

Travellers' Club Meeting 7th November 2010

Douglas Raupach "Papua New Guinea & Beyond"

Twenty-nine members came along to hear about an epic exploration by Doug and Patricia about 20 years ago (including sleeping rough, eating crocodile meat, tough trekking and visits to numerous remote villages) and to look at a treasure trove of photos.

Doug's introduction mentioned New Guinea's alpine mountains (occasionally snow-capped), heavy afternoon rainfall, enormous rivers with water volume and deltas to match the Mississippi.

He outlined the route taken by their small group:-

- Flight - Port Moresby to WeeWak on the north coast
- Motorised canoes through Sepik River delta thence upstream via several lakes and tributaries into the mountains
- Flight to Mt Hagen and trek up Mt Willem (N.G.'s highest)
- Road to Goroka and the visual delights of the Highland Show
- four-day walk from Goroka down to Madang Road

The Sepik river region, a pre-war German colony, featured the wide shallow delta channels, visits and overnights in selected villages, exploration of mountain tributaries and lakes with their numerous villages. Early on, the tourists were having a daily swim during picnic lunch stop until someone commented that the locals/crew/staff never took a dip, asked them why and the reply "crocodiles" ended the daily dips. Every village has a House Tamaran (meeting house/spirit house) which provided sleeping bag/mosquito net accommodation for the group. Some Tamarans were roofless or excluded women but the group made the necessary adjustments. We saw shots of Sago Palms and the extraction/processing of the villagers' staple food. Each village has its Sing-Sing group which performs (drums, pipes, exotic costumes, dancing, chanting) for local celebrations and occasionally for visitors (i.e. these tourists) and goes to compete at the annual Highland Show. Some villages have Christian churches. Doug suggested we observe how the visages of the locals (all Melanesians) were quite different as the journey unfolded thus emphasizing the centuries long isolation of village life – travelling/working outside the village was rare.

The flight to Mt Hagen was via wartime village airstrips – landings so rare that the whole village came out to meet the group. From the air, tea plantations and the absence of roads was notable. In the town, shots of the modest hotel, local markets, birds at bird sanctuary, display of inter-village warfare for benefit of tourists, pig meat feast.

The trek up Mt Willem departed pre-dawn – shots of lodge accommodation, fantastic views, the peak 14,500 ft ASL, cloud build-up during the day.



The annual Highland show is over three days and attracts thousands who camp on the outskirts. The judges were from the Australian Administration which established the festival as a strategy to reduce inter-village warfare and isolation. The competing Sing Sing groups with their stunning costumes, painted skin, spectacular headdresses and jewellery drew gasps from Doug's audience. He mentioned that the sounds of their performances really enhanced the experience. These photos are priceless in their own right but also historically because there has been enormous change/decline in traditions in New Guinea since they were taken. We really enjoyed the account of second placegetters getting out their bows and arrows and attacking judges and first placegetters. Everyone scattered - they were soon controlled/subdued - no casualties.

The four-day walk downslope was along an old logging track with some boys to help carry tents/luggage and calm down hostile betel chewing villagers armed with bows and arrows.

In the Ramu valley overnight accommodation was at a mission station with showers (former quarters for now departed nuns).

Madang photos showed a coral island resort – super comforts and a tale of Doug's dinghy being swept away in a current and rescued by two boys in a canoe.

Quite an intense session of questions/discussion followed the talk indicating a high level of interest by the audience. Sincere thanks to Douglas and Patricia for sharing some of their treasured memories with us and to Michele Barbeau, the Society's Office Manager for her excellent brochure.

'Ela Taranto