



West Papua:

Survival in the last unknown



I run my fingertips over my body with a sense of morbid fascination. It just doesn't feel like my own anymore. My ribs stand proud of my abdomen and I can read the physical trauma of the hundreds of bites and scrapes on my legs and arms like brail. Bizarrely, the smell of fresh cooked toast fills my nostrils. It's oozing from the mud and fungus underneath my feet and floating down from the leaves in the thick canopy overhead. I'm in pain but blissfully detached from reality. I know I shouldn't indulge the toast fantasy but I'm really hungry. Actually, I'm starving.

WORDS AND IMAGES Will Millard



Cutting through patches of bracken in forest clearings was always a chore. At times it towered above us.



Will, early on in our descent, when it was still good fun.



The start of the rapids on the Wara

DEPRESS THE BUTTON on the GPS, looking for a distraction before I have to take my turn hacking out the path ahead. It flickers into life and reveals our position on the satellite map, a small pink blob in a vast smear of unbroken green. We are fighting for survival on a totally unanticipated retreat in the heart of Indonesian Papua's most isolated, uninhabited forest. No one knows we are here. Our satellite phone died a week ago and we're down to one woefully inadequate 800-calorie ration pack a day. A quick calculation reveals we have made a heartrending 720 metres in the last two days of cutting through solid three metre high bush. This is getting very serious indeed.

It had been five years since I first arrived on the shores of West Papua, Indonesia's eastern most province and the western half of the island of New Guinea. I had taken a job as an English language teacher in Jayapura, the state capital, and was longing for adventure and excitement. I wanted to become the explorer of my dreams in the world's last great

unknown. However, unbeknown to me, the state contained a truly macabre collection of interlocking geographical extremes that have successfully kept the outside world at bay for centuries: The largest mountain range between the Andes and the Himalayas, Asia's most intact tract of lowland rainforest, and a whole series of vast unrelenting swamps; it is a natural fortress beyond compare.

People have been living in New Guinea for 45,000 years, its unique geography resulting in hundreds of distinct tribal groups and up to one third of the world's total languages. The level of isolation in some parts of West Papua is so extreme that some people not only lack knowledge of the world outside, they don't even realise there's another tribe living in the valley next door.

Then there's the wildlife. Saltwater crocodiles, pig lice, sweat bees, freshwater sharks, deadly vipers, the New Guinea taipan, poisonous centipedes, the velociraptor-like cassowary, and even a semi-carnivorous fish feared locally for its alleged ability to remove the testicles of anyone unfortunate enough to swim into its territory. Malaria is a massive

problem, as are a host of other diseases that mostly disappeared in the wider world at the start of the last century, elephantitis for example, but also typhoid, trench foot, river blindness and a horrendous parasitic worm that causes pustules and deformities to develop in any fleshy tissue it invades. In essence, the ideal choice of kit would include a comprehensive set of antivenin backed up with an arsenal of medical supplies, an inflatable motor boat, enough dry rations to support a small army and about 300 porters. Utterly impractical for the self-sufficient modern day adventurer working to a tight budget but, above all, a totally unsuitable model for working in a territory that demands utmost discretion. A territorial dispute between the local indigenous population and the Indonesian Government has seen the state embroiled in a separatist conflict that has ground on for over half a century. Sporadic violence, especially around the lucrative Grasberg mine, and subsequent accusations of human rights abuses leveled at the Indonesian authorities, has left the vast majority of the state strictly off limits to

foreigners. My expeditions have had to be conducted with utmost sensitivity and, for a large part, total secrecy.

I've had some truly wonderful experiences in the past five years. I uncovered and recorded 'the Great Road', a long lost inter-tribal trade route that was once among the oldest foot only routes in human history, and filmed the remarkable survival of a centuries old salt-well maintained deep within the forest. I've met hidden tribes and encountered obscure wildlife, won awards and gained more sponsorship to pursue my dreams. The restrictions placed on West Papuan travel has left it woefully under researched and, as a result, I couldn't help but feel that at any moment I could stumble round the corner and discover something truly remarkable. New Guinea accounts for less than 0.5% of the world's landmass yet is responsible for a staggering 10% of its species, one third of which are found nowhere else on earth: the planet's smallest parrot and its largest rat, freshwater sharks, fanged frogs, singing dogs and even poisonous birds. This list isn't just endless. It's incomplete. There is absolutely

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no doubt West Papua has more to give. I felt incredibly privileged and knew my skills in the region were giving me access to a

unique unseen world. I grew bolder and my confidence swelled. By the start of 2012 I was heading off with



The packrafts doubled as beds on the lower reaches of the Wara when there was nowhere to sling a hammock.

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my expedition partner and medic, Callum Fester, on an attempt to uncover a new line that linked the tribal trade routes of the central highlands with the coasts, explaining, I hoped, how highland trade products had been transported out of the state as early as the 13th century. I had picked two plausible routes: one headed north through a gap in the mountains that eventually linked up with the populations of the mighty Mamberamo river. The other headed south and into the Asmat region of the treehouse-dwelling Kombai and Korowai clans. If we could pull it off I knew we would become the first people to

make an unbroken, unassisted crossing of the state. After five years of hard graft in some truly inhumane conditions, I felt experienced enough to pull it off.

Unusually heavy rainfall had flooded the Asmat to the south, so I decided we should start from the middle and try to work outwards along the northern route. At first things went well. We successfully maneuvered away from the major points of conflict in the central highlands and entered the start of the lowland forests after just two weeks. Another week later we left the last tribal community in the area – a fantastically remote, totally self-

sufficient group of Yali warriors in the centre of the rainforest. And then things started to go quite dramatically wrong. I almost stepped on a six-foot Taipan, then, while attempting a first descent of the Wara river, a slither of white water that penetrated the corridor between the mountain spine and the vast stretch of lowland jungle sweeping along the Mamberamo, Callum came within an ace of drowning while exiting a small waterfall. The river conditions had deteriorated as we headed downstream. Soon we found ourselves in a stretch of whitewater way beyond either of our level of experience. Huge whirlpools, cataracts and deep rabid plunge pools that could swallow a raft four times the size of our Alpaca Explorers met us at every turn. With sheer gorge sides effectively locking us in, we had no choice but to press on downstream. We were in well over our heads, and, to make matters worse, the weather had taken a turn for the worst, effectively doubling the river's volume and pace in a night. Our efforts to make life as safe as possible meant the descent became unbelievably time consuming. It took us a week to descend little more than 30 kilometres before we were finally, mercifully, ejected onto a truly stupendous river.

I guided us through the first set of lumpy rapids and then chose a line tight to the right



Descending the last pathways to the Wara river with Yali tribespeople.



Callum strains to see the best way through the undergrowth on our retreat. We couldn't see more than a few feet in front of our faces for two weeks.



The flying insects were intolerable at points deep in the forest.



Relief at finally making it to the bottom of the river Wara was short lived. The mouth empties into an even bigger stretch of white water.

hand bank. Huge-twisted trees were strewn all along the black-sand beaches that hugged the shore. Hornbills and cockatoos exploded from the canopy overhead, their high-pitched shrieking calls initially masking the deep guttural rumble that was coming from the bend in the river directly ahead.

For a second I was utterly mesmerised. My sleep deprived and hungry body had slowed my brain right down. I just coasted forward in my packraft, hypnotically towards a towering giant of a wave as wide as an Olympic size swimming pool. I swiveled to Callum and signaled to get out of the river immediately. We beached among the trees. I switched the camera off.

"This is not good" I turned to Callum, breathing deep, "Actually, this is a disaster". His eyes were wide. He didn't need to speak. The rapid was ridiculous and extended as far as I could see downriver. The expedition north was over.

I sat down on a sun-baked boulder, removed my hat and cupped my face in my hands. In my desperation to keep us moving I had lost sight of the fundamental reason I was even on this expedition. I was supposed to be uncovering a foot only trade route. This

place had never seen people let alone carried legions of highland traders to the coasts.

The kit was in tatters, our rations were critically low and we had taken a phenomenal battering. I looked at Callum – just as strung out, just as determined. I knew he could carry on if I asked him too but I owed it to him, our friends and our families not to do this anymore. I owed it to myself.

We separated out all of our gear, counted up the rations and after a night's sleep in our inflated packrafts we turned round and made our way back. It took everything we had left, extraordinary self-discipline and above all, huge amounts of luck.

Ten days later we were sitting on a rock back outside the remote Yali village we had left weeks previously having just cut through every inch of almost 10,000 feet of unrelenting, undulating forest.

Ahead we could see the wooden fencing sweeping round the village, the orderly sweet potato gardens, banana plantain, fruits and the network of paths we had followed out to the river all that time ago. I could hear the lullaby-like chatter of the Yali language within the fence, I could hear the children screaming in play, I could even hear the dogs and the

village pigs. They were sounds I hadn't heard in weeks and it felt truly wonderful, and even a touch overwhelming, to hear them all again.

I looked to Callum. His face was thin and pale, his clothes hung limply off his frame, his muscles utterly wasted. He cracked out a toothy grin from behind his thick dark beard, his ribs like mine, visibly prominent.

"Soon," he pointed towards the village, "we will eat like kings!"

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