

The Road to Hagen

Discover a world of bloodletting, cane swallowing, polygamy and skeleton spirit dancers in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

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Skeleton dancers from Mindima Village at the end of their performance.



Ansley winces in pain as a glass-tipped arrow is fired repeatedly into his tongue.

Our van comes to a screeching halt and, for the first time in about three hours, I unclench my jaw. It's been that way to save my teeth from rattling together. My lower back aches, my nostrils are full of dust and DEET, and my body is jittering with nerves as we leave our vehicle and push through a shroud of dry palms hanging over a makeshift entrance. A group of villagers is on the other side to greet us, their smiles wide and so full of crimson betel nut it's difficult to see where their gums start and stop. At least I can tell they're excited to see us. Secretly, after what I've already been told, I'm hoping the experience will be over quickly.

But before we even arrive at Safanaga Village, a remote and isolated settlement just outside Goroka in Papua New Guinea's Central Highlands, we've been told by folks from Papua New Guinea's Tourism Promotion Authority (PNGTPA) we're the first group of western journalists to travel this road between the two main highland cities of Goroka and Mount Hagen. While this is significant given it's considered one of the most treacherous stretches of highway on the planet, this fact almost instantly pales into insignificance. On the village's riverbank, I sit aghast as waves of human blood and bile disappear downstream.

The Keeya people of Safanaga Village are one of just a few clans in this region still practising a confronting bloodletting initiation ritual. It happens regularly, but the PNGTPA reps say fewer than 20 tourists a year witness the tradition that involves young men removing the dirty or impure blood – they allegedly inherit it from their mothers at birth – in order to aid their transformation into men. I watch in complete disbelief as three young brothers, Apune, Ansley and Yapo, use a range of makeshift bush apparatus to inflict unspeakable pain on themselves.

Yapo is the first to start the ritual. He rolls leaves into two tight wands, so they're of a similar length and appearance to a cigar. Once he's done, he repeatedly and violently pushes them up into his nostrils like two pistons firing rapidly in a car engine. Yapo, along with our group, is visibly distressed. Ansley then hands a tiny bow and arrow over to his little brother, sticks out his tongue as if it's a bullseye and, in rapid succession,

a glass-tipped arrow is fired into it. After about 20 times it's obvious the pain is almost unbearable.

"This [is] the most dangerous [part]," one of them says to our group in broken English, just as the remaining brother, Apune, begins to swallow a two-metre length of cane.

In a few seconds, something as thick as but less flexible than a skipping rope miraculously disappears down Apune's throat and into his body. He calmly gags before it emerges again. I have to look away. Needless to say the entire experience renders me speechless and emotionally broken. It's in this moment I realise that, despite being only 150 kilometres from mainland Australia, I'm in another world.

In reality, however, what we are watching is just a show. Sure, it's a complex celebration of tradition, history, storytelling and ritualistic coming of age, but today these types of experiences are a way for these tribes to keep centuries-old traditions alive as well as attract much-needed tourist dollars.

When you look at Papua New Guinea on a map it's hard to fully grasp the sheer remoteness in which villagers like the Safanaga live. Picture a tablecloth laid flat then pinch it in the middle and bring it to an elevation of 4,509 metres. That's the height of PNG's tallest peak, Mt Wilhelm in the Central Highlands. Their home, along with millions of others, is perched precariously in these fog-draped mountains.

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Yapo performs the Keeya tribe's traditional nostril-stabbing ritual.

And in a region with more than 800 different ethnic groups and tribes, despite the pressures of the western world being firmly wedged against it, the highlands still remain a buffet of sensory tribal traditions where visitors like us are welcomed with open arms.

We're visiting the region on the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of the famous Hagen Show, an annual sing-sing (the word means gathering) featuring the coming-together of dozens of tribal groups in the town's central stadium across a single weekend. It's an opportunity for tourists to witness a melting pot of cultures all in one place at the same time. A cultural tasting plate, if you will.

Yet a mere weekend of watching these traditions unfold behind a fence as just another white-faced spectator is far less enjoyable than taking the long road between Goroka and Mount Hagen and crafting a remote experience to visit hidden tribes and witness their traditions along the way. There's something much more raw and unscripted about seeing these take place in context, as if you're being invited to peer inside a cultural time capsule with the implicit permission of a village elder.

Like the famous Australian Leahy family, who led the first expeditions into the highlands during the 1930s in search of gold, each new day feels like another scene from the acclaimed documentary, *First Contact*.

THE ASARO MUDMEN

We start with the most popular tribal group in the region. They're so popular, in fact, I'm sitting in the exact same spot as actor Morgan Freeman, who was here a few weeks ago filming his latest Netflix series. Its notoriety in no way makes our personalised visit any less spine-tingling.

There's an eerie silence before a horn sounds in the distance. Smoke wafts over the village's dedicated performance ground and an Asaro Mudman scout, with a young boy in tow, leads out to "check for enemies". Within just a few seconds dozens of ghostly mudmen wielding clubs and bows break through the smoke in a frenzy, bombarding us from every angle.

Their performance is tantalising, their movements deliberately intimidating. With each drumbeat, I try harder to peer through the holes in their masks – some of them weigh up to 15 kilograms each – to catch a glimpse of their eyes just to make sure I'm still dealing with humans.



A Highlands family in Korul Village gathers around a pile of raw coffee beans.

GORUMEKA CLAN

"You can help expose my country, my village, my community to the rest of the world to help us keep our traditions," leader of the Gorumeka clan, Robert Gotokave, tells me as he cradles his machete. We're on an hour-long hike to the top of Mount Gorupuka.

Gorupuka was once a World War II staging post for Australian artillery and Gotokave's grandfather was a Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel who ran supplies up the mountain to fuel weary soldiers.

"I'm one of the sons of soldier men, too," he says with a smile, and for a moment we share a special bond as I tell him my grandfather was stationed not far from Port Moresby at the same time.

But the mountain is so much more to Gotokave than simply a relic of a long-ago war. It's a sacred place where his elders have held pre-battle sacrifices for generations. The summit is accessed only by a secret



An Asaro Mudman emerges from the jungle.

cave and I must leave the branch of a local fern at the 'door' before I'm allowed to enter or risk never being allowed to leave.

As Gotokave finally takes us back to his village, the other men are already dressed in their post-war celebration garb. Yet this dance, known as the mokomoko, is overtly sexual and phallic.

There's thrusting, grunting and suggestive woven devices worn around waists which are, we're told, designed to arouse the interest of any female onlookers.

THE SKELETON DANCERS

A few hours up the road in Mindima Village you hear the shrieking before anything else. While the sound is horrific enough, it's when you see the skeleton performers the real fear sets in.

Their faces are intricately decorated for our arrival and, in terrifying detail, they re-create the story of a monster who lives in the mountains above their village and who is famed for stealing and eating Mindima children.

KORUL VILLAGE

Before arriving in Mount Hagen you first pass through the breathtaking Chimbu province, which rises steeply out of the Asaro Valley.

In Korul Village I meet Batman, his name an

indicator of both his size and stature. He's huge, like most Highlanders I've met so far, and as he leads me over the crest of the hill where his village sits I understand why – you need to either grow wings or build muscle just to live here.

My journey through Korul is like visiting a modern history museum. Village life fans out in front of me and I look out across the valley. Batman says there's as many as 3,000 to 4,000 people living here, yet I remain focussed on just four people at the end of a small clearing.

I'm introduced to village chief Bomal and his three wives. He sits proudly on a log, munching on a piece of fruit and surrounded by his concubines. Polygamy is still widely practised in the highlands, as too are 'bride prices', with pigs used as the most common form of currency.

The chief shouts angrily for water and wife number two hastily scurries off to appease him. Once again, as I felt in Safanaga a few days earlier, I'm uncomfortable and can't help but look away.

In the space of just a few days I've witnessed bloodletting, phallic sex dances, polygamy and skeleton spirit rituals, but on the road to Mount Hagen in Papua New Guinea's highlands that excruciating feeling of unease at every corner is all just part of the experience.



A typical roadside stall in the Western Highlands, just outside Mount Hagen.

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Air Niugini flies direct to Port Moresby from both Sydney and Brisbane. There is no road access from Port Moresby to Goroka or Mount Hagen, but Air Niugini operates internal flights to both destinations.

airniugini.com.pg



TOUR THERE

For a truly individualised village experience, contact PNG Highland Adventures, which organises a number of overland adventures and can adjust itineraries depending on your interests.

If you're visiting specifically for the Hagen Show, Trans Niugini Tours is the largest operator in the country and can manage all accommodation, transfers and ticketing. pnghighlandsadventuretours.com pngtours.com



GET INFORMED

For more details about travelling to PNG's highlands go to the official visitor website.

papuanewguinea.travel



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HIGHLAND ADVENTURES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA



Australia's closest neighbour is also one of the most culturally diverse places on the planet.

It is a country loved so wholeheartedly by those who crave authenticity, playing home to 800+ different languages and the most unique tribes in the world. An opportunity to experience one of the traditional cultural festivals is something that should be on every culture-seekers' bucket list.

ENGA CULTURAL SHOW
August, Wabag

GOROKA SHOW
September, Goroka

HAGEN CULTURAL SHOW
August, Mount Hagen

KUTUBU KUNDU & DIGASO FESTIVAL
September, Lake Kutubu

TOP 3 HIGHLAND ADVENTURES



CLIMB ONE OF THE SEVEN SUMMITS

At 4,509m, Mount Wilhelm is not only the highest mountain in Papua New Guinea, but is also the highest point in all of Oceania. Despite its mammoth height, Mount Wilhelm is actually the country's most accessible mountain to climb.



TREK OCEANIA'S HIGHEST VOLCANO

Papua New Guinea's second highest mountain, Mount Giluwe (4,367m), is part of a huge volcanic massif. One of the world's Volcanic Seven Summits, the five-day trek to the peak passes through vast grassland and alpine landscapes.



AN AUSSIE RITE OF PASSAGE

Trekking world-famous Kokoda is not only a 96km physical endurance challenge, it is also a spiritual journey retracing the footsteps of the thousands of Aussie Diggers and Papua New Guineans who were killed or injured defending Australia.