

# The balikbayan has arrived

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**T**HE magazine *Balikbayan* has been in the works for a long time, when I came aboard, to supposedly, “help.” Over pasta and wine at a restaurant in Makati, I was informed of the gameplan, the direction, the vision. I took down notes in between bites of pizza, listening to my editor-in-chief, Lito Ocampo Cruz, whom I have encountered when he was still head of E! Entertainment Philippines, and when I was still with another paper. Our very down-to-earth publisher, Roger Lagmay Oriol was also in his element, sharing with us his thoughts and takes. All in all, we were all excited. Times are bad, we know. But there seems to be a compelling force that pushed us to just walk on. There was just no stopping us. I was swept by the tide myself. I knew I was in for a different kind of ride.



The Asian Journal Publications, Inc. has been in the newspaper business for 18 years. As the Filipino-American community newspaper across the United States, its editions reach generations of Filipinos from Los Angeles to New York. *Balikbayan* is the newest venture of Cora and Roger, and for Sir Roger, a new journey. He says in his publisher’s note, “this time, we are going back to where we all started.” The magazine is also for him, coming full circle, a way of journaling the *balikbayan*’s

“every glorious homecoming.” For Sir Lito, the romantic one, the magazine, the baby, is “our valentine to love of country.” This is also our way of carrying the banner for Filipinos, and our country, a bright color in itself in the intricate fabric of American culture and society. *Balikbayan* is our way, not only of showcasing our country, but also the Filipino who had gone to almost all parts of the world. A writer once said that we are dominating the world through diaspora. *Balikbayan* is actually a way to come home, no matter how far we have gone.

All of us were virtually working 24/7, talking to writers, calling up photographers, meeting up almost every other day, arranging for printing and most of all, writing down the bones. The heart of the work is of course the magazine’s battle cry, “love of country is back in style.” Very hip, and yet, very challenging to capture.

The real hurdle was to concretize this love through articles that would show just this. Blame it on serendipity; all things just fell into place somehow. We had articles on Bohol, a Pampanga old kitchens tour, the *Barako* and the coffee industry, *bangus* and Dagupan, expatriate poetry. We also had pieces on the Quiapo fiesta and the walking tour by led by the “Pied Piper of Manila,” Carlos Celdran. We were even fortunate to get an exclusive piece on a recently released film set in Bukidnon, written by the scriptwriter herself. Stories alone took some weeks of gathering, reviewing and polishing. I’ll hate using the word “edit” this time because we did more than that—we all looked closely into the stories, finding the points where the words would sag or just lose power.

We delighted in the lines, the scenes, the sentences, the language that showed a lot of brilliance. To me, it was like going back to Creative Nonfiction class again. We were conscious about the kind of writing we wanted for the magazine: we wanted it to be supple as a verbal structure and as experience. Simply put, we wanted the best kind of writing. Same also went to our visuals and our design, some of which took time in executing. We indulged in a lot of discussions in front of our large screen Macs, arguing on color scheme, placement and balance. The cover took

almost ten hours to do. In *Balikbayan*, I have worked with the most exacting staffers ever, who all share the sharpness and the occasional fierceness.

*Balikbayan* is a very intense event in our lives, a defining moment. And it is to me, a way of coming home to writing after enjoying the academe for almost two years. After teaching creative nonfiction in class, I rediscovered the beauty of this craft, which Lee Gutkind himself says frees the journalist from the limiting traditional principles of the Who-What-When-Where-Why-Hows. I am happy I was able to put into practice, finally, what I have taught to aspiring student writers. This moment too ushers in my own entry into writing in English, having written most of the time in Filipino. All of us here in *Balikbayan*, underwent a baptism of fire of some sort while we were putting together this magazine.

We wanted *Balikbayan* to be a different one. We wanted a new way of looking at travel, and lifestyle. We did not want to be just another title. “Love of country” is what will set this magazine apart. We not only promote the sites and the sights here, as everyone does. We are selling that creature “love of country,” pitching it especially for our Filipino expatriates in America and elsewhere, as a new way of life, as a new lifestyle. “Love of country” has leapt out of our postcards, has moved from the stasis in monuments, has come out of the ordinary images of the jeepney, the ice cream cart, the beautiful white sand beaches. “Love of country” is the ghost in the machine, the real deal, the life any Filipino away from home should carry in his or her heart. We must all come home to this kind of love. Everything, anyway, starts and ends in love. Love of country is back in style because the Philippines, as we remember, write, and read it, is made more meaningful through *Balikbayan*. Again, there’s no one way of loving our country. You can probably start by reading *Balikbayan* every month.

On all counts, *Balikbayan*, the magazine, is a whirlwind romance. At least for many of us who have been involved in the creation of this new venture—from the publisher, down—it was something sort of letting ourselves get into the groove of things, picking our brains out tirelessly. Most of the time, we bled, thinking and thinking endlessly of how to go about the contents, how to lay out the stunning pictures, or how to effectively create a stir for this new kid in town who’s about to go to school with the big boys and girls in the big school for the first time. When the magazine hit the stands at the bookstores, we felt proud. But even before everything, we already imagined the magazine, coming out of the press, hot and brilliant in our own hands with its immaculate white maiden cover, its unconventional but no-nonsense typography display, and its insightful and well-written stories. We don’t say this because we have high regard for ourselves (a healthy sense of self worth though is still important). We are saying this now because we ourselves are head over heels for this magazine, where we are carrying the new battle cry “love of country is back in style.” We ourselves fell in love with *Balikbayan*, so fast, we never turned back. We just kept looking in, to get you hooked and keep you looking back. ■



Publisher’s Note:

## Carrying a torch for RP

At a time when the economy is in turmoil and has already affected several parts of the globe, it always helps to know that there is a place you could always come home to, where you can spend time with your loved ones and have the time of your life, whether relaxing on the beach or having a fill of Filipino foods at a town fiesta. The Philippines is such a place, with its fantastic people, its glorious islands and its culture so diverse it is an envy of other countries, it deserves to have a someone carry a torch for its wonder and beauty. Now, with *Balikbayan*, despite the chaos and troubles we face as a nation, everything seems to be a little better and brighter. After all, we have a lot to be thankful for. ■