



FEATURE:

Vigan City: The Heritage City of the North

On December 2, 1999, the City of Vigan, the capital city of Ilocos Sur, was inscribed in the prestigious UNESCO's World Heritage List of Sites and Monuments of 630 cultural and natural properties of exceptional universal value. UNESCO described the city as "a best preserved example of a planned Spanish colonial town in Asia with its architecture reflecting the coming together of cultural elements from elsewhere in the Philippines and from China with those of Europe to create a unique culture and townscape without parallel anywhere in East and Southeast Asia."



Vigan's antiquity reveals an inventory of 187 massive-structured ancestral houses. Most of these houses are inhabited by descendants of its original builders and are used for original purposes, i.e. as religious and administrative buildings. The historical landmarks and museums, such as the Father Burgos Museum, Plaza Salcedo, Crisologo Museum,

Plaza Burgos, the Provincial Jail where President Elpidio Quirino was born, St. Paul's Cathedral, Arzobispado, Simbaan a Bassit (small church), Filipino-Spanish Friendship Park and many more, are also part of the city's cultural heritage.



In addition, the age-old industries like the burnay (jar)-making and the "abel" loom-weaving continue to fuel the city's economy. Moreover, the city observes religious and cultural traditions like the Semana Santa and Tres de Mayo.

Being the only surviving colonial city in the entire Philippines, Vigan is being developed as a primary tourist destination in Region 1. Annual festive cultural events, such as the Vigan City Fiesta, Viva Vigan Festival of the Arts and World Heritage Cities Solidarity Day, are celebrated to strengthen cultural awareness and appreciation, as well as to promote local tourism.



Likewise, the conservation program on the authenticity of the City is also being implemented. The Vigan Heritage Conservation Program, anchored with community participation, formulates legislative protective measures and undertakes doable projects/programs that would preserve the city's cultural heritage such as the ancestral buildings and the people's core values and traditions. Moreover, the strengthening of the Vigan Tourism Council, implementation of beautification projects and the establishment of the Vigan Culture and Trade Center contribute to the growing tourism industry of the City.

History. In pre-colonial times, Vigan was an island strategically located at the mouth of the Great Abra River. Since Vigan lies along the nearest coast of China, it became a bustling port of call of sailing merchants who brought exotic products from China, Indochina, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and Arabia. In exchange, products such as gold, beeswax and animal skins which were brought down from the Cordillera Mountains were traded to the merchants. Some of the seafaring traders, mostly Chinese, settled down in Vigan, intermarried with the natives and started the multi-cultural bloodline of the Bigueños, the natives of Vigan.

On May 20, 1572, Governor Guido de Lavezares sent Don Juan de Salcedo (a Mexican Creole and grandson of Miguel Lopez de Legaspi) to determine the extent of the island of Luzon and find a shorter route to Mexico for the Hispanic Galleon trade. On June 13, 1572, Don Salcedo first landed in Vigan and claimed by force the said town. As a reward for his

services, Don Juan de Salcedo was given the ancient province of *Ylocos* (which comprised the present provinces of Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Abra, the northern part of La Union and the sub-provinces of Bontoc and Lepanto encomienda). Two years later, he established a Spanish settlement called Villa Fernandina (in honor of the young son of King Philip II of Spain) consisting of a villa, a church and fortifications on the outskirts of Vigan, from where he administered his huge *encomienda*. Eventually, Villa Fernandina and Vigan were merged together as the capital of the old *Ylocos* province.

On December 14, 1762, Diego Silang, a native of Caba, La Union, led the “Caillanes” uprising because of the abuses of the Spaniards such as the payment of tributes and forced labor. In May 1763, the traitors Miguel Vicos and Pedro Becbec assassinated Silang. The brave and faithful wife of Silang, Gabriela, assumed leadership of the uprising but was later captured by the Spanish authorities. On September 20, 1763, Gabriela was hanged in Vigan, leaving a priceless legacy as the first woman to revolt in the Philippines.

Vigan got its name from an anecdote carried by the tongue of generations which tells of a Spaniard walking along the banks of the Mestizo River. There, he met a native of the place and stopped to ask: “*Como se llama usted de esta lugar?*” Not understanding a word in Spanish, the native scratched his head and upon seeing that the Spaniard was pointing to a plant, exclaimed in Iloco: “*Bigaa Apo*”. Bigaa (*Alcasia Macroniza*) is a giant taro plant belonging to the gabi family which used to thrive at the bank of the Mestizo River. Vigan derived its name from the plant Bigaa.

Vigan was converted to a city on December 28, 2000 through Republic Act No. 8988, otherwise known as “An Act Validating and Recognizing the Creation of the City of Vigan by the Royal Decree of September 7, 1757 issued by Fernando VI, King of Spain”. The Bigueños unanimously ratified the creation of Vigan City during the January 22, 2001 plebiscite conducted in Ilocos Sur.



Geography. Situated along the western coast of Northern Luzon, Vigan lies in the northwestern part of the province. It is bounded on the north by the Municipality of Bantay, on the east by the Municipality of Santa, on the south by the Municipality of Caoayan, on the west by the Municipality of Sta. Catalina, and on the southwest by China Sea. It is 408 kilometers north of the City of Manila, 80 kilometers from Laoag City and 139 kilometers from San Fernando City, La Union, the government center of Region I. Its tributaries flow into the Pangada River in Sta. Catalina, Caoayan River in Caoayan, Boquing River in Bantay and the Bantaoay River in San Vicente.

The City has an approximate land area of 25.1 square kilometers, which represents 1.1 percent of Ilocos Sur’s total land area, divided among thirty nine (39) barangays. Most of the barangays in the City are classified as rural areas. Unlike other municipalities with towering mountains, Vigan is mostly plains with gently rising hills on the southern portion.

Demography. Vigan City recorded a total population of 45,143 in 2000 with a population density of around 1,797 persons per sq. km. Ilocano was the predominant ethnicity comprising about 96.5 percent of its household population in 2000. Likewise, Ilocano is the most spoken dialect in the city. About 95.2 percent of the people in Vigan City were Roman Catholics based from the 2000 Census of Population. As of 2002, all of the barangays in the city had power/electric supply. About 57.7 percent of the total households in the urban areas had access to potable water thru the Metro Vigan Water District.

Socio-economic Activities. Agriculture is the major industry in Vigan City with about 36.0 percent of its total land area used for farming. Its major crops are rice, corn, onion, eggplant and tomato. Majority (95.4 percent) of the agricultural lands are irrigated.



The pottery-making industry is also prominent in the city. Its products include banga (cooking pots), karamba (water vessels), dalikan/pagugingan (firewood and charcoal fed cooking stoves), bakka paso (water and animal feeding basins) and masetera (plant pots). Burnay (jar)-making is also well-known in the city. Burnay is used as a garden ornament in ancestral and modern houses.

“Abel” loom-weaving also contributes to the economy of the city. Majority of the loom-weavers are women. Abel Iloko products include blankets and bed covers, pillow cases, bath towels and robes, place mats and table napkins, runners and others. Traditional colors and designs which have similarities with the Cordillera design are used in the products.



The place is also known for its food-making/meat processing industries such as the manufacturing of empanada (similar to the Mexican taco), Vigan longganisa (native sausage), and Royal bibingka (rice cake).

The City is the center of trade and commerce in the province of Ilocos Sur. Merchants from other towns come to the city to sell their wares. As of 2002, 869 establishments were registered in the Office of the Mayor. Majority of these establishments were stall holders of the newly established city mall.



Facilities. Vigan City, being one of the major tourist destinations in the North, has 17 hotels/inns/lodging houses/resorts that could accommodate at least 250 guests/tourists.

The City has a total of eighteen (18) public elementary schools, three (3) public secondary schools and one (1) state university as of SY 2002-2003. These were complemented by fourteen (14) private schools which included four (4) elementary schools, three (3) high schools, one (1) elementary/high school/college, three (3) colleges and three (3) vocational schools.

The health services in the City are delivered by one (1) government hospital, ten (10) private-owned hospitals, one (1) City Health Office and eleven (11) barangay health stations. As of 2002, all of the 39 barangays had their own day care centers.

References:

2003 Socio-Economic Profile of Vigan City, Vigan City Planning and Development Office
Brochures on Ilocos Sur, Department of Tourism Regional Office 1

2003 Countryside in Figures: Ilocos Sur, National Statistical Coordination Board Regional Division 1
www.vigan.gov.ph