

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2023 – PART III

Years ago I had the brilliant idea to travel to Papua New Guinea. Since then, the thought of returning one day to The Land of the Unexpected, as PNG is jokingly called, has always prevailed. Today, literally day to day, 16 years later, I am back again to visit the annual Sing Sing festival. An event like no other, in which dozens of “wild” tribes such as the Mud Men of Asaro, the Huli Wigmen, the Skeleton People or other colorful dudes gather in the center of Mount Hagen located in the Western Highlands of the otherwise mainly inhospitable country. The colorful motley crew comes to give the best of themselves.

Arriving in the capital Port Moresby I have a layover of almost 6 full hours. Quite boring, but if you travel this side of the planet you know in advance that you cannot ignore it. Inside the terminal I talk to a beautiful young woman from Myanmar. She goes by the exotic name May Myat Noe Oo. The second part of her angel name is especially striking. Myat, probably translated from the Flemish Mie Jat, as my late grandmother was also popularly called. All this aside, May Myat came to Port Moresby to work as a retail manager for the next 2 years, she explains. Given the political situation in her home country, I completely understand her. A little later her future employer shows up, she waves me goodbye, quickly puts her Facebook contact in my hands and I solemnly promise her to visit her tumultuous country some day when the situation improves. And usually when I promise something like that....

By the way, it is one of the few Asian places that I have not yet visited. I don't really got it with rogue states. After an hour's delay (The Land of the Unexpected remember ?), we're finally airborne with an old fighterjet from Air Nuigini to perform a flawless landing a little later between the coffee plantations of Mount Hagen. I meet my host family from the cozy Shalom Mission Home, perfectly located on the edge of the city. My room is without a doubt the most comfortable accommodation the missionary home has to offer. With me were another Croatian couple, a couple of gentlemen from Serbia and another lost German. Upon arrival, the rooms are distributed and I note that I have the only room with a

private bathroom. Nice and convenient on the ground floor, comfortably situated in the garden. The others have to share a bathroom with a couple of Australians who arrived earlier with their son. Since breakfast is not served, we have to resort to the local supermarket. There is a communal kitchen on the first floor, but here too I hit the mark because my room has a kitchenette with all utensils, a toaster and a full-fledged refrigerator, a kettle so that I can enjoy a private meal and a cup of instant coffee when I wake up. Although the first mentioned apparel will not last that long. After the first use I already managed to make the thing stop existing.

Well, there is a decent restaurant a 5-minute drive away where I had my dinner with Daniel. Daniel is one of moms, as I now address her; 5 sons. Because I'm so happy with my room, I treat him to a pork steak and fries. I assume the tam-tams are working perfectly because a little later mom also appears and slides her pair of legs under the table as well.

The price tag is surprisingly low, so I don't let myself be known and, as befits a real cement bag (nickname of a parishioner from Sint Jozef, ed.), I show my generosity to the local Papuans. In such countries it is never a bad thing to fall into the grace of your host family. This always comes in handy when you need transportation or whatever. A little later I ask mom if I have the opportunity to have my laundry done somewhere. The reassuring answer "3 kina". I then ask if this is the rate per garment. "No, no, per wash load," my host replies. 3 kina converted comes out to approximately 75 euro cents. I immediately buy a pack of detergent in the supermarket and ask mom to do my laundry. For decades, one of the permanent items that never comes out of my Eastpack luggage is a travel adapter. Such a handy thing where you can fit the base of your battery charger into any socket in the world. Indispensable and a permanent fixture for every world traveler. "What the f**k" I shouted to myself in all kinds of languages. I must have forgotten that indispensable trinket at home!

I ask Daniël if there is a store somewhere that can help me out. In vain I try my luck at some local traders. Until a certain moment when I enter a cell phone store, a friendly lady comes from behind her counter and

hands me a used adapter. I ask her what I owe her. Just bring it back on your last day of your stay, and if you forget, so be it, replied the sweet girl. How nice is that !

Just when I thought to myself that there were surprisingly few insects or vermin sharing the accommodation with myself while I prepared a toastie, she suddenly appeared. Out of nowhere, as if she was waiting for me to fall asleep. Unlike her brown counterpart last year in the Brazilian Pantanal jungle, this lady had a jet black bright color. The winged ugly one was of decent size. Was, I say, because now the beast is a bit smaller, and you can take that literally. When it is alive it is 4 to 5 centimeters, add antennae of the same length and you are dealing with a monster of an insect. I can't close the window. The typical Asian window with glass slats, which during normal operation can be swiveled in such a way that it makes it more difficult for winged or crawling creatures to enter the room, they do not work. To make matters worse, there is no mesh in front. "Come on in guys". That has to be the first and hopefully only easily resolved defect in my room. While some street dogs are howling incessantly just below my window, I crawl under the thin sheet hoping not to be bothered too much by the nocturnal intruders.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2023 - PART II

Friday August 18: In preparation for the main attraction, a kind of mini show is organized in Paiya, a village not far from the center of Mt Hagen. WOW, if this is a "mini" show, I wonder what the main weekend will entail. What a colorful spectacle.

Various groups from all corners of the country adorned with the feathers of birds of paradise, which flutter around here like sparrows did in our country a few decades ago, arrived. Sometimes their noses are pierced, their faces covered in a layer of red or yellow lead. The voluminous female butts covered with green foliage or straw.

Others have little to worry about. There's a tribe hopping around with nothing more than a gnarly penis sheath on their crown jewels. That is to say, at the bottom of the tube dangles the man's shriveled pouch that apparently has seen better days.

Due to the constant spectacle, my camera doesn't have time to catch its breath, so I forget to protect my skull from the Papuan sun. As a result, my fleshy helmet approximates the color of a ripe tomato.

Upon arrival back at my accommodation, no fewer than 3 black cockroaches tried to seek company from my presence. One was even resting on my toothbrush. One by one I expertly directed the uninvited guests to the afterlife.

Saturday, August 19: This morning it is already very busy around the arena where the main program of the Mount Hagen festival takes place. It is difficult for me to describe what can be seen here. An orgasm of colors is perhaps the best expression.

Most populated groups comes from all corners of Papua New Guinea. It won't surprise you that this is the absolute reason why I will spend 4 nights in this mysterious area. No, it is not an everyday journey and you will immediately notice that when you talk to like-minded people. You will never find a traveler coming this way without having conquered around half, if not the entire globe in the past, in search of an off-the-beaten path. To myself it is even the third time that I have set foot on Papuan soil. If you also include Indonesian West Papua, I even come to five times.

Like every evening I will have my dinner at the Highlander Hotel. In terms of quality, unsurpassable in this region. You have to accept the Western-oriented prices, but you get value for your money. I call Larson, my regular driver, and ask him to take me there. We've barely left when I hear gunshots and see hundreds of locals running away as if their lives depend on it. And maybe it is. Larson decides to take a detour and avoid the hysterical crowd as best he can. Earlier that day near the show grounds of the festival I found myself in a hellish hustle and bustle that was difficult to comprehend. At the Highlander Hotel I tell my story to the waitress who I befriended with earlier. "Oh, that's normal," she answers me apparently without surprise. "It's Saturday, sir, people are coming out on the streets." Street fighting is a regular part of that. Anyway, in the restaurant I order a glass of Sauvignon wine to accompany my dinner. Instead of bringing the bottle to the table to pour, the lady takes my glass to the kitchen and shows up again a little later, the wine glass half full. "The Sauvignon is finished, sir, but I brought Chardonnay." "Um.... Okay" I answer, bewildered, but I don't bother.

When I arrive back at the Shalom Mission Home after a more or less delicious Highlander buffet, the two of them are already waiting there and I get the feeling that they are looking straight into my eyes. Gradually I get used to the ugly ones and let them live. I even give the 2 winged invaders a pet name, Flurk and Lucifer. I don't know if it's the giant mussels, the scampi or the pastries, but luckily I have a private bathroom. It is already the third time that I have had to sit on the throne to relieve a liquid form of stool, always accompanied by the most natural sounds that humanity usually produces unintentionally. I just hope that I don't have to squeeze a bottle cap into my anus tomorrow morning so as not to make a fool of myself on the last day of the festival and by extension in the rest of Papua New Guinea.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA 2023 – PART III

Sunday August 20: Update on the violence yesterday in the city: Larson tells me that the police shot dead 2 drunk men on the street. So the gunshots I heard were clearly not just in the air. In this country, human rights are not taken very seriously.

It is a strange sight, hundreds of people walking across the street every day without a solid direction. Most do not have any form of transportation. There is also no organized public transport.

This weekend with the festival, an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 will be out daily.

Now I completely understand why Larson received a call from Daniel, the son of the house at the Shalom Mission Home, on our drive to the Highlander yesterday while we were on our way to the Highlander. Because he knew that we had just left and that we ended up in the middle of the commotion, he wanted to know if I was okay.

The family at the Mission Home is very concerned about my affairs while I am in Mount Hagen. They really do everything they can to make me happy.

During my last day in Mount Hagen, the loving people even offered me a dinner, which out of respect I accepted. It is a typical local "mumu" meal.

An adult pig is dragged to the kitchen with a rope around her leg.

A few years ago I witnessed a similar massacre in Papua, Indonesia. A pyre is built to cook the unfortunate animal. A man expertly clubs the

poor animal to death, even though it had a slow progress. Not for the faint of heart. A number of sharp blows are delivered to the poor animal's head with a metal rod. The result is a scream from here to Tokyo until the animal finally starts to convulse. The poor pig is swung onto the pyre until it is blackened and ready to be stripped of its hair with a shovel. It is then placed on its back and the slaughterer rips open its belly. The intestines are removed with their bare hands and thrown separately into a large bowl. Nothing is wasted and will also be prepared later.

I ultimately decide to pass on the typical evening meal, but the family prepares a tasty meal especially for myself, consisting of a chicken leg with mashed potatoes and broccoli. It's something different than a half-cooked pig's head, I think by myself.

On the festival site itself, mostly using body language, I started a conversation to some tribal figures. Furthermore, I am regularly approached by locals who want to take a photo with me. I'll let it go. Finally, you will never believe the last fact. I can barely grasp it myself. Upon leaving this fascinating country, during my stopover in Port Moresby from Mount Hagen to Manila, I have enough time to spot the Bird of Paradise in its natural habitat. I met Solomon 16 years ago during one of my PMV rides. Since then we have never really lost sight of each other and look... it pays off. We had an appointment and the man is waiting for me at the airport. I already check in my luggage at the Air Niugini counter to Manila, so that I can leisurely walk outside the airport for an hour or two during my layover. After we have visited the nature park I ask him if it is possible to stop somewhere briefly so that I can buy a souvenir t-shirt. "No problem". When I walk into the store I can't believe my eyes! Who is there behind the counter? May Myat Noe Oo! She is as astonished as myself. I met Myat when I arrived at the arrivals hall of the airport. We both had a few hours to kill and started talking. Now I leave the country and by pure coincidence meet the young lady from Myanmar again in a city of over 400,000 inhabitants. It's a small world. That's all folks.