

Getting to Know the Igorots – The Mountain Roads

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When I first went to the Cordillera in the Philippines I was warned about the roads but that was like trying to explain to someone from the tropics what snow was all about. I had no real frame of reference to use to understand the comments.

When the Americans arrived in the mountains late in the nineteenth century and finished the road to Baguio the next challenge was to start building

roads in the rest of the mountain range. It was never intended that all communities be linked by roads and indeed today there are still many that do not have access, but the intent at the time was to at least link the major communities together. Until that happened the only way the people could get around was on foot. I recall one story I was told about an old man who wanted to sell his harvest in Baguio. He walked 175 kilometres (as the crow flies) over three days



carrying his harvest and then he walked back. Today that's not necessary, were he still alive he could do the trip in six to eight hours by jeepney or truck and he'd be able to carry a much greater load than what his shoulders could carry.



Building the roads was a horrific exercise. Like building rice terraces it was necessary to carve the roads out of the side of the mountain. Sometimes that was with pick and

shovel where there was a lot of soil, sometimes that was with chisels and mallets cutting through stone, and other times it was with explosives to blast away particularly hard rock. Gradually one metre at a time the roads were carved out.

Now in some places they were literally cut out of hard solid stone and



those road sections will likely endure forever unless there is a severe earthquake. Other road sections were carved out of softer material and these may



suddenly disappear and plummet down the side of the mountain. With the remaining road sections some of those will also collapse while others will survive. The larger risk in each case tends to be

land slides. In bad times like in the midst of a typhoon, it's not unusual for tons of rock and soil to suddenly slip off the side of a mountain and smash down on a road. Sometimes it means the road



is buried until it can be dug out, sometimes it's broken off the mountain and a new section has to be built.

The landslides make things worse. It's often not possible to dig the road out quickly to keep the traffic flowing so the government will simply run a bulldozer over the surface to flatten things out so traffic can flow again. Subsequent rains then will create deep ruts on the mud such that vehicles will sometimes get stuck in them. After a few do get stuck more of the road gets dug out.

These experiences can be quite daunting at the best of times.

Often to get around the problems of mud when it rains, road builders will use gravel on the surface of the unpaved road. But this isn't gravel as we know it here, these rocks are the size of grapefruits and cantaloupes and they are carefully placed one at a time instead of just being dumped by a truck. Those rocks wreak havoc with the vehicles that drive over them but on the positive side in a rain they prevent the vehicles from slipping sideways and plummeting down the side of the mountain. So any trip along those mountain roads is a unique experience of being bounced along mercilessly hour by hour.



Yet there is also more. Vehicles on the mountain roads operate in both directions of course except that many of the roads are in fact only one lane. Passing them becomes an interesting challenge as one truck or jeepney has to ooze to the edge of a steep cliff so that the other vehicle can squeeze between it and the wall of the mountain. If you happen to be in the vehicle on the cliff edge don't look down, it's not recommended. An even worse issue which I also experienced one night was to have a vehicle fail on a narrow road where it's impossible to get around it. The only solution for that issue was for everyone to get out and help fix it so that it could drive on and then it was necessary to sort out how dozens of vehicles in each direction were going to take turns

passing each other.

Once you've experienced those roads you'll never complain about any of ours again. Our worst roads are smooth as glass in comparison. And just to defend the government, it is hellishly expensive to maintain mountain roads and for a small developing nation it's impossible especially when the mountains don't produce enough tax revenue to pay for even a quarter of it. And if you ever go there try not to think about the impending earthquake that can happen any time, or the possibility of being crushed by tons of rock and soil from above, or about slipping off the side of the mountain down a thousand metre cliff. If you think about any of these things you'll never travel into the Cordillera and you'd never experience a truly remarkable land. Think of happier things and go have an amazing adventure. Thankfully many roads are now being paved but that doesn't eliminate the natural hazards. Earthquakes and land slides will always continue regardless. I think I prefer Toronto traffic.

