

ROMANCING SAGADA

(Somewhere in Sagada Mountain Province, Philippines, 2009.)

I am balancing, as calmly as a monkey on a tightrope in a circus.

Except, that this is not a comedy act and there is no net below to catch me. And, to be honest, a squawking ape would be thrice as graceful. Instead, steep rice terraces, one jutting out after the next, look up at me, and I at them, marking my reflection in muddied water, teeter-tottering on the cracked, caked ground underneath me, of which there is only room for one shaky foot at a time. An inch of a mis-step, and it's straight down the mountain that these rice-terraces are carved of.

And I am so ready to kill John.

All women know that all men have issues with asking directions, right? And my boyfriend is no exception. In search of adventure, we threw out the option of having a guide bring us safely to our desired spot in Sagada—the “Big Falls”, and decided instead to follow an animated map from the Sagada Tourism Office, trekking our way through four—no, five—hours of sun, rocks, and slippery rice terraces. And, ask directions along the trek?? No way, no how.

Not that I hadn't expected it, though. It was my globetrotting Sagittarius man who, six months ago, made me walk up a tower to “view” a birds' eye perspective of Leipzig in Germany, failing to tell me beforehand that the staircase was all of 80 meters high and 500 painful steps to the top. It was also he, who, at midnight in Prague, assumed that the best way to Charlesbridge was a romantic stroll through 5 degrees of soddy weather across the entire city, and also his remark before our trip to Sagada: “Where's the adventure if you try to plan everything?”

Prior to last week, I'd been googling for an ideal itinerary so that I could make this the “perfect” weekend getaway. I'd talked with friends who had been there; I'd read the guidebooks, clicked through countless sites that offered advice on this Mountain-Province haven in North Luzon. Knowing that this time was the first for both of us to Sagada, I naturally looked to the all-promising Internet to help me out.

But when John disapprovingly commented that we should just “go and see what happens”, I ended up agreeing that perhaps the romance of adventure would be lost in a detailed planning scheme. I seriously hoped he was right.

Ask anyone who's been to Sagada, and your inquiry will be met with sighs and recollections of a faraway place where wanderlust takes over, as one photographer termed it, "*A Place to Go Before You Die.*" Maybe it's because there, so many pilgrims feel closer to Heaven amongst the mountain tops, the echo of nature, and the healthy yoghurt served up at every tiny restaurant.

Or maybe it's because, hello, a European trekker had once insisted on going without a guide and slipped, never to get back up again.

Every now and again, I would look up at our surroundings, taking my eyes off John's leading feet in front of mine, and see nothing but terrace after terrace, stacked up on each other and rising in all directions. Because no path was marked to the waterfall we were trying determinedly to reach, it was left up to his extra-good-sensory-perception-of-direction, and my agreement to just "follow and stop whining".

If I had done my research on the Internet, of course, I would have learned that there was indeed a staircase leading to the falls, that just because we could already see it in the distance didn't mean it wasn't half a day's journey away, and that sure, I had been three years in a professional dance group, but that didn't mean I could balance well at all.

Trust a loving man to make sense of the madness, though, and somehow find "adventure" amongst tropical heat and mountain terrain. We trekked past a gold-mine quarry, through endless slopes of slippery rock, up and over muddy, hilly steepes. No, we didn't find the "cemented pathway" every other travel blogger writes is the surest way to the Falls. Puzzled locals who met us on our trail would either shake their heads in disbelief or laugh out loud that we didn't have a guide, pointing at us hysterically.

It's those moments when you feel like one more minute and this could kill your relationship; that you never should have listened when he persuaded you take that unknown route, when you wonder how on earth you let him talk you into such a situation.—Again!

I am elated when, at the end of those 5 hours, (and by some miracle) we reach our picture-perfect destination, have time for a frolic in the falls, make up after being mad at each other during the trek, and find our way back with a little boy who happens to be there at the same time and knows the way to the paved stairs.

In the end, I had to admit that John was right about tossing out Internet and Travel guidebooks, and when retelling the story later, it's much more fun to recall. Rice terraces will now always bring back memories of our rendezvous with Nature, that summer when we survived the day, and each other.

Sagada is charmed, alright, with all the perfect elements for adventure. It's the thrill of not knowing where your feet—or heart—will take you, which leaves you following only your natural instincts and romancing the road less traveled, together.

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(End Note: John and I were married in Denmark, just 3 months after this article was written.)



--By Nyx Martinez