

Wed Oct 15, Part 2

The plane took off from Karawari, back on the grass runway and up over the mountains again. While the first plane ride was over an hour, this one was only about 15 minutes. We watched from the plane and began seeing lakes and rivers – the Sepik, our destination.

We are in East Sepik (pronounced See-Pick) Province in the middle Sepik. The Sepik is 750 miles long and is full of sediment (as we could see in our showers). It is a fast flowing river that takes much of the sediment with it and pushes out into the ocean. For 50 km around the mouth of the river you can see the brown water. There are only 3 roads in the Sepik area so you really have to fly wherever you go. For example one road was not fixed for 5 years and was not usable. So there are essentially no roads, no shops and no phones in the Sepik area. The Sepik people live completely off the land, weaving baskets and nets for catching fish. Fish and the Sago Palm are the main foods here.

The Sepik region is populated primarily by the latmul people, who live in small, traditional villages along the banks of the river. The homes here were built of bamboo and were on stilts with ladders leaning against the entrance. Husbands and wives and their children all live together here. The women always sleep in the front so that if they have to get up during the night they won't step over the man as that would weaken him.

The children inherit their mother's clan and their father's tribe (there can be different clans within a tribe). It is a Patriarchal society with the father's first name becoming the child's second name. Men not allowed to have sex outside of marriage and once a child is born, don't have sex with their wife until the baby can talk; ie abstinence is encouraged.

Children are often adopted by family members if their parents can't afford to educate them. This can also happen between tribes. It is important to have sons as they inherit land and carry on the father's name. On the other hand, girls are important because the parents get paid a bride price when she gets married which helps pay back for the price the man paid for his wife (pay back system)

The latmul are a complex people who express their culture and beliefs through their art, carving incredible masks, drums, baskets and sculptures that integrate their daily life and their belief of objects possessing a spiritual essence. Tribal life centers around the Haus Tambaran, or Spirit House, the most important building in the village. Carvings including masks, statues and figures are kept inside the Haus Tambaran. And an amazing array of masks, statues etc are for sale, carved by the individuals of the village. The carvings are created to be inhabited by spirits. They help the people meet the challenges of everyday life and to ward off the influences of unfriendly spirits. Many are also used in ceremonies and rituals that mark the important stages of life. Each tribe has its own beliefs and the people recognize spirits, deities, totems and ancestors unique to their clans. As a result each village has developed its own artistic style.

But the truth is that we on the outside understand very little about the carvings and ceremonies and the mythology surrounding them as these cultures are centered around secret societies, at times with only the men allowed to see them or participate.



We landed at Timbunke, another grass runway, but this one with a village along the river with a Catholic church. David, one of the guides met us and informed us that the speed boat was broken and instead of taking us to the Sepik Sprit, our riverboat hotel, we would be going by canoe. We all imagined that he (or us) would be paddling, but luckily there was a motor. The canoe was a very long dugout, with old smooth wood. They placed low lawn chairs for each of us, one at a

time. As each person settled in, the next chair was placed and then next person boarded. Once we were all settled, they passed out umbrellas to protect us against the sun. And off we went for the over one hour ride to the riverboat.





It was wonderful! At first I just watched the river flow by, the trees at the river's edge, the birds flying into the very blue sky.

We saw egrets – lots of them, and other birds I could not identify, like a white and yellow bodied bird with black wings. There are 229 different bird species here including the Birds of Paradise, cockatoos, parrots, hornbills, and cormorants.



There were women along the shoreline, in their canoes, fishing. We kept seeing bottles floating by the edge of the water, and I thought how disappointing to see this garbage, but it turns out that is how they mark their fishing nets. In the picture below you can see the tail of a fish that was caught. They fish primarily with nets, and it is usually the women that fish, but sometimes the men spear the fish. Most of the Sepik is filled with catfish, although tilapia has been recently introduced into the waters. The women often have to spend several days away fishing and live in the canoes. They take their little children with them. And they cook the fish on the canoe when it is time to eat. And as we passed each one, they would wave and wave and wave.





The sun was still high in the sky, but the trees and clouds reflected in the water as our dugout canoe glided by. Much better than a speed boat.



After a while, I just closed my eyes and felt the wind in my face, the smell of the river, and the sound of the motor. Well, you can't have everything. It was very peaceful none the less.

We are in the middle Sepik where there are several thousand people speaking 250 languages. The river and the lakes are full of crocodiles and the jungles are filled with poisonous snakes. Malaria is common. They communicate with the spirits of their ancestors, mark rites of passage via music, dancing, masking, architecture and ritual sanctification.

