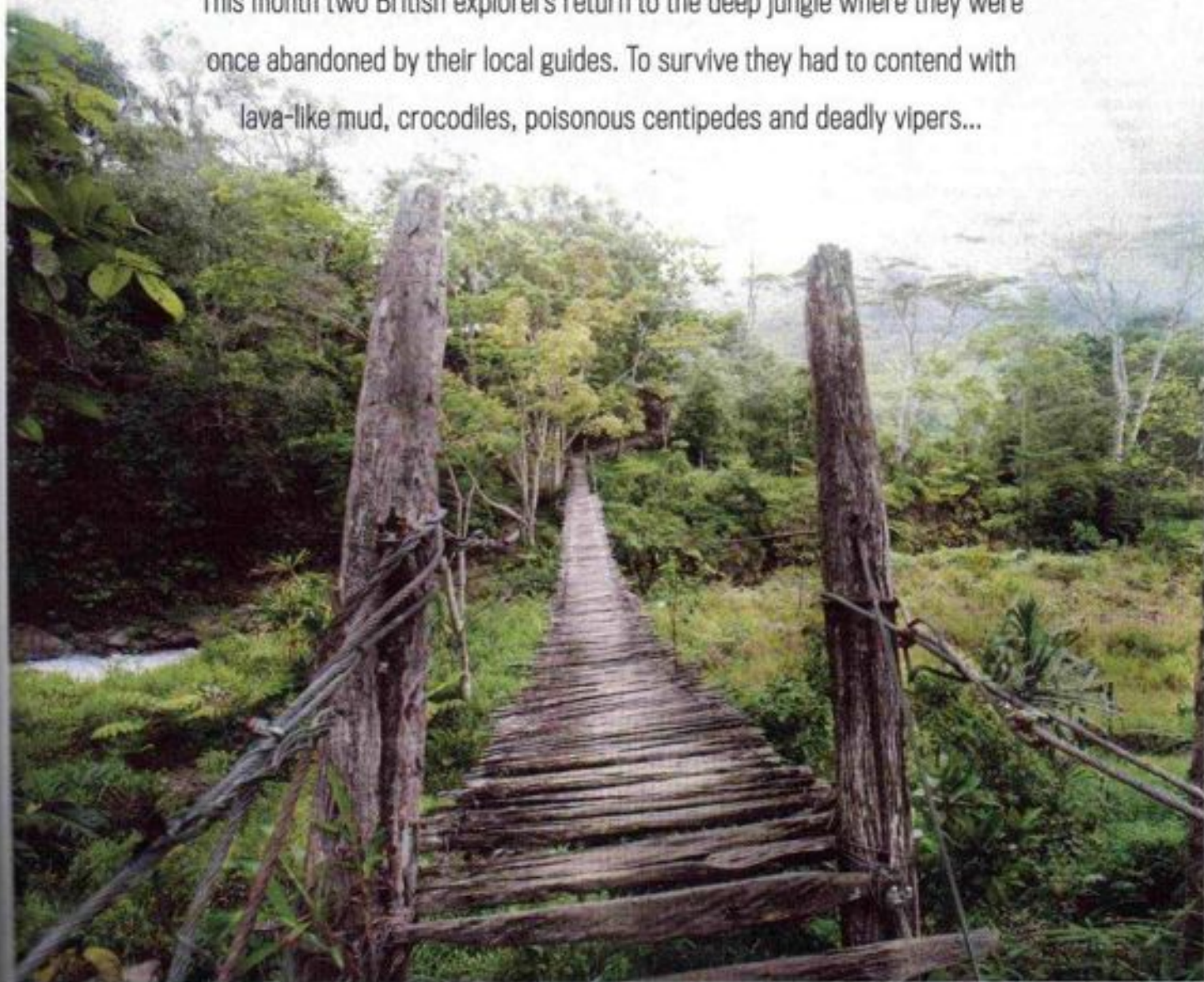


Words & Pictures: Will Millard

# SURVIVING

## THE LAST UNKNOWN

This month two British explorers return to the deep jungle where they were once abandoned by their local guides. To survive they had to contend with lava-like mud, crocodiles, poisonous centipedes and deadly vipers...



**E**yes widening in mild shock, sunburnt and sweating, I tried to process exactly what had just happened. "There's a shred of hope that they've just... just..." I stammered but the words just stuck in my throat.

"...Gone off for a KFC?" offered Callum with poorly concealed sarcasm.

I looked around, desperately trying to glean something positive from our nightmarish situation. I noticed that our kit had at least been ditched in an elevated forest clearing, but surveying the panorama caused my heart to sink only further into my fetid jungle boots. We were standing in what was essentially a tiny chink in the armour of an otherwise utterly impenetrable landscape. Seas of forest undulating over 3,000-metre peaks stretched to the horizon in every direction, doubtless concealing vast uninhabited valleys, waterlogged forest floors and impassable rivers; a thousand natural snares waiting to catch us out should we fail to stay anything but absolutely alert. A tough ask, especially considering we had just lost our entire contingent of local guides, our food and our waterproofs.

Had we not been in such desperate circumstances, I might have been impressed. This sort of natural landscape was a major draw in attracting me to remotest New Guinea in the first place. Yet abandoned and alone it was impossible not to feel anxious. We were, after all, in deep trouble.

West Papua is truly one of the world's last unknown places. The western half of the island of New Guinea and the easternmost province of Indonesia, it couldn't really be much more remote globally, but it heaps further isolation on itself with the geographical extremes within its borders: a formidable 115,000 square kilometres of swamps, rainforest and the largest mountain range between the Himalayas and the Andes. A near perfect natural fortress.

Unsurprisingly, West Papua has kept the outside world at bay for centuries. People have, in fact, 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 languages within its borders alone. The level of isolation within some parts of West Papua is so extreme that some not only lack knowledge of the world outside their borders, they don't even realise there is another tribe living in the next valley.

I have been conducting expeditions in West Papua since 2007 and still struggle when it comes to deciding precisely what gear to bring. The first thing to consider is that



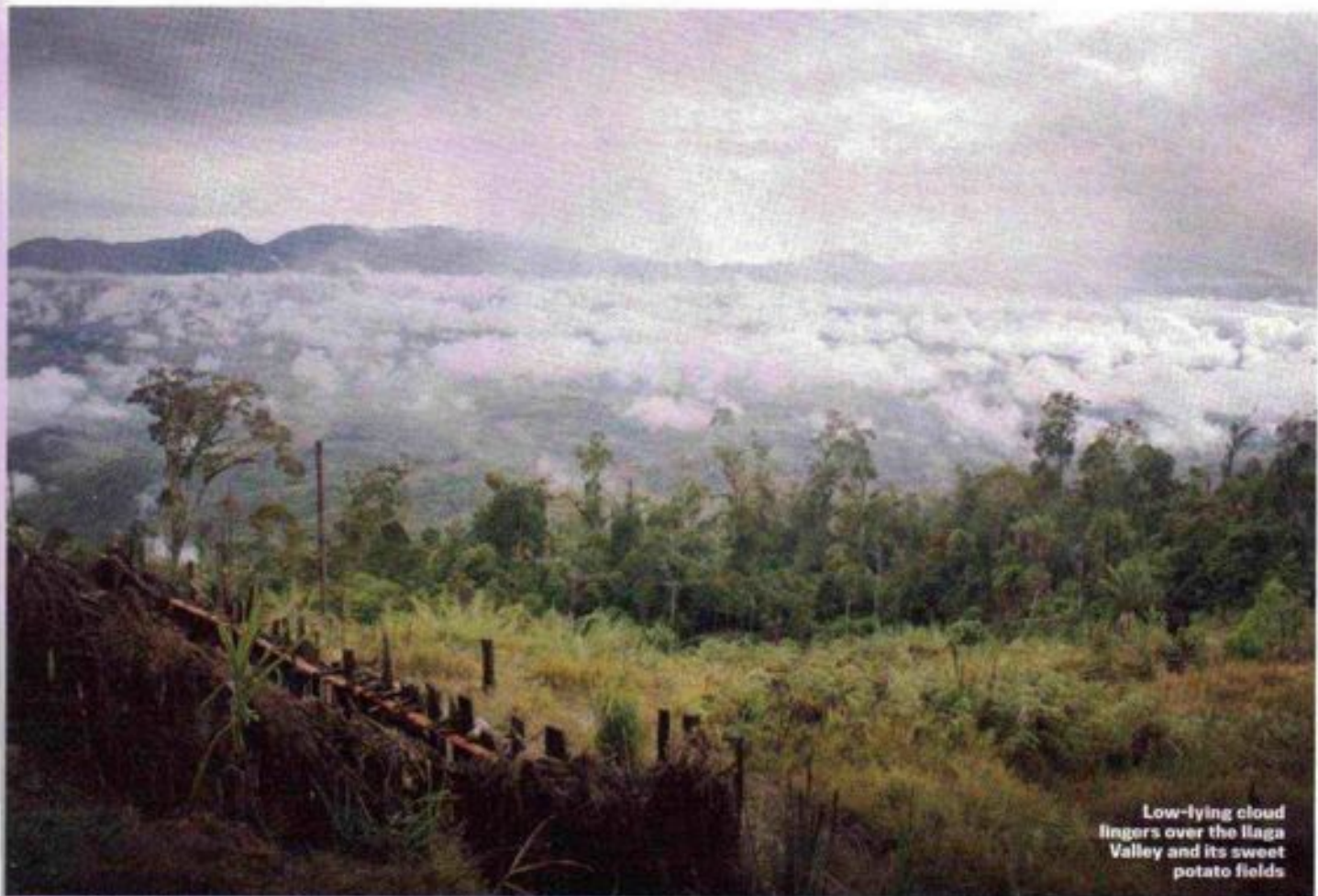
**FROM TOP, CLOCKWISE:** Dani tribesmen outside a highland hunting hut; high-street shopping in Enarotali; a Yali warrior wearing a 'kotoka', made of a specially grown gourd

## "Malaria is a big problem, as are elephantiasis, typhoid, trench foot and river blindness"

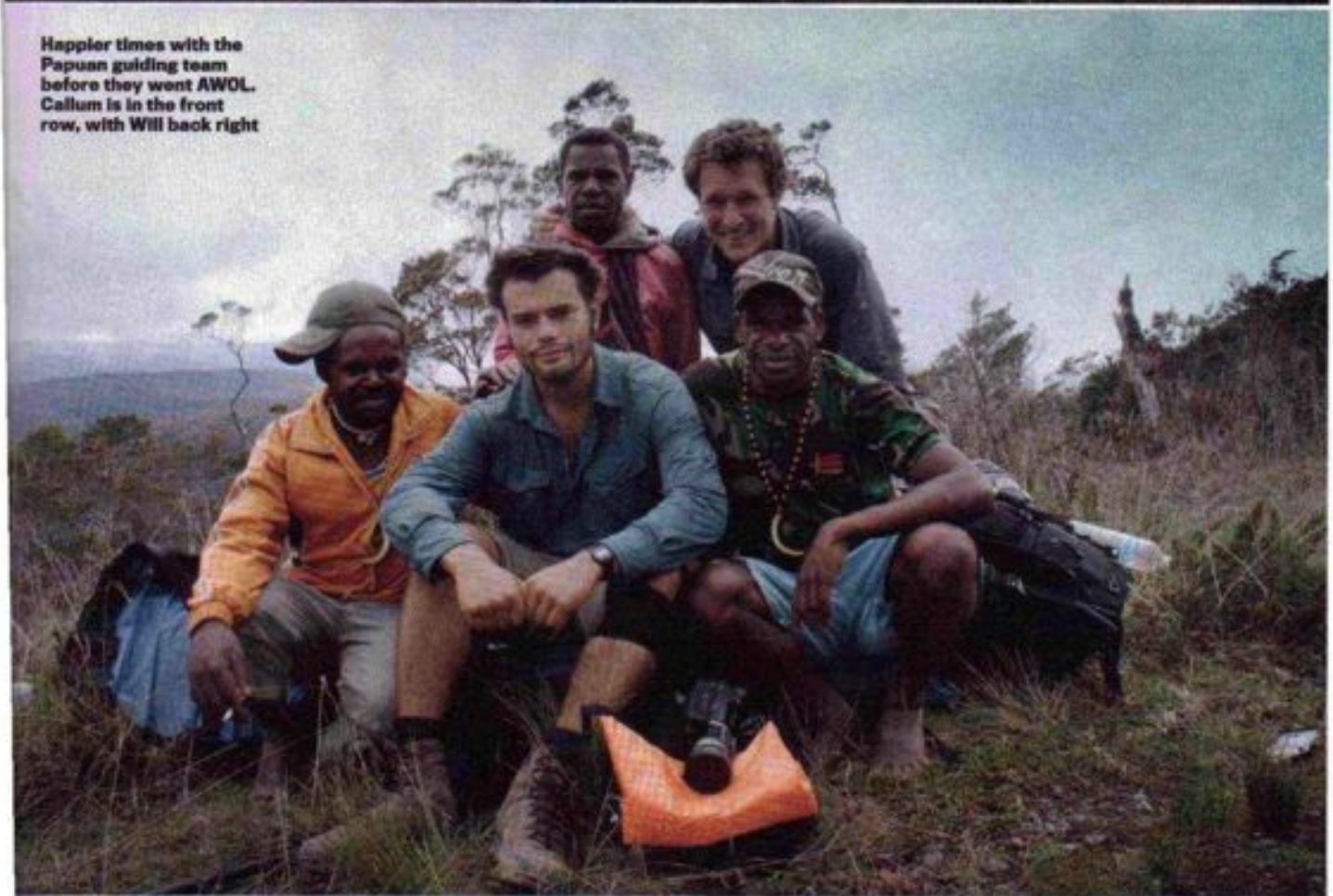
ridiculous geography. Big mountains require heavy boots and warm clothing. It gets cold at night, there's heavy rain and, at high altitudes, ice and sometimes even snow. But there are also those vast lowland swamps and river crossings, which really require high-backed jungle boots and packrafts, and warm highland clothing has no place in the humid jungles. You also have to consider the wildlife: saltwater crocodiles, pig lice, freshwater sharks, deadly vipers, the lowland 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 big problem, as are a host of other diseases that mostly disappeared in the wider world at the start of the last century: elephantiasis, for example, but also typhoid, trench foot, river blindness and a parasitic worm that causes horrific pustules and deformities to develop in any fleshy tissue it invades. In essence, the ideal choice of clothing would be a Victorian diving suit, complete with metallic helmet, inch-thick canvas suit and lead boots, backed up with an arsenal of medical supplies, an inflatable motor boat, enough dry rations to

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Low-lying cloud fingers over the Iloga Valley and its sweet potato fields



Happier times with the Papuan guiding team before they went AWOL. Callum is in the front row, with Will back right

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Children from Papua's fearsome Moni tribe appear to have seen the X Factor; the international game of king of the castle; a Dani warrior

support a small army and about 300 porters. This, of course, is utterly impractical, particularly for the modern-day adventurer who will often need to be entirely self-sufficient. I've found out the hard way that you are likely to suffer accident, illness or injury as a result of trying to carry too much gear. On multi-day expeditions, it pays to be as quick and light as possible, although you don't need to be in peak physical condition.

In 2007 I set off on an attempt to cross West Papua in the form of my life. I had been in-country for nine months working as an English language teacher and training hard: daily eight-mile hill reps in 100 per cent humidity, at least three gym sessions a week specifically targeting my upper body and a 15-mile walk every weekend through our local forest with a weighted pack. Needless to say by the time I set foot on the track I had almost no body fat to speak of and felt as if I could eat mountains for breakfast.

It was a huge mistake. The combination of long gruelling days, constant climbing and our insufficient rations caused me to lose weight I didn't have, and the muscle mass I had spent months building up started to waste away. I was exhausted and vulnerable, and sure enough, I got extremely sick with a blood infection. If it wasn't for my friend Heron, a member of the Dani tribe who had chain smoked his way through my entire training period and who carried me back down to the local hospital, I would've been finished. These days I concentrate on endurance in training, usually long walks with weight and core exercises. The confidence acquired from several successful expeditions helps me feel comfortable going into a new project slightly overweight, safe in the knowledge that it gives me a bit of a back-up when our rations start to thin and that I'll get fitter as the expedition progresses, provided I pace myself at the start. With each subsequent expedition I lead in New Guinea I find I enter heavier, my kit gets lighter, my team gets smaller and my ambitions get greater, but last time my fat, fast and light approach got tested to the limit.

I was leading a Royal Geographical Society-sponsored expedition right into the heart of the province, searching for the 'Great Road', a 400km inter-tribal trade route stretching the length of the highlands that once formed one of the longest and oldest foot-only trade routes in human history. Two years of research, pilot expeditions and careful nurturing of local contacts had armed me with just enough knowledge to believe it was worth mounting a larger expedition. If we succeeded in



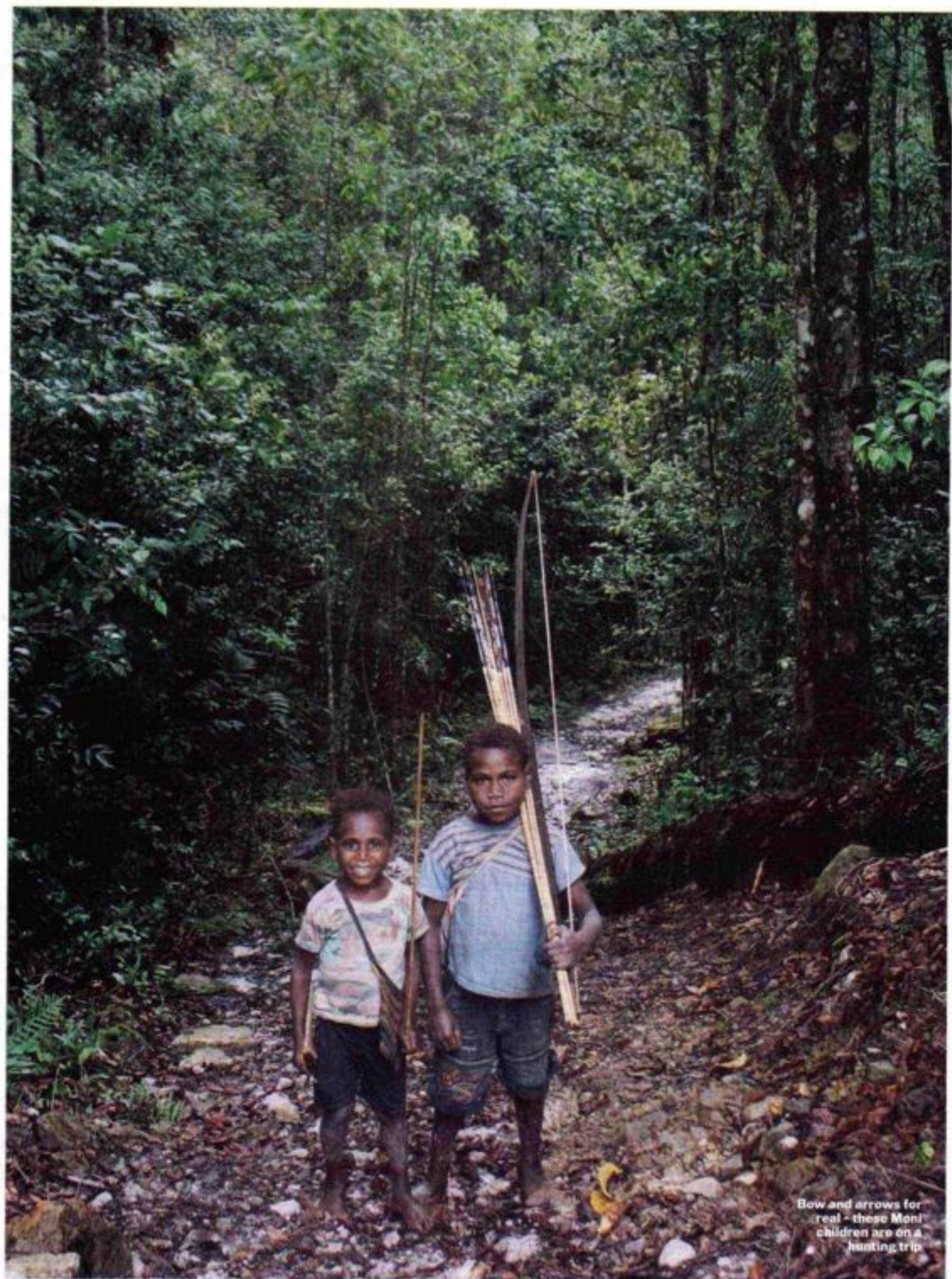
**"I had almost no body fat and felt I could eat mountains for breakfast - a huge mistake"**

recording the Great Road's prolonged use I knew we could help add to the evidence suggesting complex systems of trade existed in Papua long before outside influence.

Things got off to a bad start. I had been in the country for almost two months and although I felt we had uncovered evidence of the Great Road it was obvious it was in a state of terminal decline. Broken bridges, abandoned villages and an ever-shrinking path slowly giving in to the thick-set creepers that choked its borders all indicated that West Papua's long-distance trading was a thing of the past. The majority of highlanders were employed in and around the highland

hub towns that were served by road and air, negating the need to trade on foot. As a result our efforts were met with indifference, and we were struggling to hold together a team of Papuan guides and porters for anything more than a few days at a time. To add to our woes, I had taken the executive decision to take a live pig with us. The Great Road was traditionally used to trade in pigs. A man with many pigs is likely to have many wives, cowrie shells, land and power. I had just one pig, Sarah, named after my girlfriend. It was a nod towards the Great Road's pig trading past and I was hoping it

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Bow and arrows for real - these Moni children are on a hunting trip

**TOP DOWN:** "Just the two of us." Callum and Will alone in the jungle and camping by the Great Road's remains; Honnal shelters and the head man's hut in Dani land

might be a useful bargaining tool. I have had many problems in the past when trying to explain to locals my reasons for wanting to explore the Papuan hinterland. The most frequent question was: "Why would a western man, who can easily afford a flight, want to walk?" I asked myself precisely the same question on an almost daily basis, but I felt that having a pig could provide a useful distraction; it might even legitimise the entire expedition as just another on-foot trading party. At first it worked perfectly, but after a few weeks on the Great Road, and not one on-foot trader to speak of, it became clear that my theory was some way off the mark; a fact that was hammered home to me as I stood with my pig, rucksack and Callum in a remote mountain clearing with little more than a word carved into the ground in a local dialect presumably explaining our guides had decided to, "give it a miss, thanks."

We were abandoned in a stretch of mountains that straddle the state borders of Tiom and Puncak Jaya. It was just about the remotest stretch of highland forest in Papua's remotest state. We may as well have been on Mars. Plus it was the frontline for fighting between the Indonesian military and the Free West Papua movement, an indigenous band of freedom fighters intent on gaining West Papuan independence from Indonesia. It was hilly and thick mud was running like larva down most of the tracks. We were moving at snail's pace. I could understand the guides' decision to do a runner.

Quietly, we divided out the kit that hadn't been stolen. We were going to have to ditch a lot of stuff. Now, two men down, there was no way we could carry everything that was left between us. You would be surprised, when you are really pushed, what you will leave behind. Stoves and fuel went first, swiftly followed by our spare rucksack and tent. The idea of personal space in a survival situation is frankly ludicrous. We even got rid of some of the medical kit. I found this particularly tough, but as Callum pointed out if we found ourselves needing all of our heavy duty dressings then there wasn't much hope of getting out of the forest anyway.

We walked on alone through a dark forested valley following a small stream that we hoped would eventually lead to civilisation of some sort. Gradually we grew weaker, but hunger and fear were controlled by rigid routine: I collected the water, he popped in the purification pills, I screwed on the tops, he cleared the ground for the tent, I checked the path ahead for signs of people or food, and repeat. Every painstaking mile, we set small, achievable goals that we pursued



**"It was just about the remotest highland forest in Papua. We may as well have been on Mars"**

devotedly, chastising ourselves heavily for failure and wildly celebrating minor victories in our turf war with the wilderness.

Finally, on the evening of the fourth day a break in the trees revealed a clearing on the far side of the valley. With reckless abandon we charged forward for what felt like hours before collapsing, exhausted, in a field of sweet potatoes. We would eventually be saved by a remote Lani tribe, but Sarah the pig, trade item-cum-mascot, died in my arms.

Two months later we would successfully record the remarkable survival of the on-foot trade in natural salt over in the far west of the state, but we would never forget the hard

lessons in self-reliance that frightening abandonment had taught us.

Expeditions in remote places can get dangerously addictive. This month I'm starting my attempt to make the first unbroken and unsupported crossing of West Papua via two remote lowland rivers. It will be the biggest adventure of my life. I'm hoping I can learn from some of my past mistakes but also to build on the many positives: keeping optimistic, being willing to change your target, believing in yourself and your team, but above all being passionate about what you are doing and why you are doing it, no matter what the wilderness throws at you. ■