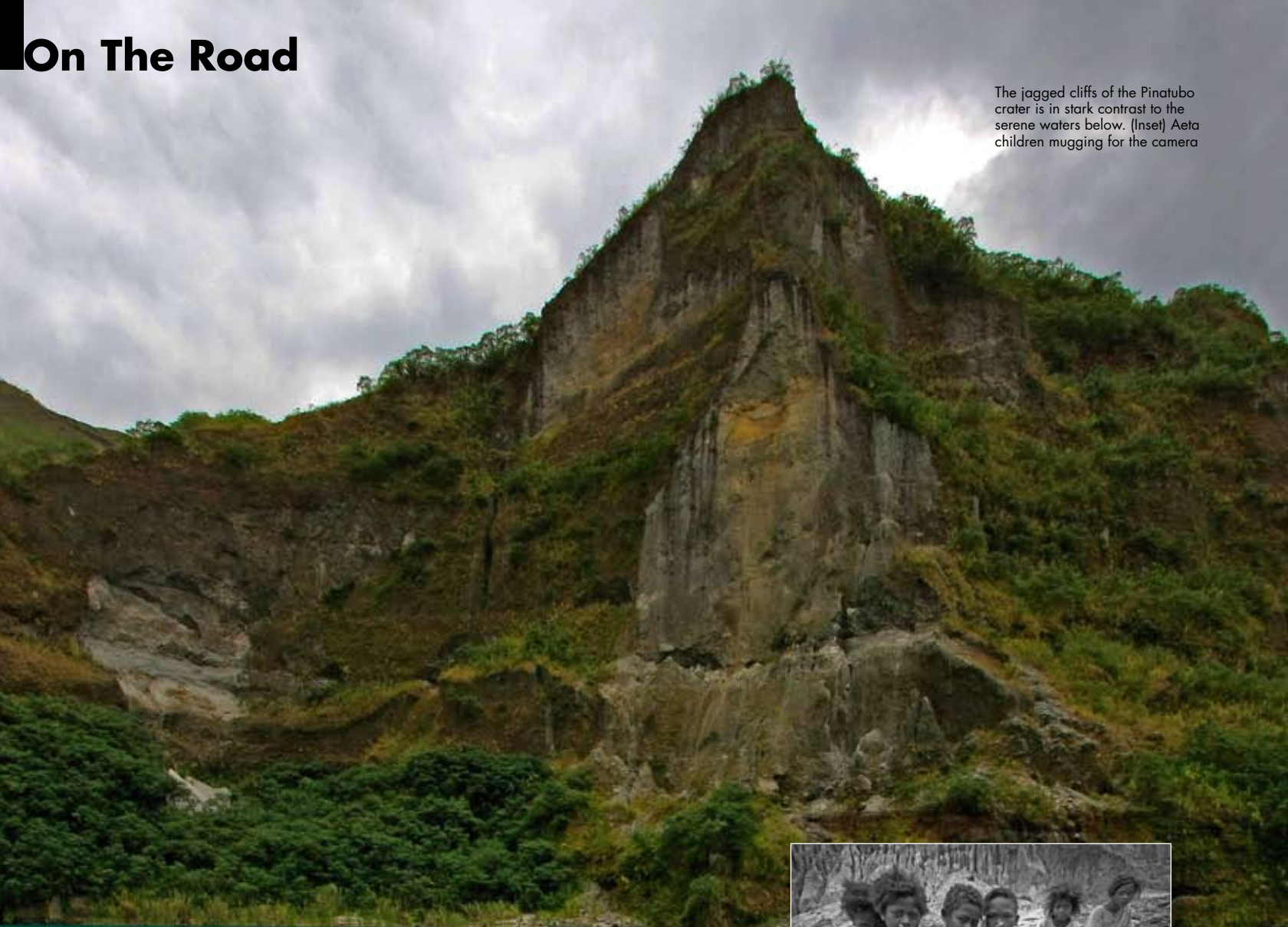


The jagged cliffs of the Pinatubo crater is in stark contrast to the serene waters below. (Inset) Aeta children mugging for the camera



The picturesque lake changes color from blue to green because of its high sulfur content



Rocky Mountain High

A quick climb up Mount Pinatubo's crater lake whets **Albert Labrador's** lust for exploring unknown territory

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALBERT LABRADOR

It was an opportunity for a return to my youth. My friend Ryan, upon finding out that I was once an avid trekker ("mountaineer" is a term I reserve for übermensch vertical wall-scaling types), asked me if I'd ever been to Mount Pinatubo.

The climb was supposedly moderately easy and the many postcards I'd seen showed just how spectacular the summit crater and route would be. After several postponements, Ryan—an avid 4x4 enthusiast—and I finally set off on a daytrip to Santa Juliana, Capas, Tarlac, the jumpoff site for most Mount Pinatubo climbs.

I was happy for progress in the area. The aftermath of the Mount Pinatubo eruption in June 1991 changed the landscape of Central Luzon. After four centuries sleeping, Mount Pinatubo erupted so violently that it spewed more than five billion cubic meters of ash and debris and left 847 people dead, 23 missing, more than one million people displaced, and hundreds of millions of dollars in private property and infrastructure destroyed. While the initial eruption was devastating, the aftermath was equally grim. Since the eruption, typhoons, or even just heavy rains would trigger lahar flows, which buried everything in its path. Lahar flows deposited more than three cubic kilometers—around 300 million dump-truck loads—of debris in the areas surrounding the volcano, destroyed the homes of 100,000 people, and 17 years later, still pose a threat to inhabitants of the area. Thus, news of developments in the area, such as a trek to the Pinatubo crater is proof that life continues to flower amid the danger.

Mount Pinatubo Spa Town in Santa Juliana is set up to handle the mostly Korean tourist groups that trek the route. You need to pay a fee for a compulsory guide and to rent a four-wheel drive to take your group to the trail head. Over-nighters are required to get a mayor's permit and take a guard from the airforce unit stationed at nearby Camp O'Donnel. Ryan took his spanking new Suzuki Grand Vitara with him to avoid having to rent the raised Toyota Mini Cruisers or CJ5s that are the standard vehicles on the route. So after a few formalities, we were off in air-conditioned comfort on the rough track leading to the trail head.

There are two routes up to the Pinatubo crater lake from the trail head. The traditional route is a three-hour slog along what was probably a lahar slide down the mountain. The new route, aptly called the "skyway," is a mountain road that joins the main trail a scant 45 minutes from the campsite. Unfortunately for us, the skyway route was closed, but at least the main route would allow me to gauge just how badly I'd fare after my seven-year hiatus from the outdoors.

The route was marked by hardy grasses and shrubs. As we continued on the trail, the grasses became sparser until we were driving along what looked like a desert interspersed with clumps of grasses. The Suzuki performed quite well considering it was lower slung than the Mini Cruisers. It handled the four stream crossings with aplomb, only getting stuck when we neglected to clear its crossing point of stones that snagged on the bottom of the car. And even then, it took

On The Road

little effort to get it unstuck and we were soon at the trail head. The jeep drivers that had just disgorged their groups before us looked on in amazement as the Grand Vitara sidled up to the mud-splattered and heavily weathered Mini Cruisers, looking much like a cocktail party guest showing up at a rodeo. The jeep route reminded me of the tracks I traveled in northern Pakistan a decade before—the only thing missing was the Bollywood soundtrack. I was now ready for the second part of the trip—trekking to the crater lake.

My daypack, loaded with a couple of sandwiches and ample water, felt light as I swung it onto my back. I was thankful that it was a daytrip and that I didn't have to take the usual ton of equipment that an overnigher would require. The guide, Ryan, and I set off in bright sunlight down a track bounded by crumbling valley walls in various shades of gray and ochre, sprinkled with mottled boulders and stones along which mountain streams meandered. At first, we carefully stepped on stones and rocks to cross the streams to keep our feet dry. Soon, it dawned on us that we'd never be able to avoid getting our feet wet, so we waded, hoping that the stream we were crossing was the last dunking.

The trail did prove easy and nowhere as steep as I had imagined. A steady breeze kept us refreshed as the moonscape of the lahar trail narrowed with the rising altitude. After an hour or so of walking, I saw Ryan in the distance stamping his boots into the ground repeatedly like he was trying to squash something on the trail. In his long hiatus from the outdoors, the soles of his boots had crumbled as the rubber dried up, leaving the vibram soles hanging from the uppers. In frustration, he eventually tore the soles off—he may as well have been wearing ballet slippers! He slogged on, however, quietly cursing his boots and bad luck.

Soon we were at the point where the skyway route met the main route up the mountain. Five Aeta children sat on a nearby boulder, asking for candies and mugging for photos, adopting typical “gangsta” poses that are all the rage among kids. Our guide said that the Aetas had already been resettled on the slopes of the volcano, some even working as guides. As we hiked, the trail narrowed even more and the gradient began to steepen. At this point, grasses, ferns, and trees had already grown along the little brooks that meandered downhill, making the climb less forbidding. A bit of cloud rolled in and made the trek even cooler, though I couldn't help wondering what trekking down a barren rocky river valley would be like if a thunderstorm suddenly broke out.

The trail narrowed to a stream and the familiar mountain smell of sweet spring water and fresh foliage waving in the breeze took me back years. My pace picked up and I was soon scrambling among boulders ahead of the guide and my two companions. The trail was well-maintained and clean—only a few stray candy wrappers spoiled the experience, but considering it was a popular trekking route, this was nowhere near the amount of refuse I've seen on other mountains.

I could tell that the trail was nearing its climax as I looked up and the clouds seemed closer than before. I reached a clearing at the steepest point of the trail that led up to some concrete steps, and then to two metal structures housing public toilets. A welcome sight actually, since the presence of toilets helps keep the campsite clean. The concrete stairway was probably placed to prevent soil erosion from the steepest and most exposed section of the climb. As I wheezed up the path, I wondered at the strength of the workers who had to haul several sacks of concrete up the mountain. As the trail leveled off, I realized that I had made it. I took several deep breaths of



Big 4x4 vehicles can make the going easier

the sweet mountain air and whooped with delight. I prevented myself from proceeding to the actual end of the trail and seeing the spectacular crater lake; I waited for the others so we could all savor the view at the same time. Soon enough, Ryan and our guide arrived and our pace freshened in anticipation of the scene that would soon meet us.

We ran to the viewpoint and it did not disappoint. The crater lake lay before us in its glorious vastness. The water glowed green in contrast to the ashen gray walls. Surprisingly, a lot of greenery had grown and, along with it, birds had begun to inhabit the cliff walls and reeds along the water's edge. The silence was only interrupted by their chirping and warbling—

and the clicking of camera shutters. The clouds caused bands of shadows to play along the landscape before us—it was breathtaking.

Soon, we descended farther down to the water's edge. A few climbers were sunbathing and enjoying the water. There was ample space for many more on the beach, enough to stretch out on our own without having to bother those already there. We pulled off our soggy boots, consumed the rest of our trail food, and enjoyed the view.

As I gazed at the otherworldly beauty of the crater lake, I couldn't help smiling and anticipating many climbs in the future. I was, most definitely, back. ■

You'll have to cross streams and walk this trail to get to the lake



Spa-ing on the Edge Pinatubo Spa Town rises from the ashes with this unique spa adventure

When Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, few thought that 17 years later, the community would adopt and make use of the volcano's ash to make money. Pinatubo Spa Town is in Sta. Juliana, Capas, Tarlac, an area totally destroyed by the volcano's explosion. This spa takes advantage of its location. The pampering starts with a 30-minute volcanic ash body scrub, and another 30 minutes in the mudpool for a full-body mudpack. The ritual ends with a relaxing “Pina-Thai-Tsu” massage (incorporating the techniques of Philippine, Thai, and shiatsu massage). The complete spa adventure cost P5,000 and is inclusive of roundtrip transportation to and from the pickup point at Subic Bay, a 4x4 vehicle to the trail, tour guide and local trail guide, conservation fees, lunch at Spa Town, and the spa treatment. For more information, go to seahorsetours.com.

HOW TO GET THERE

To Get to Sta. Juliana: Take the North Luzon Expressway and exit at Sta. Ines. Continue down the road toward Baguio. You may either go straight along the Mabalacat route and enter Capas town from the south; or detour to Concepcion and double back, entering Capas from the north. The Concepcion route generally has less traffic.

When you reach the Capas Market turn in Sta. Juliana at Manson Drug—from Mabalacat make a left; from Concepcion, make a right. Continue down this road through a military base (there's a checkpoint

and a “tanks crossing” sign.) Pinatubo Spa Town is about 20 minutes from the Manson Drug turn-off. This is where you get off to arrange for a guide and 4x4 transport.

WHAT TO BRING

- A change of clothes, if you want to go swimming in the lake or for changing afterwards. The trek can be dusty
- A sturdy pair of walking shoes, boots, or sandals
- Water and trail snacks
- A hat
- Sunblock

RATES

- Guides: P500
- 4x4: P2,500
- For more packages, check seahorsetours.com

OTHER TIPS

- Go early so the sun won't be so high when you start your trek.
- There's a chance your trek will be aborted if it rains. The trek can be dangerous in rainy weather.
- Be careful swimming in the crater lake—the bottom abruptly slants down. Guides say the deepest part of the lake is 5,000 feet deep.
- The high sulfur content of the water can also be drying on hair, so color-treated hair should be protected.
- For recommended tour packages, try Lakbay.Net, tel (2) 517-6655, e-mail travelife@lakbay.net.ph