

## A Papua New Guinea Story

by Ehud Reiter

Part 1: On how I spent two days waiting for an airplane in a small "end of the road" town in PNG

Part 2: On how I spent a week in the PNG "cities" of Mt Hagen and Wewak, trying to track down my lost companions

Part 3: On the sad tale of a truly "buggeredup" trek through the PNG Highlands

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## A Papua New Guinea Story

### Part 1 of 3: Waiting for the Plane to Yengis

On how I spent two days in a small "end of the road" town in PNG

Prelude: I had signed up for an trekking tour in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. After only one day of trekking, however, we realized that due to overweight packs, it would be impossible for us to finish the trek on schedule, so we decided to send as much excess luggage as we could (including most of the food) back to our starting point, the town of Kompam, where it could be flown to the mid-point of the trek, the airstrip at Yengis. Thompson, the local guide we had hired, said he would take the luggage back and fly it out, and at the last minute I said I would go with him.

Wedn, afternoon: Myself, Thompson, two carriers, and about 80kg of excess luggage set off for Kompam. There was a lot of tribal fighting in the area, and we passed a burned-down primary school and many abandoned huts. For the first part of the trip we were escorted by a group of impressive-looking local warriors (with feathers in their hair and "arse grass" on their behinds), who carried spears and bows&arrows to protect us in case we ran into an enemy tribe. Unfortunately, though, these brave fellows decided to call it quits and go home as soon as we left "friendly" territory. Fortunately, the enemy tribe did not make an appearance, and we arrived in Kompam in one piece.

The local people think white men are wimps at walking, and I dare say they are right. We covered in 5 hours the same distance that took the full trekking party 8 hrs to cover on the way out, and the only reason we didn't go even faster was my presence. I have never felt so wiped out by a walk, and had to be helped over the last hill (45-degree slope, very muddy and slippery path) by our carriers, who were twice my age and were carrying packs which were 50% heavier than mine.

We finally arrived in Kompam around 5:30PM. Kompam was a government town, which provided services (primary school, airstrip, small hospital, police station, etc) to the surrounding villages. It was also, in the most literal sense, the end of the road. The permanent population was only a few hundred, although there were always several hundred villagers from the surrounding area who were in town for one reason or another.

There were no tourist accomodation of any sort, so Samson, the local district manager, very kindly offered to put me up in his house. I spent quite a bit of time talking to Samson, and gathered that he came from a pretty successful family, and in fact one of his uncles had been ambassador to the US - until he killed someone in a drunk driving accident and was forced to return home! It just goes to show you that diplomats literally do get away with murder ... Samson was from a coastal tribe, and assured me many times that the coastal regions of PNG were much more "civilized" than the Highlands.

Thur, noon: The plane to Yengis wasn't due until Friday, so I spent the day hanging around town. Samson's brother and some of his friends showed me around, and took me down to the local river to take a bath. I wandered around the trade stores, talked to some school kids, and in general took it easy.

I was somewhat surprised when, in the middle of the afternoon, I came upon an argument between two men, one of whom accused the other of stealing \$50 (a significant amount of money in PNG) from him. The

amazing thing was that the argument, which included some nasty threats about what would happen if the accused ever showed up anywhere near the home village of the accuser, took place while the two principles, together with myself and several other spectators, were all lying on the grass beneath the shade of a large tree. No voices were raised, and no open signs of anger were shown. An on-looker might have thought they were discussing the weather, not making accusations and threats against each other. It made me wonder how peaceful other "tranquil looking" Third World towns and villages I have seen were.

Thur, afternoon: Samson took me over to the local Baptist Mission, so that I could make reservations on the Friday MAF (Missionary Aviation Fellowship) plane to Yengis. As Kompam had no telephones, telexes, or whatever, the mission people told me they would have to make the reservation in the evening, by radio. I was told to go to the airstrip on Friday morning, and just wait until either a plane showed up or until I recieved a message from the mission saying that they had failed to make a reservation for me.

The mission itself was a big surprise. I had (somewhat romantically) imagined myself as the only white man within 100 kilometers (except for my trekking companions, of course), so it was a shock to appear at the mission and discover a community of 10-20 white Australians, living a European life style (electricity, running water, flush toilets, ...). The contrast between the way the missionaries and the townspeople lived was quite striking (and, of course, the contrast between the missionaries and the villagers was even more dramatic), and I couldn't help but wonder how much these missionaries really were "in touch" with the locals.

When we got back from the mission, I discovered that Thompson (the guide our group had hired to lead the trip) had left town and gone back home. Apparently, he had decided that the 50% advance we had given him, together with the airfare money to fly to Yengis, was sufficient, and he saw no point in finishing the trip. I later found out that Thompson had quite a bad reputation in general, and had been fired from a previous job because he had been caught stealing from the till. When I eventually wrote a nasty letter to the company which "organized" this fiasco, their choice of Thompson as a guide was my biggest complaint.

Fri, 8AM: Samson dropped me and the 60kg of excess luggage off at the airstrip (Thompson had thoughtfully taken about 20kg of gear, of which perhaps half actually belonged to him). Kompam airstrip consisted of a runway and a small corrugated iron shelter, where I was to spend the next several hours waiting.

A small Cessna appeared around 9:00, but it wasn't going to Yengis. The pilot told me, though, that a larger Twin Otter would come by later, and it might be heading that way. About 10:00, a man from the mission (a local, not an Australian) showed up, told me everything was arranged, and proceeded to "check me in". I have never before been "checked in" in a corrugated iron shelter, but the man did it all, including carefully weighing my luggage and charging me exactly 9 Kina (\$11) for excess luggage!

It was actually quite fun waiting for the plane, because various townspeople dropped by to keep me company. The most interesting was a guy who was running the local "vocational school". The vocational school consisted of 2 thatched huts next to the airstrip, but apparently it was enough to make the "headmaster" a regular on the international development circuit. He told me he was going to a conference in Okinawa in a week, had just come back from a workshop in Israel a few months ago, and had been in Canada a few months before then. And here I thought I was a real traveller ... But then, you always meet surprising people in Third World towns. On my previous trip, to Ecuador and Peru, I had asked the owner of a \$2/night hotel I was staying at (in a small village in the Ecuadorian Amazon) where her children lived, and she answered that while most of her children still lived in the same area, she did have one son who was going to Princeton ...

The Twin Otter finally showed up at 1:30. Feeling quite relieved that the plane had actually appeared, I went over to talk to the pilot, only to discover that he wasn't going to Yengis, since he had already been there, and had no intention of going back! 5 minutes of

pleading, of pointing out that my companions might be in serious trouble if they didn't get the food I was carrying, had no effect, as the pilot pointed out that he couldn't go back to Yengis even if he wanted to, because he didn't have the enough fuel.

So, there I was, sitting in the "end-of-the-road" town of Kompiam with 60kg of junk, including about 15kg of freeze-dried food, and separated from the trekking tour I had paid \$\$\$ to join. Meanwhile, my companions were out in the bush, with no food and no guide. The situation did not look promising ...

## A Papua New Guinea Travelogue [continued]

### Part 2: Searching for my Companions

On how I spent a week in the PNG "cities" of Mt Hagen and Wewak, trying to track down my friends, with no luck until ...

Synopsis: I had signed up with an organized trek in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, but had been separated from the group when our guide and I had gone to the town of Kompian to fly some excess luggage and most of the food to the trek's half-way point, the airstrip at the village of Yengis. Abandoned by the guide, I waited two days for the plane, only to discover, when it arrived, that there had been a slight change of schedule ...

Fri, afternoon: A bit stunned that the Twin Otter wasn't going to Yengis, I went back to the corrugated iron shelter and sat down, feeling pretty lousy. Just at this moment, the Australian from the local mission who had supposedly "booked" me on the flight to Yengis roared up on a motorcycle, gave something to the Twin Otter's pilot, shouted a "Sorry, Mate" to me, and roared off. I must admit this didn't make me feel much better.

Fortunately, Samson, the local district manager who had befriended me, also appeared on the scene at this point, and offered some more constructive advice. Since the next flight out of Kompiam wasn't until Tuesday, Samson suggested that I had better get on the plane anyways, and reach some place with telephones, banks, and so forth. We discussed the choices, and decided that Mt. Hagen, the plane's home base, was my best bet.

So, I got on the plane, with my 60kg of excess luggage and freeze-dried food, and waved good-bye to Samson and to the 200 or so villagers and townspeople who had come down to the airstrip to see what happened to me (and who formed a circle 10-deep around Samson and I as we discussed what I should do!).

The Twin Otter took off, and made various stops on its way back to Mt. Hagen. At one of the stops, we picked up another trekker, Monica. Monica had actually come from Yengis, via some devious route, where she had been with an Australian army trekking group which had been supposed to meet up with my group. Monica had flown out because of a knee injury, and she told me that as of Friday at noon, no one at Yengis had heard anything of my group, which meant that at best they would arrive at Yengis sometime on Saturday (a day behind schedule), and at worst they were badly lost.

Friday, night: Monica and I arrived in Mt. Hagen, where one of the mission people kindly offered to drive us to the Baptist mission guest house, where we could spend the night. The driver turned out to be an old resident of Kompiam who had gone to medical school in Australia, become a doctor, married an Australian woman, and returned to PNG, where he settled in Mt. Hagen. Local villager makes good, I guess. He still had some ties with Kompiam, though, since it turned out that he owned most of Kompiam's trade stores!

The Baptist guest house turned out to be a very nice place, which was fortunate - I needed someplace quiet where I could just relax for a bit. Like most of the places I stayed in in PNG, it was in theory a hostel, where singles were supposed to share rooms with other singles, but in practice was empty enough so that I got a private room.

Saturday, noon: I went wandering around Mt. Hagen, visiting the weekly market. Mt Hagen has an evil reputation in PNG, as one of the towns

where the "rascal" (crime) problem is the worst. There were guards in all the stores, and several times people who I met on the street warned me that "bad men" were around, and that I should be careful. Hagen is often described as being like the "Wild West", meaning that police presence is minimal, and the only thing that really stops criminals is the fear of vigilantes (killing "rascals" is a very popular pastime in PNG, since it's about the only time you can kill someone and not worry about legal or tribal reprisals ...).

Anyways, the market was colorful, and I managed to escape without being attacked. Back at the hostel, I finally managed to reach the tour operator in Australia, and fill them in on what was happening. They said they would try get in touch with my trekking group [they failed], and suggested that I hang around Hagen until Tuesday, and then fly to the town of Wewak, which was the ending point of the trek. They offered to pay the airfare from Hagen to Wewak, but nothing else, which annoyed me (since I had paid for an all-expenses tour, I thought I deserved to have my expenses paid in Hagen!).

Sunday and Monday: I spent these two days at a country lodge near Mt. Hagen, generally just hanging around. On Sunday, I went to mass at the local Catholic church, where I heard an Australian priest deliver a sermon in Pidgin English, which was full of references to "strongpela tok" (= "strong-fellow talk" - Pidgin is a lot of fun!). I noticed that several of the local villagers who had told me they were going to church were nowhere to be seen - it turned out they had stopped somewhere for a quick game of "spears" (= darts), and were still playing, roaring drunk, 5 hours later. Just like back home in the US! I happened to ask one villager who wasn't completely drunk what he thought of the coastal tribes (remembering that Samson, the Kompiam DM who was from the coast, had told me that the coastal tribes were much more civilized), and he replied that they were real pansies, since they used sorcery to fight their tribal wars, whereas real men (= Highlanders) fought wars the proper way, with spears, bows, and arrows.

Tuesday: I arrived at Wewak from Mt Hagen (another Twin Otter) at noon. During the flight, I sat next to a fairly grubby looking national who told me he was a gold dealer with 2 kilos of gold hidden in his boots! There were several big gold rushes on in PNG (I had by this time met several stone-age looking natives who proudly showed me their penicillin jars half-full of gold, and heard plenty of stories about newly rich 10-year olds buying fancy sports cars, crashing them on their first drive, and then promptly buying another one ...) and he apparently had just spent three weeks buying gold at one of the gold fields. The gold he bought for \$10,000 at the fields could be sold for \$30,000 back in the capital city of Port Moresby - provided that no one knifed him and stole the gold in the meantime! Being a gold buyer was definitely a high-risk, high reward job.

Before I left Mt. Hagen, I went to the MAF (Missionary Aviation Fellowship) desk and asked if my companions were scheduled to fly out from Yengis on the twice-weekly flight to Mt. Hagen. The woman very helpfully told me that she doubted it, seeing as the flight had been cancelled because the plane was "buggerup" ...

Wewak was a small town on the PNG coast, near the Indonesian border. It had a jungle climate - hot and steamy, but beautiful tropical beaches. Apparently, it was also the "in" place for travellers, as it was the only place in PNG outside of Port Moresby where I ran into other foreign tourists.

Around 6PM, Grant, the agent from the tour company who had done most of the "organizing" for my trip, showed up with another tour group. I went over and started to tell him about the group's misadventure, only to find out that he had absolutely no interest in this. He said he was on vacation now with his girlfriend, just another customer on a tour, and he was not going to do any worrying about my group.

Wednesday: I joined the other group on a trip to the village of Tambunum, where my group was supposed to be finishing up and the other group was supposed to start a canoe trip from. It was quite a ride, in a Land Rover type vehicle over some of the worst tracks I've ever seen. In fact, every half-hour or so I would reassure myself that the track couldn't possibly get worse - but it inevitably did. There were several points when I thought we would have to turn back, but our driver (one of the best 4WD

jockeys I've ever seen) somehow always got through.

Tambunum village was known as a "crafts factory". It was the biggest craft-producing village in the biggest craft-producing area of PNG. The locals were even building a small lodge where they would put up tourists who wanted to buy crafts directly from the craftsmen. The lodge wasn't ready, though, so we slept in a longhouse - a large open house which was on stilts. The most interesting part of the longhouse was the open ground beneath it, where all the cooking was done, crafts were made and put on display, people hung around and socialized, etc. The longhouse interior, in contrast, was just a fairly boring sleeping area.

Arriving in Tambunum, I discovered that ... (drum roll) ... there was no sign of my group. The Army trekking group had indeed arrived from Yengis, more or less on schedule, but neither they nor anyone else had heard or seen anything of my group. At this point, Grant, the tour company agent, finally started taking an interest, and said he would ask people at the village to send a canoe up and look for my group [he did ask, but the village people "forgot" to do so].

Thursday, day: Still no sign of my group. The Army people and I piled into the Land-rover, accompanied by as many villagers who could fit in, and headed back to Wewak. Aside from the overcrowding, the trip was much less exciting than the one coming up, because this time the driver managed to get proper directions, which no one had thought to give him before we left Wewak.

Back in Wewak, I met a Norwegian anthropologist, who was hanging around Wewak trying to get an MAF plane to take him to the village he was doing research in. He had been waiting two weeks already, and probably would be waiting longer, as one foul-up or another kept him from taking one of the "regularly scheduled" MAF flights. The two of us watched "The Mosquito Coast" on video, and had a good laugh when someone told Harrison Ford in a shocked voice "...but that country is still in the Stone Age" (imagine being in New York and watching a movie where someone arrives in Buffalo and says "Wow! The big city"). The "jungle" scenes in the movie looked remarkably like what we could see out of our window ...

Thursday, night: My last night in PNG. I had finished making some final phone calls to the agency in Australia (no word of my companions), when I heard a knocking on the hostel door. Wondering who it could be at 8PM at night, I opened the door to discover some incredibly dirty and haggard looking travellers. I admit that I didn't even recognize them until one of them said "Ehud ..." - it was them!

#### Papua New Guinea Travelogue [continued]

#### Part 3 of 3: Stuart's Story

On the sad tale of a truly "buggeredup" trek through the PNG Highlands

Synopsis: I had signed up with an organized trek in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, but had been separated from the group on the second day of the trip. After being unable to make contact with them for an entire week, I had assumed they were lost and in serious trouble - until they turned up on at the doorstep of my hostel, haggard and dirty but at least in one piece. After they ate, shaved, and showered, I sat down besides Stuart, an Australian schoolteacher who was in the group, and got him to tell me his story. Somewhat cleaned up, it went as follows:

"As you know, we started out from Kompam on Tuesday morning, with four tourists [me, Stuart, and a Canadian couple, Jim and Jean], the Australian leader [Ron], a local guide [Thompson], and one porter [Sam]. We made slow progress on the first day, mainly because our packs were too heavy, especially Jim's and Jean's. Jean, who only weighed 50kg or so, had a 25kg pack, and Jim, who weighed 90-100kg, had a 40-50kg pack. Most of the gear they were carrying wasn't needed for the trek, and should have been air-freighted to Wewak. Ron, our leader, should have checked their packs before we left, but, unfortunately, he had not done so.

So, the first day we did not get anywhere near where our itinerary

said we were supposed to be. We set up camp in a cleared area where some huts had once stood (the huts had been destroyed in tribal fighting), and, after a bit of searching, found some water. We heard all kinds of yelling at night, which we presumed came from tribal groups making night raids on each other and burning down yet more huts. Ron assured us that tourists were never affected by tribal fighting, but I admit that I slept nervously.

The next day, Wednesday, we walked until lunchtime, where we ran into our first real village. It was obvious that it would be very hard for us to finish the trek on schedule unless Jim and Jean lightened their packs, so we tried to hire porters. Unfortunately, because of the tribal fighting, none of the villagers was willing to accompany us. After some talking, however, Thompson, the guide, said the villagers were less afraid of walking back along the trail to Kompam, and he could hire carriers for that route. He volunteered to take some carriers, the excess luggage, and most of the food back to Kompam, where it could be flown to Yengis on the Friday MAF flight. Since there was less fighting at Yengis, it should be possible to hire carriers there for the remainder of the trip. We discussed this, decided that we could dispense with Thompson's to-date unimpressive abilities as a guide, and thus agreed, thinking that we could still use Sam, the porter, as an interpreter to talk to the locals and get directions. At the last moment, of course, you [Ehud] said you would go back with Thompson to Kompam."

[Later events made me wonder about Thompson claiming he couldn't hire carriers to go forward, but could hire carriers to go back. I suspect he could indeed have hired carriers to go forward if he had wanted to, but was already looking for an opportunity to abandon us. As mentioned in part I, when we got back to Kompam, Thompson just went home, and made no attempt to fly to Yengis. I also must admit that the main reason I volunteered to go back with Thompson was that I was already disgusted with the "organization" of this trip, and was hoping that by flying to Yengis, I could link up with another trekking party organized by the Australian army. So, I, too, was planning to "bail out" of this trip!]

"After you and Thompson left, the rest of us put our packs back on and headed on down the trail. We made good time at first, because of the lightened packs, but more things started going wrong. We realized that the prepared "itinerary", which Thompson had made up, was a complete figment of his imagination, and bore no relation to reality. We had some topographical maps, but they were based on 10-year old aerial surveys (some parts were completely blank and marked as "obscured by cloud cover"), and the "trails" and "villages" shown on the maps were completely mythical. Furthermore, we met very few locals (only one or two a day, until we got to Yengis), so we couldn't ask directions. To top it off, water proved extremely hard to find, and one night we couldn't find any at all. Since our food was all freeze-dried, this meant we went to bed hungry as well as thirsty.

Ron, our leader, was not much help. He was a nice guy, but was unable to take charge and organize things when the trek started going badly. Jim, Jean, and I ended up looking after Ron more than he was looking after us.

Anyways, the "trail" we were following was always very bad (overgrown, narrow, steep, muddy, and slippery), and sometimes became almost impassable, when the mud was so thick that lifting our feet free of it to take a forward step took more effort than climbing a steep mountain trail back home. Finally, we reached Yengis on Saturday afternoon, a day and a half behind schedule.

We were pretty stunned to discover that you, Thompson, the excess luggage, and the food had not shown up in Yengis. Things were looking pretty bleak when "Johnny Cash", who ran the local aid post and in general was the "big man" in Yengis, found us. Johnny had heard about us from the Australian army group who had left Yengis Friday morning, and he told us that he had received the radio message you sent from Kompam, saying that you [Ehud] had been unable to get to Yengis and would take the luggage to Wewak. It was somewhat of a relief to discover that you were safe, and that the luggage had not vanished.

Johnny Cash was a life-saver. He spent the whole afternoon telling us in detail exactly how to get from Yengis to the village of Eram, where we were supposed to be picked up by some canoes. He also let us sleep in his house for the night, and rounded up some trade store owners who opened their

stores so we could buy supplies to replace the food that you and Thompson had taken.

We said good-bye to Johnny and left Yengis on Sunday morning. Our spirits were a bit improved, since we now had good directions, and since we were getting used to the trails. On the other hand, though, we were a bit worried about missing the canoes. They had been told we would show up on Tuesday morning and to wait for us if we were late, but we weren't sure how long they would wait.

We made very good time to Eram, arriving there only a few hours late, on Tuesday afternoon. Unfortunately, the canoes were nowhere to be seen, and the local villagers told us that the canoes had in fact shown up on Monday (!), stayed just a few hours, and then gone back home. Niugini Tours, the agency in Sydney which "organized" this mess, had struck again, this time by giving wrong or at least unclear instructions to the canoes, so that they showed up a day early and did not wait.

The situation looked pretty bad. The distance from Eram to Wewak was far too great to even consider walking, and no airstrips were nearby, so we had to arrange some kind of river transport. There were plenty of canoes available in Eram, but no gasoline for their engines.

Fortunately, the next day (Wednesday), some canoes showed up from down-river. They weren't going back for a few days, but they agreed to sell us two liters of gasoline, which we hoped would be enough to get us to the next village. We bought the gas and headed down-river in a rented canoe.

The gasoline in fact ran out before we reached the next village, but we were close enough so that we could paddle the rest of way in an hour. There wasn't much gas here, either, but we scrounged enough to get us to a bigger village down-river, where gas was indeed available. We slept in this village on Wednesday night, knowing that we would be able to reach our pick-up point at Tambunum village only a half-day or so late.

We arrived in Tambunum around noon the next day. There, though, we discovered that Grant, the Niugini Tours agent who was supposed to meet us, had not waited the half-day, but had left on a canoe trip of his own, up a different river. Worse, the 4WD truck that had brought Grant up from Wewak and was supposed to take us back, had also not waited for us, but had headed back to Wewak early in the morning. Once again, unclear instructions from Niugini Tours screwed us up royally.

It was impractical to take our canoe down-river and up the coast to Wewak, and there was no motor transport in Tambunum. The villagers suggested that we cruise up and down the river and check the other villages to see if anyone had a truck we could rent. Fortunately, this strategy worked, and we were able to hire (at an exorbitant rate) a truck in a nearby village to take us to Wewak, where you see us now!"

After finishing his story, Stuart went off to bed. The "buggerups" were not quite over (the commercial flight which was supposed to take us back to Port Moresby and Australia on Friday was seriously delayed, because the Prime Minister of PNG had also decided to go somewhere that day, and when his plane had mechanical difficulties, he decided to "borrow" the plane we were supposed to be on), but at least we were all safely out of the bush.

So, what can I say about travelling and trekking in Papua New Guinea?

- It's a fascinating place to visit. I've never been as close to the Stone Age as I was in PNG, where most people still wear "arse-grass", and tribal fights with bows&arrows are everyday occurrences. The most memorable part of my trip was not the "adventure" aspects I've highlighted here, but the many long conversations I had at night with various people (nationals, expats, anthropologists, Peace Corps volunteers, government officials, teachers, etc) about what life was like in a country just barely out of the stone age.

- The local people (nationals) are usually very friendly and helpful. The friendliness and helpfulness of Samson, the district manager of Kompam, and "Johnny Cash", the aid post worker in Yengis, saved the trip from being a total disaster.

- Expect plenty of "buggerups", and give yourself lots of extra time to cover things going wrong.
- Above all, AVOID Niugini Tours.

Would I go again? Absolutely - but next time, I'll forget about taking a tour and go on my own.