

E X P E R I E N C I N G T H E

CALAGUAS

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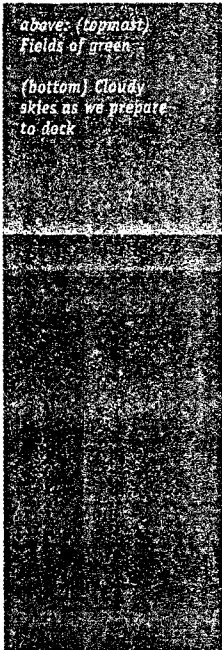
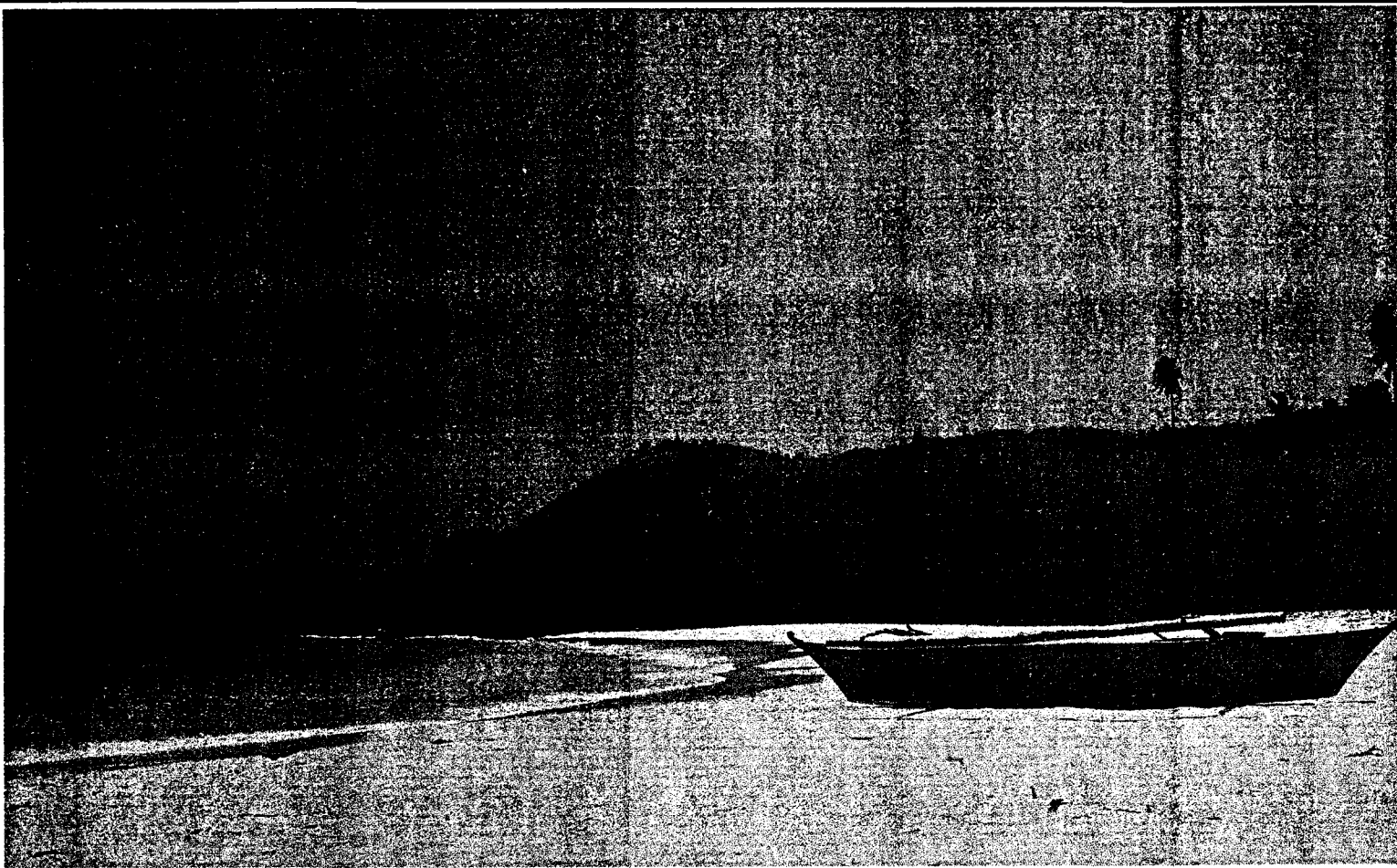
"Want to go on an adventure?"

This was the mysterious text message a friend sent me one night while I was home alone watching television. What she said instantly triggered my childhood delusions of becoming like Indiana Jones when I grow up, so I asked her where the adventure would take me. She replied that I had to travel hundreds of kilometers (350 kilometers from Manila, to be exact) down to Southern Luzon, where the Calaguas Islands in Camarines Norte can be found. I honestly didn't have an idea where those islands are, but I told her I was up to it. She explained further that it was a collection of virgin islands that I was going to. I was

a bit disappointed because I was thinking of a destination like Cairo or Venice like my childhood hero, but what the heck. The idea of going to an almost untouched beach and writing about it is as good as any Indiana Jones adventure for me. So I packed my bags immediately even if the trip itself was actually two weeks away when I received the message.

Two weeks passed and I took a trip along with other writers on a grueling ten-hour bus ride to Daet, the capital of Camarines Norte. We were welcomed by Jay Palencia who for several days, toured us around some parts of the province and the Calaguas Islands.





THE CALAGUAS

The Calaguas are a group of around 17 islands found north of Camarines Norte. Situated on the Philippine Sea, it takes a two-hour boat ride from the town of Vinzons to get there. The sea can be very choppy from October to March, according to Jay, and so the ideal time to travel there is from July to September when the seas are calmer.

The presence of large waves is not at all surprising, because it is one of the things Camarines Norte is known for. It is popular among surfers, which is why the Department of Tourism made Bagasbas Beach, one of the province's better-known surfing spots, an accredited international surfing spot.

But all the statistics and other trivia about the islands are useless pieces of information unless one sees them for oneself.

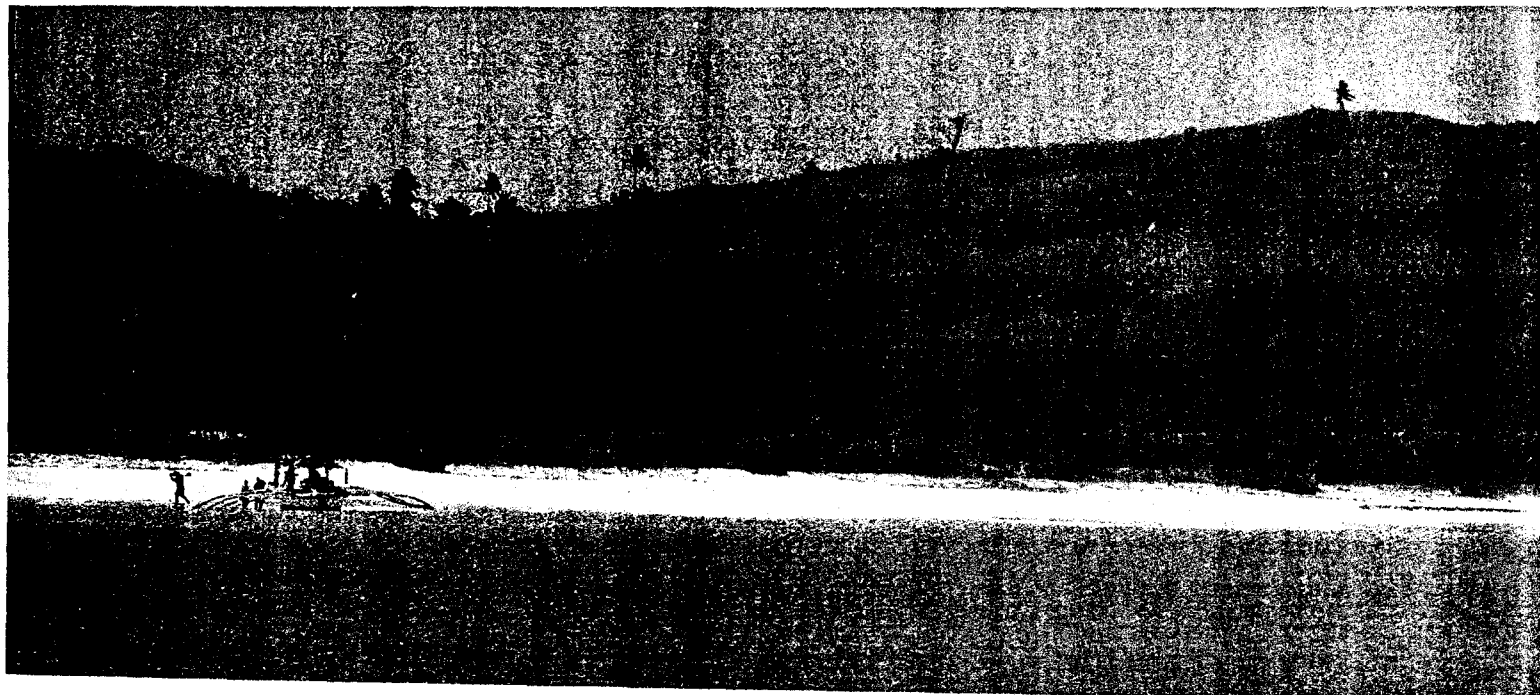
Instead of getting on a boat in Vinzons as usual, our group got on two large fishing boats in the town of Mercedes because we were composed of no less than 30 people. Aside from Jay, his friends and staff, and the band of writers, players from different Philippine and Indonesian teams that played in the Asian University Basketball Championships (AUBC) went along with us.

MAHABANG BUHANGIN

We then arrived at the area called Mahabang Buhangin, literally, Long Sand. The name pretty much describes the beach because it is where one can find the longest white sand beach in the island group. Since the large fishing boat we were on couldn't get near the shore, a speedboat of the local Coast Guard took us to the beach by batches. From afar, the view of Mahabang Buhangin looked fantastic. It was a sight of an almost unadulterated piece of nature.

When it was finally our turn to ride the speedboat, I should say I was already excited to hit the beach. Be warned though, especially if you're carrying sensitive and expensive equipment, because the waves there can make you lose your balance. Believe me because it happened to me when I was getting off the speedboat. A large wave almost knocked me off and the camera that I was holding (which I only borrowed, by the way) almost got soaked in the water. Good thing I was able to hold it up away from the waters.

On the beach, I lost no time taking some good pictures of Mahabang Buhangin, which wasn't really difficult because the place is really fantastic. The midday sun, the cool blue green waters and the fine sand were a sight to behold and are ought to be experienced. So after taking a few shots, I jumped into the waters and got lost in the moment.



above: (topmost)
Long stretch of fine
white sand.
right: (bottom)
Communing with
nature

PINAGCASTILLOHAN

After losing myself in the water, our group had lunch, took a short break, and headed towards the small island of Pinagcastillohan which lies at the heart of the island group. The island is owned by the Palencia's and is surrounded by sand bars which make for a picturesque view. There we talked to Jay about what the future may hold for the islands. He said that it would be good for everyone if the place is developed in the future because it would attract more tourists if regular trips and accommodations were available. Also, the locals will have the chance of getting alternative jobs in hotels and the like.

But with the development comes the fear of the destruction of the area. However, safety nets are being put up to ensure that it doesn't happen. In an interview with the province's representative, Renato Unico, he said that one measure of prevention is that companies that will set up their business at the Calaguas will have to pay a bond beforehand so that if something wrong happens in the future, they cannot just run from it and that there will be funds to rehabilitate the area. Whether or not this will work is yet to be seen, however.

COMMUNING WITH NATURE

As I mentioned earlier, the beaches of the Calaguas are almost untouched. It means that there are no amenities yet like those found in more developed beaches. Whether it's a good thing or not depends on each visitor. But for me, the appeal of the islands lies in the fact that I, along with the first time visitors, were given the chance to see how, in Jay's words, Boracay may have looked like some 20 years ago. No one is given that kind of opportunity that often.

Having said that, if you're planning to travel to the Calaguas, there are some things that you have to keep in mind. First of all, do all your personal stuff before you leave for the islands so that you do not have to go running around looking for a place to do it if it catches you in a bad time. Also, remember to bring enough food and water for your entire stay because you won't find any *sari-sari* store there. If you plan to stay overnight, it's good to bring a tent and a sleeping bag with you. Sure, it won't match a comfortable bed to sleep in but you get to lie under a blanket of stars at night. Finally, if your ideal getaway means leaving the city life behind, then taking a trip to the Calaguas will give you just that. The place doesn't have a phone signal, much less a WiFi hot spot. But it's all good to be one with nature from time to time.

So go and pack your bags now and head to the South of Luzon. A day trip on a chartered boat from Vinzons to the Calaguas costs only P4,000 while for smaller groups, it's more practical to take a ride with fishing boats where the fare is on a per-head basis. ♦

