



## TRIP NOTES

### TUWALI, MILNE BAY, PAPUA NEW GUINEA TRIP - MARCH/APRIL 2007

The purpose of the trip was to join a film crew collecting stock footage. Part of the trip was to be based aboard the dive vessel *Sprit of Nuigini* (“Spirit”) with the remainder of the trip based at Tuwali Resort in Milne Bay. The trip ran from early March through to April 18.

Trip reports are by their nature not meant to be literary masterpieces, so please accept the odd spelling or grammar mistake.

### TRANSIT TO TUWALI

Alotau Airport (also known as Gurney Airport) is a typical regional airport constructed with Japanese and Australian aid money. The airport is constructed on the original World War Two airstrip used by the RAAF to fight the Japanese. Like most things in PNG, maintenance is not kept up and the tropical conditions take their toll on buildings and amenities. The public toilet looked quite good from the outside, however, after walking into the toilet, I quickly decided to wait until I found a suitable tree or bush. I don’t think the “facility” had been maintained or cleaned since it had been built.

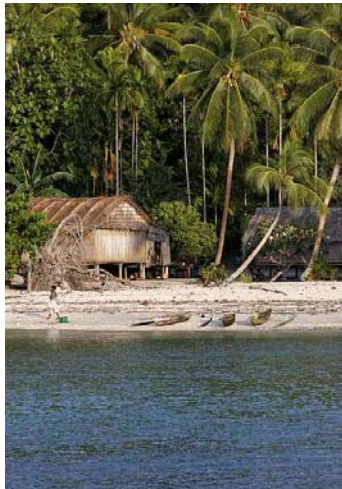


Alotau itself is nothing exciting. A town constructed by the water for its port facility in the shadow of the precipitous Owen Stanley Ranges. The usual buildings supporting local industry and services have sprung up along the foreshore. The port itself with the many boats of varying disorder is interesting as is the market along the shore. It rains heavily in Alotau during the wet season as clouds are uplifted over the ranges. The high rainfall in the area is blamed as the reason for the relatively high suicide rate amongst nationals in Milne Bay.

Tuwali staff pick you up from the airport and transfer you to Tuwali Resort. A four wheel drive mini bus is used as much of the road is not passable to normal traffic after rain. The travel time from the airport to Tuwali is around 2 1/2 hours. A highway initially leaves Alotau and traverses several metal pontoon bridges constructed by Australian engineers using Australian aid money. After a few kilometres the highway gives way to a narrow bitumen road, before changing to a dirt road and then a dirt track. Several streams require fording which can be problematic during rain events. Rain had recently fallen and our

driver stopped the bus behind an assortment of vehicles including utilities loaded to the hilt with locals. He then walked across the stream gauging the current before climbing back into the bus and crossing the stream.

The road/track is adjacent to the coast and several villages are passed between stretches of jungle and bush. Large trees grow beside the road and in some of the villages candle trees (because they look like candles) grow along with huge rain trees. Ferns, orchids and other tropical plants are quite common. Occasionally you maybe lucky to see a snake attempting to cross the road. Like most parts of PNG, if a snake is seen, it usually is killed by a local as they detest snakes.



### **VILLAGES, TRANSPORT & GARDENS**

The villages for the most part are very clean and the houses neat and tidy. House construction is relatively simple and local materials are used. Roofs are usually made from thatch or tin. Although most of the houses are typical PNG style, especially in the villages, there are homes that are more western in appearance.

Electricity for the most part is not available outside the main centres and lighting is by kerosene lamps and candles. Cooking is mostly “open fire” style, however, some villages do have portable gas stoves. Generators are available for power,

however, these are not common except in the more affluent villages. I noted in one village a TV set sitting on a long table surrounded by several logs and a few church-like seats. There was no roof and the theatre was open air. A small generator was humming in the background and several children were watching the latest in pirated DVDs.

Pigs are common and the driver is careful not to hit one with the vehicle! Our driver had killed a pig on a earlier trip and we were hailed to a stop by a few unhappy nationals. The decomposing remains of a dog were shown to the driver as evidence for his earlier crime



and compensation was demanded. No doubt the nationals were double dipping and had eaten the pig that had been struck by the bus, and were attempting to receive compensation in addition to eating well the night before! Pigs are usually worth a small fortune in PNG and I was told one pig is worth about 800 – 1500 kina.

Transport is via PMV (people moving vehicle) and costs a few kina each way. There is no timetable and if you want to catch a PMV you wait by the road and wave one down as it drives past. Most PMVs are utilities or small trucks. Most nationals do not own or drive motor vehicles, but use canoes or walk.

After one dive, I observed several canoes loaded to the gunnels

being paddled from one rocky point an another. The canoes were heavily laden with children, food, an assortment of cooking utensils (pots and pans), building materials and sleeping mats. I was told that it was a large family changing location.

Most of the villagers tend gardens of some sort; usually it is the females that do the work while the males rest in the shade plotting and scheming! The gardens are normally located along the flanks of steep hills above the village. An assortment of edible produce is grown including; yams, taro, fruit, bananas and pit-pit (local grass).



### **SUBSISTENCE LIFESTYLE & RELIGIOUS ZEAL**

Much of New Guinea's population live a subsistence lifestyle. This is especially evident the further you travel way from cities and towns. Much of the work is done via a barter system in which produce will be exchanged for other services (such as house or canoe building). But, this style of barter is changing as the younger generations receive formal education and secure jobs in town, only visiting the village on weekends. Much of the money earned is returned to the family and "wantoks"). The money is then used to purchase services otherwise bartered for in the past.

Earning "hard cash" may appear innocuous at first, however, it's very slowly eroding the strong culture base that identifies New Guinea nationals. Another silent killer of New Guinea culture is the presence and determination of various missionary organisations. Although missions do provide benefits (i.e. medical aid & health) to villages distant from the main centres, their main task is to convert their subjects from a former belief to a predominately "western" belief.



Without going into great detail, New Guinea culture is based strongly on pagan beliefs, rituals and ceremonies in which stories and customs were passed from one generation to the next.. The missionaries have destroyed much of this structure (especially in coastal and accessible regions). As age-old customs have been replaced with the beliefs of western religion, and education has become entrenched into village life, the elders of the village have stopped passing along the stories. Many of the young now are not particularly interested in the past, but look to a future of consumerism, paper money and supposed wealth.

Papua New Guinea is a very inhospitable country, covered in thick, often impenetrable jungle, with villages separated by rivers or precipitous bluffs thousands of feet high. It's this jagged and wild environment that initially allowed the evolution of hundreds of different tribal clans, each living within its own small area and supporting its own beliefs, unique culture and language. New Guinea has over 800 languages which accounts for more than a third of Asia.



It's the country's physical geography, internal isolation, and strong tribal customs that is minimising the effects of westernisation. However, as missionaries destroy the social structure and strive to convert, they sow the seed for westernisation, consumerism and the ill effects caused by our supposed modern society.



## LOCALS

I was surprised that there were not as many people walking the roads as in Rabaul (East New Britain). People were really only obvious at or near villages. It is customary for nationals to always carry a very large and sharp bush knife (machete), however, it was Sunday and the locals do not carry machetes on Sunday as it's the day of worship. Bush knives are used for many things – and are as common as cell phones in the west!

Being Sunday, many of the locals were dressed for church in black trousers, white shirts and black ties. The children were also well dressed. This is contrary to their normal dress which is dirty shorts and T-shirts. If the conditions are sunny, many of the females carry large colourful umbrellas to protect them from the harsh sun. Often the road is a swarm of colour from various umbrellas. The less affluent, cut banana leaves from the jungle and use the leaf for protection from the elements. Many of the woman folk carry their possessions on their heads similar to the way they do in Africa.

I found the people from Milne Bay not to be as friendly and outgoing as those I have met in other regions of PNG (namely the Toli people of East New Britain), although the children (as everywhere) are very friendly and curious. The bus transporting divers to and fro from Tuwali is one of their main form of entertainment. And children will wave and yell frantically as you pass by in the bus.



Entertainment is sparse and definitely not western style entertainment. Most villages have no western entertainment appliances outside perhaps a small radio or cassette player. The local village church may own a TV and video/DVD which is used now and again to show movies. Sing sings are a common form of village entertainment. Children play with toys crafted from local products such as coconuts and banana leaves.

One young fellow dragged a split coconut with a piece of line, while another young lad had a piece of line tied to an plastic electrical drum and rolled it along behind him. A more imaginative use of an old tyre was to roll it in front of you and use two sticks to control the direction of the tyre (difficult to explain). It's pleasing to see that children everywhere do not require the latest plastic gadget available from Wal Mart!

The final 30 minutes to Tuwali is rough and bumpy as the bus slides its way through thick mud before reaching a clearing on the ridge devoid of jungle but covered in flowered kunai grass. The driver changes the frequency of his VHF radio and calls ahead giving his location. This is standard practice, as “rascals” can be everywhere in PNG. Hold ups, although uncommon, are on the increase in Milne Bay and safety is always paramount. At the end of the track, a fast boat meets you for the final 20 minute run to Tuwali (which has no vehicular access).

I arrived a week earlier than Jolanda and went direct to the Spirit of Nuigini (rather than to Tuwali) and had a 3 hour bus trip to a village at the end of a peninsula. By the time I had reached the village it was dark. I was met here by two crew from the “Spirit” in a zodiac. After loading my equipment aboard the zodiac, we sped off into the darkness to rendezvous with the mother ship – we called the night transit “stealth mode”. If you were in any other country you may believe you were being abducted!



### THE DIVING

We spent part of our time aboard the Spirit of Nuigini and remainder of our time diving from Tuwali. We saw lots of things and did about 80 dives. Most dives depending upon the depth were between an hour to two hours duration. The longest run time for a day was 6:20 which is long time to be underwater.

Best dives were when I came across a school of 17 mobula devil rays - they hung around me for 12 minutes looping and playing in the current. On another dive, I was taking a photo of a candy-cane goby (1 inch long) when the background moved! I looked up as a 45 foot whale shark swam past me. It then turned around and swam past again - a fantastic experience! Whale sharks are harmless plankton eaters that can reach 60 feet in length. Although not exactly rare, its odd to come across a whale shark the way I did (22 meters depth on a wall)! I had seen another whale shark earlier in the week, but no that close! This one was 10 feet from me! For a similar experience - stand at the bus mall and watch a bus cruise past slowly a 3 mph, 10 feet from where you are standing - that was the size!

Apparently I had a 14 foot great hammerhead swim around and above me - but I didn't see it as I was looking at some small critter on a wall dive!

Most dives produced interesting animals, and although the large creatures are the most obvious, many smaller animals proved to be the most interesting. Snake eels, gobies, blennies, nudibranchs, flatworms, anemone crabs to mention but a very few. Because we were diving certain sites regularly we also witnessed some amazing animal behaviour not normally observed by divers. Cuttlefish laying eggs in stinging coral, nudibrachs and octopus copulating, snake eels feeding, moray eels hunting cooperatively with trevally and coral cod and trout hunting, feeding and protecting their territories.



## TSUNAMI

Oh we also had a tsunami! Nothing too bad at our location - just a moderate tidal surge. All the same to be on the safe side, the captain took the "Spirit" to sea until the wave event passed. This was the same tsunami that inundated much of the western Solomon Islands and destroyed several villages and towns in the Weston province. The

tsunami was caused by a major earthquake which resulted from movement along a undersea fault line. The earthquake's epicentre was in the Solomon Islands chain.

## DIVER DIES

We also had a death on-board. We were diving when an emergency call came from another boat about a diver getting bent (a local diver). We weighed anchor (is that the right term) and powered to assist (a 120 foot boat running at 18+ knots!), We had divers in the water, but left a zodiac with them. The small boat with the bent diver and our boat were going to meet half way. We assisted as we were the only boat nearby that carried emergency equipment (oxygen and other life support equipment). We reached the small tender in about 20 minutes and were faced with a guy lying prone in the small boat with four nationals looking at him!



I was the most trained (I was a paramedic with the ambulance service in a precious life) so I instructed the casualty to be transferred to the larger vessel. CPR was commenced with 100% Oxygen, and appropriate drugs administered to try and get the guys heart going again - but no luck! This guy was dead as a plank!

Later investigation discovered he was indeed bent - and massively so! He had done a dive the day before to 160 feet, then on the morning of the accident another dive to 160 feet followed by a 24 minute surface interval and a dive to 304 feet!

From what I was told, the diver had surfaced early as he had run out of air (when I checked his tank it was completely empty). He had yelled to the boat boy to get him a tank of oxygen,, which was unavailable. He then requested a second SCUBA tank of air, however, this also was not available. He supposedly then said "Fuck, I'm bent, I can't move my legs and I'm paralysed, get me on the boat". After being dragged into the boat, he lay on the deck and said "Fuck, I'm dying" - then died! I learned later that the bent diver had said he didn't need additional air tanks or oxygen. As such, no spare tanks were loaded onto the boat.

The autopsy showed massive damage to all the vessels caused by explosive decompression of nitrogen gas. When conducting my initial examination, and during CPR, I could feel the air (nitrogen) crackling like rice crisps beneath the skin (subcutaneous emphysema). The casualties face was almost black in colour from internal vessel rupture, and his eyes were bulging like a voodoo doctor! This guy did not have a chance - period! Oh well, that stuffed up 2 days thereabouts as we had to wait for the police, coroner, etc!

This guy made some fatally disastrous mistakes (no oxygen for decompression, no spare air, small dive tank, no decent/ascent line. no stand by diver, and an outrageously dangerous dive plan - to mention but a few things). Interestingly he was -army/police and was an experienced technical diver instructor (American national). Just shows that complacency can and does KILL! It was unfortunate that the guys wife was present during the whole ordeal. She was rather distraught (obviously). It just goes to show that when you visit these places you are on your own - F-up major and there is a high probability that you will die - as no one else is there to help!



### CAUGHT THE BUG & LOCAL HOSPITAL

Jolanda and I caught some kind of intestinal parasite towards the end of the trip - nasty but typical and to be expected in countries like PNG! Jolanda's condition was much more serious than mine, and at one stage we thought she may be suffering acute appendicitis (the parasite can mimic the signs and symptoms of appendicitis).

It was decided that Jola required more advanced medical treatment, and arrangements were made to transport her to the local hospital at Alotau.

The trip to Alotau by fast boat and bus was literally "hell" for Jolanda who was in severe pain. The trip was an early morning 0430 departure and the weather was rough making the boat trip very slow and wet. The bioluminescence was outstanding as the boat pushed through the waves. Shards of colour were visible in the engine's wake for several meters behind the boat. The shards reminded me of builder with a grinder!

After a rough ride in the bus we reached the regional hospital and were met by Dorothy (a friend of Rob Van der Loss). The hospital was a unique experience and is one I definitely do not recommend to any traveller. Outpatients was quite busy and we joined the line of locals.

There is a strict etiquette of how and where you should line up, and not being local we were quickly chastised by the head nurse for sitting in the incorrect row of seats. Directly in front of us were two rooms named cube 1 and cube 2. A curtain separated the outside world from the inside of the cube where someone was moaning in discomfort. Outside of the outpatients building, in the oppressive heat, several dozen locals hung about along with a



few mangy looking dogs! I noted a pretty local girl who was throwing up in a drain outside the hospital – probably malaria or pregnancy!

The doctor who saw Jolanda was a Chinese PNG national and was very thorough in his examination. During the examination I asked the nurse if I could visit the bathroom (toilet) and she flashed a worried look at me quickly explaining that the amenities were not to western standards and so on. There were two toilets; one for patients and one for staff. The staff toilet was not much better, but had at least been cleaned in the last year.

Jolanda required some drugs which had to be dispensed by the pharmacy outside outpatients. The sign read "Revenue office – pay here" – certainly no mixing of words here!

Heavy rain had begun to fall (the wet season had begun a week or so earlier) and it was soon obvious that the rivers would be too swollen to return to Tuwali straight away. Dorothy radioed Rob, who picked us up and took us to his house for a few hours. We then travelled to the airport to pick up some American tourists before making our way back to Tuwali. The fast boat ride was spectacular as the sea conditions had improved and the recent storm was still in the area. Lightening flashed illuminating our surroundings as we were treated to the light show caused by the bioluminescence as we sped along in the darkness to Tuwali.

Fortunately the additional drugs given to Jolanda eased her suffering and she was able to fly out on a commercial flight to return to Australia a few days later.

- 1 **Wantok** – Identity is still defined in terms of one's own kin, or wantoks, rather than by nationality, an introduced and unfamiliar notion. Wantok comes from Tok Pisin, "one talk", a person who speaks your language. It is no surprise that with over eight-hundred-and-thirty wantok identities it is difficult to find a true unity of all people in PNG.

This diversity is one reason why nationalism is largely a foreign concept in PNG.

- You may also be interested in reading previous trip reports and diving operator reports from PNG (see dive operator and trip reports at [www.anaspides.net](http://www.anaspides.net)).
- **Please also see Dive Operator Report for Tuwali at – [www.anaspides.net](http://www.anaspides.net)**

