

Getting to Know the Igorots – Cabbages – Earning a living

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Have you ever complained about the cost of a cabbage in the supermarket? In the mountains in the Philippines many rice fields have been converted to vegetables, cabbages in fact because growing rice is no longer economical. Cabbages need minimal labour in the course of the growing season and can offer a modest income. So today you will sometimes see a field of cabbages in this case about three kilometres from the nearest road.



When they are ready for harvest it's necessary to go to the field, harvest a bunch of them (which can be done simply with a knife) and carry them to the nearest road. This trip starts by going through a "residential" path like the one at the right below.



It's not practical of course to carry them three kilometres one at a time. So the men have a long bamboo pole from which hangs a large basket on each end. This is filled with cabbages. Each basket holds from twenty five to thirty cabbages each weighing about two pounds. During the harvest they are packed tightly into the baskets and then stacked ever higher in order to carry as many as possible. Once you can't stack them any more they are tied down with large rubber bands. At this point the farmer simply lifts the baskets onto his shoulder and proceeds to carry them to the road. The load usually weighs about 120 pounds or more and the trip is about three kilometres..



Once at the road there is usually a jeepney parked to receive the harvest. Occasionally they will use a truck but the jeepney is the traditional vehicle and generally is all that's used for this.

Initially they remove the benches from the back of the jeepney and then they start to stuff the entire cavity with cabbages until there is absolutely no space left. That

complete, they then stack more on the roof. Eventually the roof can hold no more either at which point they're covered with a tarpaulin for transport to market.

By the time this is all finished, they will have stuffed about 20,000 cabbages into the vehicle all of which had to be carried by hand. In this case it took four guys three days of constant work to load that jeepney and get it ready to go to market.



While this seems like a really daunting task to earn a few pesos, these guys actually had it easy.



In Benguet province, the most southern part of the mountain range, things aren't quite as simple.

If you happen to be growing your cabbages on the other side of the river, you can be hiking for far more than a kilometre just to get them to the river. At that point there are cables strung across the river. You attach your basket to the cable, cross the river, and then proceed to haul it up to the road which is usually a good fifty metres higher than where you attached the basket. Only then

can you start to load the jeepney. However, even this is relatively easy when compared to some of the other challenges.

In Benguet and in many other areas of the mountain range, fields will cascade down the mountain for a thousand metres below the road. These farmers have to carry their harvest not only a kilometre or two as the crow flies, but also up to a kilometre up to the road. Now that is a struggle. These farmers often take a week for six men to finally fill a jeepney.



Once the cabbages have made it to market, they tend to sell for about five pesos. We currently get about 40 pesos to the dollar which means the cabbage earns about 12 cents. And to earn that twelve cents you had to pay four to six men for two to six days to harvest the cabbages and then you're paying the owner of the jeepney not only up to a thousand pesos to transport the cabbages depending on how far they have to go, but also a few hundred pesos in compensation because the jeepney can't be used for anything else over the time period that it's being parked and loaded, a period that again ranges from two to six days. It's a hell of a way to earn a living.