

"The Wooden Chair and the Footprint of Christ" by Oz Mendoza was originally published in Enrich Magazine, June 2012

The Wooden Chair and the Footprint of Christ

by Oz Mendoza

The description of the place intrigued me. "Birds and butterflies, plants and flowers abound. The sounds of nature, the movement of the wind, the gush of pure water, the dance of the rain are all in harmony." It was like a song, calling me, whispering of a better place to be than the one I was in.

Those words led me, three days later, to be jouncing along in the back of a Hummer on a rugged mountain road, finally about to see the fabled valley that is Bangkong Kahoy.

I wondered whether it would live up to my expectations.

Getting Away From It All

I needed a break from the city, from my deskbound existence of bathing in monitor light, fingers tapping away monotonously. I could look out the window and see a sunny day, but I knew that once I went outside it would just be concrete and exhaust and cars and shopping malls.

Bangkong Kahoy is a valley in Dolores, Quezon, about three hours away from Manila. It was strange to think that a kind of Arcadia could be anywhere that close to urban chaos. I imagined a pastoral landscape straight out of a Thomas Cole painting, where sweet winds wafted down from the lofty mountains.

In reality, it was a hot, sticky day when I arrived in Bgy. Kinabuhayan, Dolores, and the area smelled faintly of fertilizer. Yet I was hopeful. The trees surrounding me were wonderfully tall and luxuriant. A dirt road led up to mysterious highlands, and an open-top Hummer H3 stood by it, waiting to make the journey.

I climbed into the rear of the Hummer, which was stacked with cases of San Miguel beer. I had to stand on the cases and clutch the sides of the open roof as the Hummer trundled along the rocky trail to the heart of the valley. On the way, we passed a man on a horse strapped with large bundles of vegetables, heading down to the market.

Ten minutes later, the Hummer stopped near the edge of a cliff. I clambered out and took in the amazing sight before me. A sea of greenery stretched away as far I could see, while in the distance loomed the peaks of Mt. Banahaw and Mt. San Cristobal, wreathed in an aura of clouds. Massive as sleeping giants, the mountains appeared to take up half the sky.

It was startlingly bright. The green color of the vegetation was intensely vivid under the noonday sun. Other colors—of flowers and golden-hued leaves—popped out spectacularly, almost playfully.

I'd seen beautiful parks, but Bangkong Kahoy surpassed them all. The wild highs and lows of the forest growth, rambling and untamed, conveyed a rugged charm no parkland could attain. But even as I admired the beauty of the wilderness before me, I had a despondent thought. How long could the forest possibly survive?

Wooden Chair Valley

Ecotourism is increasingly being embraced throughout the Philippines. It is an endeavor that recognizes the human impulse to visit less-traveled places rich in natural beauty, while taking care to keep this natural beauty from being lost. The great irony of tourism is that the love of people for a place often brings about its deterioration. In Quezon, the trails of Mt. Banahaw and Mt. San Cristobal have suffered so much from the ravages of visitors that they have been closed for years to allow the landscape to recover—to the dismay of would-be pilgrims and trekkers.

Fortunately, the fate of Bangkong Kahoy may unfold differently. Dion Pullan—owner and manager of BK Valley Eco-Resort—is working to combine a low-impact tourism project with nature preservation and livelihood enrichment. Pullan is sympathetic to the plight of the traditional vegetable farmers who reside in the valley. It is their vital need to support their families that leads them to resort to pillaging the forest for resources. BK Valley offers them a more eco-friendly way of generating satisfactory income.

And it offers everyone else a sanctuary in which to relax, slow down, and enjoy nature. You can do that in many places, but BK Valley is especially alluring. (I've hiked woodlands in the Pacific Northwest, and they have nothing on the beauty of Bangkong Kahoy.) It helps that the resort feels so welcoming. Pullan says that visitors sleep in open-air huts with no doors, where they are absolutely safe. And I know that must be true. Life here is simpler, slower paced, perfectly placid. A funny thing: I was feeling more invigorated here than I ever did in the city.

The Footprint of Christ

Sadly, I did not get to sleep in a nipa hut in BK Valley, because I ended up visiting a mystical pool and crawling through a bat-infested cave.

It was, shall we say, a unique experience.

Just a few minutes away from Bangkong Kahoy, you will find a rocky pool that the local folk have named Bakas ni Kristo. As its waters come from Mt. Banahaw, people believe they have

mystical healing properties. They come to this place to collect water in bottles and light candles on surrounding stones.

The setting failed to inspire me. For the pool lay beside a paved square that, while convenient, proved inelegantly mundane. Furthermore, a large flat rock by the pool was painted with ugly block letters warning people not to throw their arms around the rock. It was depressing.

Walking downstream, away from the pool, I felt my mood lift immeasurably. This was still a lovely place. There were people bathing in the shallow waters, and other ungainly signs of human intrusion. But I admired the huge, mossy boulders and the towering trees. Sunlight filtered pleasantly through the thick leaf cover, lending the water a delightful shimmer.

On a nearby rockface, I found a dim cavern that had been transformed into a rough-hewn shrine. Flames from candles set before figures of the Virgin Mary and Sto. Niño emitted feeble light in the sepulchral darkness. A pit within the blackness led ominously into some deeper chamber.

I entered the crevasse, following a guide who carried only a small, flickering candle. Its glow led me down a narrow, snaky passage with clammy earthen walls. The cavernous tunnel stretched on endlessly. The walls squeezed in so tightly that at times I was forced to crawl on my hands and knees, my fingers undoubtedly squelching into bat excrement. Once in a while, we would enter a chamber inhabited by fluttering bats, which whirled around my head. Other times, I had to wade through dank cavewater pools.

Finally a dim glow led to a brighter glow, and I found myself emerging into sunlight. The journey had been harrowing, but I was exhilarated from having gone through it. I felt vibrantly alive.

I had just crawled out of a Stygian hell-hole. But that still beat sitting around a desk, in the hell-cubicle of everyday life.

END

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