

## ILOCOS LAKBAYAN - 2

Our accommodations in Laoag actually was 6 km southwest, in FIR, or Fort Ilocandia Resort, a sprawling hotel/watering-hole for the rich and famous during the Marcos heyday. It had fallen on hard times, but was converted to an attraction for Asian tourists when taken over a few years back by Chinese interests who flew in gamblers, golfers, convention attendees, and the like directly from Taiwan and HK to the Laoag International airport nearby. Unfortunately for the owners, and fortunately for us, some recent airline flack had closed these direct flights. So the place was not reeking to full capacity,



and we apparently had gotten a good hotel deal.

There still were the bilingual signs pointing to the huge swimming pool, the gambling casino, the beaches, hot-air balloons, etc. See photo on left.

That's Lisa on the right photo at the beach.



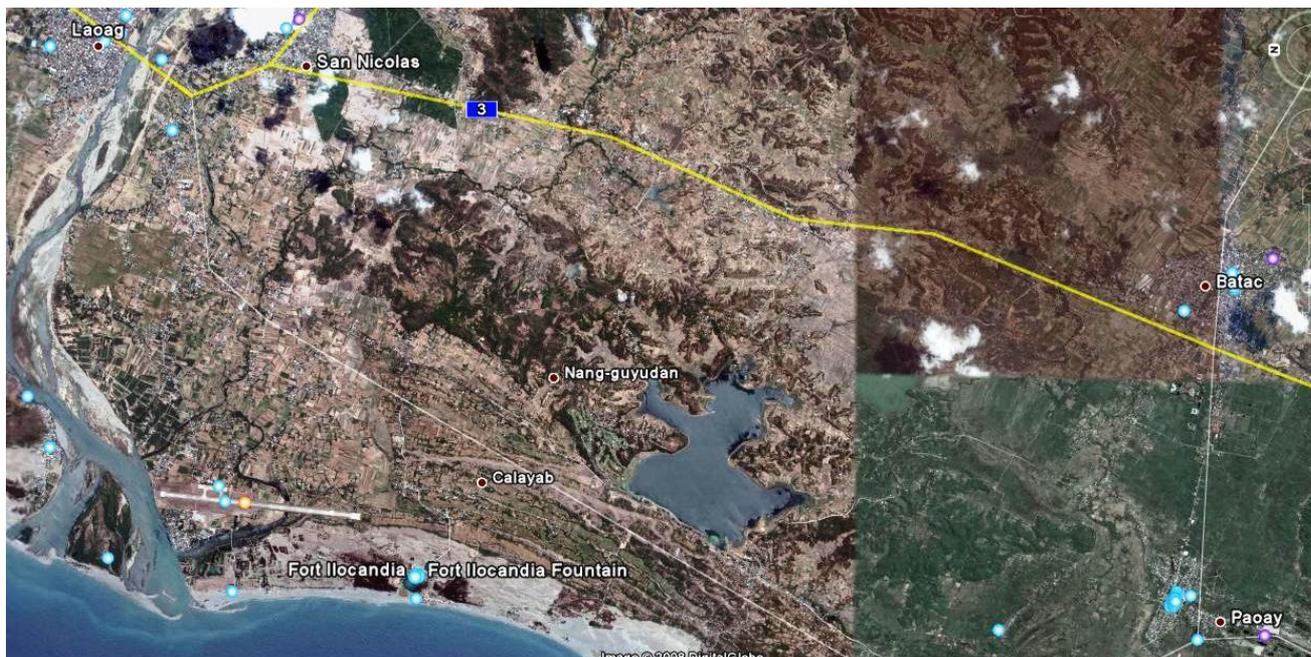
But there were other things, too, gaudy and otherwise. The peacocks in their cages made beautiful backdrops for pictures, but there also were statues galore. The one on the left shows Jimmy, probably dreaming of his albeit lewd Galatea. I similarly posed, but the image is in Jimmy's camera.

Anyway, we had checked in and settled down in our rooms by 6:30 pm, and we agreed to meet at 8:00 pm at the lobby for a light dinner at the Hirensa restaurant in Paoay that advertised pinakbet pizza, dinuguan pizza, among others. This we couldn't miss. Paoay was one of the must-see places with the old church and bell tower, and we remembered we had passed a junction on the national highway which pointed to Paoay, so we figured we'd just double back there again to see the sights at daytime. Surprisingly, none of us

had brought a detailed map of the area so as to relate to Mercy's must-see list which included Badoc, Sarrat, Currimao, Burgos, Pagudpud, Malacanang of the North, Dingras, etc. Neither did the hotel have any map, except a Xeroxed sketch from Laoag to the airport to the hotel. The Philippine road map from Romy's car did help some, as it showed the major roads in the region and the relative distances between towns, but not in enough detail.

We asked directions from the hotel staff how to go to Paoay, and they did one better by calling the restaurant and making reservations. We drove off, backtracked to the main highway, headed south and drove on, and on, and on and couldn't find that junction to Paoay. In the meantime, Mimi read off her "codigo" and noted that the Saramsam restaurant in Laoag also served the same dishes. Then the lead car hesitated, made a U-turn, and started back as we in the van followed. We stopped for directions and were told to turn left at the next junction, which the lead car did after about 10 km and which made me realize instantly we were just doubling back to the hotel. Via cell phone, we conferred, and decided to turn around and go north, cross the river into Laoag city, and go to Saramsam restaurant. Fortunately, we found it without any problem, it was open till 11:00 pm, and it had exhibits and other paraphernalia for sale that the other site didn't have, and it had the same owner. We asked the staff to call the Paoay branch to cancel our reservations. After 1-1/2 hours of being lost, and hungry, and frustrated, we felt good and vindicated at this outcome. The pinakbet pizza was really something, and we ordered double. The oysters and dinuguan pizzas were also very good.

So later that night, I logged on to GoogleEarth and extracted as many maps of the immediate areas we intended to explore, captured them as picture files to display on the laptop, and made a rough itinerary for the next few days. Below is a map of the area clearly showing that if we hadn't doubled back last



night from Fort Ilocandia (bottom left of pic) to the main highway (in yellow) near the juncture to Laoag (on upper left), but instead had turned right on a secondary road, we would have reached Paoay (lower right) much faster. The blue feature near the center is the famed Paoay lake.

On day 2, after a 7:00 am buffet breakfast that was part of the hotel deal, we packed our swimming gear and drove up north. On Mercy's list was Saud Beach, Blue Lagoon beach, a certain water fall, the windmills at Bangui, the lighthouse at Burgos where on a clear day you can see forever, I mean, see Taiwan, etc. I added to the list the church tower at Bacarra, and Mimi added the store in Pasuquin that serves the best biscocho bread. Mercy also reminded us of the haho-halo stand at the Bacarra market, reputedly very good, owned by a good friend of the Adiartes. A tall sightseeing order indeed.

But when we got to Saud Beach at about 10:30, we found the place had been blocked by some big excursion group and we had to eat the buffet lunch and swim before noon. We decided to explore other places. We went further east to Blue Lagoon beach which was just as beautiful. But the weather had turned hot and scorching, and we were getting hungry, and we decided to eat native, alá "dampa" style (go to a local market, buy the best food, go to a restaurant and have it cooked – we were tipped about such a place a few km further east). We decided to skip any swimming. Also, since the waterfall was a good 1-1/2 km hike into the wilderness, it also would be scrubbed.

The market was just a roadside affair but it had lobsters, crabs, fish, octopus, gulay, and for cheap (lobsters at 300 per kilo!) But alas, the "restaurant" across the street was more of a carinderia, where we sat on benches with a single electric fan, and pretty soon, a bus parked in front of us, kept it's engine running as it disgorged it's passengers for a quick lunch at the turo-turo section of the carinderia.

Ah, but it was all well worth it. See the ecstasy of the group in the picture. And this was just the first course.

To be continued...

