Northern Luzon in the Philippines

by Paul Sarno

I was fortunate to obtain the loan of a four wheel car and driver from a Philippine friend in October, 2013. I then scheduled a ten day excursion to the mountainous part of northern Luzon, that country’s largest island.

After a ten hour drive from Manila over a short expressway followed by crowded two lane roads undergoing widening construction, my benefactor’s cousin and I started at the city of Vigan near the northwestern coast. There, we spent three days visiting eighteenth century colonial Spanish South American churches, mansions and museums. Together with many Philippine tourists we walked cobblestone streets, ate local delicacies (often pork) and finished one meal with halo-halo, a tasty intricate ten ingredient ice cream and ice concoction interspersed with sweet beans, sweet Caro, coconut jam, purple yam, jackfruit and what looked like rice krispies. Delicious!

We spent the rest of the journey traversing five thousand foot mountains on curving two lane roads into the Cordillera region of northeastern central Luzon as I wished to see the dress, rice terraces, huts and descendants of the early inhabitants of that Island who preceded the people commonly known as Filipinos. To that end, we travelled to Bontac, Sagada, Batad and Banaue. I learned that since the 1970s, the ladies wear tops and all indigenous residents don their native clothing only at funerals and during about three yearly festivals. Fortunately their native dress, sculpture and huts and photographs of their rituals are on elaborate display at four local museums. I was also able to walk to extensive astoundingly beautiful rice terraces still very much in cultivation and observe coffins of their deceased at burial sites in caves and high on small mountains.

The trip terminated in Baguio, the warm season residence of American Governor-Generals in later colonial times and Philippine Presidents. This was a cool three thousand feet above steamy sea level. I was studying the oil paintings of Benedicto Reyes Cabrera, a/k/a BenCab and other contemporary Filipino artists when my driver Danny casually advised me that Typhoon Santi was approaching. My benefactor advised a rapid retreat to Manila; so, after a Korean dinner, we experienced a six hour drive past multiple trucks on the same roads on which we had driven to Vigan. But now, we were frequently reduced to one lane as the construction had ceased for the night. As the wind howled, the rain pelted down, trees fell and I tried to follow the journey by map in the back seat, my capable driver maneuvered the four wheel Land Cruiser to my Manila hotel. All the while, he assured me that this was only a category three storm and that the Island experiences about twenty typhoons a year.