



North Luzon

Discover



IT'S MORE FUN IN THE
PHILIPPINES



Welcome, Mabuhay!

In the Central Cordilleras of North Luzon, sky and land seem thrillingly close. Mountains covered in pine forests and lush cloud forests protrude majestically up into the cerulean sky canopy. Not to be outdone, exotic rice terraces also reach upwards for the sky. Often referred to as the "stairway to heaven", they were once created by the courageous traditional mountain people of Ifuago and are indescribably beautiful and graceful. They are considered the eighth wonder of the world and in 1995 UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site. The rice terraces of Banaue are the crowning achievement of all cultural landscapes and leave people speechless and overwhelmed when they view them for the first time. They

are of spectacular dimensions and their existence is quite unfathomable. Through the eye of the beholder they appear to have risen from a dream.

Besides the breathtaking terraces and mountain landscape, North Luzon has many other sites of interest too. Highly interesting towns like Sagada or the western coastal town and World Heritage Site Vigan are cultural pearls, which are an indispensable part of any tour through the Central Cordillera. Natural attractions such as the majestic Pinatubo volcano also make North Luzon an essential highlight of every trip to the Philippines.



Rice Terraces of North Luzon

The Banaue Rice Terraces belong to the mountain province of Ifugao and are part of the Central Cordillera, situated around 300 kilometres north of Manila. Believe it or not they cover an area of 250 square kilometres. If the terraces were positioned end-to-end they would measure over 20,000 kilometres – they could stretch half way around the world!

The oldest rice terraces in North Luzon are estimated to be around 3,000 years old. This is when the mountain farmers of Ifugao, the „people of the sky world“, began using their simple tools to build rice terraces on the mountain side that is quite steep in parts, later stabilizing them with supporting walls and dams. Throughout the millenniums that followed, entire massifs were transformed into rice terraces that the venturous people of Ifugao proudly refer to as the “stairway to heaven”.

When the Spaniards first caught sight of this wondrous region in the 16th century, they did not believe that the local skilled farmers were capable of such a masterful culture of cultivation. They assumed that an extinct tribe with a highly sophisticated culture must have been responsible for this unbelievable reconfiguration of the earth's surface. It was not until much later that academics realised it was the simple-living folk of the sky world who should be credited for this important cultural achievement.

Why though was this enormous reconfiguration of the landscape necessary in the first place? It arose from the need to fulfil the requirements for growing wet rice. Wet rice can only grow on flat fields inundated with water. Nowadays, the fields are irrigated in exactly the same way as they were 3,000 years ago. An ingenious system of bamboo pipes, channels and small ditches guides the spring water from the highest paddy field level down to the lower terraces. Since the climate in North Luzon is perfect for the cultivation of rice, rather than choosing to cultivate plants in accordance with the land, the land has been adapted to the cultivation of chosen plants. This was a truly enterprising decision as it provided the rice farmers with another source of food. Countless fish are bred among the flooded terraces, a combination which to this day serves up tasty dishes.

The Ifugaos together with the Bontocs, Kalingas and Apayaos make up the Igorot people who first came to the Philippines over 3,000 years ago. The humble lifestyle that they still pursue to this day contrasts greatly with the mighty rice terraces. Most live in simple huts mounted on stilts with grass roofs and wear traditional clothes that - depending on the occasion - are colourfully decorated and adorned with status symbols. The Ifugao people have managed to preserve many of their old customs and rites and perform ancient ceremonies. Almost 170,000 people live in the villages among this terraced landscape.

Five of the most famous rice terraces in the Philippines are situated around Banaue. Integrated into different landscapes, each has its own individual character. All five are worth paying a visit and can be spotted on hikes suitably conducted by a local guide.



Banaue

The small bustling town of Banaue lies at an altitude of around 1,200 metres. Besides the dwellings and a few friendly accommodation facilities and restaurants, the museum is highly recommended, as are the many souvenir shops around the central market square. Traditional fabrics, jewellery and other handcrafted products can be purchased here. The rice terraces in the area are some of the most spectacular in the world. The best place to view the magnificent panorama is at Banaue View Point, which is four kilometres away.

Batad

Shaped like an amphitheatre, the rice terraces of Batad climb hundreds of metres up the mountainside. The small town in the centre is one of the most beautiful and original in the Central Cordillera. You can travel to Batad from Banaue by bus or jeepney along a 12-kilometre stretch of road. After branching off towards Batad there is a two-hour walk along mountain paths and a pass. Colourful birds, heliconias and many other tropical plants such as coffee and cocoa line the route until you catch sight of the pretty huts of Batad. From there, it is worth making a detour to see Tappiya Waterfall that stands almost 30 metres high. After the one-hour walk to the falls, visitors can enjoy a well-earned swim in the small turquoise pool.

Bangaan

After branching off towards Batad, two kilometres along this road is the village of Bangaan. This too is a picturesque place surrounded by countless rice terraces, where time seems to have stood still.

Mayoyao

Mayoyao is situated around 30 kilometres east of Bangaan. Here the rice terraces are bordered by stonewalls. If you imagine how the rice farmers managed to carry the heavy stones from the river up to the highest parts of the mountainside, you can better envisage what a laborious and gruelling task it was to create the rice terraces.

Hapao

On the way from Banaue to Banaue View Point you can branch off towards Hapao. This romantic and picturesque valley is a great place for long hikes. The grand rice terraces that surround you form a captivating panorama. These too are bordered with ancient stonewalls.



The caves of Sagada

Sagada sits at an altitude of 1,500 metres and belongs to the Mountain Province. It is well known for the traditional burial sites of the Igorots that are found in this region. The complex burial rituals of the natives are rarely practiced today. The remnants of these rites can be seen around the locality. Coffins made out of pinewood whose locations were chosen by the deceased during their lifetime, hang from rock faces and in burial caves. The limestone Sugong Cave and Lumiang Cave are especially worth seeing. Culture enthusiasts and nature lovers alike get their money's worth. Sumaging Cave contains beautiful stalactite formations rather than coffins and should only be explored with an expert guide.



Bontoc

Bontoc, the capital of the Mountain Province, lies in the heart of the Central Cordillera at an altitude of 900 metres. Even just the journey from Banaue to Bontoc is already an experience: romantic valleys and magnificent mountain ranges covered in pine forests and mossy cloud forests define the landscape. Shortly before arriving in Bontoc, the scenery transforms into an enchanting cultural landscape. Cultivated rice terraces and vegetable fields lie along the mountainside around the town and the Chico River snakes through the valley east of Bontoc. It is a long walk to the rice terraces of Malegcong, whose wonderful location and masterful formation are on a par with the rice terraces of Banaue. Standing 2,310 meters high, Mount Data lies between Bontoc and Baguio, at whose foot is the Mount Data Hotel providing very pleasant and popular accommodation.





Baguio City

Baguio is the summer capital of the Philippines. This is thanks to its pleasant climate during the summer months. It is a time when many inhabitants of Manila travel 250 kilometres to escape the heat of the coastal city and enjoy the pleasant temperatures in this mountain town in the heart of the Benguet province. It is also a place with many sites of interest including the Botanical Gardens and Burnham Park, a pretty green area with a lake, boat hire and orchidarium. Visit the Club John Hay, a former US military area that now houses sports facilities including swimming pools, a golf course and tennis courts along with two restaurants. The Baguio Benguet Mountain Province Museum provides an insight into the life of the tribes from the Central

Cordillera. Visitors can stroll and shop around the city market selling many regional products from the province.

World Heritage Site of Vigan

The cityscape of Vigan was strongly influenced by more than three hundred years of Spanish rule in the Philippines. In 1999 UNESCO declared Vigan a World Heritage Site due to its unique combination of ancient Asian building design and European colonial architecture. Aside from the grand houses, the traditional handicraft businesses in the old town, museums, markets and historic churches such as the Cathedral of Saint Paul built in 1641 all combine to make a visit to this western coastal town a remarkable experience.





Mount Pinatubo

On the way from Manila to the Central Cordillera it is worth making a detour to Mount Pinatubo, an active volcano standing 1,486 metres high located 90 kilometres north of the capital city. Its eruption in 1991 was so fierce that its entire summit was blasted away. Since then rainwater has collected in the crater to form an acidic lake. Walks can be organized to visit the hot springs on the volcanic faces through ravines, lahar landscapes and to the crater's edge. It is even possible to fly over the volcano to experience unparalleled views of the entire area.



Not to forget...

Remember to pack some warm clothing, as it can get very cold at night in the mountains. In higher regions, the temperatures in December and January drop to almost freezing point. Waterproof walking shoes and a raincoat are also essential items. However, this does not mean that your sun screen is unnecessary. It is a known fact that the sun shines rather intensely in the mountains.

Photographs

The breathtaking terraced landscape and the impressive mountain panorama of the Central Cordillera provide unique photograph opportunities. Make sure you have sufficient memory card storage, as your camera will be flooded with many idyllic shots - and that's just of the many fabulous perspectives created by the „stairway to heaven“.



Travel Tips

Arrivals

The best way to travel from Manila to North Luzon is by public bus. Four or five-day tours of the region can also be booked. For further information, contact the Philippine Department of Tourism or your tour operator. The journey from Bontoc to Baguio takes you along the Halsema Mountain Highway and through delightful landscapes. The 130-kilometer stretch through the spectacular mountain region incorporates many breathtaking views. Angeles City is the departure point for four-wheel drive excursions to Mount Pinatubo.

Climate

The dry season in the Central Cordillera runs from November to April and the rainy season dominates the rest of the year. The warmest months are March and April, while November to February is the coolest period.

Rice calendar

The rice calendar is of interest to those who wish to visit the rice terraces as part of their trip. Rice seeds are sown at the start of December, often in special seedbeds. The young plants are set in ploughed fields up to eight weeks later with the help of cows or water buffalos. Until harvested, the rice needs to be well cared for. The farmers must battle against the frequent outbreaks of weeds and pests. The rice is harvested in July, around five months after being sown. Until December when the cultivation starts over, the terraces are prepared and work is carried out on the water channels and supporting walls if necessary.

Accommodation

There are many lovely hotels and other accommodation in the Central Cordilleras. In addition to the simple and comfortable forms of accommodation, the larger towns also have excellent resorts.

Getting about

Travelling around the island of Luzon by colourful jeepney, public bus and taxi is both comfortable and reliable. Tricycles - motorbikes with sidecars are also very popular.



