

# Earnest Snoops

By ERNEST GONZAGA



The captivating City of Puerto Princesa in Palawan is habitually called “City in a Forest.”

Waves of immigrants from other Philippine provinces, and even other countries, have converted the city into a mishmash of various cultures. Among the

Dave Dewbre. Upon arrival at the city’s airport, Diana and Department of Tourism staff greeted us with the customary shell leis and brought us to the exquisite Dolce Vita hotel.

At the welcome dinner party held at the posh A&A Plaza Hotel hosted by Mayor Hagedorn for us, the band “Sinika” sang and played native instruments and the cultural group, “Pangkat Kalinangan,” danced in vibrant assortment of costumes of their region.

The music of Puerto Princesa is genuinely very Filipino, from the musical instruments and their sounds, to the very feel. The music and dance were



Sinika singer



Mayor Edward Hagedorn and Diana Limjoco with the Pangkat Kalinangan

earliest inhabitants were the “Cuyunons” with an abounding legacy of legends and traditions, while the home-grown groups include the “Tagbanuas” and the “Bataks,” each with their own distinct way of life.

Our four-day Puerto Princesa sojourn was rendered unforgettable by the warmth of the city mayor, Edward Hagedorn, and good friend Diana Limjoco and husband

both urban and ethnic, ritual and modern, which told of a community at peace with its past and its present. They even have a Puerto Princesa song, and songs that sing of unanimity and the natural world. It was essentially a night dedicated to showcasing Puerto Princesa’s life-force.

Mayor Hagedorn speaks about safeguarding the splendor of Palawan. He changed this

once-althy city into one that is so unsoiled. In fact, Puerto Princesa is now a Hall of Fame awardee in the Clean and Green Contest, which each year cites the cleanest and greenest city in the Philippines.

Just recently, Mayor Hagedorn’s two key festivals were held. “The Feast of the Forest,” where thousands go to plant trees in the watershed area, leading to a forest cover and



Diwan drummers and firedancers

a mass wedding (in which the foremost prerequisite in order to be wed is to plant trees in the mangrove), was uniquely awe-inspiring. Up to 285 couples, mostly low-income residents, without having to spend a single centavo said “I do,” and then planted mangrove saplings after the ceremony oficiated by Palawan Bishop Pedro Arigo.

The occasion likewise marked the eighth year of the city’s marine conservation program dubbed, “Love Affair With Nature,” designed to rehabilitate known spawning grounds for ash.

We spent the next days on the photo-shoot of Mayor Hagedorn, Diana Limjoco, and the scenic places of Puerto Princesa for my Manila magazine, Images Asia and FilAm Star. The people at Puerto’s bay walk cheered as they watched the shoot, at which a group of na-



Pangkat Kalinangan dancer

tive drummers and are dancers, called “Diwan,” played and was actually part of the shoot.

During the remaining days



Roy and Stella Aippersbach, Diana Limjoco and Dave Dewbre

of our stay, we were treated to a fantastic tour of the city. A must-see for the first time visitors and tourist in Palawan is the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, often referred to as the Underground River and has been inscribed by the UNESCO as a World Heritage site. It is reputedly the most beautiful subterranean river in the world. It is also nominated as one of the world’s New Seven Wonders of Nature.

The pictographic lagoon, outlined by incredible limestone mountain scenery, greets the visitors before entering the underground river. Our boat slid soothingly into the mouth of the cave. An 8.2 kilometer river stretch ran through it that winds through an amazing cave and its endless marvels, before emptying into the South China Sea.

The boat rower pointed

to us a range of outcroppings that establishes the majesty of the place. The cave was full of stalactites and stalagmites that had shaped over the eons into breathtaking structures. The cave was murky and soggy. The part of the cave called “The Cathedral” was truly filled with enormous formations of granite, marble and lime that remind of massive figures sticking out of the basilicas of Rome.

The people of Puerto Princesa owes their natural wonders to the commitment of the city government, led by Mayor Hagedorn, to the preservation of nature and maintenance of ecological balance in partnership with an apolitical environmentalist, Diana Limjoco.

She, together with hus-



Palawan weaver

band, Dave, started an electric transport business that recognizes the potential and its positive effects on the environment. They are currently training all their energies into this very noble and worthy cause.