



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**



THE PERFECT NATURAL FORTRESS

I was leading a five-month expedition, my latest foray into the Indonesian province of West Papua. Years ago I had heard rumours of vast networks of hidden pathways, the greatest trade route you've never heard of, spread out across 2000 kilometres of the most taxing collection of geographical extremes. I had come to Papua to walk all the way from the highlands to the coasts, but so far had found nothing but hardship and loneliness in the world's most isolated wilderness.

West Papua is one of the world's last unknown places. Accounting for less than 0.5% of the world's landmass, it is home to a staggering 10% of its species, one third of which are found nowhere else. It forms the western half of the enigmatic island of New Guinea and is also the easternmost province of Indonesia. It couldn't be much more remote from global infrastructure but it heaps further isolation on itself with its formidable 115,000 square kilometres of swamps, rainforest and rugged mountainous spine: the highest range between the Himalayas and the Andes. In sum, a near perfect natural fortress.

It might seem an unlikely place for people to live, let alone thrive, but, from the wildest swamplands to the loftiest 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'.

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 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 tradition, and then walk it.

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 and, in 2009, I even rediscovered an epic 250 kilometre-long trade route

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

WHEELY FUN
Clockwise from right: kicking up some dust, chilling at a chorten, crossing the river at Philim.

« Our plan called for us to travel light and move fast: myself on foot and Mads on his state-of-the-art bike »



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.

MAY YOU WALK WITH JESUS

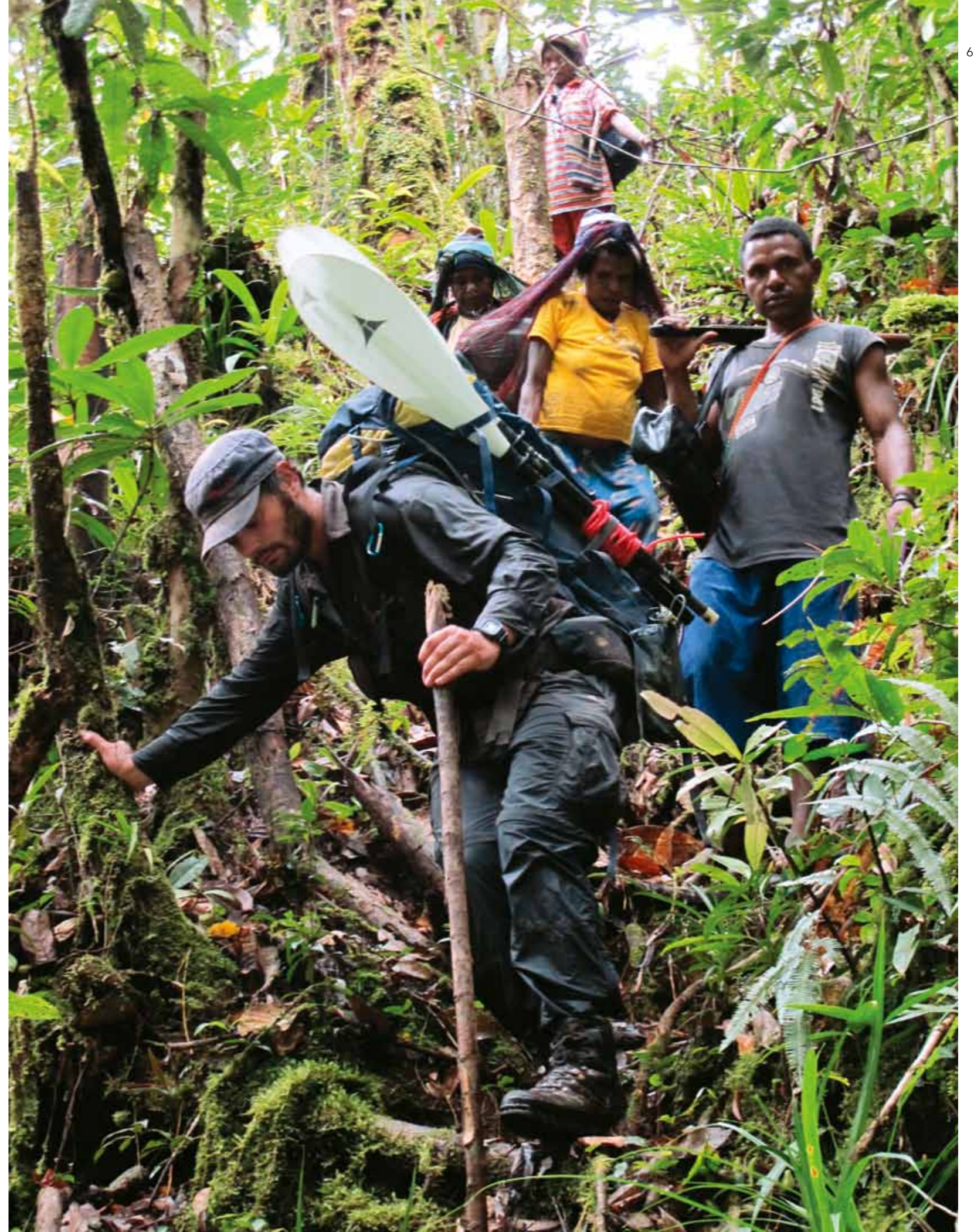
Time was no longer on our side, we were already more than two weeks into our 60-day visa and 500 kilometres short of the Mamberamo clans. We had entered a dense forest and progress was slow.

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



SET IN STONE
Cairn-like chortens and mani walls covered in inscriptions are everywhere in the Tsum, with many demonstrating a level of craftsmanship beyond that found elsewhere in Nepal.





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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."

I turned to leave but he gripped my bicep and leant in close to my face, "but you listen to me, you be aware of the snakes. You understand?"

Picking up the tiny track it quickly became clear this was going to take us far longer than two days to get to Wara. Thick brush enclosed us on all sides and, as the man had said, the place was crawling with venomous snakes lying in wait along the path in search of an easy rodent meal. Our eyes were kept firmly on the ground at every carefully placed step.

Eventually we found Wara village in a grass clearing in the forest: little more than a simple cluster of conical wooden huts and a church. The people were almost completely self-sufficient, only occasionally walking out of the jungle to the forest for supplies such as cooking oil and the occasional sack of rice to supplement their diets. They did not, they explained, travel further

north of their position. No one did. The forest upstream was uninhabited, there was no ancient trade route and no villages to speak of. To continue was suicide. They said.

We had reached an impasse. The project could have finished right there, but I felt somehow that there was a good chance we could still find a way to the Mamberamo alone. Our satellite map showed a river near our position that ran into another much larger river, marked on my map as the Bogor, that would eventually flow into the Mamberamo and out to the coast. Going forward was undoubtedly a risk but we had the supplies and packrafts to pull off the descent if the river conditions remained good. The river by Wara was difficult but not impassable, and there was always a chance we might find people between Wara village and the headwaters of the Mamberamo that were still using the river route to trade but were hitherto unknown.

It just felt right to continue. This was what we had come for.

THE DESCENT

The first three days were idyllic. Allowing our rafts to take the loads was a massive relief after weeks of heavy hauling and the river was hemmed in by some of the most spectacular forest I had ever encountered. The canopy heaved with sulphur-crested cockatoos, hornbills and a host of brightly coloured birds and fish-eating predators the likes of which I had never seen.

Then we encountered our first storm, doubling the volume of water in the river and ramping up the speed in an instant. We were trapped in a narrow gully and on whitewater far beyond my level of experience. There was no way back up the river as the current was too strong and the sides were

too steep to climb out. We had no option but to keep moving downstream. Every dry bag we owned was punctured, our satellite phone had died and we had lost nearly all of our recording equipment. We hauled and rafted on, rationing ourselves to just 800 calories a day until, after a relentless week, we 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, pinning me briefly underwater, and our shoulders were black with bruising.

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. This was supposed to be a study of intertribal trade. What was I doing so far from human populations and any semblance of a trade route? Maybe the Wara villagers had been right. This was suicide.

I felt Callum's hand on my shoulder. "What do you want to do now, Will?" He spoke quietly, knowing what our predicament really meant.

We had no other option but to turn back to Wara village. But as we couldn't kayak back up the whitewater we knew we would have to force a different route, across three mountain ridges and through many kilometres of hostile forest, cutting every inch of the way back to safety.

FIRST CONTACT

After six weeks we were just wishing it to be over one way or another. We cut a path with our only serviceable machete, barely able to see any more than a metre or two in front of our faces and moving forward less than 500 metres a day. My right hand curled into a claw from the days of cutting through bush and Callum's feet lost all their skin to trench foot. Every day was almost

identical. The only barometer of change were our rapidly deteriorating bodies.

If I have learnt anything from all my time leading expeditions in West Papua, it is that it does not give up its secrets easily. We had long given up hope of finding signs of people and were just hoping to survive yet somehow, here we were, eyeball to eyeball with a white dog.

This was huge. There was no way a domestic hunting dog would be this far into the forest without its human owner. We approached to within 20 metres before it turned around with disinterest and trotted off down the gully.

No Papuan is ever far from their dog. Desperately, I called out greetings in as many different dialects as I could muster: Indonesian, Yali, Dani, but there was no reply.

We traced the pugmarks of the dog. They went into a stream so I ditched the bags and started searching and shouting frantically. People, without doubt, were near.

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 our pain and infection under control: we had started with just ibuprofen and paracetamol, but were now also taking co-codamol just to sleep and amoxiclav for the infected welts that had sprung up all over our hands and

LEADING BY EXAMPLE
Zanskar Gorge below 3,850m Purfi La (left). Children drive their sheep and goats home before nightfall, Lingshet village (below).



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.

"If" 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 with

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a totally different tribe."

That was it. 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 coasts. 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 bank, 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

WHEELS OF FORTUNE
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PRACTICALITIES When to go

There is rain year round in Papua but the drier weather is from May to November. The immensely enjoyable Baliem Valley Festival, which sees tribes from the Dani, Yali and Lani gather for several days of cultural dances and mock battles falls in August.

How to get there

You can fly to the state capital Jayapura with most major Indonesian airlines from the transport hubs of Jakarta, Makassar and Denpasar. Once in Papua you will need to fly on to most other locations. There are three flights a day to the highland town of Wamena; and daily flights to Sorong, for the world famous diving around the Raja Ampat, and to Timika, for access to the Asmat.

What to take

Anti-malaria tablets are absolutely essential and I would recommend also taking a mosquito net and strong repellents. Seek professional medical advice specific to the region before leaving. Pictures of your family and home life are always a great means of communication and entertainment when you have no common language and small gifts such as postcards and pencils are much appreciated.

Contacts and further info

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 jalan from the police station in Jayapura listing the regions you intend to visit though. 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.

