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Feature



The Kokoda Track runs roughly halfway across Papua New Guinea in a straight, single-file line through the Owen Stanley Range, from Owen's Corner on the outskirts of the country's capital, Port Moresby, to the small village of Kokoda in Oro Province. Over the course of 96km, there are 20 muddy peaks concertinaed together, so despite the relatively short distance and low altitude, the total ascent is equivalent to climbing from the village of Tengboche in the Khumbu to the summit of Everest.

Though established as a postal route by the British, the trail is famous as the site of one of the bloodiest conflicts in the Pacific War. 2017 marked the 75th anniversary of the gruelling campaign that saw a poorly prepared and ill-equipped Allied forces – mostly Australian – defending against the invading Japanese.

The trail requires a license and a guide. Given the reputation of Papua New Guinea as a difficult place in which to travel (cannibals, Raskol gangs, volcanoes etc), these tours are usually arranged from abroad, and come with a heavy pricetag that I simply could not afford. I also wanted to carry my own food and equipment, so I took a punt, and when I arrived in Port Moresby, headed straight to the Kokoda Track Authority office to see if there was another way.

PERMITS AND GUIDES

On the third floor of a department store at the end of a long and intimidatingly over-lit corridor, was the office where permits are issued. I was welcomed with large, slightly confused smiles as I explained who I was and what I wanted. They led me into their boardroom and told me to wait. Over a few hours, various people came and went, conversations were held that I didn't understand and then, eventually, three men – Allan, Noel and Bob – from the Association of Guides and Porters suddenly stopped their meeting to address me. A few minutes later an offer was on the table and I had myself a guide. No porters. No fuss. Just me and Allan.

We arranged to meet early to get a head start, but a problem with transport meant we didn't get going until late morning. Tired of waiting, we hailed a local cab. As we left the dusty, littered city behind us the countryside became progressively more dense, green and impressive. A series of sharp switchbacks took us higher. The driver dodged craters in the road, his head bobbing either side of fat cracks that dissected his windshield. Alien-like black boulders were scattered everywhere; like ➤



JUNGLE FEVER

Dan Shone describes his trek along the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea, scene of bloody WWII battles between the Allies and the Japanese...

WORDS & PICTURES: DAN SHONE





→ someone had opened a giant bag of charcoal at the top of the mountain and let the nuggets tumble down.

We arrived at the triple arch that marks the entrance to the Kokoda Track. The trail started downhill, a muddy ochre slide peppered with jaundice puddles. The going was quick, and although my pack felt on the heavy side (approximately 18kg), it didn't cause too much trouble. I was walking with my guide Allan and his young son Lalo who was learning the ropes. Lalo didn't like to talk. As I was carrying my own food and equipment, Lalo and Allan were each taking a full porter's food load to be delivered somewhere up the trail. Lalo was barefoot. Allan was in flip-flops.

We climbed down to Goldie River for a thigh-deep river crossing; I was already caked in thick, sticky mud. At the crossing, I was befriended by Terry, an enthusiastic ex-military Aussie guide, and his two travelling companions. Around us was a constant flutter of tropical butterflies, from small luminous butterflies no bigger than a penny, to graceful giants as large as your hand. All-in-all, it was a pretty nice way to start the trek.

The hills around us were domed and thick with vegetation, like rows of mossy molars with the occasional jagged bare snaggletoothed rock poking through. Our first day was cut short as there were four large groups up ahead and, with some groups seeming to have twice as many porters as hikers they had taken all the

“The concentration required to negotiate the steep downhill climbs was intense and mentally draining. Whether the footing was mud, nested roots or stone, it was treacherous and slippery.”

available camping spaces. The Aussies and I decided to stop a few hours short at Good Water rather than battle it out for sleeping places, and the place certainly lived up to its name. Boasting a pristine creek to bathe in, we rested in simple open-sided shelters, while overhead, swallows and bats took turns dive-bombing insects.

EARLY TO RISE

We were up the next day at 4.30am, in time to hear the chirp of frogs turn to birdsong and set off while the air was still chilly. We climbed what was known during the war as the Golden Staircase, a steep climb boxed in a wooden staircase to help transport troops and munitions to Imita Ridge. The stairs had long since rotted, and the footing was now a tangled nest of thick tree roots.

As we traversed narrow ridge lines with near vertical sides, Terry pointed out places

where skirmishes and battles were fought. Most of these battles saw the Japanese fighting their way uphill which, when you see the terrain, seems impossible. Unsurprisingly, they endured heavy casualties. In those close encounters, hand grenades were the most effective weapon for defence and the Australians would toss hundreds of them down onto their enemies.

The steep ups were punishing and the sharp downs were treacherous and unforgiving, and in the mid-afternoon a heavy storm drenched everything. As we climbed higher, the soil changed colour, so we walked through streams of fizzing orange pop that bubbled over our boots. My pack felt heavy, my feet were tired and I started to wonder if I'd taken on too much.

Around midday, Terry began to feel unwell. “I got something on my back,” he said, which was particularly worrying as Terry seemed like a man with the constitution of cured meat. We crossed the Maguli Range for three hours, starting with a very difficult steep ascent, followed by a short flat and then a steep downward climb into Nauro Village. After 13 hours of walking and having climbed three significant peaks in a day, we finally arrived at camp – tired, bruised from the inevitable falls, and very, very hungry.

Sweat, humid air and muddy puddle-ridden ground had all conspired against us. Head to toe, everything was soaked, so we sat by the fire and dried our boots. Unfortunately, this wasn't an option for the

WWII troops. Australian forces were issued equipment made for WWI, including leather-soled boots and only one pair of socks. Most of the soldiers dumped their socks and opted to keep their boots on at all times. Terry told us about a soldier who finally removed his boots after weeks in the field to find the flesh between his ankle bones and Achilles had rotted through, leaving only a gruesome hole.

We woke at 5am and start walking an hour later. The mood was sombre and business-like. From Nauro we headed downhill towards the marshes and an easy flat through the Brown River Swamp. Long slender logs laid end-to-end provided a tightrope for us to cross the boggy patches, but where the ground was dry we were able to walk in double-file, passing through a wide boulevard flanked with giant stooping trees heavily bearded with moss. We crossed the river and arrived at The Wall, an hour of hellishly steep, strength-sapping incline leading to the Menari Gap. Terry (who I came to learn is ex-SAS, anti-terrorism and sniper-trained) was still not well and was finding it tough, stuck at the back, mute and pushing through, at intervals lying prone by the side of the track with his eyes closed. It looked bad.

We stopped at the small village of Menari for lunch, where neat wooden stilt houses sat on perfectly dug-out and flattened patches of earth. A red, foot-flattened football pitch acted as a town square. At the edge of the village large communal gardens had been cleared, cultivated and fenced to prevent wild pigs eating the crops. In neat rows the village grew sweet potatoes, yams, corn, pineapples, papaya and bananas. Some 87% of Papua New Guinea's 8 million population live in remote rural areas, primarily in small subsistence-farmed villages dotted across the country's giant carpet of forests. Over 65% of Papua New Guinea is pristine forest and, after the Amazon and Congo, it's the third largest remaining rainforest block in the world.

Day four, a stone staircase led us down to Mission Ridge where, in a single 36-hour period, the Australians threw 1,200 grenades. You have to be pretty close to throw a hand grenade at someone, and the damage they must have inflicted is hard to imagine.

The concentration required to negotiate the steep downhill climbs was intense and mentally draining. Whether the footing was mud, nested roots or stone, it was treacherous and slippery. There were no safety holds and falling could see you tumbling to a bone-shattering conclusion. At the head of our line was Vincent, the burliest of our guides, whose job it was to set the pace. As he went, he cut steps into the hillside where the eroding water has slicked them down. In spite of this, we all took a tumble at some point, even





Vincent.

We passed down narrow stone pathways, through a creek and down a waterfall, past shimmering red leafy bushes and under a ceiling of white trumpeted flowers. Another stiff climb took us into Naduri where we bought bright fruit and giant avocados. Most of the walking was through the shade of the jungle, but occasionally we passed through open faces where the expansive valleys and lush hills unfolded in front of us – dense green prickled with delicate dabs of colour from the endless variety of trees, and the mountain-tops always crowned with mist.

After one last climb for the day, we walked down through tall trees to the crash site of a Japanese WWII Bomber. Parts of the fuselage, landing gear and machinery lied twisted in piles. Live .50 calibre machine gun bullets were scattered on the ground. We set down for the night at Campsite 1900 in the Myola range. To beat the cold I slept fully clothed.

COOL RUNNINGS

The cool carried through to the morning and made for an enjoyable start; the air tasted fresh and crisp and we walked an hour before breaking sweat. Even the ground had firmed up and it was nice not to have to think about making adjustments each time your foot met the floor.

We climbed a spur steadily for an hour-and-a-half, finally reaching the ridge and cresting Mount Bellamy, the highest summit, at 2,190m. The summit itself was unremarkable, so we took the necessary photo and moved on quickly, down the steep path into Eora Creek and over a vine-bound wooden bridge at Templeton's Crossing. This is where the Japanese finally abandoned the trail and retreated to Buna on the north coast. Their relentless attitude (notoriously having no word for 'surrender' in Japanese) led to intense suffering. By the time they were in view of Port Moresby, the Japanese soldiers were so starved and ridden with dysentery that some began cannibalising their own porters.

After lunch Allan, Lalo and I waved goodbye to our Australian companions. We had a flight to catch and Allan had had word that they had decided to leave a day early, so we were playing catch up. We ploughed ahead, climbing without break and descending at skipping pace. We leapfrogged over and slid under fallen trees. Giant dense hardwoods too big to move, with notches cut in to allow you to get a hold. Some were so big that there were small wooden bridges to cross them.

After a short detour, we arrived at yet another stash of military artillery, including mounds of unexploded hand grenades, 3-inch mortars, and giant field shells that hold up to 5kg of plastic explosives. This

land was owned by Allan's family, all the way to Alola village, about a two-hour walk. Allan told me that as a child he and his friends would light a big fire, throw in a mortar and wait for the fireball. As you do.

In spite of our efforts, when we reached Alola it was just past 4pm, getting dark, and raining. To make the plane we would need to push on, but after a 10-hour day with only 30 minutes break, and with tough terrain still ahead, we decided to camp down. Allan and Lalo built a fire as I sat resting in the corner of a dark, smoky hut. Allan cooked deep green choko vine to eat. Everything smelled of smoke.

LALO TIME

Day six, and the final morning, I awoke to the gentle crackling of battered pancakes, a treat from Allan. We left the village, crossed a waterfall and, aptly for this walk, began a steep uphill. My cold legs protested at every step. We were now walking on Lalo time, which is to say that we were not dawdling. We did everything at pace, hopscotching around quagmires and springing to the firm spots where the roots were thickest. As we descended, the air became humid and the vegetation took on a wet sheen; bushes of chubby, striped leaves gleamed like sucked Humbugs.

We had almost arrived at the end of the range; the broad flat expanded beneath us. As we got lower, we were once again surrounded by butterflies – large lilywhite ones with yellow camomile-flower spots on their wings. At Hoi, the last village on the range, we took a final cool dip. Purple and blue dragonflies skittered across the bubbling water.

Out of the blue Allan, got word that the flight, which was due to leave at 11 that morning, hadn't actually arrived yet due to the poor weather, so we finished at a sprint. I can't tell you much about Kokoda because we flew past it in a blur. It looked nice enough – bigger than all the other villages, with stalls lining the road and people generally chatting and milling about. With time to spare, we got to the airfield, which consisted of a long grassy field and an open concrete shed. We and our bags were weighed. Our seats were secured.

The Kokoda Campaign finally ended on 22 January 1943 after six months of bloody and desperate fighting – 2,165 Australian troops killed, 671 US troops killed. Of the near 20,000 Japanese landed in Papua between 21 July 1942 and 22 January 1943, around 13,000 died there. And the Papuans, serving on both sides, lost approximately 1,350.

After a bumpy take-off, we sailed into the clouds and flew low through the mountains. The short flight gave us one last lingering look at the crumpled green carpet we had just crossed. 



THE KNOWLEDGE

KOKODA TRACK: What you need to know before you go



WHEN TO GO

April to October is the 'drier' season. Technically, you can walk it all year round, but in the wet season some of the rivers swell to be almost impassable (so you might have a long wait or two).

HOW TO GET THERE

Most people arrange their trek from abroad, but be warned that this can be very expensive. If you are willing to invest a little time

and take a risk, then head to Port Moresby and track down The Kokoda Track Authority office in Boroko. www.kokodatrackauthority.org

HOW HARD

Difficult. Most people take 7-10 days and walk with porters. The longer you take and the more help you have, the easier it will be.

WHERE TO STAY

Mapang Missionary Home in Boroko is reasonably priced (for Port Moresby), clean and very friendly. There's no alcohol allowed on-site so if you want a beer to celebrate you'll have to head into town. www.mapang.org

If you are looking to arrange a guide from abroad, I could not recommend Terry at Adventure Out highly enough. www.adventureout.com.au

