

Getting to Know the Igorots - A Hill Station

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Colonial powers had severe problems in the tropics. Their armor and woolen clothes were absolute hell in the relentless heat. There were serious problems too. Sickness meant an expensive trip home and the need to recruit a replacement. A tour of duty could not be very long.

Eventually a solution was found, particularly by the Spanish, the “hill station”. Going up at least 1,500 metres, meant temperatures and humidity were more moderate. With this discovery they

began to build major cities high in the mountains in each tropical colony. Now people could be treated up there instead of being sent home, tours of duty could be longer and whenever someone needed a break from the heat, this was possible.

In the Philippines the Spanish tried the same thing but consistently failed because they were fought off by the Igorots. Only in 1846 did they manage to finally establish La Trinidad, a

settlement of only 20 homes. Today this is a city and the capital of Benguet Province, the southern extent of the Cordillera.



When the Americans came they discovered the Spanish records and headed to the mountains too to find what today is the Baguio area in 1900. But there was a problem, there were no existing roads and only a few houses.

The first American explorers were smitten with the weather and the landscape and decided that it would be an ideal site for a future city and summer retreat from the sweltering heat of the lowlands. It did not take long for Gov. William Howard Taft (who later became President of the USA) and other officials to agree that this should be the location for the summer capital and health resort of the Philippines.



On June 1, 1903, the Philippine Commission decreed Baguio as the “Summer Capital of the Philippines.” The Americans were determined to make Baguio a showcase. But a road had to be constructed if the city was to prosper. This resulted in an initial budget of \$75,000 in 1901 to build the road. The road was finally opened on March 27th 1905 at a total cost of \$1,966,847.05, a staggering bill for that time and the cost of the heavy work in the canyon had been approximately \$75,000 per mile (roughly P6,280,000.00 per kilometre in today’s rates).



According to records, between 2,300 to 4,000 workers were employed in the building of the road, all of different nationalities— American, Hawaiian, Indian, Mexican, Chinese, German, Irish, English, Swedish, French, Japanese and, of course, Filipino. A breakdown of the figures showed that 49 percent of the workers were Filipinos, 22.5 percent were Japanese, 17.5 percent were Americans and Europeans, 11 percent were Chinese, and the

remaining 11 percent were from Latin America and other countries.

Records also showed that less than half the number of workers survived the building of the road. Aside from accidents, many too, died of malaria. Some of the survivors stayed behind and settled for good in Baguio City.

In addition to the roadbed itself, Colonel Kennon constructed 40 bridges—two of which were made of steel, the others of wood. Except for the use dynamite to blast out solid rock, it must be noted that there was no heavy equipment then—work was done usually with ordinary picks and shovels. This was no small feat in 1905. Still, according to engineering experts, it was the most expensive engineering work at that time, a big drain on the colonial budget.



With the road in place the Americans were able to construct Baguio. They designed the city for 35,000 people providing enormous recreational facilities and hospitals. In time there was a full downtown catering not only to the relentless flow of visitors escaping the heat but also to a growing number of residents. Finally Baguio did become the summer capital of the Philippines. Every spring the entire government complete with its files would be physically moved from Manila to Baguio where it remained until the fall when the government returned to Manila. This persisted until air conditioning started to become more affordable and more available at which point it was no longer



necessary to move the government.

Today Baguio is vibrant modern home to almost 500,000 people and this explosion has strained its infrastructure considerably. In time other hill stations in the world also gained the stature of great cities but Baguio remains unique as one of the most diverse and well planned of all.