The Homestay Phenomenon: Expedient Homes in the Majestic Cordillera Highlands

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Abstract Utilizing combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches using the techniques of survey, open-ended questions and interviews, this study aimed to: (a) describe Batad’s geographical location and ecotourism attractions; (b) analyze Batad’s Homestay as a potential economic driver to boost local tourism efforts; (c) identify current enablers as well as challenges of the homestay industry; and (d) propose relevant recommendations to ensure the sustainability of the homestay industry. Results revealed that Batad is one of the 18 barangays of the municipality of Banaue, province of Ifugao, Philippines. It is famous for its amphitheater-like rice terraces, one of the five clusters of rice terraces in Ifugao that was inscribed in the 1995 UNESCO World Heritage Site list. This once isolated farming community is steadily transforming itself into a tourism community. It was found that some local attractions in Batad consist of: (a) Batad’s Rice Terraces resembling an amphitheater; (b) the Tappiyah Waterfalls; (c) the Awa view; (d) Sitio Patpat; (e) Batad’s Traditional Ifugao huts; and (f) Batad’s Socio-Cultural Activities. The homestay owners were dominated by female entrepreneurs, in their middle adulthood and were mostly Batad residents. Most homestays have limited staff as the homestay industry was only a part time source of income. Capacitation trainings mostly consisted of first aid or emergency response trainings, front office, social etiquettes, banquet and housekeeping. Some enabling mechanisms comprised: continuing presence of local and foreign tourists; global, national and local presence or efforts to preserve the rice terraces; infrastructural project especially the paving of roads that lead to Batad and electrification; national and local environmental education programs; rich ecotourism sites; and capacitation or assistance extended by local and national agencies. Some challenges comprised: limited contribution in community environmental education awareness; limited representation in tourism development; lacked of internet, cell phone and television signals; inadequate marketing strategies; inexperienced homestay staff; lack of waste disposal and drainage; continuing professionalization of staff; how to create unique brand image; and inadequate financial support for farmers to sustain the rice terraces.

Keywords: community leadership, community awareness and participation, community capability building, enablers and challenges, and sustainable tourism


1. Introduction

Considered as the world’s largest source of domestic income, local tourism is often regarded as a means of achieving community development [1]. It is similarly promoted as an economic development strategy worldwide. Latest estimates in tourism arrivals indicated a much higher percentage year in and year out. The yearly increase in income makes tourism a global industry [2].

Accordingly, the Philippines welcomed about 579,178 tourists just for the month of February 2017, which was 5.36% higher than the February arrivals of last year. By regional grouping, East Asia was the biggest source of arrivals with 312,240 arrivals with a market share of 53.91%. This figure rose by 2.69% relative to its arrivals in February 2016. Korea, Japan and China which belong to this region accounted for 48.85% of the total volume. North America provided the second biggest influx of tourists with 99,788 arrivals, forming 17.23% of the total tourist traffic. This volume showed a 14.46% growth vis-à-vis its arrivals of 87,178 for the same period last year. The ASEAN region accounted for 37,980 arrivals, contributing 6.56% to the total. The largest chunk of arrivals came from Asia, covering 62.05% of the total or 359,352 visitors. Arrivals from the Americas contributed 17.43% to total inbound volume equivalent to 100,947. On the other hand, 69,924 arrivals (12.07%) came from Europe while some 24,986 arrivals (4.31%) were from Australasia/Pacific. Estimated visitor receipts for the month of February 2017 aggregated to about Php 18.40 billion [3].
Because of this, the Philippine Department of Tourism and other governmental agencies provide training and services to the local community to educate the people, if not upgrade their competence and skills to attune themselves with this unprecedented opportunity to benefit themselves from this tourism industry. While many indulge in small stores, restaurants, transportation, tour guiding, massage or therapy and the like, others explored the homestay business.

A homestay is an option for hotel accommodation, which could be much cheaper in terms of price but with quality services that may truly provide greater access to land, people and culture, especially when the tourism activity-theme is about rural or ecological or cultural tourism.

The term homestay evolved as the B&B industry in many foreign countries. It is short for bed and breakfast, a small lodging establishment that offers overnight accommodation and breakfast. Bed and breakfasts are often private family homes and typically have between four and eleven rooms, with six being the average. A normal B&B usually has the hosts in the house. It is also used to describe the level of catering included in a hotel's room prices, as opposed to room only, half-board or full-board [4].

There is a subtle difference between bed & breakfast, paying guests, and homestay. Bed & breakfast accommodations may or may not be homestays. Similarly a paying guest accommodation may or may not be a homestay. A homestay combines the comfort and distinction of a boutique hotel with the personal hospitality, informality and local knowledge enjoyed when staying with family friends. Truly, the move to attract more tourists especially in historic and cultural sites have developed better services with an amalgam of local touch [5]. Thus, the term homestay reflects a personal and cultural bonding between the tourist and the local people.

In the Philippines, tourists as well as homestay staff consider the friendliness of the host as the most important factor, followed by easy access to tourist places, the site being the most appealing place. In Philippine homestays, local tourism provides mutual benefits for both the tourists and the operators. Tourists have the opportunity for a relaxing break in a homely environment. In like manner, operators have the opportunity to develop profitable business, make new friends and contacts, understand the cultures and lifestyles of others, and to educate guests about their way of life.

Consequently, the Department of Tourism of the Philippines is continuously laying out product portfolios to promote higher value tourism products and services that are expected to increase more visitor spending. In the Cordillera Region, the Cordillera Tourism Master Plan adopted "culture" and "nature" as its main thrust and vision for development. This thrust is sufficiently embodied and summed up in what is popularly known today as "eco-tourism." The overriding goal is to preserve, conserve and enhance the region's natural environment and its rich ethnic culture for people and visitors to appreciate, enjoy and learn from.

Integral to the Cordilleras is the province of Ifugao, which is endowed with rich historical, cultural, natural and man-made tourist spots and attractions. Most famous of them are the extensive rice terraces located in four municipalities of the province namely: Banaue, Kiangan, Hungduan and Mayoyao. Its wonders have gained the respect of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which recognized them as treasures of humanity, declaring the rice terraces of Ifugao as world heritage. The reputation of these attractions has boosted tourism related activities in the province making it second to the city of Baguio [6]. As such, tourism activities in the province are focused on the aforementioned heritage municipalities [1].

Thus, considering the tourism boom in Ifugao especially in the municipality of Banaue, the homestay as an industry offers transient homes to both foreign and local tourists to enjoy the luxury of god’s gifts and man-made wonders. True enough, while the concept of homestay as an enabling mechanism for local tourism development has reached many countries of the world, its possibility as a community income-generating project and private investment opportunity has never been fully maximized or at best, still at its infancy stage. Such an example is true in the Philippines, particularly in Batad, Banaue, Ifugao, Philippines.

To date, there exists paucity in related studies on local homestay industry in the Philippine tourism sector. Consequently, such a study could maximize the potential of homestay as an economic activity to support the local tourism sector. The specific purposes of this study were as follows: (1) describe Sitio Batad in terms of its geographical location and demography, tourist attractions and foreign and local tourists’ arrivals; (2) describe and analyze Batad’s homestay industry as a potential economic driver to boost local tourism efforts in terms of profile of homestay owners/operators, tourist accommodations at the homestays, marketing and promotion strategies and sustainability of the homestay industry; (3) discuss some enablers and challenges of the homestay industry; and (4) provide robust recommendations to ensure the sustainability of the homestay industry in the locale.

2. Methodology

This study utilized combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches using the techniques of semi-survey, interview, document scanning and analysis, photo-video documentation and armchair anthropology. The quantitative descriptive part described the current local tourism attractions in the locale of the study, descriptions on some demographic profiles of homestay owners and other relevant descriptions of homestays. The qualitative part utilized the techniques of open-ended question and document scanning to gather direct experiential accounts on tourist accommodations. The document scanning and analysis technique validated the existence of information gathered from tourists and homestay owners regarding tourism attractions and accommodation by using available records or documents in the locale. The photo-video documentation ascertained the direct interaction between human activities (relative to homestay) and environment (tourism attractions). Armchair anthropology gathered information from secondary or tertiary sources about the locale’s geography,
its tourism attractions and homestay accommodations; and the inductive-reasoning technique of writing was used to provide robust recommendations based on the identified challenges to ensure the sustainability of the homestay industry in the locale.

In culling the needed information, this study considered the following groups: (a) The Homestay Owners or Operators. Their knowledge as to the beginning and growth of the homestay program in the locale of this study was deemed relevant, thus, they were considered the prime participants to the FGD; (b) the Homestay Support Personnel or Staff. Inasmuch as they are considered the front line personnel truly immersed in the day-to-day operations of the homestays, they were considered as subjects for interview; and (c) Foreign or Local Tourists. This group was considered to ascertain the veracity of the information which was shared by the homestay owners and support staff. Considering the above sources of information, the study followed the purposive sampling technique since these groups of people can provide the most objective data.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Description of Barangay Batad, Banaue, Ifugao

Findings of the study revealed that Batad is one of the 18 barangays (the barangay is the smallest political unit in the Philippines) of the municipality of Banaue, province of Ifugao, in northern Luzon, Philippines. It is located on the eastern side of Banaue and is a part of the rugged Cordillera Mountains of northern Luzon. Batad is a place for self-reflection, amusement, relaxation and wondering especially at the beauty and serenity of the place. Batad is famous for its amphitheater-like rice terraces, one of the five clusters of rice terraces in Ifugao that is inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage Site list of 1995. Batad may have one of the coolest climates in the Philippines, but it is not as cold as that of Baguio or other parts of Benguet but still has a cool weather year round, about 21°C (70°F). With the tourism boom in 2000 and onwards, coupled with the paving of the roads in some parts going to Batad and Mayoyao, some local residents from Batad and nearby Banaue who had the capital to start a small scale tourism business began to construct homestays for Batad tourists and the mushrooming of small stores, especially along the Batad junction and at the saddle enroute to the village. In the latest 2015 census, Batad is a village of fewer than 1,100 persons. Consequently, this once isolated farming community, forgotten by time, is steadily transforming itself into a tourism community. Electricity came to Batad in 2005 and with it came video players, frozen meat, cold drinks, including bottled wines. Batad is approximately 18 kilometers from Banaue town proper. The schedule and frequency of trips from the town proper depend on passenger traffic. There is a jeepney that goes to the saddle twice a day. The jeepney takes its passengers to the end of the road past the saddle, approximately 15 to 20 minutes trek to Batad village. The fare is Php 150. One can also hire the entire jeep for up to 20 persons for a rent of Php 1500 - each way or to and from the saddle. A tricycle is also available but has to be bargained for the price. Meanwhile, a tricycle can take two or three people for Php 150 each but the ride is much less comfortable or a tourist can hire the whole tricycle for Php 450. From the junction, a tough four - kilometer trek up and downhill to the village would be a challenging experience. The rule is that upon arrival from Banaue, one can register at the tourism office and pay the Php 20 environmental fee. Once a tourist arrives in the village, he/she is asked to pay another Php 50 for environmental fee. Seemingly, there is an unwritten rule that exists between the tourist and Batad tourism. While everything has a price, a modest amount of negotiation is expected in many of Batad’s tourism activities. Bargaining is the rule of the game. Apparently however, these things do not worry so much the adventurer-tourists. Enthralled by the beauty of God’s creation - nurtured with patient human hands, untouched by modern technology, sightseers and vacationers immerse themselves in pure bliss and fun in the various tourist attractions.
3.2. Local Attractions

Some local attractions in Batad consisted of: (a) **Batad’s Rice Terraces** resembling an amphitheater. While Batad may be a remote village of few local residents, it is said to be the home to the best and most well-preserved rice terraces in the Cordillera region. The terraces reflect the deep-rooted socio-cultural values of the Ifugao people. Patience, hard work, sacrifice and communal sharing are among these traits. Their deep attachment to land and nature have paved the way for the creation of this wonder that up to now still fascinate man’s imagination; (b) the **Tappiyah Waterfalls** is a strong, turbulently hammering, powerful and beautiful body of water, about 70-meter from top of the ridge and below with a wide swimming area of natural pool, thus, it is a great place to go for a swim. The trek to Tappiyah Waterfalls is one of the most popular things to do in Batad. After a day of hiking, the refreshing water provides splendid relief from the forsaken drenching heat of the sun; (c) the **Awa view deck** is a man-made structure especially created to allow tourists to have a full view of the amphitheater-like rice terraces in Batad. This is the highest point of the rice terraces system. This is also a passage way for many locals in reaching sitio **Patpat** from Batad; (d) **Sitio Patpat** is a small sub-village of Batad. While this sitio itself does not have too many attractions, the two-hour hike going there via the Awa view deck passes through some amazing sights. A sightseer first crosses a hanging bridge then hike up rice terraces which lead into a small
forest with numerous little waterfalls and springs; (e) **Batad’s Traditional Ifugao huts.** A traveling tourist can easily observe and compare those who have more and less in life through the native Ifugao house. Those who have less in life live in the traditional **abong** and/or **inappal.** These two types of Ifugao houses serve as temporary shelters when working in the rice fields or in their swidden farms. In the case of the poor, they serve as permanent residence for those who cannot afford to construct a more elaborate **bale.** The **bale** is elevated from the ground by four sturdy posts, which are about 10 to 12 feet high. It is primarily used as the family’s dwelling unit. Conversely, those who have more in life are able to construct more sturdy houses. The traditional heavy thatched roofs are now reinforced with metal beams and corrugated irons. The bamboo walls are now replaced by concrete walls and cement plasters. Amidst developments, some homestay owners have incorporated a blend of tradition and modernity. Traditional huts and indigenous crafts were integrated in the new house. Other newly built homestays have built Ifugao traditional houses within the compound to allow foreign and local vacationers the chance to see and explore or have a partial glimpse on the domestic life of the Ifugao people through the native houses; and (f) **Batad’s Socio-Cultural Activities.** Examples of socio-cultural activities include: a bonfire where transient visitors are invited to commune with other visitors and some locals; storytelling, wearing of native attire; Ifugao traditional dance; and Ifugao native products.
3.3. The Homestay Industry

In terms of the homestay industry as a possible economic driver for local tourism promotion, it was evident that the homestay owners were dominated by female entrepreneurs, who were mostly in their middle adulthood and were Batad residents. The homestay industry was still generally young with an average year of about five years in the industry. Most homestays had one to two staff that did the chores due to the presence of few visitors. As a source of income, the homestay industry is only a part time source. Capacitation trainings mostly consisted of first aid or emergency response trainings, front office, social etiquettes, banquet and housekeeping are also additional workshop trainings attended.

Some enabling mechanisms that motivated the homestay owners to stay in the industry consisted of: the continuing presence of local and foreign visitor-tourists; global, national and local presence or efforts to preserve the rice terraces; infrastructural project especially the paving of roads that lead to Batad and electrification; national and local environmental education programs; Batad’s rich ecotourism sites; and capacitation or assistance extended by municipal and provincial tourism offices to local people such as the DOLE, TESDA, and DTI.

The challenges of the homestay industry included limited contribution in community environmental education awareness; a weak voice in tourism development; inability of Batad’s homestay facilities and amenities to meet international standards; the absence of internet, cell phone and television signals; marketing problems; inexperienced homestay operators/owners; waste disposal and drainage ditches; professionalization of staff; creating unique brand image or identity; and sustaining financial support for farmers to continue preserving and protecting the rice terraces.

Many of the aforementioned challenges enumerated by homestay owners were affirmed in the study conducted by Bhuiyan, et al. [4] on the Role of Homestays for Ecotourism Development in the East Coast Economic Region of Malaysia. Accordingly, some challenges which may actually become role - duties of homestays included: (a) the physical infrastructure of the homestay. The homestay infrastructure must always be built parallel to the kind of environment of the place. To improve quality, soft loans can be provided for home stay owners to improve the quality of their guestrooms; (b) integrated approach to solving homestay problems. The problems of marketing, training capacitation, waste and sewerage problems, environmental and social education programs, and others must be approached in a holistic and integrated manner. A framework to be crafted by provincial or local legislators for proper integration of key stakeholders should be created; (c) commercial interest and community participation. The homestay industry must not only provide financial interest for homestay owners but also the people in the community who are also directly involved in maintaining the ecotourism sites; (d) local entrepreneurs’ training capacitation. Homestay owners and operators should have basically the competence or skills in running a business; (e) low or poor quality of accommodation. Not meeting international quality standards tend to limit the number of foreign and local visitors. Benchmarking is thus necessary. For example, an unacceptable bathroom.
and toilet facilities are not comfortable and hygienic for tourists; (f) identity crisis. Each homestay must have a unique brand image or identity that differentiates it from the rest to attract visitors; and (g) lack of campaign or marketing. A poor marketing strategy leads to unflourishing homestay. Little investment in this would result to minimal guests.

Figure 18. Challenges Confronted

Consequently, the policy recommendations crafted in this study were based on the challenges forwarded in this study to enhance the Batad homestay industry.

In the light of the findings of this study, the following conclusions were derived: (1) Batad’s local tourism and homestay industry have the potential to be fully developed as long as sustenance of the rice terraces and other ecotourism sites and the people’s socio-cultural activities are given emphases and that infrastructural projects like roads, homestay facilities and amenities – including internet connections, television and cell phone signals meet international standards; (2) Batad’s homestays as a potential economic driver to boost local tourism efforts gave credence to seven important aspects such as the homestay industry’s economic benefits derived; empowerment of homestay operators; cultural practices promotion; social or local participation; ecotourism development; built design and infrastructure; and governmental assistance; (3) While there are enabling mechanisms that encourage the homestay owners to do business in Batad, they also face myriad of challenges along the way that need to be resolved through legislative or political actions, community participation, partnership and linkages, homestay empowerment and local leadership-initiated programs and activities; and (4) the policy recommendations crafted in this study aimed to: (1) provide some empirical data on the current status of the homestay industry in Batad; (2) offer some relevant suggestions for the resolution of identified challenges; (3) promote a multi-stakeholders’ approach to solving challenges that pertain to ecotourism and homestay development; (4) propose some baseline data that can be transformed into needed local and provincial legislations, policies, rules and regulations; and (5) help craft baseline activities (future prospects) to sustain the homestay and ecotourism industry in the locale.

In the light of the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. In order to boost further Batad’s local tourism, the following are highly recommended: (a) that continuing infrastructure projects like paving of roads and electrification from the saddle to the far-flung Sitios of Batad be continued; (b) the safety of hikers be taken into consideration by widening the walkways or paths leading to the ecotourism sites; (c) some rules and regulations be provided to visitor-tourists to always maintain the cleanliness along the pathways from the saddle to the various ecotourism sites; (d) those areas with dangerous uphill and downhill climbs be provided with metal or concrete guardrails for the safety of the trekkers; (e) group of local people can be employed to maintain these pathways and the compensation can come from the registration fees of visitor-tourists; (f) tour guides should see to it that all local and foreign tourists register at Banaue and Batad Tourism Information Centers; (g) to make Batad more accessible to tourists, a feasibility study of adding color-coded transport cabs or highlander jeeps circling the area can be explored as a tourism project by the municipal or provincial local government units; (h) unattended or abandoned areas of Batad rice terraces should be tilled and planted using the Chaw’wa system; (i) conducting feasibility studies on establishing communication links among schools or HEIs in the area be made a research theme; (j) establishing partnerships with the Department of Transportation and Communication (DOTC) and other telecommunication groups such as SMART and Globe can boost the effort to install communication links; (k) a separate Tourism Master Plan for Batad can be created that complements the Provincial and Municipal Tourism Master Plans; (l) exploration of other feature activities aside from mountain climbing and trekking like adventure zip lines, cable car riding and rock wall climbing be done in the future to motivate the tourists to stay longer in Batad; (m) integration of more socio-cultural activities as part of local tourism deepens attachments by the
local people and visitors on their indigenous knowledge, systems and practices; (n) sustaining or establishing linkages or partnerships with international and national agencies and private organizations may help beautify the ecotourism sites; and (o) to further educate the local community and to engage them more actively, conduct of caravan tours that promote environmental education awareness among the local people and familiarization tours in schools and sitios be conducted.

2. In order to boost Batad’s homestay as a potential economic driver, the following are recommended: (a) sustaining capacitation among homestay staff should be done to further professionalize them; (b) capacitation trainings should be wide-ranging and reflective of skills along services offered by homestays; (c) cleanliness and orderliness, including services, provision for homestay amenities, safety and security must meet international standards; (d) homestays infrastructures, built and designs should always be akin to nature or the immediate environment following the principles of green and vernacular architecture and engineering; (e) conduct of benchmarking activities be done by homestay owners to be able to meet quality standards; and (f) as a partner in boosting the economy of the place, it would help the homestay owners if some legislative or political actions, renewed community participation, stronger partnership and linkages, homestay empowerment and local leadership-initiated programs and activities be done to support the industry.

3. Some challenges of the homestay industry can be resolved through the following: (a) establishing a strong Batad Homestay Association; (b) producing more promotion materials; (c) attending local tourism assemblies; (d) partnering with local legislators who can sponsor bills in support of the homestay industry; (e) conducting benchmarking activities; (f) hiring of a skillful (ICT competent) staff to do the marketing promotion using digitized means; (g) conducting website maintenance or creating websites and other social media means; (h) creating tour programs and packages; (i) employing various strategies and techniques such as technology-based broadcast (radio, television, multimedia, and online means) and print media (newspaper advertisements, brochures, feelers, flyers and tarpaulins; (j) attending capacitation trainings among homestay owners / operators; (k) attending short term business schooling to be able to know the rudiments of business; (l) attending business counseling sessions or training programs; (m) creating a Master Plan for an integrative approach to solving waste disposal and sewerage system; (n) conducting community-based approach in solving waste disposal and sewerage problems; (o) creating a unique brand or identity; (p) creating stronger networks with travel agencies; (q) attending seminars on creation of brand image; (r) employing a consultant to oversee brand image creation; (s) creating linkage partners in the international and national organizations or agencies that give donations; (t) working with legislators in crafting resolutions giving subsidies to farmers (governmental financial subsidies); and (u) identifying abandoned and unattended rice fields and sustaining the Chaw’wa system that provides help for the farmers in the form of financial and manual help for the restoration of privately owned rice terraces.

4. That the policy recommendations crafted in this study be taken into consideration by local government units and homestay owners inasmuch as they were based on the salient findings of this study.

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