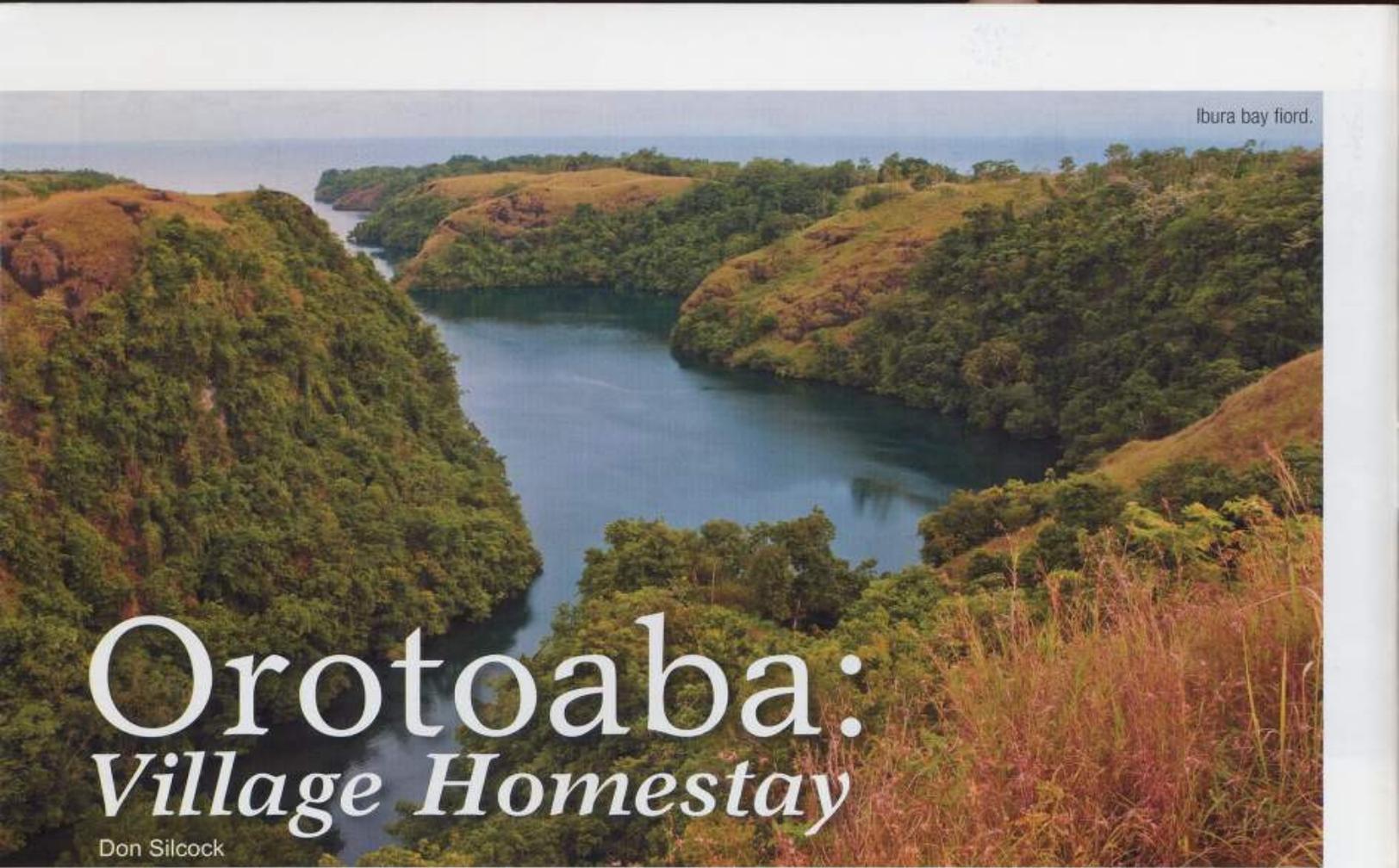


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OUR WAY





Orotoaba: Village Homestay

Don Silcock

"I am blaming it all on Tim Flannery. I used to think I was quite adventurous..."

I am blaming it all on Tim Flannery. I used to think I was quite adventurous until I read the 2007 Australian of the Year's book, "Throwim Way Leg", about Tim's adventures in Papua New Guinea.

As a keen diver and underwater photographer, PNG is one of my favourite places in the world. I have been lucky enough to visit the country once or twice a year for over 10 years. But when I read about Tim's extended field trips into the remotest parts of the country, I felt a little bit like Homer Simpson watching the Discovery Channel...

My tales of diving many of the best

locations in PNG, and the things I have seen and photographed, seem like pale imitations of the adventures that Tim describes so eloquently (and at times hilariously) in his book.

I started to feel that the comfort of en-suite rooms at dive resorts and air-conditioned cabins on liveaboard dive boats had made me soft and that if I wanted to experience Papua New Guinea I needed to get out and really immerse myself.

So there I was on the observation deck at Tufi Dive Resort in February this year relaxing with a cold beer and watching the sun go down after a long day's scuba diving the offshore reefs, when Simon Tewson the resort manager challenged me in his own inimitable style with, "You up for that homestay at Orotoaba?"

We had discussed it a few days previously, but heavy rain up in the hills had meant that we would need to wait for better weather to get there. Visions of Tim Flannery expeditions flashed before my eyes as I nodded nonchalantly, to which Simon responded, "OK, I'll pack a few cold ones and the crocodile repellent for you."

Cape Nelson and its Fjords

The Cape Nelson area of Oro Province is one of the most scenically spectacular areas of Papua New Guinea and it's no mistake that Tufi is universally referred to as "Beautiful Tufi".

What makes the area so special and unique are the "tropical fjords" that line the northern and northeast coasts of Cape Nelson. The area's unique topography is the result of an ancient eruption of three volcanoes on Cape Nelson, from which the lava flow created the long and narrow coastal inlets as it poured into the Solomon Sea.

Geologists refer to such coastal inlets as rias, because a true fjord is created by glaciers – large but slow moving rivers of ice that carve out the U shaped canyons over thousands of years, with the fjord being what remains after the climatic conditions change and the ice melts.

However everybody refers to the Tufi rias as fjords and I have to say that 'tropical fjords' sounds way cooler than 'tropical rias'.

Visually, the fjords are stunning. The dive resort is built on the site of the original pub and hotel that served the small expatriate community when

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Tufi was a settlement for the Australian Administration prior to independence, the views are simply spectacular.

There are a total of 17 significant fiords on Cape Nelson. Tufi fjord, together with its northern and southern neighbors, Maclaren Harbor and Amuian Bay, are the three largest.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is inherently more of a concept than a specific template to be followed. Well done, it allows the casual visitor to experience an aspect of a specific culture without a total immersion that may be a little more "real" than is actually desired.

My personal definition of good ecotourism is that it is an opportunity to go deeper into a local culture – a unique chance that would not normally be available, and one that benefits all participating parties equally.

The "win-win" outcome is essential, because if the casual visitor is to benefit, the experience must be a natural one, rather than something that appears to have been carefully choreographed and stage-managed. For the local people to benefit, there obviously must be some

financial gain, but I think the key to success is to give them a feeling of real pride in demonstrating fundamental aspects of their culture to the visitors.

In this age of globalization, where borders and boundaries are rapidly disappearing, the great danger we all face is that we all become very similar. Specific cultures that are outside of this globalization mainstream become both more interesting and more valuable, so if providing access to those cultures makes their owners feel good and makes them

some extra money, then count me in!

So it was with truly noble intent that the following day Jim Hancock, myself and our guide, William, set off from Tufi in one of the resort's dive boats to head down the coast to Jebo village, two fjords down from Tufi fjord.

It was an interesting combination because Jim is a really nice guy, roughly half my age, who had traveled all the way to Tufi because he had read one of my articles on the diving there! Not only had he been convinced by what I had written



House at Orotoaba village



Jackson inspects one of the village gardens.



Gifts organized by Sharon Jewson of Tufi Resort for the Orotoaba school.

about the diving at Tufi, but he had also traveled all the way from the Maldives, where his day job was the Cruise Director on one of the most luxurious liveaboards working the islands there.

Jim's mindset on the homestay was remarkably similar to mine: just go with the flow and see what happens. It turned out that we had similar underlying concerns... Would we be able to drink the water? Would we get malaria from all the mosquito bites? What would the food be like? Would the beer that Simon had packed for us stay cold? Where could we go to the toilet? Just a few of the dark thoughts we later admitted to.

Mine Host

The boat journey to Jebo took less than 30 minutes and waiting for us on the beach were a group of kids who seemed very excited to see us, and our host, Jackson, in whose guesthouse we would be staying at that night in Orotoaba.

Jackson is typical of many Papua New Guineans I have met in rural areas of PNG, initially reserved and watchful, and then once that ice is broken and he has



Jim Hancock poses in front of the magnificent Ibura bay fiord.

your measure, you find a raw intelligence and command of the surroundings that is both fascinating and worthy of deeper engagement.

He quickly arranged for a couple of the teenage kids to be porters for our bags, and then it was off through the rising hills and rich kunai grass to the village of Orotoaba.

With Jackson and William in the lead, and the teenagers following behind, Jim and I quickly left the beach behind

us and made our way through the kunai grasslands. About an hour later we entered Orotoaba to be greeted by another group of excited kids and a pot of very nice, freshly made tea in a rather battered looking tin teapot, taken in the specially built "dining room" next to Jackson's house.

What Jackson has done is take a piece of land, about 100m from his house on the eastern side of the village facing the sea, and built a detached guest house with three bedrooms and separate toilet and bathroom buildings. This allows the guests their own space and privacy just metres away from the village, but as Jackson's wife cooks all meals in her kitchen, the food is transferred to the dining room where the guests gather to eat.



Jebo Village.

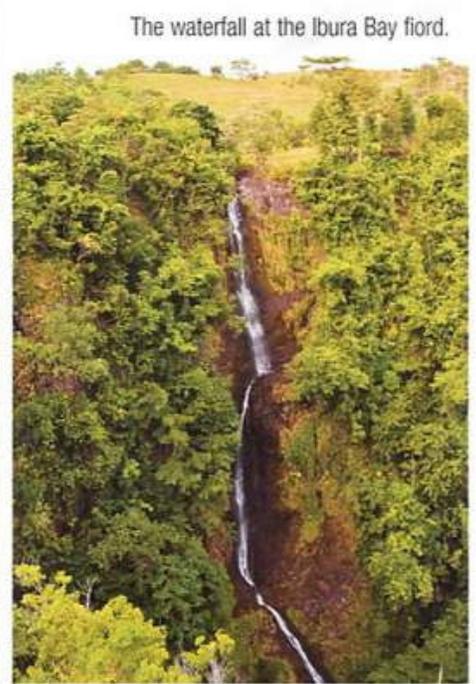
The Village

Orotoaba appeared very similar to many other coastal villages I have visited in PNG, with well laid out neat and tidy houses made of bamboo and a common grass area that is communally maintained. The focal point of the village is the Anglican church and again, this is very

Jackson's guesthouse at Orotoaba.



The waterfall at the Ibura Bay fiord.



typical of many other villages.

Jackson introduced us to all the villagers we encountered on the tour, all of whom seemed to regard us with an equal mixture of curiosity and concern. The curiosity was easy to understand. After all, here were two white guys who had given up a night in the sort of resort the villagers could barely perceive of, let alone stay at, to come to their village. The concern was a bit harder to rationalise, till it dawned on me that they were just nervous that their basic living conditions would be looked down upon.

Life is a relative thing in my experience and that flicker of concern in the villager's eyes, as they showed us their homes, brought back the intense feeling of inadequacy I remember feeling many years ago when a rich uncle came to visit our humble "council house" in the working class UK I grew up in.

Of course there was no way to properly communicate that empathy, so I just had to do my best to put the villagers at ease and thank them sincerely for sharing a small vignette of their lives with me.

Virtually all village life in PNG is subsistence living, which means that the villagers grow the majority of what they eat in small gardens cleared from the jungle and bush. In a location such as Orotoaba, its proximity to the sea provides an abundance of marine life and an excellent source of additional food, and then of course there are the ubiquitous pigs so greatly prized by Papua New Guineans.

Luxuries such as clothes, washing



One of the bedrooms at the Orotoaba guest house.

powder and kerosene for lighting are bought by selling vegetables and fish at the market or to the resort, and whenever possible, hand-made handicrafts to tourists such as Jim and myself.

Jackson showed us some of the bush gardens on the way to see the Ibura Bay fiord and its splendid waterfall, and I came away with a determination to never complain again about having to buy vegetables for my wife at the local market on a Saturday morning!

Fine Dining

After a long and interesting afternoon, Jim and I sat on the guesthouse verandah sharing our thoughts on village life over a (still) cold beer, then we took turns to use the toilet and bathroom facilities in preparation for dinner, served just as darkness descended on the village.

Simon Tewson had previously told me how, when he first established the

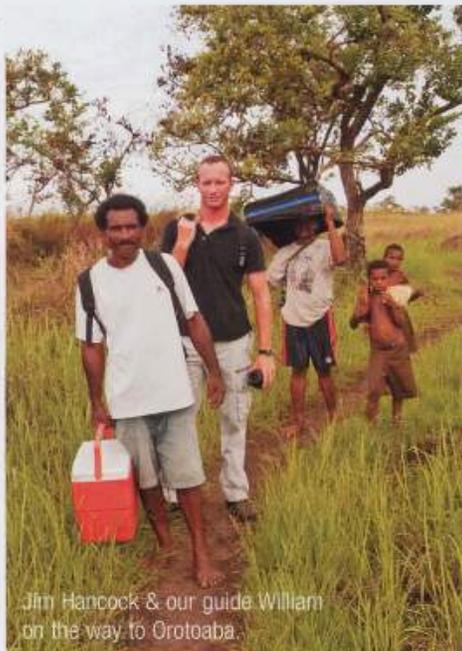
village homestays, he had had to train the various guesthouse owners on what to serve and how to properly prepare it. So I was rather curious to see what fine dining in Orotoaba would be like now that the day's activities had equipped me with a significant hunger!

Jim and I were very pleasantly surprised to be served several plates of fresh vegetables and local seafood, excellently cooked and served with a strong sense of pride by Jackson and his wife.

Basically we could not have asked for more and it was with an intense feeling of satisfaction that I carefully arranged the mosquito netting around my bed and then settled down for a great nights sleep in the guesthouse – even though it was only just after eight at night...

Birds Of Paradise

The mountains to the west of Orotoaba are home to a vast array of



Jim Hancock & our guide William on the way to Orotoba.



Young Orotoba village girl poses nicely for her picture.

bird life, including the Raggiana Bird of Paradise, and our guide William came with us to take Jim and I to see them.

However, that involved a very early morning departure from Orotoba and a walk of about one and a half hours through the rainforest.

I went to bed determined to be up early, rearing to go, but from about midnight the heavens opened and heavy

rain had fallen constantly through the night. By the time the alarm went off at 0430, my enthusiasm meter was reading zero. I was able to rationalise this to myself quite easily because, first of all, I did not have the long telephoto lens with me that would be required to photograph the Bird of Paradise. Secondly, the torrential rain that was still falling would soak my camera backpack and damage all

my expensive gear.

Jim, on the other hand, was clearly not convinced by my feeble excuse and went off with William, who simply shrugged and got on with the task in hand.

I allowed myself the luxury of sleeping till first light, when the rain obligingly stopped, and then after performing my morning's ablutions (more on this later...) I set off to photograph the village

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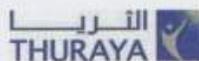
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Jebo beach.

as it came to life.

Jim and William returned triumphantly around mid morning with tales, but no pictures, of the bird life, including an encounter with the Raggiana Bird of Paradise!

Breakfast...

Jim and William's return was the signal for Jackson's wife to serve breakfast and another excellent pot of tea in the battered teapot. It was also apparently the signal for the villagers to come and chat. The open windows of the dining room allowed them to adopt a 3D multi-directional approach.

This interaction went on for over two hours and was for me probably the highlight of the homestay. The basic mechanism is that if you live in a village without mains power there is virtually no access to external sources of information such as TV or the Internet, so anybody from outside the village is a source of potential "news". If, like Jim and I, the visitors are from a long way away then they must be in possession of some really newsworthy information and the villagers want to hear it!

So for the next two hours Jim and I embarked on a rambling and mutually beneficial interaction with the villagers, which ranged from them trying to understand where we were from and how we lived, to us asking about local traditions and culture, such as the face tattoos worn by many of the women.

These interactions are really something to treasure because they are a great leveler, giving you a tremendous insight into village life and putting many of the issues of modern life into perspective. For example, at that point in time, the cost of petrol back in Sydney made me

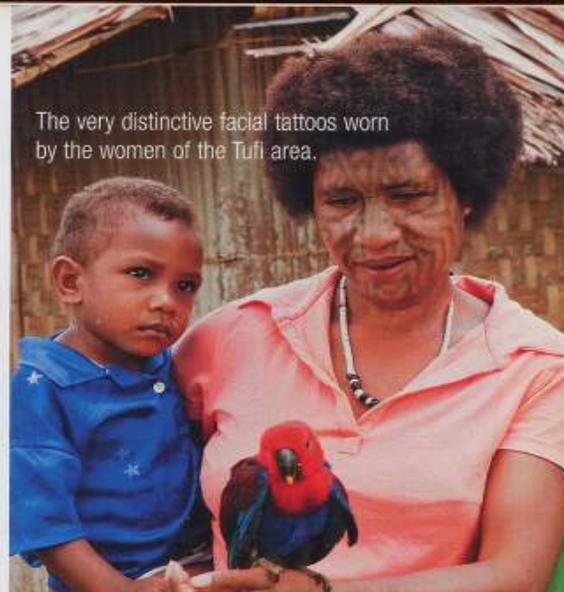
think twice about the cost of a day trip down the coast, but here in Orotoaba it meant that kerosene for lighting and cooking became just too expensive to even consider buying!

Ablutions...

I simply have to share this story with you. When we arrived back at the guesthouse after the village and waterfall tour with Jackson, I felt the need to avail myself of the toilet facilities.

Now I have to state that camping is not really my thing, and bush toilets are somewhat of a mystery to me, so it was with a sense of foreboding that I drew back the curtain on the "drop toilet" at the guesthouse. It turns out that the toilet was kind of a thunderbox built over a deep pit, and once I had worked out the score was about to use it when something

The very distinctive facial tattoos worn by the women of the Tufi area.



made me think of ants and spiders just waiting for me to expose myself to them.

Sure enough, a quick check with the torch revealed a small colony of ants patrolling the general area of the toilet seat...

Nature being what it is, somehow I had to deal with this and I remembered the can of mosquito spray in my bag, which I swiftly retrieved and promptly rendered the toilet safe to proceed.

Unfortunately, the following morning I forgot all about the ants and, seconds after assuming the position, felt a biting sensation on what is possibly the most vulnerable and definitely the least exposed part of my anatomy. I have rarely moved so fast, so early in the morning, as I did that day in Orotoaba! ▲

Don Silcock

Young boys from Jebo village.

