

TRIP NOTES

PAPUA NEW GUINEA TRIP SEPT 2002

Please note that trip notes are exactly what the name suggests. They are not polished literal works. If you want to know something specific about the area visited, feel free to e-mail me.

Port Morseby, Madang, Lihir Island, Hansa Bay, Rabaul

Our PNG trip went well. I've been there before, but I think this trip was much more interesting. I seemed to see far more this time around. We were in-country for 26 days in total. As you know we mainly visited PNG for diving. We did 34 dives in the Madang, Hansa Bay and Rabaul areas.

Papua New Guinea – General Information and Experiences

Overall PNG was an interesting place to visit. Some areas were dangerous to white folks such as Port Morseby and these areas are best left alone. The PNG nationals are for the most part friendly and inquisitive. They live a very simple subsistence life style which revolves around the village structure. Bureaucracy and corruption amongst the Government agencies is obvious everywhere. Aid money gets filtered away from projects into people's back pockets continually. The roads are very poor with pot holes everywhere. The vehicles are either wrecks that barely drive or brand new state of the art four wheel drives – usually driven by Government officials!

The average PNG national thinks along the line of three things: Cash crop (to get instant cash for the village and himself); Compensation (how can he/she can gain instant cash out of the expatriates) and protein (protein being the requirement for fresh meat as most of their staple diet is carbohydrates and fruit).

I came across one problem when diving a ship wreck just off shore. The PNG nationals whose land the ship was on wanted the dive operator to give them a few dollars for allowing us to dive the wreck (compensation). The operator told them to shove off and as a result they through stones at us which were very well aimed!! There was also a lot of threats about slitting throats and raping wives and so forth. This lead to increased security at the hotel for a few days. The obvious solution was to pay them a few dollars, but the expatriates are very greedy and do not want to pay anything they do not have to. Unfortunately this leads to the PNG national population not really getting along with expatriates. Tourists are fine most of the time. But, sometimes the line between the tourist and the expatriate is rather thin. At these times tourists can and do get themselves into trouble.

Madang, Rabaul and many other areas in PNG have many small offshore islands that are mostly uninhabited. Jungle reaches the shore and coral growth begins at the low

tide mark. The coral is stunning in the shallows and snorkelling is very enjoyable as the water temperature is 30 degrees Celsius.

Madang

In Madang I spent a short time walking in the jungle with a PNG national guide. The jungle is amazing! Large rainforest trees are draped with vines possessing large bright red flowers. A tree hummed as I walked past. On further examination I discovered a native wasp nest which harboured hundreds of one inch black and yellow wasps! Large 7 inch millipedes were common as were a myriad of colourful butterfly species. One butterfly was the size of a dinner plate!

We carried water in a water bottle, but our guide when thirsty cut a leaf with his bush knife and manipulated the leaf to form a vessel suitable to scoop water from a hole. At one stage we passed along a ridge which had several trenches still visible. This must have been the front line at some stage of the war. A little further on and several machine gun tripods were discovered. American or Japanese? It was hard to tell. Several streams had to be bypassed but as the jungle is so thick the only way to negotiate the foliage it is to follow the river and streams. These are the PNG highways. Along one stream a large chunk of rusty metal was found. The thread at the end indicated that this was once a 500 pound bomb. We then learnt that the area had been carpet bombed in 1994 by USAAF bombers.

The roads are in poor condition and Madang is known as either flying fox city after the several hundred flying foxes that roost in the area, or pot hole city after the numerous large holes in the pavement.

Which was the better area – Madang or Rabaul? It really depends upon your interests as both regions are distinctly different and have disparate cultures. I found the Rabaul PNG nationals a little more friendly than those in Madang and I also found the geology and World War Two history in the Rabaul area fascinating.

Rabaul (a very brief history)

Rabaul is located on the Gazelle peninsula of East New Britain and was one of the first areas of PNG to have permanent contact with Europeans with the passing of William Dampier in 1700. In the 1870's traders were attracted to the area in search of pearls, pearl-shell, tortoise-shell, rare woods and copra – not too mention rare minerals and the beche-de-mer which was eagerly sought for markets in China. In 1874 the German trading company Godeffroy and Sons established a permanent trading post in the Duke of York Islands (near Rabaul) and established another post with a permanent wharf and buildings near present-day Rabaul.

In the early 1800's the Germans had firmly established themselves in the region to the concern of the Queensland Government (Australia) which was the nearest country. The Chief magistrate of Thursday Island in Queensland decided to travel to Port Moresby and declare the archipelago known as New Guinea as a sovereign of

the Crown, however, the British Commonwealth appeared to show little interest. The Germans did show considerable interest and immediately dispatched two warships to Rabaul and raised the German flag officially on the 3rd November 1884. In the following year New Guinea was annexed and divided into three regions owned and administrated by the Dutch, German and British Governments.

The first German capital was established at Finschhafen by the German New Guinea Kompagnie, which was the first private trading company in New Guinea. The company was responsible for administrating the territory in addition to operating as a privately run, profit making company. In 1898 the company surrendered its assets and control to the Imperial German Government and in 1910 the capital was moved to Rabaul; the town flourished.

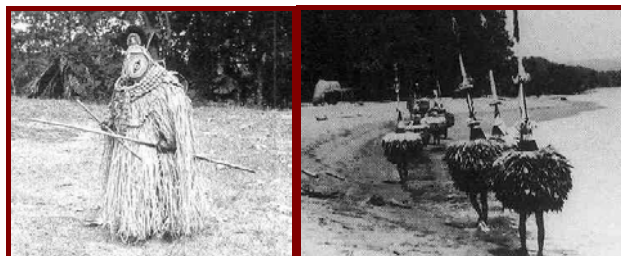
Rabaul quickly became known as the jewel of the Pacific with its picturesque harbour, majestic volcanoes, tree lined boulevards, and stately tropical style houses and bungalows.

In 11 September 1914 soon after the outbreak of World War One, Britain requested that Australia occupy German New Guinea to prevent its use to re-supply German submarine and surface raiders. Australia complied and Australia landed on the Gazelle Peninsula to secure the wireless station at Bitabaka. It was here that the first Australian servicemen were killed in the First World War (before Gallipoli).

The Germans surrendered the territory and the region was administered by the Australian Government. On May 9th 1921, Australia was granted a mandate to administer what was German New Guinea on behalf of the League of Nations; Rabaul remained the capital and Port Moresby remained a separate administrative headquarters for Papua.

Indigenous Peoples (PNG Nationals)

The Gazelle Peninsula is home to several indigenous populations; the Taulil, Baining, Sulka and Butam tribes. The Tolai are not the original inhabitants of the region and migrated from New Ireland several centuries earlier, but outnumber the original inhabitants.



Above: *Duk Duk* – supernatural powers and belong to the world of sorcerers.

Before the arrival of the Europeans in the late 1880s there was frequent fighting between Tolai clans, and captured enemy were killed and eaten! Early Tolai society had no chiefs, but men who were successful warriors or were rich became the big men of the clan. A big man could own his own mask in the powerful male secrete society of the *Duk Duk*. And he would acquire supernatural powers by joining the society of the sorcerers. Many followers would come for his protection and he was allowed several wives. Today, the Tolai are predominately Christians of mixed denomination (United, Adventist, Methodist and Catholic).

A unique feature of Tolai society which is still used today is shell money called *tambu*.

Today the Tolai are a very friendly, outgoing and helpful people and are frequently thought to be more superior to other tribes within New Guinea. This is most likely because they have been in contact with Europeans and Asians for a longer period of time than other tribes. Certainly, they are very adapt at doing business white man style!

The Molkolkol

Everyone wants to think that there is a tribe somewhere that has not seen white man!

If there is a place anywhere in the world that this can occur, then it is New Guinea. The island is very rugged and the terrain inhospitable and exceptionally difficult to traverse. Precipitous jungle clad mountains with deep impenetrable ravines bisect the country. Tribes that live in one valley do not know of the existence of another tribe in the valley beyond.

The Molkolkol is a very small tribe which prior to and during the war years raided coastal settlements with great ferocity. The Tolai, German and Australian administration feared the Molkolkoli, as did the Japanese administration (1942-1945). The Molkolkol were a band of fierce marauding natives that undertook fast hit and run raids – Very few of the attackers had ever been seen and war-time patrols failed to secure the area from their attacks. An Australian patrol once had a contact with a group of Molkolkol and both parties quickly went their separate ways; such was the legendary terror perceived from this small tribe.

After the second World War post war patrols failed to find any sign of the Molkolkol who were estimated to have a population of around 50 people. It is thought they were probably part of the Bainings tribes. Finally in 1951, an Australian patrol managed to find two round houses constructed by the Molkolkol and make contact with the small tribe. Although regularly on the move, the Molkolkol kept houses and gardens that they would periodically visit. Today they are peaceful tribe with a rich culture that is fiercely protected.

World War Two Relics (Madang, Hansa Bay and Rabaul)

I was a little shocked at the state of the WW2 relics. I spent considerable time in the 1980's looking about (once again mainly diving) in the Solomon Islands. The preservation of the plane wrecks, ship wrecks and other junk on the land was quite good. You could still hunt about and find an old American helmet, a pineapple grenade and similar such items in pretty fair condition. The relics I saw in the bush in PNG last month were mostly just bits of rusty metal bearing some similarity to what they originally were used for. Helmets were bits of tin with holes in them. I guess time is marching on and I suspect that in another 20 years or so there will be little left of the smaller relics. The tropical conditions with constant rain certainly do not enhance the preservation of metallic objects!

Despite this, there are still many items that are in reasonable, if not excellent shape. The aircraft are especially noteworthy. During the war the Japanese used a heavy metal primer which has protected much of the aluminium frame from erosion. Unfortunately the Americans failed to use the same primer; Japanese planes are in better condition than their US counterparts.

We dived three aircraft worth mentioning: A Japanese biplane US code named "Pete". This plane was in excellent condition at 30 m depth in Simpson Harbour, Rabaul. Everything was as is, including cabin machine guns, sliding canopies and all gauges. The wires between the two wings was even still there. Apparently it was sunk at its mooring by an Australian aerial attack.

Another aircraft we dived on at Rabaul was a Japanese Naval zero which was in 32 m of water. The aircraft is almost in new condition (as wrecks go) and sits upright on the sand. The only item missing is the canopy which the pilot ditched before landing. You can take your tank and fins off and sit in the seat! Great fun. Once again everything is there. Apparently a diver about 10 years ago found a pistol under the seat (not there now). The plane was ditched just offshore after being shot up by allied planes. Locals said that the pilot crashed, swam ashore and rejoined his unit!

The final aircraft we dived is located at Madang and had a more sombre story. It was a USAAF B-25 which was shot up by Japanese anti aircraft batteries after a strafing run over Madang. The port engine was shot off and the pilot made a forced landing near Wongat Island (a beautiful sandy Island with jungle on it – I saw the most lovely butterflies here). He made a perfect, left rudder flap down landing, however one of the crew was KIA on ditching. The remainder of the crew swam to the nearby island and were captured by the Japanese. The pilot (A captain) was sent to Japan for questioning and imprisonment and the crew were immediately beheaded on the above mentioned white sandy beach!

The plane is in very good condition and is as is. The .50 cal's are there with ammo still in the hoppers ready for firing. The fuselage is slowly becoming full of silt and only three quarters of the plane is visible above the sand. The flight controls still move!! The twin tail looks superb! A great dive with some interesting history.

Interestingly, I was speaking with two guys in Rabaul who commented that they had just discovered a US dauntless dive bomber (US Navy). The plane still had the tail gunner strapped into his rear seat. Apparently what happened was that the pilot ditched into the sea and the rear fuselage snapped in half with the tail section bending over the front section, trapping the gunner in his seat. The pilot swam free but the gunner drowned. They had just come back from diving the plane and reported that the bones were in place with the aviators accouchements about the body. These discoveries are not uncommon. In 1998 an Australia beaufighter was discovered with flight crew. A USAAF B-25 was discovered with crew remains in a bay at Rabaul in 2001.

To find these wrecks on the land is very difficult. The jungle is very thick and almost impenetrable in places. The topography in PNG is very mountainous and there is no infrastructure such as extensive road systems or rail systems. This in conjunction with the climate ensures that many of the wrecks above land erode relatively quickly. However, wrecks underwater (especially aircraft as they are constructed of aluminium which does not corrode at the same rate as steel) are another matter. Many of the undiscovered wrecks are deep – some in excess of 70 meters. I saw a side-scan radar image of an area of coast 30 km long. The side-scan read out recorded 135 plus images on the sand. These images were planes or parts of planes.

We also dived quite a few ship wrecks – all Japanese! The wrecks were interesting, although those located in Simpson Harbour at Rabaul are becoming silted up and are quickly deteriorating - especially since the 1994 volcanic eruption event. Several aircraft wrecks are still in excellent condition and have not suffered deterioration due to aluminium construction.

One excellent wreck at Rabaul was Georges Wreck. This wreck lies off the coast perpendicular to the shore; the bow is in 10 meters of the water and the stern is in 70 meters of water. Visibility is excellent and the wreck is fairly intact. The ship was assigned to the Imperial Japanese Navy as a mine layer and was bombed by US aircraft. The captain of the ship ran it ashore, however, the ship sunk shortly afterwards at a precarious angle (about 50 degrees).

The wrecks at Hansa Bay, north of Madang are in much better condition than those covered by volcanic ash in Rabaul, although several show signs of massive internal explosions when they were sunk during the war. The wrecks are relatively clear of silt due to prevailing currents. We saw fire trucks on one wreck as well as gas masks, ammunition shells, fuses and sandals (no bones!!) The marine life on one wreck called the Sushie Maru is amazing – so prolific and species rich.

On the shore there are leftovers of the war in all sorts of places. Marsden matting is a favourite building material in the local villages. A Japanese tankette sits beside the highway in Rabaul. In Hansa Bay are the remains of a Japanese Betty bomber – still in an overgrown revetment by the WW2 strip!

Underground Tunnels and Anti-Aircraft Guns in Rabaul

In Rabaul there are hundreds of miles of underground tunnels. Some still require exploration. The tunnels we explored were very hot and stuffy and had resident black spiders and the odd snake or two! The spiders were large (hand size) and looked very fierce! (which probably means they are harmless).

We visited a few of the larger tunnel systems and found them very interesting. One was a hospital tunnel which was very extensive. You could see where they had wooden structures constructed for beds and so forth. The tunnels are constructed in volcanic ash, therefore, there are many indents in the wall to house lamps, etc. Jolanda found some war junk in one tunnel, but you could not really make out what it was.

One tunnel had 5 Japanese barges still in it. The barges were in OK condition. The barges were used to ferry supplies to Japanese troops on outlying islands during the hours of darkness, and during the day the tunnel provided protection from allied aerial attack. POW troops were used to haul the barges 1 km to the shore and back again. Then the POW's lifted and hid the railway tracks that allowed the barges to be moved. POW's also grew bamboo above the tunnel entrance to hide the entrance from prying allied aviator's eyes! (the bamboo is still there, but the rails are long gone – I saw some holding up a fence near by!).

Another area we visited had a lookout tower, several underground bunkers and some anti aircraft guns. The guns were in very good condition. I was told the area is literally riddled with tunnels and unexploded ordinance. I was shown one tunnel which had caved in many years ago. I was told it was for ammunition supplies and that the tunnel had collapsed during an air raid along with 200 allied POW workers! Apparently it is too dangerous to dig out and remove the remains.

Bitabaka War Cemetery

Bitabaka War Cemetery is a very peaceful and relaxing area with large rainforest trees and neatly cut grass. The cemetery is maintained by the Australian War Graves Commission. I searched the brass plates and noted the many names that were listed as MIA / KIA. There were thousands of names of missing airforce and army personnel.

Originally this area was used by the Germans prior to the First World War as a wireless station. The first Australian casualties of the war occurred here when Australia was requested by the British Commonwealth to annex German New Guinea. Australian troops landed at Rabaul and after a short skirmish with German soldiers seized the wireless station.

On my visit to the cemetery I also had with me a young Japanese man aged 24 (he was a diver staying at the same hotel). He looked about, took a few pictures, then became bored. I explained what he was looking at and he said he knew very little

about the time period. He then said: “ not very good, sorry, sorry” and wandered off to wait by our rental car. I would have liked to dwell longer, but time was short.

Volcanic Eruption at Rabaul

Unfortunately, the trip was cut a few days short due to natural events occurring at Rabaul. Tuvurvur (caldera volcano incorporating several cones) last erupted in 1994. This eruption event devastated Rabaul and much of the surrounding region.

Jolanda and I were standing at the end of the airstrip (old WW2 strip used by the Japanese, then the commercial airport which was closed due to the 1994 eruption because of ash and lava flows) when the volcano decided to advertise its presence again.

One minute there was a steam and what appeared to be smoke emanating from the crater, the next instant there was a huge explosion (which hurt our ears) followed by ash and rubble being ejected into the atmosphere. At one stage we saw rocks the size of cars being ejected from the cone! The water around us began to boil with shrapnel as small rocks fell to the ground and hissed as they cooled and out-gassed. Just before the eruption the thermal springs (beside me) started to bubble furiously releasing sulphur dioxide gas! A great experience which will never be forgotten.

If you want to read more about the eruption and learn the geology, navigate to the image gallery section.