutritious food, the Master's Garden and Maleng-ag Cafe are showing the Cordillera folk how to fight malnutrition, a long-term problem of the highlanders.

GO UP TO ATOK, BENGUET

For tourists, who have more time to spare, explore more by going north to Atok, Benguet. Thanks to the Arroyo government, the newly-paved Halsena Highway became a tourist spot itself. You can see the scenic pine forest, deep canyons, ravines, and mountain peaks as you drive through this highway. From Baguio, it takes two hours to reach Atok. But you can still stop over to Enca Eco-Tourism and Organic Farm in Acop-Caponga, Tublay, Benguet.

This 45-hectare farm was opened early last year so that the public could discover and enjoy nature in the highlands at its best without the amenities of modern life. The place which is host to pine and oak trees is becoming a favorite destination of foreign visitors. It has a stream and it is ideal for mountain hiking, eco-walk, camping, rappelling, and horse back riding.

After going to the Enca Eco-Tourism and Organic Farm, drop by to the Kedit Ornamental Garden operated by Ms. Estella Kedit. You'll see here breathtaking sceneries of valleys, hills, and communities. You can also buy ornamental cactuses and flowers.

Just about 7 kilometers from Kedit's place towards Kilometer 26 in Atok, is the Arabica coffee farm of Cathryn Attiw. Here's where Arabica coffee, pine trees and alnus trees are managed well to reforest about 7-hectare mountainside. The success of this family in growing Arabica coffee under pine demonstrates a profitable alternative farming that promotes forest and soil conservation. In the Cordillera, the soil, which takes a century to form, and forest in mountain areas are so essential and yet critically in danger of being lost through traditional farming practices. Proponents of the technology at the Benguet State University (BSU) say that planting coffee under the pine trees is a way to manage and enhance the forest cover.

Close to the Attiw's Arabica coffee farm is Thaddeus Bernardo's plantation of indigenous blueberries on the mountainsides in Kilometer 21, in the boundary between Atok and Tublay. With some investments to develop an outlet road and to construct sheds and comfort rooms, the area is expected to become an agro-tourism destination. Here, you'll find an indigenous blueberry known as Ayosip or alumani which naturally thrives in steep mountainsides, shaded mossy slopes, and pasturelands. This shrub is bluish and is known to have anti-cancer properties. However, it is becoming extinct; thanks to the Bernardo family for preserving this indigenous shrub.

The market for indigenous blueberries in the Philippines is still very limited, but it has great potential because of its medicinal and nutritive values. The Fruits Nutrition Facts cited the crop to be rich in Vitamin C, sugar, and fiber. The fruit also contains Vitamin E, Vitamin B1, Vitamin B2, Vitamin B6, and Vitamin A.

From the Attiw lot, move up to a place called Topdak. Here, you can have a clear view of the tail-end of the Ambuklao dam, once known to be the largest dam in Asia.

About an hour ride up north, you'll be at the highest point of the Philippine National Highways in Sayangan, Atok. If you visit during the rainy months, you will see cascades along steep mountainsides. Come during November-February, the night frost season, and experience the chill of the Siberian winds.

On top of Sayangan is the Paoay Plateau where most of the cruciferous vegetables in Benguet are grown along with those grown in Madaymen Plateau in nearby Kibungan town. When you reach the town of Buguias some 70 kilometers from Baguio you can view extensive vegetable terraces.

You may also visit the oldest and still the most productive gold and copper mine in the country, the Lepanto Consolidated Mining Corporation (LCMCo) in Mankayan, Benguet. Since the LCMCo's operation in the Spanish times, Mankayan town has been a melting pot of various tribes in the Cordillera and other people from other parts

of the country. Lepanto is also the site of the bloodiest battle between retreating Japanese forces and their guerrilla pursuers during the last world war.

If you want to go deeper into the mountains, go to Mountain Province and check out the Mount Data Plateau then move up to the rocky mountains of Sabangan. The roads connecting Sabangan and Sagada maybe rocky, dusty or muddy, depending on the season. But with some determination, you'll reach the misty town of Sagada.

This place is known for its limestone rock formations, caves, and heavy community-grown pine stands. It has its share of beautiful rice terraces and waterfalls in Fidelisan. Every December, bird watchers visit this town, and by February more tourists come to witness the colorful cultural Langay Festival held in the first week of April.

From Sagada the route brings you to the warm valley and capital town of Bontoc. It's up to you if you'll go further to Kalinga or exit towards Nueva Vizcaya through the Banaue rice terraces in Ifugao.

Agro-tourism is taking root in the Cordillera. All towns have their unique farms, products, and socio-cultural come-on for visitors. What the stakeholders need to do is organize themselves, put up clean restrooms, cozy hotels, and good restaurants along the way. Good roads are also a must to promote and make these places accessible to local and foreign tourists. More importantly, the preservation of mountain forests and watershed, the promotion of exciting cultural events and organic food, and security must all be part of town planning.

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