

## **TRIP TO VOLCANO**

Liz, John and I decided to take a day trip out of town, we needed some fresh air, preferably transparent air. I had concluded that Metro Manila was not a fair representation, and I was building a nasty mental image of a polluted archipelago. So somewhere away, with less traffic and fewer KFCs and Jollibees (the local equivalent of Burger King, which they also have. Good ole Kentucky Fried Chicken has almost reached respectable restaurant status here, and the Jollibees are as numerous as real ones), a “nice trip to the country”.

So we chose a tourist laden day trip to the local volcanic area, Tagaytay. About 90 kilometers from here. Nice lake, immense views, nature, smoking caldera. At the last minute John suffered an attack of work related responsibility, so Liz and I were left to our own devices, in the care of our semi-regular taxi driver. He knew the general area, but had never visited the lake or volcano itself. Knew enough English to understand us, of course I knew no Tagalog, Liz had learned “Up ahead on the left”, and “Thank you”. So if we lost our driver, we could get back home using a series of politely explained left turns.

### **Ride out**

The ride out was nice enough, highways smoother than I credited. Clean roadways. 75 pesos for the toll. A poem about trees sprang up alongside in Burma-Shave fashion, on official highway department signage. I was starting to relax.

### **Chaos to start**

Arriving at the destination was a circus. The general scene is this: The approach was from mountainbottom along a two-lane each way road, climbing slowly up the mountain side. Along this road are many houses and small shops. Amazingly, these shops and houses front was right along the road, meaning when they stepped out the front door, they stepped into the slow lane of the road. Kids, dogs, and unspecified are playing in this lane on both sides. The speed limit is 35-45 KPH, and cars are dodging in and out of the playground lane.

At the top are several small cities, resort style for the most part. There’s a huge lake in the middle. Centered in this lake is an island complex, the remnants of the live cone. Boats take you out to the island, where you can then climb or be hauled by horse, up to Coneside. Inside the cone is a smaller lake, filling in the opening of the volcano itself.

When we drove up to the first point, still along the mountain top, there’s a gaggle of guys hawking boat tours, waving small wooden or cardboard signs. We’re still a few miles from lakeshore, but with cell phones everywhere the hookup is no problem. When they see a couple of obvious Americano types inside, they start running on both sides, shoving each other in their attempts to get signs up in our windows. “My God boys, a couple of live ones!” was written across every face. Our taxi driver, Albert, was under siege. We wanted to walk around the towns at the top first, then go down for a lake/climb tour. And managed to get Albert to convey that to the guys. Success, we lost that crowd. Decided to walk around at the bottom first. It was on down to lakeside.

### **Brakes failing**

Part way down Liz's comment was "they need to learn something about switchbacks in road design". This road down to the lake was pretty steep, steeper than most public roads I've seen, even in the Santa Cruz mountains at home. Albert was riding the brakes. We were in a small Toyota Corolla. About 70% of the taxis here are that model. Ours seemed in good condition. Not like Efren's rental bomb, whose clutch gave out on his way back home. Anyway, part way down we see a large flatbed delivery truck, at least a 20 foot bed, at a crazy angle hanging off the road. Who could have parked it there? Well, the cab of the truck was smashed into a tree, and that tree was the only thing keeping the truck out of the bedrooms and goatpens down the hill. Down a very steep hill.

How steep? At the bottom, close to lakeside, another gaggle of boatboys. More persistent than above. Much more. And boy, were we news of the day. While stopped in the street for negotiations, and further explanations of our desire to walk around first before taking any boats anywhere, smoke started rising from both front tires. So much so it seems they might be on fire. Albert got out, checked them, kicked them, got back in, and declared them not on fire. But the smoke was pretty impressive. All the while the rentmetakemyboatverygoodridebestdealI'llbeaguideforyou assault was relentless. All in Tagalog. It seemed one guy was more relentless than the rest, or he had the best window position. We were told there was nowhere else to walk, there was nothing to do here but boat trip. Liz was frantically (well maybe not frantically, but with a sort of deliberate haste) checking the Lonely Planet guide for assistance.

I caved. "We'll take the damn boat, then walk around."

1<sup>st</sup> mistake. Never make important decisions on a full bladder.

The winner jumped in the car, to direct Albert and walk us to the correct port. We were waved into a dirt lot. There was some confusion here, as Albert wasn't sure what he was to do. We invited him along, and I was glad to have him. This was a first for him, and I appreciated his grasp of the local dialect. Not that Albert was far from home, but this puppy (me) was far from Rome, with only a cell phone connection to the suddenly comforting streets of Manila. So off we trooped, down some paths, past Grandma's house, to the water's edge.

### **No boat negotiations**

Ha, Ha, did I say port? I meant a slew of pontoon boats pulled up in mud along the shore. A short bamboo bridge was hauled from somewhere, we crept across, the "guide" and his buddies jumped onboard, and we got underway.

2<sup>nd</sup> mistake, and I hadn't yet taken care of the first one. About 150 yards from shore, I remembered to ask how much this boat trip was. "2500" he said without a blink.

Now, this was after our friend back in Manila, the-guy-in-the-know, had told us the boat should be around 500-700.

P2500. And we were now 200 yards from shore. I started gently complaining about how much that was. And the “guide’s” marginal grasp of English started to deteriorate further. Until I had complained so much he offered us the use of a cottage on the island, for as long as we wanted. Liz heard this and wondered what we needed that for, we weren’t staying overnight. My gutter trolling mind immediately realized what he was implying. 300 yards from shore, and now no turning back. I decided to take up the cost issue later. Enjoyed the remainder of the trip, with Liz trying to not be too bummed by our getting ripped off. I explained to her what his cottage offer was all about. It was funny. Oh well, how could he know we didn’t desire a tryst trap as part of this tourist trap escapade?

### **Climb up to top**

Arrived at volcanoshore. Another small bamboo bridge from ship to shore. Small village, many, many tiny horses. These represented the mobile mode of choice for the climb of a lifetime. But Liz and I, having previously braved the trek to the waters of Crater Lake, figured this for a no-brainer. Take it on foot was the only way to fully experience this wonderful event. Also the horses appeared to be ill cared for and on their last legs. Dave G, you remember the dirt, horse poop trails of Yulapa? The exact same deal, except more rocky and steep, like when we hiked up to the water falls. Much steeper. And much, much more poop. This was tourist season on horse rides! Declined an offer to buy beer, promising a more positive attitude and better thirst once down the hill.

Did I bother to see what the poisonous plants might lurk at ankle height? Nooooo.  
Did I bother to put socks on with my sandals, here wading through dry dust and horse pookie? Nooooo.  
Did I bother to wear a bandana across my nose and mouth, like many of the locals were? Nooooo.  
Did I bother to bring any water at all, and did I prudently purchase some before climbing? Nooooo.

Off we go.

### **Fumaroles**

Absolutely beautiful at the top. 360 degree view of the lake inside the mountain top. Gorgeous! Down in the caldera there are several large holes and patches along side the water with steam coming out. Just like a good volcano should be. Reminding me that Liz’s book says the last good eruption was in 19something, and this is considered a fairly active though small volcano. Seismologists are here year-round for study. I think the steam vents are called fumaroles, and it all looks excitingly prehistoric. You can buy bottles of water and fresh coconuts for drinking the juice. Unfortunately, it seems that

every plastic bottle from this season's trade is tossed into a trash pile down the side of the mountain. Maybe they're waiting for the next eruption to handle it.

### **“Putá”**

While drinking my coconut, a kid, one of the horse leaders, started asking a Japanese lady to allow him to take her picture with her camera, for a few pesos. Not very diplomatically but it was polite, with his halting English and that was the gist of his request. Wordlessly, she got up and walked away. He started yelling “Putá” after her. Several times. Then he and his buddies laughed and talked some more about the puta. This was in the middle of many people, mostly Asian tourists.

Now, I've always heard puta was derogatory Spanish or Hispanic slang for female body parts. Liz confirmed. Veneers are thin my friends, very thin.

### **Boat negotiations**

Climbed back down. Easy trip, but far more dusty. About halfway down, called our local friend and coworker to ask for advice on the boat negotiations. He tsk-tsk'd that we hadn't asked before getting in. Ya know, shoulda, woulda, coulda. Anyway, he said try offering 1000. I told him that if I was thrown into the lake, he better come and get me. Wasn't sure I liked the idea, but I was willing to try. I wasn't in some jungle (yet), there were dozens of other tourists as witnesses should anything jump off. They were all Asian, but their eyes worked and would see and testify to the same thing. So we had our taxi guy try to intercede. I monitored the conversation, starting it by saying “I just want to pay 1000” to the boat guide, who had waited down by the boats while we climbed.

He predictably went through the roof. Figuratively speaking. Through the palm fronds would be more accurate. Anyway, Albert took over from there. Now, my issue was I felt they were taking Albert for a ride too, after all he was the “city boy”, driving a cab of american tourists outcountry. We obviously had money, and they obviously needed some. We were just transport mechanisms for getting it to them.

So I continued monitoring the conversation between the two of them. It was alternately passive and passionate. But Albert was getting nowhere. He tried coming in at 1800, the guy settled on 2200. Then the talks stalled. Where's the UN when you need them? In the middle of this, a local woman came to me, holding out a 1000 peso bill. Asking if I could change it for her, giving her two 500s.

Surreally, she is one of a group of people offering us water and coconuts at 20 pesos, straw hats at 1-10 pesos, depending upon whom you asked, and who knows what else was for sale for the asking. Complete ragtag deal.

Real casual-like. Holding the 1000p note loosely. “You have two 500s for this, sir?”

Total fake bill. I wasn't able to tell from looking. But this was interfering with my following the negotiations. Liz said there were still many of the old bills floating around, worthless, but to the casual eye they looked like the current currency. I had to laugh,

because it didn't occur to the lady how strange it must look to be holding a 1000p note, after her kids were trying to beg a few pesos.

Anyway, the beer guy came dancing up, remembering me from the ascent phase, reminding me of my "promise" to buy a beer from him. Here was my chance at some leverage. I told him I couldn't buy the beer, I'd love to, but I was broke unless he could convince the boat guy to lower his price.

Remember, I was depending upon the kindness of strangers if the bolos started swinging.

He shook his head, that was my battle, but the beers were waiting. The pressure was on. I broke into the negotiations, and held up 2 fingers, I'd go for 2000. I caved again. It was getting on to 2:00. We hadn't eaten anything all day, and cold drinks were waiting. Boat Guy jumped at 2000, everybody was friendly again. I bought beers for Liz and Albert, for his hard work. Kofi Annan could not have tried harder! The beers came with us, over some small protestations. I think the bottle deposits were becoming an issue. I was prepared to tell them to get it from the boat guy. The beers and their bottles were coming with us. Everybody shook hands all around. "No problems, No worries!"

### **Back to lakeside**

It was fun, and only 30 dollars more than we should have paid. But you thought it was over, and so did we. When we went to climb into the boat, there was this incredibly old geezer, must have been held together with bailing wire. He was holding the bamboo bridge for us to get back in the boat. As we were on the bridge (these bamboo deals were only 6 feet long, just enough to get from dry mud to tip of boat) stepping into the boat, Mr. Boat Guide pops with, "That will be 20 pesos for bridge rental."

Unbelievable!! He didn't crack much of a smile. The ole man was wheezing and grinning. I had to ask, "Does this cover the bridge rental on the other end too?"

"No, that bridge is included in the boat rental." Again, not a smile. Remember, there were no bridge fees before now.

Well, the trip back across was uneventful. We landed, and starting walking back to the car. Foolish me to think it was all over. As we started up, Mr B Guy wanted a tip. Honestly, he thought he had earned himself a tip. I told him his "tip" was that I might return, if I had any money left. We must have looked like walking, talking ATM machines, according to one coworker.

Here's another really funny bit after all the hubbub over boat fees. As we approached the street, with Mr. Boat Guy in the lead, his other boat rental buddies started yelling at him. I gathered that they were asking him "How did it go". He waved them off the first couple times, but they kept yelling. I then witnessed him hold two fingers out, pointing downwards. He was trying to hide this gesture from us, but I was to his side and back. At the sight of two fingers, the crowd roared their approval. He had really taken the tourists for a good one, beers all around tonight!

After a few steps, I walked up to him and clapped him on the back. “So, you were telling your buddies back there how much money you got off of us, right? You told them two thousand?” He started laughing and tried to tell me that wasn’t the case. But he couldn’t keep a straight face. I told him that was okay, I had fun. Liz later read in her travel guide the typical boat fee was 800-1400 pesos. We had just paid 2000.

Back at the car, we shook hands once again, and told everyone thanks. Incredibly, after we had shut the doors, rolled up the windows, and started to pull out, some kid ran up with a wrinkled parking ticket. I think it was circa Marcos. 50 pesos. “Parking fee”. The kid even had to look at Mr. Guy to get his cues. He was going to get as much as possible. I’m glad and surprised the taxi was still in one piece. We could have been buying back our wheels!!

**A closing statement on the day**

Along the highway they have huge billboards, circa BladeRunner. One was of an older gentleman, in his 50s. The caption, in major point type, was “Even if the traffic pisses you off, you can still be in control”. I thought it was for cell phone services, or something to reduce the impact of the insane traffic. Instead, as we got closer, it was an ad for adult diapers.

If it were so easy to stay in control...