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Carved into the flanks of mountains in north Luzon nearly 2,000 years ago, the Banaue rice terraces in Ifugao province stretch as far as the eye can see.

Terraces of the Cordillera

The Philippines' Ifugao rice terraces, masterpieces of agrarian art, cloak entire mountainsides.

BY MARY HENSLEY

More than 30 years ago I fell under the spell of one of the most remarkable man-made landscapes in the world—the ancient, hand-carved rice terraces that striate the **Cordillera Mountain region** on the main Philippine island of Luzon, about 250 miles north of Manila. I had grown up among mountains in Montana, but nothing prepared me for the sight of these sinuous, bright green terraces stepping down steep tropical mountainsides. It was natural poetry.

When I first came to the Cordillera region in 1976 as a Peace Corps volunteer, I found a place where landscape and culture were woven seamlessly together. For generations, the planting, cultivating, and harvesting of rice have been the foundation of local culture and the central focus for its communities. Legend has it that the gods from the Skyworld gave the first sacred rice to the original builders of the terraces. What I remember about the Cordillera is the smell of rice cooking and the woman in my village who, for 27 years, stored a basket I had paid to have made because I said I would come back for it.

Nearly three decades passed before I returned to

my village of Uma, Lubuagan, in Kalinga province. Much had changed. Both the terraces and the indigenous culture were slowly and steadily losing their structural integrity. Young people were leaving the mountains, abandoning strenuous subsistence farming to seek opportunity elsewhere. The elders anxiously wondered who would preserve their heirloom seeds and terraces, the living connection to their ancestors.

A glimmer of hope came in 1995 when UNESCO declared five clusters of rice terraces in Ifugao province a World Heritage site. I returned with a dream of introducing the heirloom *tinawon* and *unoy* rice to a wider market, to help farmers earn more wages and, in a small way, help preserve the terraces. I'm privileged to be part of a project that is helping revitalize the hauntingly beautiful rice terraces of northern Luzon. Today, I have my handmade basket and a bit of my dream.

Mary Hensley founded Eighth Wonder, Inc., and the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project (www.heirloomrice.com) to connect growers of the rare mountain rice to the international market and give people around the world an opportunity to taste the rice.

VITAL STATS Location:

Ifugao is a rugged, mountainous province in northern Luzon, the largest of the 7,000-plus islands of the Philippines • **Size:** 972 square miles

• **Population:** 147,281

• **Climate:** Warm during the day, often turning chilly at night

• **Activities:** Trekking, visiting remote villages, shopping for local handicrafts

• **Notable:** The mountain tribes whose ancestors first created the rice terraces, including the Ifugao, have generally resisted government efforts at assimilation.