Forgotten roads, lost peoples

Beyond known tribal borders and beyond exhaustion, two intrepid explorers battle the jungles of West Papua in search of an ages-old system of trade routes

Story by Will Millard
Papua New Guinea

"I don't believe this..." I was whispering, my heart pounding through my sweat-soaked shirt. I was glad Callum was here to see this too. This forest was supposed to be uninhabited. If I were alone I might have shrugged this off as a mirage, another sign of my dangerously weakened state, maybe the beginnings of an inexorable deterioration into madness. Yet, right there, off as a mirage, another sign of my dangerously weakened state, maybe the feelings of an unworldly menace were slowly seeping through... There were other eyes on us. All we could do was stare ahead and breathe. We were being watched.

A hunting dog, obviously domesticated, and it was staring right back at us. I was hardly in the mood for a heart-stopping game of interactive hide and seek. But the combined effect of utter exhaustion and a genuine fear of the unknown was screaming: We're being watched.

Standing stock-still at the base of a thick, buttress-rooted tree, was a pure white hunting dog. I swept my gaze upwards and noticed that the dog, watching us intently, was trapped in the darkness behind the dog. We could both feel it. There were other eyes on us. We were being watched.

Everything I thought I knew about this forest was in question. Yet – I gripped the handle of my machete tighter. We scrutinised the wall of darkness behind the dog. We could both feel it. There were other eyes on us. We were being watched.

I stood up straight. Tense, we scrutinised the wall of darkness behind us. It seemed an unlikely place for people to live, let alone thrive, but, from the Welds swamps to theollu mountain crown, tribal groups have forged a living in this environment of absolute extremes. I had come to Papua to walk all the way from the highlands to the coasts before they disappeared forever. I believed it was still possible that in the province's remotest corners, trade still continued in the old way. All I had to do was rediscover this path in a region that had largely turned its back on trade routes unknown to the outside world, managed and maintained for centuries by a group of people widely written off as 'stone age savages'.

As Papua modernised in the wake of the Indonesian takeover in 1963, it was inevitable that the vast majority of tribes would move on from their past, choosing instead to fly or transport their goods by vehicle over distances previously covered by foot. Who could blame them? But to lose the routes altogether would be to forget one of the longest running networks of trade in human history. I decided to try and make a last record of the lines to the highland spine. It might seem an unlikely place for people to live, let alone thrive, but, from the Welds swamps to theollu mountain crown, tribal groups have forged a living in this environment of absolute extremes. West Papua might have repelled outsiders right till the middle of last century but the hinterland has been populated since the dawn of the last ice age (some 45,000 years ago) when the first Melanesian people were able to cross from Australia to New Guinea via a land bridge that once joined the two islands.

Its geography may have since limited contact between tribal groups, as evidenced by the extraordinary number of different languages within the province, but there are signs everywhere that they didn't always live in total isolation to each other. Right across West Papua, tribes shared cultural beliefs, staple crops, domestic animals and tools, thanks to a network of trade routes unknown to the outside world, managed and maintained for centuries by a group of people widely written off as 'stone age savages'.

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Sounded simple. But it took me five years to even come close to a realistic plan. I pored over harrowing expeditionary accounts and learnt of anthropologists and missionaries who had embedded themselves with remote tribal groups for decades. I conducted numerous pilot expeditions running the length of the highland spine. I was arrested, abandoned, robbed and nearly starved to death, but slowly I began to build leads and evidence of a much bigger route: the use of the bailer shell throughout the highlands as a currency, the stone axes of the mountain Dani in carvings in the Asmat swamps, and all the fireside tales from Papuans old enough to remember the ‘great walkers’ that carried parcels from the mountains to the ‘the men who lived in trees’ - the famous Kombai tree house builders of the south.

Gradually my plan came together. My research indicated that the most likely links with the tribal groups of the highlands came either from the clans of the Mamberamo river in the north or from the Kombai and Korawai tribes that populated the Asmat swamps to the south. Two potential routes, of over 1000 kilometres each, meandered out over a massive expanse of unexplored wilderness. Gradually my plan came together. My research indicated that the most likely links with the tribal groups of the highlands came either from the clans of the Mamberamo river in the north or from the Kombai and Korawai tribes that populated the Asmat swamps to the south. Two potential routes, of over 1000 kilometres each, meandered out over a massive expanse of unexplored wilderness.

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wilderness; the satellite imagery alone revealed huge areas of wetlands, networks of whitewater rivers, lines of forested peaks and one of the most intact primary rainforests left in Southeast Asia.

It was immensely exciting, the sort of place I would never in my wildest dreams think could still exist today. I also knew it was a huge undertaking. I convinced Callum, my closest friend, to come as my medic and partner, and by the start of 2012 all my sponsorship was in place. We were going to be totally self-contained, utilising lightweight packrafts that we could carry into the forests with enough medical kit and rations for 120 days. I hoped we would quickly find pathways and people still trading traditionally, but within weeks of the first leg north to the Mamberamo we had left the last notable settlement behind and plunged deep into the forest. We were heading into the unknown.

M A Y Y O U W A L K W I T H J E S U S

Time was no longer on our side, we were already more than two weeks into our 60-day visa and 500 kilometres short of the Mamberamo clans. We had entered a dense forest and progress was slow.

A large Papuan man carrying vegetables in a sack emerged from the forest ahead. He explained he had come from the north, along a tiny foot-track through thick forest to a village called Wara. The village, he said, is the last outpost of the Yali tribe; it lies beside a great river.

My heart leapt. Maybe, just maybe, this is the lifeline we needed to get to Papua’s north. Could this be the ancient...
trade route I’d been hoping to find.
I hastily drew a rough map in the back of my notebook and conferred
with the man. He nodded demurely. Running his finger along the biro-ink
ridges on the page, he fixed my eye: “It will take you two days to Wara. May
you walk with Jesus.”

Wara villagers had been right. This was suicide. There was to be no let up
having made it to the Bogor alive. It was a vast river with car-sized boulders and the largest set of rapids I had ever seen.

We needed help. We were in a bad way. It was obvious that the last few weeks had taken a massive physical toll. We were thinner than ever before and were gulping down the antibiotics and painkillers to get the worst of the infections that had sprung up all over our hands and bodies.

I turned to leave but he gripped my bicep and leant in close to my face,
“Wala!” He spoke quietly, knowing what our predicament really meant.

Then we encountered our first storm, doubling the volume of water
falling on our rafts. I had strained a muscle in my left knee after my foot
emerged into the Bogor river. Our knuckles were split wide-open from being
bashed on the rocks, I had strained a muscle in my left knee after my foot
had become wedged on the riverbed, paining me briefly underwater, and our
shoulders were black with bruising.

We traced the pugmarks of the dog. They went in as many different dialects as I could muster: Indonesian, Yali, Dani, but there was no reply.

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legs. We had run out of bandages and plasters and were reduced to taping up our fingers to keep the worst of the flying insects from feeding on our sores. We both knew deep down that we were getting close to our thresholds; if we could just make contact with someone now then maybe we could get help to reach Wara again. Maybe this ordeal would be over.

I followed the stream right down, only to find it disappeared into dense wall of thorny bushes. I scanned the banks, looking for more prints, but found none.

“IT” I whispered, “that was the people of Wara on a hunt, they would have come over. People’s hearing here is too good to have missed our shouts . . . unless . . .”

Callum grinned and finished my sentence “. . . we just crossed paths in the middle of the forest, and that was it, we just quietly crossed paths in the middle of the forest, and that was all. Why I do what I do. Why I take the risks I take. Why I return to West Papua time and time again. For that very real chance that I could one day turn the corner and see something no outsider had ever seen before.

The people of Wara were absolutely adamant no one lived or traded in the forests to the north of them. I had naively ignored their warnings three weeks before when I pressed on downstream and northwards in the forlorn hope they could be wrong. Now, I realise that in a way we probably both were. Whoever it was we encountered in the forest that day had absolutely no interest in meeting us, and they certainly weren’t engaging in any trading activity with the people of the Mamberamo with some 400 kilometres between them and no paths or navigable rivers to make the connection.

Survival International, one of the world’s foremost NGOs in the field of indigenous rights who have surveyed the province believe there are still uncontacted tribes there, perhaps even dozens of them. Making first contact with indigenous people should always be a two-way choice. We certainly weren’t out there to force ourselves on anyone who didn’t want to meet us. As it was, we just quietly crossed paths in the middle of the forest, and that was fine with us all.

Eventually, we did make it back to Wara village and back out to the road. Callum left the project after that first leg and it would take me another two months before I finally found my ancient route to the coast. After all that hardship in the north I discovered a clear route heading south, right through the Asmat and out to the South Pacific. But that first night, after we staggered back into the Wara village and got our first proper meal in weeks, the conversation turned to what we had seen in the forest. The villagers were still adamant that people did not live north of their position.

I didn’t say to them at the time, but later, on the same day we saw the dog, I had wandered alone from our camp to assess our onward route. In another gully I found a small muddy stream with the same set of pugmarks emerging on the back, yet here they were joined by another set of prints. Human ones. Side-by-side they ran away into the forest together. And that’s where I left them. AA

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“WHEELS OF FORTUNE
Savouring a trail that brings cultural discovery and grand scenery in one bike-ready package.”

Papua is usually in the news for all the wrong reasons. A separatist conflict between an indigenous organisation known as the OPM and the Indonesian military is grinding on towards its 50th anniversary. Trouble can flare up around protests, foreign journalists are banned and tourist movements are restricted.

Papua is, however, a safe place to visit and locals will be very pleased to see you. You will need a surat jalur from the police station in Jayapura listing the regions you intend to visit. It is very straightforward to get and generally the police are helpful.

Papua is more expensive than the rest of Indonesia, particularly with the flights. Also, very little English is spoken. However, there are some good trekking operators run by English-speaking Papuans. Try Mac at http://trek-papua.com for the Baliem Valley, or else drop into Papua.com, the internet cafe in Wamena, if you intend to travel to the highlands independently.