

PAPUA NEW GUINEA - 2007

Aug-3-'07

After a 4.00am wake up call in Brisbane's Mercure Hotel, I'm finally on my way to "The Land of the Unexpected", "The Last Frontier" or simply PNG. Sounds complicated ? Well, I'm talking about Papua New Guinea.

On arrival in Port Moresby, the nation's capital, I met a traveller who's flight was cancelled. The airline's system went down and it resulted in a complete chaos on the airport floor. Yet another domestic flight was cancelled and while I had a 5-hour transit at POM airport, it allowed me enough time to imagine what I would do if my flight would be cancelled as well.

Did I mentioned that I am in "The Land of the Unexpected" ?

Anyway, my departure was on schedule and before I realized it, I was in Milne Bay's capital Alotau. A neat little harbour town. 3 nights I will spend in this magical place.

At the Napatana Lodge, I had a sea-facing bungalow with a huge verandah . All amenities at this eco-friendly lodge are provided. Hot and cold water, fan, coffee- and tea facilities, there's mosquito spray in the room for both the human body as for the room. Among other hotel facilities is the upstairs open-airy bar annex restaurant a very popular place, specially during weekends when locals gather here. Immediately I met some interesting locals and travellers a like. One of them Lonely Planet author Dean who was here in PNG for updating the new 2008 edition of Papua New Guinea. I can strongly advice this guide book. I bought the latest 2005 edition and found it very useful.



But if there's one thing I can recommend you besides the LP guide book, it would definitely be the Napatana Lodge. The food is very tasty. So is the service and your hosts Pam and Gretta. Together with their husbands they operate the Napatana and will do anything to make your stay a memorable one.

Florah, the daughter of Gretta is your perfect private guide. She's able to plan your daytrips with you and arrange DIY tours using just local transport like a PMV (Public Motor Vehicle) or a dinghy (small boat).

Aug-4-'07

With the assistance of Florah, Dean and myself took off with a PMV to East Cape. A PMV is the local bus and anything goes inside. Goods, bags of rice, a dog and as much people as possible. Between this, myself.

As the name suggests, East Cape is the most easterly point of PNG. There are a number of islands off shore. The nearest Boiboiwaga Island is just a 2-minute dinghy ride away. We had chosen to go here instead of the little more distant islands because between June and October the sea can be quite rough and unsafe. There are no lifejackets available this side of the planet and we opted for safety instead of sorry. As we bought a drum of fuel in Alotau, the dinghy's outboard motor was filled up and on we went after I took use of the local toilet, a fenced pit in the bushes.

We were about far enough from the shore when all of a sudden the engine gave up. Too far to swim back or to call for help. Luckily another dinghy passed by and noticed our problem. He tow us back to shore, we switched into another small boat and made it safely on Boiboiwaga island where plenty of colourful fish and coral are waiting to be explored. The island is deserted, with lots of vegetation plus a true coral garden in the shallow waters in front of it. Go there with your loved one, carry a cooler with a couple of SP's (local beer) and fresh fruit. Bring snorkelling gear and the island is all yours for the day.

Today is Saturday and that means party-time ! Only on Saturdays there's dancing at the "Jetty", a club for locals. Wherever I go in the world, I find it always interesting to check out the local nightlife. And I can tell you that I came across some unusual sights and sounds in the past.

After a security check, I was given green light to get in. But not alone ! I had 2 private body guards with me from the Napatana who surrounded me wherever I moved my feet. Apart from this, 3 more staff members who were there also to look after me. Definitely this was not wasted luxury as I later found out. Minutes after I took my first beer, next to me a local was beating his wife like a mad cow. Not him, but the lady was dragged outside by night-club security. Right after that, a similar situation took place in another corner. I had heard that abusing women in this country is still a common practise but I had never seen it with my own eyes until today. Here in the club, it was clearly a domain dominated by males. But the fighting escalated and it went on at different corners with bottles, stones and anything which wasn't too heavy to throw. It was really a scary experience.

Just 90 minutes after I had entered the place, my private bodyguards brought me back to the hotel safely. By then the bar ran out of alcohol anyway - maybe because this Belgian was there, hihi.

Outside, the troubles kept going on while my guards instructed me to walk slowly by and avoid eye contact with the fighting groups. Welcome to the Land of the Unexpected !

Aug-5-'07

After quite an exciting night, it is good to have a relaxing day and enjoy some of the best that PNG has to offer...its stunning natural sources. I decided to explore the rainforest around Halowiya. Following the river up to a great waterfall and you'll notice different kinds of colourful butterflies and birds alike. I spotted several species of gorgeous birds, the White Cockatoo being one of them which I could easily recognise. Walking back towards the beach, there's a tiny little islet, with good snorkelling according to Florah - my



local guide. Unfortunately, today it is Sunday and no dinghy available to get me there. A good swimmer would surely be able to make it as the distance is really short. Driving back to Alotau, we stopped along the way as I noticed another phenomenal gift from nature. A group of about 30 dolphins were frolicking

about 100 meters off shore (see picture). The flat sea today made it very easy to follow them. A great end of the day.

Aug-6-'07

Just a short 35-minute flight over the Coral Sea brought me into a totally different world that goes beyond your imagination. I had been doing research since the past 2 years about this mysterious string of Melanesian island-gems spread out in the Coral Sea. They belong to Papua New Guinea but that's about all they have in common.

The Trobriand Islands, known as the Islands of Love celebrate their annual harvest of the yams with fantastic festivities as canoe races, traditional dancing, funny cricket games and more. It usually lasts about 2 weeks. It really is by all means the absolute highlight of the year and a must for every traveller interested in culture. Several anthropologists have been here before myself, but this time I could finally step into the world of this magical place on earth.

The start of the "Milaa Malaa festival" as it is officially called, takes place somewhere in July/August while the yam cultivation cycle is the basis of their calendar. It starts with the Kula expedition canoes at Luba area, encompasses Wawela to Okaiboma villages.

The second day, the Kula Expedition sails to Kitava Island while the 2 following days canoe racing elimination rounds are taking place.

On day 5 the Kula exchange Feast takes place at Kitava Island. Next day the Kula Expedition departs Kitava Island for Kiriwani, followed by 2 days of rest.

It was the second rest day that I flew into the smallish airstrip where a sort of pick-up welcomed me to bring me to Butia Lodge, the best available accommodation on the island.

The second part of the Milaa Malaa festival sounded the most interesting in my opinion, that's why I decided to arrive here today, because part 2 should start just about now. However, on arrival I was told that the whole festival was (sigh) cancelled !!!

Who ever said that PNG is often referred to as the Land of the Unexpected ? I had travelled more than half-way around the globe to witness this colourful event. I took off a great deal from work, bought a very complicated (and expensive) air ticket and last but not least, collected a pile of research about the island group to hear minutes after I stepped foot on this magical ground, that all activities were simply cancelled.

This 2007 Milaa Malaa festival was previously announced by the official PNG PTA and a detailed program was sent to me... All for no reason. Even the organiser, who I met the day before in Alotau and who owns Butia Lodge, did not inform me about the cancellation. Perhaps to secure my bookings at the lodge, I don't know. Anyway, I reduced my original stay at the Lodge from 7 to 4 nights because of that reason. So did a fellow traveller who came from New Zealand with the same thing in mind as myself. Deeply disappointed but still amazed about the warm people of the Trobriands, I explored the **Station** which is nothing more than a couple of small trade stores selling basic stuff.

At the Station, which functions as a sort of meeting point for locals, there's always some local way of life to witness. Some people (not to mention most of the people) are chewing beetle nut, others buying fresh fish straight from the dinghy while the women are doing some shopping at the small local seaside market. Always full of photo opportunities.

As we heard that a funeral was taking place this morning, always an interesting place to visit too, except in your own country of course, we headed toward the gathering. I had no idea where all this people came from but I estimate several hundreds, if not thousand people showed up. Some only to watch from the top of car wreckage. Children played inside of what which was long ago a car too. Actually the deceased passed away already a while ago, but relatives wait until they have enough funds to held the feast, because that's what it is - a feast.

As a way of respect, many local visitors donates money on top of huge piles of something which I never learned what it is (see picture). The ceremony is a very exciting event with laughter and rumour, something never seen at a funeral. In the afternoon, I decided to jump on a truck, our chartered vehicle that brought us under a downpour to the beach of Kaibola. As I arrived I noticed two dolphins who made a perfect spin in front of my eyes, as if they were welcoming us to the village of Kaibola. The beach here has a coral bottom which make it a bit hard for sensitive feet to wade through but offers perfect snorkelling because of its splendid views under the surface.



To continue this exciting day so far, Toku, the Butia Lodge' manager brought us to another fantastic village settlement, Okaiboma where a young Trobriander lady just gave birth 4 weeks ago. Under Trobriand tradition, the young mother can only go outside her hut typically dressed in a very short grass skirt and shoulder coverage but other than that, naked.

The least I could say of this village visit that it was a memorable one in any ways. As soon we, the white men, were spotted by local kids, they start screaming "Dim dim" which means something similar as "white man" (or female in that matter). Children were very very excited each time we drove our truck through their playgrounds. The same ritual took place upon leaving a village. The locals ran after us in excitement, waving and screaming but smiling all the time, while adults were as friendly as their younger fellow

citizen expressing that by reaching their hands to shake.

When I stand upright behind the truck's cabin to catch a forward glimpse of where we were heading to, I felt like the pope himself, waving hands to everyone passing by, which without exception was answered by the same way of greeting. As there's just power supplied at the Butia Lodge between 6 and 10pm but more likely between 7 and 9, the telephone line is about 25% of the time in operation too. Running water was sometimes another small inconvenience, let alone warm water of which I just had the final night of my stay.

This night again no running water came out of the shower. But God must have kept an eye on me because after dark it start raining again which offers the greatest natural shower outside one can imagine. I must admit that apart from this minor inconveniences, the Butia Lodge is a great place to stay with great staff and delicious food. I specially loved the fresh mud crabs. Hmmm... And it was constructed alongside an old WW II runway. If you're a typical organised package tourist, don't go to the Trobriands or Papua New Guinea. But if like myself, you enjoy to live and mingle with locals, ready to accept their lifestyle and don't wear a watch, you'll have a blast !

Aug-8-'07

As we had again an agreement with the driver for a chartered vehicle today (see picture below), we told him yesterday to pick us up at the lodge at 8.00am. So as expected he showed up again with a big smile on his face as if nothing happened, somewhere around 11.00am which was just as yesterday a few hours too late. Well that is Trobriand

lifestyle. You take it or leave it. Nobody cares about time and watches are a rarity for the Trobrianders. When I planned my trip, I had asked myself whether or not I should bring along cheap watches as a gift. Someone on the Lonely Planet forum had informed me not to do so because they simply don't wear watches this side of the planet. I believe him now. Anyway, the excuse for the delay was because of some problem with the vehicle. This I immediately believed too because each time we want to



stop somewhere, the driver made sure that the vehicle was parked facing downhill. Not a bad idea because the engine never made it by its key-start. It was pushing and puffing all the time. Besides from that, a second local guy came usually with us in the back of the truckload to pump tires by hand. Usually the truck had 2 spare tires inside and they were needed badly. I can't remember a single day that we used the truck without having to replace a tire. The "highway" has been made of hard and sometimes sharp coral.

After a short bumpy ride, one tire being changed and a push start, we arrived at the Paramount Chief's village to be introduced. Nothing special in my eyes besides that the dude seems to be big Ronaldinho fan as he was wearing an oversized T-shirt with the football-star's head on it. No tv's on the island so I ever wondered if he realized who's face he was promoting by wearing a T-shirt of the Brazilian football player.

Little later I arrived in Oweria where a Milaa Malaa practising was taking place or was it just set up as a private performance to us because of the cancellation of the original Yam festival ? I don't know. Anyway, no matter what reason, it was a very colourful and attractive show. Spectacular and one of the most beautiful performances in terms of dress and appearance I ever had witnessed during my past 15 years of globetrotting. During the performance, we were spoiled with fresh pomelo, coconuts, bananas and great photo opportunities. The third stop for today: Oyuveyova, where we could see the make up of the performers. Ladies are traditionally made up by their mothers while gentlemen are face-painted by relatives or friends. By the end of the day, a group of males appeared on the scene to give a short show on the sport fields. By all means a day to remember !

Aug-10-07

Despite Air Niugini's reputation of flights being cancelled every possible moment, I haven't got any problem so far (knock on wood) and my two domestic flights brought me safe and well to Mount Hagen's airport where Kim, the owner of the Kumul Lodge was waiting me on arrival.

Another very scenic ride through the Eastern Highlands brought me to my next destination in the Enga Province at an altitude of above 2000 meters. Sometimes literally driving through the clouds but to arrive finally at the Kumul Adventure Resort as it promotes itself. The eco-lodge is entirely build of local bush materials to be found in the jungle in which the lodge is located. There's a nice lounge with a stove in the middle where visitors can warm their feet. Remember at this altitude it can be very cold, specially at night as temperatures drops down to about 5 C°.



The lodge mainly attracts bird watchers from around the world. I met U.S. folks who where there, weponed with cameras holding huge tele lenses supported by tripods. The lodge had a fantastic outside balcony with views over the bush canopy. In front of it a feeding board where all kind of birds took their breakfast by dawn. Myself, I carried a more simple Panasonic digital camera and took a few great "bird" shots too. The accommodation exists of standard rooms with private bathroom (hot and cold water) or a larger bungalow with a double + single bed, and a

separate bathroom. The heating of the room was done by a kerosene heater which was placed inside by nightfall. I never used it cause it a bit smelly. Food was very nice in this lodge but it has to be said that they overcharge you for whatever service you use or sometimes even not use. You have to make clearly appointments on prices for service, whether I'm talking about meals, daytrips, transfers, guide anything. They have a worse reputation of overcharging and I heard similar stories from fellow travellers. You're warned.

Aug-11-07

Why I am here in the middle of nowhere ? It is the best place to stay if you want to visit the annual Enga Show, this said despite the overcharging of services as I mentioned before.

And the Enga Show is exactly the reason why I am here, although I am involved into Pet products business, bird watching is not my cup of tea really.

Every second weekend of August, just a week before the bigger Mount Hagen Show, the annual Enga show takes place in Wabag, a reasonable short ride away from the Kumul Lodge.

Different tribes from the Eastern, Southern and Western Highlands, from Enga and other Provinces gather here for this colourful spectacle. If you only here in PNG for a few days, make everything possible to see at least one Sing Sing show. It should not be skipped if one is taking place somewhere. Some of the more famous tribes such as the Huli wigmen from Tari are extremely colourful dressed adorned with Bird of Paradise feathers, their faces painted in bright yellow, their nose pierced sometimes and their bodies shiny reddish oiled.

The best feature of the show however is the fact that in contrary to many other nations in the world, the Papuans love to have their picture taken. It is amazing to experience when the participants come to ask me if I can take their picture. They don't request anything in return, they just seems to be very proud that a western visitor came all the way from Europe to see their beautiful performances. Very nice and a warm experience. I sometimes



chatted with people in whatever language, but we understood one another. Others then that, locals pay 1 kina to get in, while foreigners pay 50 times that amount. It has to be said though that locals are only allowed to be at the showgrounds outside the fenced

fields while foreigners can get inside to have a really close up experience. However, I spoke to a couple of American visitors who were their completely independent and could get inside the fence for just 8 Kina. We had paid the 50 Kina to the Kumul Lodge operations (sigh). Anyway, I didn't complain since this is something else to remember forever. A truly feast for all the senses.

By the end of the afternoon, my skull was burning like hell - I forgot my hat - and couldn't stand it any longer.

This morning, I had met Alison at the Kumul Lodge, a young British lady who was on her own travelling around the world. She was here at the right time during the Enga show. We both enjoyed the afternoon. I estimate to be a few thousand visitors, locals that are. Between them about 25 to 30 foreigners with different nationalities. I praised myself so lucky being here today as one of a few handful of foreign people.

The drive back between Wabag and Kumul Lodge offers dramatic scenery with valleys, rapid rivers, waterfalls and gorges. Low clouds hanging between rugged mountains adds to the mysterious environment and perfectly represents the Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Aug-12-07

The Enga show is held over two days. Since this is such a once-in-a-lifetime event not to be missed, I decided to go again today. As I mentioned before, most of the Kumul Lodge guests are here for its fantastic bird watching opportunities. Not myself. I want to go outside, taste the colourful way of living between the Highlands of PNG. Visiting local villages and enjoy the scenery.

However it is really very hard to organise something in PNG. If you want to make an appointment for a vehicle with driver the previous day, it is perfectly possible that he arrives 2-3 hours later than agreed for your pick up, or doesn't show up at all ! One has to take it as it comes. Tourist services are very poor at most areas. I met an Italian couple who paid half a fortune to have a well-organised package tour to different destinations in PNG. It was done through a local agent. On arrival they need to make changes in their original program because of the suspension of Airlink Services. They were full of complaints all the time I spoke with them.

To keep the story short: In my humble opinion, PNG is not a country for package tours unless you're fine with some changes during your tour or minor inconveniences.

Aug-13-07

I thought 3 nights at the Kumul Lodge would be enough for the moment, so this morning I drove up to Mount Hagen, a city famous for its annual Sing Sing Show too. I just want to stay overnight in Mt Hagen to prepare for Goroka tomorrow. I arrived before lunch in Mt Hagen, so I could organise an afternoon trip in the neighbourhood to do some sightseeing but...

Got stuck up at the grounds of the Hotel Poroman. No way to get something organised again. The only option is to hire a car which is very expensive this side of the world. I made an appointment with the driver who brought me from Kumul Lodge to Mt Hagen. In fact he was the private driver of the Italian couple but these people were friendly enough to take me with them as they had to go to the airport of Mt Hagen anyway. After we had dropped the Italians at the airport, I appointed the driver to come to pick me up at Hotel Poroman for some sightseeing this afternoon. I had been waiting for another 2 hours and still he did not arrive yet.

The Hotel Poroman is a nice accommodation if you're not in need of a big lobby with piano bar and 3 different restaurants or such. It is located neatly in town while its grounds are protected by a wall and a secure guarded gate. Although about everyone had warned me not to venture on my own in Mt Hagen, after a full 3 hours of waiting for Solomon, the driver, I decided to go into town anyway.

I think personally that Mt Hagen is fine during the day and not more dangerous than let's say Amsterdam. The streets are, as in all other bigger cities here in Papua New Guinea,

packed with people. And a white skinned guy with a red backpack and a Lonely Planet guide book in his hand, is an easily spotted target between the dark skinned people but I never felt any danger walking in the streets of Mount Hagen. Anyway since I don't have much on program I took off.

The market, my destination is even more crowded than the streets. After a short stroll through the vendors, I heard my name being called ! Coincidentally, I bumped into Kim – the owner of the Kumul Lodge – where I had spent the three previous nights. She was stocking up groceries for the lodge. I explained her that I was just killing time because my driver, Solomon didn't showed up. She said that her husband was waiting outside the market and that he would be happy to show me around Whagi Valley this afternoon. He has a 4-wheel drive, so you understand that I was delighted to join. We drove a few kilometres and he provided me with stunning views along the valley. That was really cool I thought and could not thank him enough for his generous effort.

What I didn't knew by now is that I would be heavily charged for this short 45-minute ride when I check-out the Kumul Lodge after my second stay later (read on).

Normally wherever I am in the world, after the sun has gone down I usually check out the nightlife in the neighbourhood. But in this place I leave it for what it is and decided wisely to stay at my hotel. However, I heard that the "Hagen Club" would be a hang-out for expats en visitors. But wandering on your own by foot through the streets of Mount Hagen is asking for troubles. I stayed at the hotel grounds.

That night at the hotel's bar I am completely alone, no other visitor or guest is inside. So, I started to chat with the lady behind the bar. I came to know that it is quiet everywhere because of the recent elections. Last week there where some roads being blocked at the most important intersection where I passed a few times before. People held demonstrations around that area while soldiers kept everything under control simply by killing one unlucky dude.

Around 10.00pm I called it a night. I had chosen the cheapest category of accommodation at the Poroman Hotel because they have the same space as the more expensive and have similar lay-out and amenities. The only difference is the tv. The cheaper rooms can only receive local channels while the more expensive can get CNN as well. I did not come to Papua New Guinea to watch the "victories" of Mr Bush in Iraq. Yet there's another more expensive class accommodations available of which are a bit further away from the road and have less noise. When I was laying in bed, thinking back of the past days, I noticed continuously people's figures of which I could see through the transparent curtains. I think back to the missed Mila Malaa festival at the Trobriand Islands. How difficult it is to get something organised wherever you are in this country. En more importantly, that you need a lot of patience with whatever you want to do.

Aug-14-07

I had an appointment at 8.00am this morning with Solomon who will drive me with his PMV to Goroka today, my next destination in this country. At 9 am I was still waiting while I received a telephone call from Junne, a helpful young lady who I met earlier at Paradise Adventure Tours office (yes, there's a travel agent in town). She kindly ask me if I need to go to Goroka. I explained her that I am waiting about an hour for Solomon. Much to my surprise she answered that he is at her office and that he will be here within 10 minutes.

He arrives finally at Hotel Poroman at 10.30h where I was about to give up. The PMV is as full as a can of sardines, all locals. Luckily I can sit at the front together with the driver and another fella. I never knew how they managed my luggage inside the can of sardines on wheels, but it got in.

Although sitting at the front is considered to be the most comfortable seat available, I can tell that I had more enjoyable rides before, even at the top of the truck at the Trobriands last week. De front window is full of cracks and it looks like a road map. De road to Goroka is reasonable good and never really boring because of the spectacular views. We drive trough typical Papuan scenes.

As we stopped at a gasoline station, I noticed a bright yellow coffin standing up. It has a



sign "For Sale" and I ask myself whether it is a new one or a second hand. Every now and then I notice darts boards attached on a pole at roadsides. It is a popular outdoor game here in the Highlands and people often win or lose lots of money as it is pure gambling.

I spot a lady fully soaped, washing her body next to a waterfall. A little bit further as we're about to cross the border into Simbu Province, we were stopped by a police control unit. No problem. More further we are witness of a practising Sing Sing group. Pity that we can't stop. I am not on a private tour. Myself I need to travel about 3 hours and a half but most of the passengers inside the PMV are going all the way to the coastal town of Madang, another 5 hours away. That is past Goroka.

During the trip I make a deal with Solomon that he will come to pick me up at the Bird of Paradise Hotel at around 2 pm tomorrow to bring me to the Asaro Mudmen as well as to make a brief stop on top of the magnificent Dualo Pass.

And then, finally...at about 3 pm the streets are getting more crowded which marks that we are entering Goroka.

After about 10 nights in more or less poor circumstances, I decided to spoil myself tonight and stay at the luxury Bird of Paradise Hotel which costs me 253 Kina a night, but I don't care. Finally a spacious room with a bathtub which I fill up instantly. It is a very comfortable establishment complete with swimming pool, fitness room, decent restaurants and a few bars. Contrary to Mt Hagen, Goroka has an inviting atmosphere to wander around. I feel perfectly safe when walking along the busy roads. However, it is the same thing here as well when it comes to organise something.

Alright, tomorrow Solomon come to pick me up to go to the Mudmen but until then I want to keep myself busy, even if it is just a village visit somewhere. No matter how much effort the friendly ladies behind the Bird's reception are making, there's no way to find a company or driver to get me around. There is a tour agency next door to the Bird but the Japanese lady can't help me ahead neither.

I then ask myself, why these people are running business while they are impossible to sell the products. I am ready to pay, but no service is available. This is really something the PTA of PNG should consider. More services means more business. More business means more income. More income means better facilities. Better facilities means more tourists... This is how a sleeping fishing village as Phuket in Thailand became a billion dollar resort town. There are countless of examples.

Ok, PNG will never be a luxurious resort but it certainly has many touristic potentials. Great hiking, Superb diving, extremely rich culture, stunning nature, excellent bird watching,... the list is endless.

Finally, the Japanese lady can offer me a tour to the Asaro mudmen. I compare her fare with the 48 Kina I have to pay tomorrow with Solomon during my private tour.

The Japanese lady at her tour agency ask me 325 kina with a minimum of 2 people going, which turns out to be 650 Kina !!! (sigh) Tomorrow I pay 48 Kina plus the advantage that we stop at the Dualo Pass and I am going in complete privacy. This declares immediately why tourism is here still in its children's shoes. Again at the Bird of Paradise, Karina the receptionist is doing everything within her limits to make me happy and keeps trying to figure out a half-day trip. She even contact her personal friend who owns a car to get something done. I decided to try again tomorrow morning. If things doesn't work out, I will just hike on my own up to Mount Kiss which offers nice views overlooking Goroka where after I will just relax at the poolside of the Bird.

Aug-15-07

Again today, in no way I can get something arranged in addition to this afternoon trip to the Asaro mudmen. I decide to go to the local market, always nice to wander around and definitely a colourful event here in Goroka. It is as crowded like an egg. Between all these coloured people, the contrast with myself, the white face, is immense.

A number of times people are trying to start a conversation with their strange visitor. Not a lot of people seems to speak English here. I ended up buying nothing as most of the goods were clothes, fruits, vegetables and basic items such as lighters, coathangers, balpens and other small stuff.

At night back in the restaurant of the hotel, I am approached by two local ladies who offer me their company and it is immediately clear to me that they have other services available as well. I gave them a friendly "No thanks" and enjoyed my dinner.

Unfortunately, this night I can't stay anymore at the Bird because a group of Japanese were being booked in and there isn't any vacancy available anymore. Not a big problem as a little further away there's another plush hotel, The Pacific Gardens. This has the disadvantage that I had to move my stuff again from one to another hotel but on the other hand, gives me the opportunity to check this accommodation out as well. I even paid more compared to the Bird, 300 Kina a night incl. of breakfast, but the room is huge and is remarkable spotless. I am sure this is quite a new wing where they put me in. Solomon and his companion are exhausted from the long drive to Madang yesterday and the return route today. They look tired and dirty.

Very polite, Solomon ask me if they could take a shower in my room since they have to wash themselves in a river otherwise. They spend their nights in the smallish PMV because their employer (Paradise Adventure Tours in Mt Hagen) doesn't want to provide them even with the cheapest accommodation. I am happy to offer both these guys a hot shower. Solomon keeps telling me that each night they have to spend the night in the PMV and refresh themselves in the nature. Because the only option at the Pacific Gardens Hotel was a Deluxe Premier Room, Solomon and his partner are surprised what they see inside the room. A very spacious room with walk-in shower and wall to wall mirror. It is clear that the hot shower made them feel better, and I felt good myself that I could offer these friendly folks what they deserve. A little bit of respect.

Unfortunately they will have to spend the night in the PMV again.

Aug-16-'07

I rise early this morning because the three of us will have quite a distance to drive ahead back to Mount Hagen. That is Solomon, the driver and myself. I decided to hire the entire PMV for myself only, so that no other passengers can hail the vehicle. This has the advantage that I can tell the guys where and how long to stop without interfering other passengers.

Unfortunately, the spectacular Daulo Pass is completely covered with clouds so the view is zero. However as we drive on, the clouds make way for the first sparkles of the sun. This gives me few photo opportunities but it is never quite the same as the Daulo Pass which I could perfectly see yesterday when the PMV was fully loaded with passengers. Soon we reach the border with Simbu province again, home to the famous skeleton people. They have the weird custom to paint their body entirely black first and draw some kinda skeleton over it. The meaning is to scare a rival tribe. I try to imagine a clash between the skeletons and the mud men, it must be a cruel sight by night. Here in Simbu, I decide to visit this rare people and on arrival I am awarded with a private performance for an audience existing of just one single Belgian visitor.

I paid 81 Kina for this show. I know, I might see these people performing at the Mount Hagen show later but it makes a difference here in the bushes, at their own environment. Apart from that, I didn't come here with the idea to keep my wallet shut and missing things. I want to see as much as possible. I realize that I am very fortunate to be at this side of the world today. Sometime half afternoon we leave the dusty roads and arrive in the crowded streets of Mount Hagen. On arrival at the Hotel Poroman where I should meet Kim, the owner of the Kumul Lodge, I bumped into Dean who I met earlier in Alotau and the Trobriand Islands. We discussed about the



past week, exchanged some experiences over a dinner at the Poroman. The bar of the Poroman Hotel is decorated with authentic wood-carved masks from the Sepik region. Little later one less as I buy one of these nice artefacts. Later when I am again at the Kumul Lodge, I noticed that I forgot the mask in the Poroman Hotel back in Mount Hagen.

Aug-17-'07

Today, I want to enjoy the fascinating areas and breathtaking scenery of the Highlands in Enga Province. Deep valleys, waterfalls and rapids are the order of the day as we drive with a hired 4x4 through the region. I thought I had a great deal for 50 Kina to hire this off-road vehicle complete with driver. First stop has little to do with the rough nature...or probably it does. Just downhill at the beginning of a hairpin curve, a heavy truck hangs against the the steep rocky wall, facing down. Immediately it is clearly visible that the driver must have a very good guardian angel. If the truck would not have been able to stop, a few meters further it would have fallen down literally dozens of meters. I estimate it about 50 meters lower. I talk to the driver who is sitting motionless on the side of the road, staring at his truck. I understood that he experienced a break failure and that he could only manage to stop by sliding against the mountain wall. His truck finally stood still just a few meters before the edge.

Our next stop is less spectacular but more photogenic. We make a stop at a beautiful waterfall which is a bit hard to reach without the help of a local farmer who is kind enough to guide me through the high grasses. After to have crossed a small rapid, we reach the refreshing pool at the foot of this huge natural shower. It is a unique moment. The fresh air combined with this amazing environment touches my senses. It reminds me of someone who should be here with me to share this beautiful moments. Apart from the local farmer, there's not a single human in the widely area to be heard or seen. Incredible !

Back on the road again I spotted a group of youngsters playing in the rapids of a river down at the valley floor. They are busy moving stones and boulders which are not too heavy to handle. I ask myself why they are doing this and request the driver to stop so I



can get a closer look and check it out. The young boys, who are clearly not used to have a foreigner in their village are wild enthusiastic when I approach them and show my interest in their doing. A teenager explains me that they are moving the rocks to make the water flow into small creeks in a matter that the fish have no other choice then follow the water stream into a shallow bottleneck. This way makes the fishermen easier to catch them bare handed. No tools of whatsoever are being used. I ask them when they will start fishing. "After about another 3 hours or so" is the answer. "Ok, I'll be back" is my reply. The entire crowd

want nothing else then being pictured and are literally fighting to be in front of my lens.

(see PNG video) Little later at 2pm I return to my appointment to witness the free spectacle in a equally so spectacular natural setting. The fishing has been started already. An estimated hundred boys and men are continuously disappearing underneath the water surface to catch the fish. It is an amazing sight from the hillside above. It is clearly not their first time while fish after fish are being brought up above.

A mum and daughter wants absolutely have their picture taken. When I showed them the result on the display of the digital camera, there's no way of stopping anymore. Good that I have a big memory card which allows me to take unlimited photo's.

Back at the Kumul Lodge, I comfort myself in the lounge near the cozy open fire with a beer. Here in the Highlands, temperature can really drop significantly once the sun is down. All of a sudden, I spot a remarkable beautiful bird outside with a long white tail. In this region, there are bunches of the most amazing birds to be seen, hence the popularity with ornithologists. Of course the Bird of Paradise being the most rewarded. During dinner, I meet an interesting crew of MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) at the

table. Among them, the chief executive and a young pilot. MAF flies to the most remote corners of the country, there where hardly a tourist gets. They often land on a strip of grass or sand. Nothing more, nothing less. Great stories are told and I would immediately change my job with theirs. Meanwhile..., who comes inside the dining room ? Jo-Ann, who I had met the first days at the Butia Lodge in the Trobriand Islands. Papua New Guinea might geographically be such a big country, it seems to be a small world. I empty a few more Stubbies (local brew) and find my way to the naturally built bungalow to spend the night.

Aug-18-'07

Today, another highlight of this entire trip is scheduled. The annual Mt Hagen Cultural show takes place the third weekend of August. It starts today. Therefore I decided to check in at Hotel Poroman once again. Normally this venue is long in advance fully booked but fortunately for me, thanks to the elections, several guests had cancelled their bookings. Rumours went that there could be some post-election conflicts in the region. Apart from the one incident during a road block here in Mt Hagen, I had never heard or experienced any inconvenience.

My forgotten wood carving is waiting for its owner behind the reception of the Hotel. Thanks a lot guys.

As expected, the Mount Hagen show consists of a colourful motley crew of Sing Sing groups from all corners of the country. As a foreign visitor, you have to pay 300 Kina to get in which is overpriced compared to what locals are paying. But it still is worth every penny. Clans from the Western Highlands, Simbu Province, Eastern Highlands, Enga Province and several more are all coming this way to show their elaborate costumes and outfits. Again, I bumped into Dean on the show grounds of Mount Hagen but also Solomon, my private guide in Goroka and Mount Hagen is here. At about 2.30pm the show is getting to an end and I return happy, loaded with the most spectacular pictures on my memory card, back to the Poroman Hotel.



Who do I meet back at the hotel ? Andrea and Marco, 2 teachers from Germany who I had briefly met back at the Butia Lodge 2 weeks ago in the Trobriand Islands. Travellers seem to meet one another easy again this side of the planet. We have a few beers at the bar while we are exchanging past travel stories. That night, at about 3.20am, everyone was woken up by an earthquake, except myself.

Aug-19-'07

The flight to Port Moresby with Air Niugini proceeds as scheduled, even right on time. That is not very common around this time during the Hagen Show. Flights can get serious delays or even cancelled right now during the busiest time of the year. Once in Port Moresby, I had decided to spoil myself and booked a premium room at the luxurious Lamana Hotel. This hotel houses the most popular nightclub in town, "The Gold Club" and I thought it to be a great idea to have a night out in Papua New Guinea.

According to the Lonely Planet Guide, chances are quite high that you end up dancing with the Prime Minister's daughter or another local celebrity. It is Sunday today which means that my expectations are not too high. It is only afternoon yet, so time left for some local sightseeing despite that I heard that Port Moresby has not much interesting in terms of sightseeing.

Solomon had given me his brother's telephone number. He lives in Port Moresby and can get you around by his car for a price. I called him. Some 30 minutes later, a man with a "Fidel Castro" stylish beard, his face hiding behind a big pair of dark sunglasses walked barefoot inside the lobby. "I'm Daniël Wakra, brother of Solomon" he introduced himself politely.

In the car, another two "Middle East look-a-likes" are waiting. Together with the three

fella's I'm off for a so called city tour. First stop, Koki market where turtle meat is waiting to be consumed. It is displayed under a strong sun on a dirty wooden plank. Further, we make a stop at the Parliament with its impressive front. It was officially opened by the Prince of Wales back in 1984.

With some effort the car made it to the top of Paga Hill from where you'll have a panoramic view of the city. But the highlight of the city tour is undoubtedly Hanuabada Village, a settlement built on stilts above the water of the ocean. De slums are completely lacking any privacy. Everyone has previously warned me that this is a no-go zone because of the extremely high level of crime factor. Port Moresby is known as the most dangerous city on earth while the concentrations of "Raskols" (local language for Bandits) resides here at Hanuabada Village. So, I want to go there to check



out how much this is true. I have to admit that I feel alright with Daniël at my side. The two others are waiting inside the car while we wander around between the slums. I have to be careful walking the planks with gaping holes between them but I feel never any danger and local kids are frolicking around me, requesting to have their picture taken. When I do so and showing the result on the display of the digital device, just as the kids in the Trobriands and the Highlands, they are very enthusiastic and follow me every step I take.

They all look very happy in their way of life. I meet some elderly people as well who are kindly inviting me to return to their village tonight because there's a Motu ceremony. I would like to go but I don't know if that would be a good idea in the darkness. Back in my hotel, I told the hotel staff of my plan to go to the Motu ceremony and all of them are warning me not to go. So, I decided to stay on the hotel grounds, better safe than sorry I am saying to myself.

Aug-20-'07

My PNG adventure is coming to an end. It has been a trip filled with obstacles and minor problems. First at the Trobriands, the Mila Malaa festival was cancelled on arrival, then it was not possible to organise any day trip at either Goroka or Mount Hagen and on top of this, I think that I have an infection between two of my toes after I went swimming at Kaibola beach. It is painful since about two weeks and it start to get reddish.

Anyway, tomorrow I have a booking to go Whale Watching in Brisbane when I am back in Australia. After two missed opportunities, once in Patagonia back in 1992 because I was there at the wrong time and last year during a cruise on the Indian Ocean when in fact a whale showed up while I was taking a nap outside on sundeck. Someone then screamed "Whales, Whales !" When I reached up, all what was left on the surface was a blue circle where the whale just had disappeared in the deep again.

This time, the organising operator gave 100% sightings guarantees. If not, money back was their policy. So I was all excited for tomorrow when I finally could see these biggest mammals of the deep ocean.

Aug-21-'07

This morning, after I packed my stuff, loaded my camera's inside the daypack, I venture outside to wait for the van to be picked up by the tour company. It started to rain. I wished the weather Gods to a place where the sun never shines but brave as I am, I keep waiting at the Hotel lobby of the Mercure for the pick up transfer to the pier. Another 30 minutes after my appointment I start to get nervous and request the hotel concierge to give a call to the company. You can guess what I heard ? Tour cancelled !! The weather forecast was really too bad for boats to get at sea. My next trip is planned for the dry Omo Valley of Ethiopia. I estimate the chances very little to spot any whales there in Africa neither. I ask myself what else can go wrong at this trip. Not much anymore probably because tomorrow I'm leaving back to Singapore. Anyway, I am

looking forward for my next destination which is coming up after tommorow. Another night in Singapore and I'll be heading to my all time favourite place on earth... Phuket. It had been a very moving trip. PNG definitely has not stolen its nickname "The Land of the Unexpected" because that is exactly what it is. Despite this, I would go back in a minute.

It has an enormous tourist potential in it. But there's a lot of work to do still to increase services for its visitors.... Till next trip...
