

Kokoda visit: 10-21 September 2007

Papua New Guinea: where is it? We found it by getting onto a 737, flying north along the coast of Queensland for three hours, crossing Torres Strait and bingo! Port Moresby lay below us. We had two days to wait for a flight to Kokoda and spent that time with Mike and Emma, friends of Mark who live not far from the airport. Mike is a pilot. He's also an enthusiastic and very informal tour guide who made sure we saw the sights of Port Moresby (there aren't many) and completed all the shopping we needed. Mike's wife Emma and their four kids and several of her relatives living in the house were very kind to us and we thoroughly enjoyed our time with them.

During that time we also met David (a son of one of Rosie's ex-students) and his friend Samson. Both live and work in Port Moresby. Samson has recently completed a degree in Australia in community development and was keen to become involved in the Kokoda villages' homestay initiative. More about that later. Another visit was to the University of PNG for a meeting with Dr Regis Stella, who has been advising Mark on ethnological aspects of the film script he's been developing.

We were delighted to learn that Mike was the pilot on our flight to Kokoda. There's not much to get formal about on Twin Otters. Mark roamed the plane with his video camera and did a scenic commentary for the trekkers on board using a mike passed back from the pilots' cabin. The flight is only 25 minutes, but it crosses some highly unfriendly mountains known as the Owen Stanley Range. In 1942 it was on their sharp ridges and incredibly steep sides that the Japanese army suffered its first defeat in WW2 at the hands of a motley collection of part-time Australian soldiers. It's hard to imagine a worse place to fight a war and to this day thousands of trekkers tramp along the network of tracks that make up the Kokoda Trail in a kind of homage to those who fought here so long ago. Catering for trekkers is a big business, one which is almost totally dominated by foreign tour companies. This may change, but that's getting ahead of ourselves.

Our plane was three hours late leaving Port Moresby. The kundu drummers and dancers who'd been booked to welcome us had all moved on to another gig, but that didn't affect the intensity of the welcome we received at Kokoda airstrip. Mark had been there a year ago and for me it was first time, but for Rosie it was very much a return to a very special part of her past. Ex-students flocked around her. Tears flowed freely, hugs became ever-tighter. Not a moment you could ever forget. We retrieved nearly (therein lies another story) all our luggage from the plane and climbed into - what else? - a trusty Hilux for the short trip up to Kokoda Station to see more ex-students, the remains of her old house and other buildings from the late Sixties. Below us lay the school, sparsely clad in the same coat of paint it was given 40 years ago. Beyond lay the endless oil palm plantations that are quickly filling the entire Kokoda valley, replacing the rubber plantations and native forest.

From the Station we rode the Hilux with eight or ten other people about 6 km to John Beleni's block. During a fairly recent process of land reform plantation workers were allocated 10 hectare blocks on 99 year leases from the government. John's extended family lives in a collection of handsome huts on his block, surrounded by carefully tended gardens and lawns. There's no electricity (unless someone cranks up a small generator to watch DVDs), the running water runs in the various creeks that criss-cross the land, and the only vehicle is John's pushbike. This came in handy when Rosemary realised that she'd left her little red suitcase under the seat on the plane. It

not only contained her all her underwear and medication, but also Mark's passport. Ever a man of action, John leapt on the bike and tore into Kokoda reaching the airstrip just in time to catch Mike, who was about to take off again with his second load of trekkers for Port Moresby. Mike's retrieval of the bag is a long story of deviousness and intrigue, but ended happily the next day when we were amazed to see John pull the bag from behind his back as we sat under the enormous rain tree that dominates the Kokoda Station plateau. Mark, having confronted visions of a rather different life stuck in PNG without a passport all the previous night, visibly relaxed.

He introduced me to the men's bathing area. Until that moment I'd never been in a bathroom I truly loved. The shallow pool in a creek about 100 metres from the huts was surrounded by forest of an intense green that defies description. The water was transparent and exactly the temperature PNG's hot, sticky climate requires. Never have I enjoyed washing myself quite so much (except maybe one freezing night after I'd pulled a blown engine out of a Beetle at Timboon).

John's wife Judith and their two daughters provided us with every meal, simple and delicious food that just seemed to keep coming. For anti-malarial and privacy reasons we slept in the mosquito-proof tent the family had pitched for us inside the large communal hut where at times as many as eighteen family and friends also slept. We slept well (except for that first "how will we ever retrieve that passport?" night). Everyone except Rosie and Bruce was up at dawn; we usually made it to vertical about half an hour later because we didn't ever hear a sound from anyone as they packed up their bedding each morning.

Each day Rosemary's ex-students and their proud families seemed to turn up at just the right moment and in suitably manageable numbers to keep her topped up with good stories of lives well lived, hugs and massive smiles. I spent a lot of time chasing butterflies with my camera. Clouds of Papilio ulysses (the big blue and black ones) fluttered through the garden and even through our hut at times. We walked back towards Kokoda and visited John Wardman and his family at their block not far from the school. Everywhere we went we did enthusiastic photo sessions with everyone, resulting in a massive print order and mailout after returning to Brisbane, but it was worth it.

We spent one night at Savaia village. Getting there required a vehicle as we had bedding and spare clothes to carry, and there was rain about. At this time of year it normally rains mid-to-late afternoon, but this was a day when the rain was neither gentle nor intermittent. To nobody's surprise the vehicle was many hours late collecting us so by the time we reached Savaia the welcome ceremony had been on hold for far too long. And we arrived on a different road to the one they'd expected, giving everyone just one minute to move the welcome decorations to the other side of the village. (Not that we knew this at the time: we were let in on the secret later in the week during another long wait.)

It was an unforgettable welcome. Flowers were offered in every form: presented, thrown and worn. Many hugs from ex-students. Wide-eyed children wore ceremonial dress. We realised later that visitors are rare these days, so big white people are quite a novelty. We were taken to the visitors' hut (actually their school) and formally introduced to every person in the village. Standing second along the introduction line gave me a new understanding of what it's like to be a president's or monarch's spouse. One of Rosemary's best students came from this village and, sadly, was buried there last year. The first and most important thing Rosemary did was to visit his grave on the edge

of the village to present a name plaque she'd painted in his memory in a formal and very moving ceremony.

Back in the hut, after we'd enjoyed some fresh fruit and drink, several people made formal speeches of welcome. In our replies it was hard to match their formality and oratory, but there was no shortage of sincerity. Too often we eschew formality because it's unfashionable or meaningless, the language of politicians and other word weasels, but at times like this formality was exactly right because every word came from the heart wrapped in unequivocal and mutually shared joy.

It wasn't long before we were down to business. Mark sat with many of the village's men and women to discuss the homestay idea, watched by quite a few older children. The talks went well and resumed again early the next morning.

During the night we slept in one of the two elementary school huts. (Elementary school is the first three years of formal learning, and is now done in villages where possible.) This caused no problems because it was school vacation time and, anyway, there isn't a single item of equipment in the school. No pencils or paper, no chairs, no desks, books, pictures, sports equipment, not a pin. Nothing.

It rained hard most of the night and for the only time in our trip we felt the need to pull our tiny, ultra-lightweight rugs over us. Two of our hosts slept in the hut with us in case we needed assistance during the night to get to our toilet, freshly dug and shrouded in palm leaves in the preceding days. Despite the downpour the thatching didn't so much as hint at leaking.

Mark and I had hugely enjoyed our baths in the creek at John's block, but at Savaia the creek was something else again. It was deeper, greener and even more beautiful. More massive green leaves all around, vanilla orchids and even more butterflies. Plenty of kids came along to help us (not that we needed help, but we were a novelty.) Then they showed us their tree kangaroo, sadly caged and not looking particularly happy. Mark and his brothers had a pet one when they lived at Kokoda Station, but it was a novelty for me. The morning's meeting went for several hours with good results. Rosemary talked to several of the women about catering for visitors, and also with the family of her ex-student who died. Most impressive were the village's elementary school teachers. They'd been given six weeks of training in Popondetta (about two hours away by truck) and were as impressive as any teachers we'd seen. Teaching is done in Biage, the local language, which is exactly what we've advised any community school that would listen. The kids obviously love school. As soon as we'd settled in to "our" hut - their school - they trooped in, sat down in rows and waited quietly for something to happen. Fortunately an impromptu session using a digital SLR wasn't at all beyond them and we took lots of photos of each other.

Morning refreshments were delivered as fresh as they get from the coconut trees just outside our hut. Whump! More than a dozen rained down after one of the young men climbed one, fortunately missing everyone watching below. It took bystanders just moments to husk them on sharp stakes set into the ground and then lop the top off the nuts using the long and lethally sharp bush knives that everyone uses for almost every household task. I'd never been a big fan of coconut milk, but now realise the error of my opinion: it was because I'd never had access to tree-fresh coconuts.

We left late in the afternoon to return to John Beleni's block. It was raining again and (surprise!) the vehicle was late so, tired of waiting around and keeping our hosts from doing domestic things that needed to be done, we started walking down towards the airstrip through the oil palm plantations. The trees are planted about 8 metres apart so that the branches form a roof that blocks light from the ground below and reduces the need for weeding. It makes a gloomy and boring sight, broken here and there by huge bunches of shiny red seeds that are cut from the trees and piled in cargo nets beside the road awaiting collection by crane-equipped trucks. Each bunch weighs over 50 kg so harvesting them is a peril to even the strongest back. At K50 (\$16) a tonne it's not a great income to the lease holders of the 2 hectare blocks, but it beats any other source of income in the area so the oil palm plantations will continue to spread, especially while the oil forms the foundation of the eco-fuel scam that's milking hundreds of millions of dollars from the US Treasury. (Dilute an incoming tanker's cargo of palm oil with 1% diesel oil and it qualifies for a massive eco-fuel subsidy when re-exported from a US port. Not that anyone in Kokoda sees the subsidy, or is even aware of it.) Eventually our truck found us and we returned to the Beleni block. I enjoyed having a shower at the creek, a real shower because it was raining. That night we watched the DVD Mark put together of his previous visit, and another of the ABC program in which Rosie had spotted John Beleni and led to the events that brought everyone back together again. I enjoyed the delight of having Happy Birthday sung in three- (or maybe four-) part harmony, then being showered with flower petals. And there were speeches, because Mark had to leave very early the following morning. He was up before dawn to catch a truck to Popondetta and then a plane to Moresby. Sadly, he had to return to work.

Rosie and I spent the next few days meeting more ex-students and their families, visiting the school where she taught and talking with more people about the homestay project. Rosie presented Kokoda School with a CD of recordings made of the school children singing in the Sixties. Unfortunately the school doesn't have a CD player, but someone said they might be able to dub it onto a cassette tape. The school is in terrible condition, apart from the library block built by Australian volunteers in the past few years. Nothing had been painted since the late Sixties and little equipment seemed to have survived either. The school staff marvelled at the quality of work in one of her students' exercise books Rosemary had retained from her time there. The language of instruction is a major problem. Early school instruction is now in Pidgin, one of the three official national languages (the others being English and Motu). After several years classes switch to English. This is fine for students in other parts of PNG where Pidgin is spoken, but it's not the main language of Papua so much of the kids' early learning has to take place in a foreign language. It's not surprising that educational standards appear to have slipped badly in the past decade or three.

At Cecilie Kekedo's elementary school at Kokoda Station the children are taught in English from the outset. She has a dozen very keen and happy students, able to look after themselves while the adults were talking for long periods. When they decided to sing some nursery rhymes to pass the time it was, as usual, sung in multi-part harmony with clear, pure voices, and they did so for half an hour without a pause. We walked to Kokoda Hospital and met a couple of Rosie's students who were now experienced nursing sisters.

A visit to Kovelov village wasn't quite as uplifting. It's a rather run-down place at the northern end of the Kokoda Trail. Unfortunately it's one of the few village experiences had by trekkers, whose only goal seems by that stage to be a seat on the first plane out of the valley and a five star shower in a Port Moresby hotel. Quite understandable after trekking nearly a hundred kilometres through

some of the wildest terrain imaginable, but it would be so much better in one of those creeks. Really. Outside the one tourist development in Kovelov is a sign "Eco-Tourism Resort". All around it are the shattered stumps of rainforest trees chopped down to make the huts. It's appalling, and the men and women travelling with us were visibly ashamed of it.

Leaving Kokoda wasn't easy for Rosie and me, not just because of the emotional ties that bound us, especially Rosemary, to our hosts, but because of the reason Airlines PNG and the other main carrier, Air Niugini, are not famous for reliability and efficiency: they are extremely unreliable and inefficient. We were booked on the weekly 12:00 flight to Port Moresby. Because of transport difficulties we needed to get the only available lift at 7 am, so were looking forward to spending the morning chatting with the fifty or so people who turned up to farewell us. Several charter flights came for trekkers on organised tours. Finally the noon flight arrived at 12:30 and - oops! - took off without us or any of the luggage carefully stacked beside the plane by the trekkers who departed in it. The fourth plane left at 2:20 pm, still without us: yet another charter. At 5 pm we called it a day, locked non-essential luggage in the airstrip hut and walked the 8 km back to the Beleni block to spend the night. On the way back the airline agent met us on the road and informed us our flight had been cancelled (a fact we'd already deduced), and to be there tomorrow for an 8 am replacement flight. Judith Beleni somehow had a big dinner ready for us before we could blink, then we headed to bed for an early night. It had been a long day in considerable heat with no food, no toilets, little shelter from the sun (think "pair of lobsters") and the only water several hundred metres away down the steep, muddy bank of a fast-flowing river.

Up before dawn, and starting out in the dark we walked back to the airstrip and were ready to go by 7 am. Again. Nothing happened. Again. Friends turned up to keep us company. Again. The agent had long radio conversations with planes that flew over, hoping to get some news. Any news. Eventually we were told the plane would be arriving at 10:30 am. It didn't. At 12:30 pm there was something of a surprise when it appeared without warning in "the gap" - the precipitous, narrow valley along which the Kokoda Trail runs - and landed. We charged to be first at the Twin Otter's doorway, ensured our bags went through the cargo hatch and quickly scrambled aboard. Within the hour we were in Port Moresby and navigating a taxi driver to Mike and Emma's place.

That night David and Samson returned for a long meeting about the homestay project. They were full of enthusiasm and ideas, and we added many more pages of notes to our already bulging To Do lists. The following morning was our last in PNG. We enjoyed a visit from Dulcie. She is another daughter of Mrs Kekedo (later to be honoured as Dame Mary Kekedo), one of Rosie's fellow teachers at Kokoda and a good friend. PNG may have its problems, but getting news around families isn't one of them. While at Mike's place Rosie had a phone call from the wilds of Ok Tedi, in the middle of the world's largest swamp in western Papua where Taimbari, yet another of her ex-students, was working at a large mine. That was a memorable surprise.

Mike took us to Bomana War Cemetery, the burial place of many nations' soldiers who died in WW2. It's immaculately kept and depressingly large, but it's an unexpectedly inspiring place nevertheless. My mother's brother Eric was lucky not to be there: he survived many close encounters while a commando WO1 during some of the heaviest fighting. My feelings of admiration for the men buried there, as well as those who lived, turned to real anger when I read the date of one soldier's death: 7 August 1945. It seemed so utterly unfair and pointless that he

should have died the day after Hiroshima was bombed. But then I thought, why single out just his death to get angry about?

Predictably, and probably inevitably, our flight to Brisbane left nearly an hour late. Such was our experience with Airlines PNG that we'd been amazed when the flight boarded exactly on time, and totally un-amazed as we sat there for fifty minutes while the ground crew tried to find the bags of someone who'd checked in but failed to board the flight. But it was a beautiful flight with good food and a fine view of the Great Barrier Reef's innumerable islands and reefs. I am always amazed that so many ships have threaded their way through that maze of lethal coral outcrops without hitting any. And in Brisbane all our bags were waiting for us.

Will we return? Maybe, says Rosie. Definitely, says Mark - after all, he has a doco and a movie to make. Probably, says Bruce. It seems silly after taking well over a thousand photos in a week, but there is so much more to see and record and capture, and so much more to do to help the schools, the homestay and other things. And although it can never be "home" for me in the way it is for Mark, I have now experienced the depth of humanity and caring offered by Kokoda's people. Just as it did for Rosie, that's become an inerascable part of me. When she first recounted some of her experiences to me in 1975 I sometimes thought she was getting a bit carried away, a bit heavy on the hyperbole at times. But now I understand. These people's influence can't be ignored because it's there, deep in you. It doesn't diminish. She was telling it exactly like it is. For that, Rosie, thank you so very much.

The Homestay project is well under way. Savaia village plans to build a new guest hut, obtain kitchen equipment and refine its toilet facilities. John Beleni's people are about to demolish their big guest hut and replace it with an even larger one, along with driveways that won't get muddy and other renovations to make their already excellent settlement even more comfortable for visitors. Kokoda Village has similar plans. John's brother Alfred is chairman of the Kokoda Track Authority and has facilities in Port Moresby to take bookings, communicate with clients and organise air connections. At the Australian end we've set up a website (www.kokodahomestay.com) and are making arrangements with a local trekking company to include the homestay option in their offerings.

As well as the doco about the progress of the project, Mark is working on encouraging a school in Melbourne to support the village schools with financial and material aid. I've also reprinted a dozen copies of two books in Biage (the local language) for Savaia school. No doubt more will follow but, because of the tiny print run and expensive postage, at \$18 a book it's not cheap to do this.

If you're interested in looking at some photos of the people and places mentioned above, visit www.pubdata.com.au/kokoda/.

Bruce

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