

October 13



We woke up to a beautiful sunrise, one of many we will see here. The air is so unpolluted and the clouds and fog just hang in mid-air like a lake of white. And then the sky turns yellow and pink and purple and mountains glow. That is Papua New Guinea.

Haro picked us up at 630 this morning to get to the airport (remember 3 min away) for an 800 flight. We were the only white people in sight. We stood on line with Haro waiting our turn to check in. The woman behind the desk saw we were flying to Tari and asked if we would be staying at the Ambua Lodge. When we said yes, she got all excited. Seems she is from Tari and she could not stop praising the beauty of the place. She was so happy

for us that she put priority tags on our luggage (you will see why this is funny a bit later).

The airport was full of local people, i.e., not tourists. There were kids everywhere including a little girl in a long dress and rainboots (Andy asked if she knew something we didn't) and a little boy in a fleece jacket but barefoot. In fact, many of the children are barefoot.

Haro said good bye, warned us to be sure someone else didn't take our bags, not to flash our money, watch for pickpockets in Tari and remember the PNG anthem – "Always expect the unexpected." We will see him again next Monday when we return on our way home. And he was so right. This became our theme: "Always expect the unexpected."



We flew on a Dash-8-300 which is a small propeller plane. The flight took 1h 30m along the coast line and then up north to Tari. We could see the airport and runway from the air. Both looked very small, and not because we were high above them, but rather because they are small.

As we taxied in we could see wall-to-wall people at the local market. We walked off the plane onto the side of the runway. Our guide, Thomas, found us (no sign with our names here) and we all stood around waiting for the luggage. On the side of the runway....A tractor pulling a flatbed piled high with the luggage finally drove over and everyone just started grabbing for their bags (thus the priority tags were absolutely useless). The good news is that they did check the tags so everyone was sure to have their own bags.



The runway area was surrounded by a fence and a gate with a padlock on it. There were people everywhere on the other side, hanging on to the fence. We asked Thomas about it, but are not exactly sure what his answer was. We think there is so little to do that this is their entertainment.



A guard finally came and undid the padlock and we walked onto a field where the cars were parked. We then waited in a car line while the next gate was unlocked to let everyone out. And then the car was amongst the throngs of people. We could hardly get through. People everywhere. We have already

noticed both in PM and here that everyone carries very large, colorful umbrellas – not for the rain, but against the sun. So when you look out into the crowds, you see lots of umbrellas.

The market was essentially in a large field and continued along the side of the road. We saw the biggest cabbages, carrots etc. Everything seemed to be supersized.

And now a bit about Tari and the Huli culture.

Tari is in the Southern Highlands and this is where the Huli people, also called the Huli Wigmen, live. The Huli are a proud, flamboyant tribe known for their ornate ceremonial "wigs" with dances and songs fashioned on that of the mating rituals of the Birds of Paradise. (More on these birds later). Tari is in the Hela Province. The population is about 800,000 and they speak one language, the Huli language.



The Huli regard themselves as one people descendant from a male ancestor called Huli. He is said to be the first man who gardened on Huli territory. Pigs are the Huli's main exchange commodity and they are often used to pay for bride price, death indemnities as well as ritual payments. We saw lots of pigs along the side of the road.

Life for the majority of villagers around Tari remained mostly unchanged until the turn of this century, when the white man arrived. Discoveries of natural gas and mineral reserves over the last few years have brought about a sudden and unexpected increase in wealth and led to much economic and commercial activity, thrusting Tari into the 21st century in a matter of a few short years. Social, tribal and ancestral beliefs and dynamics, once embedded so deeply, are being rapidly forgotten and replaced by more "rewarding" and modern pursuits. Very sad.

Nevertheless there are still a large number of customs followed. Tari today is still one of the few remaining areas where men and women still adhere to many of their traditional beliefs and where a man's wealth and importance is still measured by his amassing of pigs, wives and land. When I asked what men do here for work, Thomas looked at me a bit incredulously and said it is the women that work the land, take care of the kids, cook for the kids and for themselves. The men just sometimes help the woman by weaving walls for their houses. The men spend their days sitting around in groups, playing cards and chewing betel nuts. We saw many of these groups of men along the side of the road.

Huli husbands and wives live separately. Children live with their mothers, until age 10 when the boys move in with their fathers. Girls stay at home until they get married, around age 16-18 years. Women are not allowed in the men's houses and men are not allowed in the women's houses. As Thomas put it, if they want children, or "relations" they meet in the forest.



Ambua (as in the name of the lodge we will stay in) itself is the Huli word for yellow clay. This clay is sacred as is the red ochre clay and sets the Huli warriors apart from all others, as the Huli use the clay for traditional body decoration (more on this with pictures later...).

We drove about 45 minutes to get to the Ambua Lodge. The road at first was paved but quickly turned to gravel or mud. All along the road we saw people seemingly just hanging out. Lots of kids. Lots of colorful umbrellas. The men wear crowns made of leaves just for decoration. Notice also the two men in the background. And most of them carry machetes.

The women carry their children or their groceries in the bilum, a woven bag which is often worn with the strap around the forehead and the bag hanging down the back.



We passed hospitals and clinics but Thomas told us there are no doctors, only nurses.

We also saw a lot of logging. PNG is the second largest rain forest in the world, but the Malaysians have come to start a logging industry. There is no thought as to the environment. In fact, many habitats of the magnificent Birds of Paradise have already been destroyed.

Everyone seemed very friendly, waving at us as we drove by. As I mentioned, tourism is increasing, but seeing a white face, while not uncommon, is not an everyday occurrence. Many people along the side of the road posed for pictures, even pictures I was taking from the car. And when they smile, their eyes just light up. I will never forget the mother we passed, washing her baby in the stream. She whiped him out of the water and held him up for me to photograph. Unfortunately I missed it, but it will always be indelibly engraved in my memory.

The houses seem to be of two types, either aluminum or mud and thatch. The mud houses are obviously the traditional ones and can have several rooms within them. The roofs are shaped like cones and are thatched. The walls are woven bamboo. But as you get closer to the cities, you see more and more aluminum. At the edge of the fields you often see a tomb, similar to other parts of Asia (we saw that in Cambodia and in Vietnam).



We finally arrived at the Ambua Lodge. When everyone but Thomas and I were off the van, I asked him what his Huli name is. He looked at me and very quietly said Nobuku, and then spelled it for me. He was very proud, but I felt like he was trying to hide the fact that he told me. Later I learned that some Huli feel if they say their name out loud, the spirits may hear it.



We were greeted at the lodge by Doban and his wife, Jocelyn, who run the place. We were offered coffee, tea and cookies and then were given a rundown of the place and the plan. There are walks and birding and village visits. There is a gift shop. Dinner is at 7:00. Lunch is at 12:30. Everything in its time and place.

Visitors have a choice of rooms here. You can stay in one of ten rooms in the main building, which looks like a motel, or in one of the 41 thatched huts. Of course we choose the huts. We have 180 degrees of windows with a spectacular view of the mountains. We are at 7000 feet here and it gets cold at night, so the sheets are heated.



At 2:00 we made our way back to the main lodge with walking sticks in hand. And Joseph had his machete. And another man was standing and chatting with him. This is how he was dressed – a combination of traditional and modern.



Our guide was Joseph, whose Huli name is Tano. Seems everyone has both their Huli name and a Christian name as Catholicism is the major religion here now.

We headed off on a 45 minute nature walk through the alpine forest. Ambua is surrounded by pristine jungle, a mass of interlocking tree tops, shades of green spattered with occasional splashes of color from high altitude orchids and rhododendrons. We walked on well-kept nature trails, crossed traditional vine bridges, tried to avoid the mud and made our way to a secluded waterfall. And then back to the lodge.



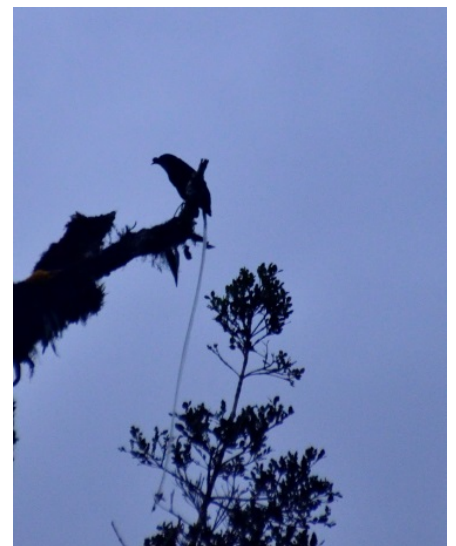
We rested for 2 hours until 5:00 when we were told to meet our guides to go birding, specifically to go searching for some Bird of Paradise (BOP).

Bird life proliferates in the forests of Papua New Guinea, including many species of Birds of Paradise – of the 43 known species, 38 are found in Papua New Guinea, and 13 are in the forests around the Ambua Lodge. These birds can be seen performing bizarre ritualistic and mating dances. Hunted by early traders for their brilliantly colored feathers, the flamboyant Huli Wigmen of the Tari Valley formed a strong bond between themselves and these beautiful birds. Huli tribesmen revere the birds, decorating their human hair wigs with the plumage of only the most beautiful birds. The forest around the Ambua Lodge is home to 13 different species, but they live deep in the vegetation and are very difficult to see.



At about 4:30 it started to rain but by 4:50 the rain stopped, the sun came out and there was the most beautiful light all around. What perfect birding weather. Except when we got to the lodge, all the drivers and guides had left. We still don't know why although they had all sorts of stories we did not believe. Finally Joseph came back to take us birding. By then it was almost

6 and starting to get dark. Nevertheless, we drove to an area that the BOP usually "hang out." They do tend to always come and perch in the same areas. As I mentioned the BOP are very hard to see. But we did see one, a ribbon tail BOP. Their tails are about 4.5 feet long! A beautiful sight.



We came back, had dinner (quite tasty) and then watched a PBS documentary about the BOP. Then it was time for bed. We came back to our cold hut and crawled into our very hot bed with our heated sheets.