

# From Baguio to Baguionas and Back

Missions in the Cordillera Mountains of the Philippines

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The rickety old jeepney drove along a deeply rutted dirt road, working along the side of a mountain. Every jolt caused the vehicle to give off disquieting popping and cracking sounds and sway disturbingly. I was packed in like a proverbial sardine with 18 others (and some chickens). Further, an unknown number were on the back fender, on top with all of the luggage and medical supplies, and on the front hood. When the cliff was on my side, I felt panic when the jeepney lurched toward it. When the cliff was on the other side, I felt somehow safer when the jeepney lurched that way. It occurred to me that that did not make sense since, either way, we would tumble hundreds of feet to our deaths. I sensed there was a good spiritual truth in it, but I could not settle my mind to think it through. I kept wondering if the driver had computed the change in the center of gravity of the vehicle due to the big load on top. To add to the concern, I was the team leader-- I was responsible for everyone being there.

Celia, myself, and our three children left Virginia in 2004, supported from Spring Hill Baptist of Ruckersville, to study at Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary in Baguio, and involve ourselves in outreach mission work. Soon we were involved in medical evangelistic missions. Celia, myself, and our 10-year-old son Joel, have done several trips, but this one I was by myself. This trip was a joint effort of Spring Hill and two Philippine churches: Calvary Baptist, Baguio City, and Blessed Hope Christian, Cavite. We left Baguio around 4AM. Baguio is THE city in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). With over a quarter of a million residents living at 1-mile elevation, it has several universities and hospitals. Most in Baguio speaks English, along with Ilokano and Tagalog. And it has the surest sign of prosperity in the Philippines—an SM Mall.

Baguionas is maybe 30 miles away “as the crow flies”, 3 hours away (minimum) in driving, and a lifetime away in style and pace. It is tucked into a mountain valley that is ALMOST inaccessible. During rainy season, it can only be reached on foot (and helicopter?). A few dozen families live as subsistence farmers and broommakers in simple houses, without electricity, surrounded by terraced rice paddies. There is a small school with lodging for the teachers (commuting is not an option). There is one “sari-sari” store. Food and lodging can be had from individual families.

We left in a bus and two cars toward Naguilian. The road twists and turns as it descends 1 mile in elevation. I had to ask to stop when my motion sickness pill failed to do its job. Naguilian is a provincial town. The open market provides a place for people in the surrounding region to buy and sell. Adjacent to the open market are the videokes (video karaoke bars) for people to spend their money. Most of the team transferred to two jeepneys. Jeepneys (somewhere between a bus and taxi) are everywhere in the Philippines. The back is enclosed with two long benches. They are amazingly versatile and many are ornately decorated beautifying the Philippine landscape. However, our jeepneys were not pretty. These were the Baguionas jeepneys-- beat-up survivors, with high wheel clearance, four-wheel drive, and an engine with gearing to go wherever roads run.

I rode in Darwin’s SUV, which was built to handle some of the worst roads in the CAR. We arrived in Baguionas around 8AM. The jeepneys crossed the river, while we in the SUV parked on one side and took the suspended footbridge across. There is no Christian witness there. Most of the people are Spiritists. The people speak Kankanei, and a little Ilokano. Tagalog and English (the national languages of the Philippines) have little use there. The Kankanei are 100,000+ strong scattered throughout the CAR.

After a breakfast with our host family, we began setting up at the elementary school. We had Dr. Rene, Dra. Evita, and Dr. Paul for medical/surgical, and Dra. Myla, Dra. Sandra, and Dra. Jennifer for dentistry. Additionally, we had nurses to take blood pressure and dispense medications, counselors to share the gospel in Kankanei, Ilokano, and Tagalog, and several others for crowd control. Then there was me. I was the supposed to be the team leader. Brother JR (a Filipino-American missionary and usual leader) was still in California.

This was my first shot as leader. Happily, Pastor Jun and brother Roy did much to ensure things did not spiral out of control. On the first day, I felt more like a team follower than leader.

We started around 10AM, with one patient waiting-- NOT a successful start. But slowly others trickled in, pausing a few meters from the school grounds for several minutes before proceeding. They would register and have their blood pressure checked. Then they had the gospel shared with them in the language of their choice. We shared some Kankanei Bibles and songbooks. Next, they went to the dentists for check-up or tooth extractions, the surgeon for cyst removal or circumcision, or the medical doctors for other concerns. Finally, they went to the pharmacy for free medicines and vitamins.

That day, we treated 160 people. Close to 75% prayed to receive Christ into their hearts. Filipinos are very friendly and agreeable as a group, and can agree to things that they don't really accept. However, it would be a mistake to downplay the momentous nature of this day. Jesus told us to preach the good news to all peoples. It took Christians almost 2000 years to obey in reaching this community. Many of the decisions made were serious and even the polite responses are still open doors for further outreach.

After an evening swim in the river, we joined people from the settlement who were invited over to our host family's house for a film-showing. Between 150 to 250 people arrived around sunset. Darwin Bayani works for Vernacular Video Ministries, which produces and shows evangelistic movies in local languages. He set up his generator and equipment, while we sat in a dry rice paddy to watch movies on a sheet hung on the side of the house. The first movie was titled (in Kankanei) "The Answer". It was built around a theme near to the hearts of the Kankanei-- a family that left the mountains to go to the lowlands, where they became assimilated into the culture and vices of the lowlanders. The story did have a happy ending, of course, and a good evangelistic message. Pastor Samuel, gave a short testimony and call to receive Christ. Many more responded. After this, they were invited to have some dinner. Few did this since they wanted to watch another movie. VVM has produced 6 movies in Kankanei so far, and has produced many other movies in other languages in the CAR. In semi-remote places like Baguionas and others accessible only by long mountain foot trails, movie showing is immensely popular and effective.

Most of the team did not stay up for the other films, but went to different houses to sleep. Five of us walked into the forest to a nice house on the hillside. There we slept on mats in the sweltering heat. Oh... did I mention the heat? Brutal! And it stayed hot into the night. One rooster had insomnia and attempted to give us insomnia as well. But we eventually fell asleep and woke up around 5AM to prepare for the next leg of our trip. Those of us riding with Darwin crossed the footbridge and crawled our way up the mountainside in his SUV, while the rest were to ride the jeepney out. We arrived in Baay around 7:30AM. Baay is more developed than Baguionas. Any 4-wheel drive vehicle can reach Baay (in the dry season). More know Ilokano and Tagalog. A few know English. They have electricity, churches, stores, and a small medical clinic with nurse staff. We became disturbed as time passed and the jeepney did not arrive. Brother Darwin had to leave so we began setting up for the medical mission, with no team and no transportation. Our attempts to call the others failed since cell phones weren't reaching Baguionas. We were stuck.

Around 9AM, it occurred to me that it was time to be a team leader. There was a large group of people ready to be treated. There were only four of us, but two were doctors and one was a dentist. We decided that if our team did not arrive by 10AM we would do the medical mission ourselves. We would get the nurses at the local clinic to do registration and blood pressure, Dr. Rene would do medical, Dr. Myla would do dentistry, Dr. Evita would run the pharmacy, and I would do crowd control. While we did not wish to skip sharing the gospel, we had a moral obligation to provide the medical care we promised them. Our hosts found someone who could go to Baguionas to fetch some of the team. I paid a lot (by Filipino standards) for him to do it, but to me, \$15 for a two-hour drive was a bargain, so I did not haggle.

At 9:45 over half of our team crawled out of a jeepney full of brooms and stumbled into the medical mission site. The local people cut tiger grass and make very pretty brooms, known as "Baguio Brooms". They are popular and functional, and provide a profitable cottage industry for the people. The jeepney driver we had

reserved did not see the team immediately, so he drove off without them. In desperation a part of our team began hiking the long steep road out of Bagyonas. 1.5 hours into their hike, they were able to get a ride with the broom jeepney. The rest of the team who were left behind were picked up by the driver we sent out, so all were in Baay before lunch.

Despite the difficulties (adventures?) of the morning, it was a wonderful day. Baay is on a mountain and the weather was cooler. The people were friendly and took good care of us. At the end of the day, we all got together to praise God for the opportunity we had to help people in need. We gave medical and dental treatment and medicines and vitamins freely to 513 people between the two locations, and 364 people prayed to receive Christ (not counting those who did at the film showing). This trip had been prayed for and planned long before we got there. Jesus' words in the book of John were so true: "I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." Many lives changed in those two days, and many hearts have been prepared for the future.

Time to go. There was only one jeepney available to take us back to Naguilian. I remarked casually about the lack of space for everyone and everything. I said I would be happy to ride on top, and would almost pay for the opportunity. What was I thinking? Pastor Samuel replied that I could not do that since riding on top of jeepneys is illegal. This statement was, of course, not serious, and is akin to an American saying, "Why of course we can't, speeding is illegal!"

We packed everyone and everything aboard. This same jeepney had repairs done that morning since the driver felt it was unsafe for passengers (an amazing admission in the Philippines). I thought the jeepney was full, but I was wrong. Several more jumped on along the way and disappeared on top somewhere.

Since, I told you much of the rest at the beginning of the story, I shan't bore you with redundancy. I was blessed in being able to learn and be a blessing. Always pray for cities like Baguio, and towns like Naguilian. But don't forget about the little places where the road or footpath widens, like Baay and Baguionas. The mapmakers may ignore them, but we are called to reach out to them all, with love.

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