Mount Wilhelm

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The rain finally started about noon, soon after I had reached the hut. Across the coire, through gathering cloud, the waterfall feeding Lake Aunde indicated the direction of tomorrow's route until it too was swallowed up by the mist, focusing our attention inside. Now little more than a shabby bothy, the wooden hut with its ubiquitous corrugated iron roof had once been a research station for the Australian National University. As welcome as any bothy in bad weather, the place was soon bustling with activity as the soaking stragglers arrived, claiming their bit of floor space before changing out of wet gear and organizing food and hot drinks for themselves and the Chimbu carriers. Activity gradually slowed down in the afternoon as the carriers headed back, leaving the rest of us to come to terms with the altitude of 3480 metres, having left our homes at sea level the previous morning. Although we were close to the equator, it was cold enough at this height to endure the smoky stove for the evening before retiring early in preparation for an alpine start, despite the rain which was still drumming on the roof.

When I first applied for a post in Papua New Guinea I had only the vaguest idea about this country, located just north of Australia. New Guinea, I soon discovered, is the world's second largest island, divided by a complex colonial history into two separate nations. Fascinating, but what of the climbing possibilities? The mountains which drew Heinrich Harrer and Peter Boardman lie in the western half, Irian Jaya, a troubled province of Indonesia, while independent PNG seems to have attracted more than its share of gold prospectors, missionaries, war heroes and anthropologists, judging from a browse through my local library. I learned more of interest from one of my earliest hillwalking companions who had forsaken the Munros to spend several years there, becoming President of Lae Explorers Club. This mainly expatriate group of outdoor enthusiasts have been active for many years organizing regular outings ranging from 'four-wheel drive picnics' and local bushwalks to longer trips in the Highlands. After a fascinating evening pouring over maps, slides and photo-albums, I accepted the post and was able to pack my rucksack in confident anticipation of some interesting trips ahead, particularly since I had been appointed to a post in Lae.

Engineers have yet to tackle the challenge of building a road across PNG, whose terrain is usually described in superlatives. Lae, the second city, lies on the north coast, accessible from the capital Port Moresby on the south coast only by air or sea. Long delays on the popular direct flight gave me an unexpected introduction to a fantastic kaleidoscope of cloud and rain forest

from the window of a cramped 'Twin Otter', skimming over sharp green ridges spilling silver ribbons of waterfalls into dark craggy gorges as we flew via Wau.

Two months later I had enjoyed a few short bush-walks in the rugged hills around Lae, seeing nothing more of the Highlands until Easter 1986 provided a rare four-day weekend and the opportunity to join a trip to climb Mount Wilhelm, at 4509m the highest peak in PNG. Covering about 100km^2, the Wilhelm massif is enormous but fortunately relatively easy of access. For many years the colonists of New Guinea had dismissed the rugged jungle-clad mountains rising up from the coast as an impenetrable and sparsely populated wilderness. As recently as the 1930s gold prospectors exploring the interior with the help of aeroplanes were astonished to discover a series of densely populated fertile valleys which were not really opened up until the 1950s. Now the paved Highlands Highway links the interior with Lae and the outside world, carrying down Highlanders looking for wider opportunities and the lucrative coffee beans which have transformed the Highland economy, growing so well in their temperate gardens. Back up flow the trappings of modern civilization which the versatile Highlanders have been quick to adopt. Sadly, this fascinating blend of ancient and modern is not without its problems. Hold-ups at shotgun point have become alarmingly common on the Highway, making travel after dark unwise. Explorers Club trips occasionally had to be cancelled at the last minute on the advice of the local *kiap* (government officer) when rascal gangs literally took to the hills in areas we planned to visit. The traditional custom of 'payback' still applies, giving an added incentive to careful driving, particularly through the many roadside villages where pigs are still a symbol of wealth and prestige, roaming unrestrained and apparently oblivious to traffic. Hitting a pig would require immediate compensation, while an accident involving a villager would have much more serious consequences.

We left Lae on a wet Good Friday morning, my first venture along the Highway beyond the trade store at 'Forty Mile', following the broad flat Markham valley for 130km until suddenly the road seemed to tire of avoiding the surrounding mountains, turning to drive straight at them, twisting and climbing over the Kassem pass into the more open rolling landscape of Eastern Highlands province. From the town of Goroka the Highway climbs again over the Daulo pass into rugged Chimbu province. The imported baseball cap, T-shirt and jeans have been universally adopted by the men of PNG, but while we waited for the rest of the party to rendezvous in Kundiawa town I noticed an old man in traditional 'arse grass'. This venerable stooping old bodach wore a cuscus fur hat, a moon-shaped mother-of-pearl amulet across his bare chest, a ragged sort of apron in front, backside covered by a withered bunch of tangket leaves, his only concession to the 20th century an incongrous threadbare jacket that had once been part of a blue lounge suit: a poignant reminder that the Stone Age is still living memory here.

The Chimbu people called it Enduwa Kambugu, but the surveyors of German New Guinea chose instead to name the highest point in the Bismarck Range after their Kaiser. The territory was under Australian administration when the first known summit climbers, patrol officer L G Vial and two

anonymous Papua New Guineans reached the top on 15 August 1938; their route is still the standard way.

We left the Highway at last for the final stage of our approach which required four-wheel drive, following a dusty rough road up the right branch of the Chimbu gorge. This is one of the most heavily populated areas of the whole country and a patchwork of vegetable gardens spreads up every hillside. By late afternoon we had reached our destination at Keglsugl (2510m) where we settled into 'Herman's Tourist Accommodation', a clean neat bunkhouse. Herman himself was a German who had spent 27 years in PNG and seemed happily settled with a Chimbu wife and half-a-dozen children.

To judge by the crowd milling around outside at dawn, Herman was not the only member of the local community hoping to benefit from Wilhelm climbers. Ignoring the disparaging comment in the guidebook that 'anyone who cannot lug his pack up the 1000 metres from Keglsugl to Pindaunde hut should not be doing the climb', we took the advice of seasoned veterans and employed carriers and a guide. Resting my rucksack beside the front gate while I took a few photos of the splendid clear morning and the colourful crowd, I turned round to see it heading up the road on eager unsolicited shoulders. We were actually able to motor a few kilometres more, past the new Provincial High School to the road-end where villagers were appointed to look after the vehicles and carriers selected. Our already large party of 16 adults and five youngsters swelled considerably, taking on a holiday carnival atmosphere as many of the hopeful carriers who failed to get a pack to carry came along anyway. We quickly spread out along the narrow trail, climbing steeply through thick rain-forest. It was pleasantly dry underfoot, and occasional breaks in the trees gave glimpses of the hills beyond: a very enjoyable start to our climb. After a couple of hours we broke out of the forest at about 3200m, turning into the lower reaches of the Pindaunde valley, dotted with tree ferns. Morainic debris on the hummocky valley floor is a reminder of the glacial ice which filled the valley 15,000 years ago, while above us the rocky outcrops of Mount Wilhelm began to dominate the surroundings through the cloud which had been building up all morning. A rocky step gave a final short steep climb leading at last to Lake Aunde and the hut.

It had been a rare pleasure the previous evening to feel cold enough to snuggle into a sleeping bag again. Now the novelty had worn off and the combination of altitude, smoke and 'night before' butterflies made sleep difficult. Success or otherwise depended on the weather, so it was a relief to wake at 1am to silence and be able to look blearily out into a dark but dry night. Our local guide had returned home the previous afternoon to attend a christening party, and true to his word was back in time for our 2am start. The line of torch-lights started stretching immediately, skirting the lake through some awkward bush before a short steep climb up another rocky step led to higher Lake Pinde. These nocturnal stumblings were planned to fit in with the notorious Wilhelm weather: a regular clear sky can be expected for a few hours around dawn, which occurs at about 6am throughout the year. As we climbed slowly west towards Wilhelm's southern Bogunolto ridge the rising moon soon made the torches unnecessary. By now the party had built up some rhythm, the

tail-end having turned back to join those satisfied with reaching the hut. We joined the ridge briefly at 4020m, glad of woolly hats, gloves and anoraks in a bitterly cold wind. Fortunately the route soon turned off to the sheltered E side, skirting below rocky buttresses. None the worse for having been up most of the night, our local guide proved worthwhile as the route was neither clearly marked nor easy to find. Another small party which had set out ahead of us wasted a lot of time and energy finding its way. Shortly before dawn we saw the tinkling lights of Madang town on the coast, 100 or so kilometres away to the north-east. The final climb to the rocky summit provided some entertaining scrambling over rough gabbro, and despite my headache I found I had enough pidgin to rephrase Patey's celebrated epigram:

> Mount Wilhelm, Mount Herbert, Sepik-Waghi divide
> Em i gudpela trainin long Cuillin bilong Skye.

We reached the summit at 7am, and already a little cloud was starting to build up in the valleys. Luckily the wind had dropped and we were able to sit and admire the magnificent panorama at our leisure before turning around to begin the long descent back to the coast and to work again on Tuesday morning.

FURTHER INFORMATION

New Guinea by Roy Mackay in the Time–Life Books *World's Wild Places* series gives a colourfully illustrated background to the scenery and wildlife, while Lonely Planet's *Papua New Guinea – a travel survival kit* by Mark Lightbody and Tony Wheeler and *Bushwalking in Papua New Guinea* by Riall Nolan are both packed with useful information.

There must surely be some interesting rock-climbing on the gabbro buttresses of Mount Wilhelm and its neighbours, and I would like to have returned with some climbing gear in the June–September period when the weather is supposed to be better. I heard rumours of activity by other parties, but never got round to searching out further information.

I do not know if I will ever return to Papua New Guinea, but my feelings are summed up in this quotation from *Among The Cannibals of New Guinea* by the Rev S McFarlane:

> When every mountain in the Alps has been scaled, and even the Himalayas made the scene of mountaineering triumphs . . . it comes with a sense of relief to visit a country really new . . .