

MY CAMIGUIN NORTE EXPERIENCE

by Matthew Jarvis

Matthew Jarvis has just spent a year in the Dagat-Dagatan community (Navotas, Metro Manila) through Dominican Volunteers International. He is a graduate of the University of Cambridge with a BA in History and an M.Phil. in Church History. This September he will enter the novitiate with the English Dominican Province. He enjoys travelling, languages, table tennis, and playing the flute.



The Lonely Planet guide to the Philippines begins its entry on the Babuyan islands: 'If you want to be way ahead of the pack, brave a wild bangka ride out to this quintet of islands...'

On 26th April, thirteen passengers boarded a *bangka* (small motorboat) to cross the Babuyan Channel in the far north of the Philippines. The ride usually takes four hours or so, in fine weather. Not this time. The sky changed, the waves swelled to over thirty feet, and the passengers were flung overboard as the whole boat capsized. They clung to broken bamboo poles, struggling to stay afloat, hoping no sharks would arrive. Panicked, as a whirlpool began to form, they paddled away for dear life. After four hours in the raging waters, they finally reached shore without loss of life.

Thankfully, I wasn't there. That was in 2009, when a group from Letran College, Manila, went on an outreach mission to the Dominican high school in Camiguin. Later, they were featured in a TV program "I Survived". But tragically, in December 2008, about forty-eight people didn't survive a similar tragedy, as their boat was overloaded with passengers and cargo. Steeled by these and many other stories about the little island, we set out from Manila on our own expedition on 27th April 2010.

Our journey was fortunately uneventful: a twelve-hour "sleeper bus" ride to Aparri, an extra hour's drive to Santa Ana, and a four-hour, noisy and mildly nauseating *bangka* ride to the beach of Barangay Balatubad.

Balatubad is the largest of Camiguin's three '*barangays*' (small administrative division) and the heart

of the Dominican mission, with the St. Vincent Ferrer parish church, the 5-classroom high school (Lyceum of Camiguin), and the convent. Far from the mainland, and with a total population of some 4,800, the island lacks infrastructure and investment. There are no roads, no cars or motor tricycles, just a few bicycles and motorcycles; no market, no doctors, no hospital; and no electricity, except what a few families can afford with petrol-fuelled generators. There's little cash in their subsistence fishing and farming economy. Many islanders can't afford even P2.00 a day for the Lyceum tuition fees. There is a free public high school, at least, but some students still have to walk for up to two hours each way, every day! To carry goods overland, we used a carabao (water buffalo), slow but steady. Difficulties in communication meant I had to wait a few days to know the outcome of the UK general election (then again, so did everyone else!). In some ways, underdevelopment may equate with 'unspoilt' beauty, but I can imagine John Cleese and a People's Front of Camiguin complaining, "What have the Romans never done for us?"

Unlike pre-Roman Palestine according to Python, however, Camiguin does have clean water from the mountain (no need for an aqueduct), irrigation, public baths (the sea!), schools, public order, and peace. The islanders live a civilized existence; indeed, I never saw anyone being uncivil. Civilization is not determined by technological novelties, but by the humanity of our existence, by justice, human rights and the opportunity for personal flourishing. Nevertheless, in this respect, there is indeed a need for further development in Camiguin. Education, medical care and communications technologies should be improved; better connections with the mainland would open up new opportunities and experiences for the people.

I was very happy to adjust to these conditions during our stay. I had two Dominican companions throughout: the parish priest, Fr. Joemar Sibug OP, and a student-brother, Bro. Paul "Pooh" Talavera OP. We also had various visitors from Manila at different times, including three architects – Pauline, Martin and Bong "Banger" Estepa – whose return trip was delayed by a storm; a medical team from Letran College; and two former parish priests of Camiguin, Fr. Vic Calvo, OP and Fr. Bien Trinilla, OP (coordinator of Philippine Dominican missions). So we never felt far from home. Nevertheless, as the only non-Filipino, I still stood out. One day, two little girls saw us walking along and started poking me

with an empty plastic Coke bottle, presumably to see if I was human. They called me 'bakulaw', meaning a very large person, but literally the word for a mountain gorilla.

Were the conditions difficult? Not really. The heat was hard, but life was slow and we could rest in the shade. My favorite spot was the hammock. At night, we slept comfortably under mosquito nets in the wooden guest house, though somehow we still got bitten by mosquitoes. We had regular meals and snacks, though the options were limited by what canned goods we'd brought or what fish was caught that day. On Sundays, we had spaghetti as a treat ('pasta fiesta'). For the actual parish fiesta they slaughtered a goat, and in the evening we enjoyed gin, beer and magic tricks by Fr. Joemar, who also baked bread and banana cake. After siesta, we would sometimes have halo-halo ('mix-mix') ice-cream. And clean, spring water was in full supply. Fr. Joemar pointed out that, in Manila, we buy spring water in bottles but in Camiguin, we use it to flush the toilet.

Camiguin is a "mission area" primarily because of its isolation. After being Prior of the Letran community in Manila, Fr. Joemar had asked to be sent to the missions, hoping for General Santos City in the far south. Instead, the Provincial sent him to the opposite end of the Philippines, remote Camiguin in the far north! But the move has been good for Fr. Joemar, who realised: "God doesn't give you what you want; He gives you what you need." Two years later, he is really enjoying his assignment, even though he misses Manila. He has to say Mass in the local language of Ilokano, though he preaches and converses in Filipino, the national language based on his mother tongue of Tagalog. Since all Filipinos are educated in Filipino/Tagalog at school, daily conversation is no problem.

What did we do there? My main aim, like Bro. Pooh's, was simply "exposure" to life in Camiguin, to witness how the Dominican mission works – what they do, how, why, and what still needs to be done. We got to travel to different parts of the island, join in daily worship and fiestas, talk to people and have fun together. But we also contributed a little. We helped the teenage 'convent boys' – Jeff, Wilson and Dennis – in some of their daily chores as they cleaned, painted a wall, and moved furniture in the school, ready for the new academic year in June. We painted part of the convent. We sorted and packed all the prizes (mostly noodles and canned goods) for the competitions and bingo games in the three fiestas which all fall in May. I also played flute in the Mass, with Jeff on guitar, and spent some of my spare time editing articles for a Dominican publication in Manila. In short, we made ourselves available for whatever jobs we might be asked to do. We also washed our clothes

by hand, but the second time I was prevented by *Manang* (=Mrs) Linda, who looks after the convent and to whose grandson I'm now a godfather. She took over in a motherly fashion, saying, in her limited English, 'I see you wash; you don't know how to.'

Life in Camiguin is easy-going and the people are relaxed. So we had plenty of time to ourselves. Having been warned to bring 'something to do', I was armed with books, only to discover that the convent library held many fascinating titles. I read about the psychology of Filipino families, the development of religious congregations for women in the Spanish Philippines, Sr. Briege McKenna's miracles, and the *Ilongot* tribe in the mainland mountain region (who were head-hunters until the 1970s – presumably when capitalist recruitment agencies took over...), among other things. At night, we used the generator to power up the TV and DVD player and enjoyed Disney's 'Up', 'Avatar', and 'La Visa Loca' (a Filipino comedy). In fact, shortly after arriving in Camiguin, Jeff recognised me from TV as the flautist in a Dominican broadcast on Good Friday! We also sang videoke, like all Filipinos, and played a traditional game of counting shells called *Sungka*. When the youngest convent boy, Dagul, played me at 'Word Factory' in English (not Ilokano, thank goodness), we had great fun, despite our lack of conversation. I'll never forget the apology for his low score: 'My English is no.'

One problem is the critical lack of health care. Fr. Vic caught TB during his three-year assignment; he told me the disease made his well-built body look like mine! Malaria is a big problem; Jeff caught it, not for the first time, and spent a miserable day or two in bed. Thankfully, the Philippine government has provided anti-malarials to every part of the country, but it's not a complete solution. Other diseases go unchecked and even first aid is not adequate. That's why a medical mission comes from Letran College for three days each summer. Two doctors, a dentist and other qualified assistants arrived on our last week. I was surprised to see two of them sporting Freemasonic 'stash', including baseball caps and a T-shirt slogan saying, "We are everywhere". When I met them, they were a bit concerned about food supplies: knowing I'd been there awhile, they asked, 'Was he that thin when he came here?' All of them were caring, efficient and amiable both on and off the job. The first working day, we went to Morol on the other side of the island. By foot, it would take twelve hours; by *bangka* over calm waters, it took us only two, plus a short trek inland. People arrived, queued up, registered, had a check-up, and got a prescription. I assisted in the 'pharmacy', trying to decipher the doctors' handwriting (no, I'm not joking) and giving out free drugs (legally!). Next day, we were back in Balatubat and the process was repeated. The

doctors also performed the customary circumcisions for boys entering puberty; that's one aspect of Filipino culture I hadn't known about before. Sadly, there was no time for the medical team to visit Minabel, so those people will have to wait till next year.

Despite these troubles, the people of Camiguin seemed very happy, hearty, and hospitable. Filipinos are usually like that, but especially in the provinces. The best evidence of this was during the three fiestas. The celebration for St. Vincent Ferrer in Balatubat was preceded by two days of sports, singing and dancing. Bro. Pooh and I were drafted in as judges for the arts contests and I ran the table tennis tournament on their home-made, undersized table. On the feast day itself, there was Mass followed by Baptisms, and the Procession under the boiling heat of the sun. In previous years, they've had marine processions carrying St. Vincent's statue with a long convoy at sea. Once, a humpback whale and several dolphins tagged along too!

Next, we were treated to traditional dances and 'parlor games' (which are actually outdoors). The funniest game to watch is undoubtedly 'Maria goes to market', when the men dress up in women's clothes, don a hat, wellies, umbrella and loaded basket, and race round the course; not least because the women all scream with delight at the sight! My favourite sport was 'Kickball', a kind of softball/rounders using a football instead. There were also Bingo games that got everyone excited; after noodles and canned goods as prizes, the tension grew palpable as we edged closer to the final prizes of bicycles and solar panels. At last, in the evening, we joined Fr. Joemar and some friends for drinks, magic tricks, puzzles and a little night music on the flute.

The simple joy of the people reflects the simple beauty of their environment. The volcanic landscape is rich with coconut trees, cultivated with rice fields, with clean air and a clear sea. At night, Bro. Pooh and I would lie outside to watch shooting stars, accompanied

by fireflies. Beforehand, we would swim at the sandy Naguilian beach to watch the sunset, or at Pamoctan island to see the corals. The convent boys came snorkelling to catch fish for dinner with a line and rod, up close to the corals. I made the most of my new goggles and contact lenses, though it would take me ten minutes to put them on! Unfortunately, we didn't see any whales or dolphins even though this was the mating season for the humpbacks migrating from Alaska. That's one of many reasons I told my hosts I wanted to "camiguin" (come again) to this beautiful place.

In between fiestas the life was quiet, especially without classes in school. So, the 'pastoral' side of our trip was limited to assisting the celebrations, along with daily Rosary and Mass. Once, I thought Bro. Pooh was inviting me to Mass when he was actually suggesting anti-mosquito measures in our room: "Let's spray!"

But we learned something about the everyday way of life; and since Christianity nourishes our ordinary lives with 'daily bread' (or here, daily rice), we got an insight into how the people of Camiguin find their sustenance, both physical and spiritual. As Camiguin inevitably develops economically (e.g. electricity pylons are already installed though not yet operational), the challenge will be to keep these priorities in harmony. Here is Fr. Joemar with the final word, describing the reaction of the people after two terrible typhoons in 2008:

'When I visited the people of Barangay Minabel and saw how the recent calamity left their houses almost uninhabitable, I asked them what they needed and how I can help. They told me, "Father, it's alright even if we lost our houses and our livelihood. What we would like to do is to rebuild our chapel." I thought to myself - the typhoons may have shattered their houses, their livelihood, even their lives, but NOT their FAITH. This is Camiguin, my new home... a home where people are full of faith and hope.'