



River Miners from Mindanao

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Mindanao, that large island at the bottom of the Philippines. A place not many tourists go due to various insurgent groups and a lack of tourist activities. In truth it's rather tame compared to other places I've been. Laid back, no rush and all the offering an off the beaten path type place holds prime. And one of the few islands that remain relatively unscathed by yearly typhoons.

It's in a place like Mindanao you can find day to day life like nowhere else. In Nepal I came across a dried up river bed that was being mined, and looked like a scene from an Indiana Jones movie. In Cagayan de Oro city I came across the opposite. Shortly after a serious flood the Cagayan de Oro river was full of milk chocolate brown colored water, and a deadly current. Not to mention, sand. Sand that builders use for construction. It meant there was money in the river.

I met Hector who used to own a bar beside the river before it was washed away a few weeks ago during the floods. Behind the remains of his bamboo bar are the houses where the local workers live with their families.



"The work comes when the builders say so."



"So they sit and wait until then?" I asked.

Hector nodded with a shrug, "What else to do? There's no work anywhere."

A barge boat is used by four local men to push out into the rivers center to collect sand. No machines here. Each man has a self made shovel. Designed to trap sand, and let water flow away. This is because to collect sand the

men have to dive into the murky water, battle the currents to the bottom of the river, scoop up the sand and then return to the surface without losing any before dumping it into the barge.

It's no easy task. As I stood alongside the shore the mid afternoon temperature had already surpassed 33 degrees. The strength of the water's current was clear as a local banca struggled to move. Today though the men are lucky, it's low tide. They only have to dive down 6 feet. At high tide add another 4 feet. Each full shovel weighs about 10 kilos. It takes a lot of effort to dive, let alone to pull the makeshift shovel out of the water, up overhead, over the side of the boat and then tip it.



I walked with Hector further down the river. Large truck tire tubes with concrete bags in the center were lined up along the embankment. Each one tethered to the other. Further down

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the river I spotted a trio of men submerged in the river and filling the sacks with sand.

"The river's current can wash them away," commented Hector. "But, they make more money this way."

"How much?"

"About fifteen pesos a sack. No boat to worry about."



Back at the barge it looked as if water was now gushing in. As sand is piled up, more water pours in through the cracks. One man takes a time out to bail out the water. Meanwhile the four others alternate between breaking the surface with a full load of sand and gasping for air before diving down again. The whole process takes an hour before the barge cannot take anymore. Water begins to lap inside from the edge. Time to return.

Using local yellow bamboo the



men lever and push the barge through the rivers current and over to the embankment. Grasping roots, leaves and branches they pull the boat beside the crumbling mud side. It's not over yet. Now they must use regular shovels to get the sand out from the barge and onto the shore. Eight feet above them. Waiting there, and looking on; some of the men's family. His wife, infant baby, and five year old daughter look on from the shade.



The sand now on the shore, it's time to shovel it once more. This time onto a waiting truck. This one trip won't fill the truck at all. There will be at least four more trips out to the center of the river before it will be filled and ready to leave. The men can then collect the wages for one full truck. Two hundred pesos. I asked again in shock at the low number.

"That's two hundred pesos a truck," replied Hector. "The men must then share out that money between them."

That's fifty peso's each for four hours of hard labor. Under one dollar. Just enough to feed

two people plain rice for the day.



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