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#48



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ISSUE #48 > DEC '10 - JAN '11
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#48 KITEWORLD

HADLOW • PAPUA NEW GUINEA • LEARN TO RIDE UNHOOKED • TORCH VS. VEGAS



THE ADVENTURES OF A FLYING GIRL.

WORDS - Gabi Steindl
PHOTOS - Jason Pini and Gabi Steindl

INTRO → Not your average two weeks in Egypt, Gabi Steindl reveals a kiting paradise that remains trapped in the stone ages in today's Papua New Guinea

My mission as 'globetrotting freerider' magically draws me to more and more unusual places and I simply love to immerse myself in other worlds and new cultures. Since I stopped competing on the world tour a few years ago, far away from the crowds my trips have taken me to the most remote corners of our fascinating planet and I have had the privilege of kitesurfing on hidden lakes in Russia, riding perfect waves in the deepest outback of Australia, exploring the unknown coastlines of Belize, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, New Zealand and Cape Verde. I've played in the waters off Caribbean islands that most people still haven't heard of, but keeping this standard of perfect kite discovery up gets harder and harder. I am a high achiever though and never happy with average results and, not so long ago, I hit the jackpot again.

I packed up my 60 kilo quiver and jumped on a plane to an absolutely unique place that only a few have discovered for themselves and travel agencies seldom offer as a destination: Papua New Guinea. A remote, mysterious country, it seems ostriched from the modern world. Stone Age lifestyles continue and, according to some sources, belligerent tribes still exercise headhunting and cannibalism.

I wanted to find out whether there were any grounds to these prejudices and clichés and, also, obviously, what the country has to offer in terms of kitesurf potential. Being aware of the extremely poor economic state and poverty that the country is in I also wanted to simply bring some joy and fun with me, so packed up a couple of trainer kites that I could show the kids how to play with, as well as stacks of pencils, note pads, paper, clothes and other goods that are scarce in schools and households.

The country, for which 'PNG' is used as a common acronym, was 'discovered' by Europeans in the 16th century by the Portuguese and has been an independent state since 1975. Divided into 19 provinces it occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea and numerous offshore islands. PNG's geographical location was another incitement for my trip. It's the world's third-biggest island state after Indonesia and

Madagascar and is located in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, approximately 160 kilometres to the northeast of Australia, just below the equator. Consistent trade winds should blow reliably during the summer months.

Papua New Guinea is also one of the most diverse countries on Earth, with over 850 indigenous languages and at least as many traditional societies, all from a population of just under seven million. Of that seven million, PNG also has one of the most rural populations, with only 18% living in urban centres. In reality it is one of the world's final frontiers and least explored - culturally and geographically - and is thought to contain many undiscovered species of plants and animals. A spine of mountains run the length of the island, marked by strong height differences and sharp mountain hilltops, wide valleys, glaciers, volcanoes, grassy plains. Between the mountains and coastal areas there are mangrove marshes, savannas and fertile wetlands of rivers and rainforests. Along the coast lie vast coral reefs, tropical islands and white sandy beaches.

PNG has recently established itself as a top 'insider-tip' in the surfing community, with reliable swells, countless breaks for all levels and all without crowds in the line-up. It all sounded simply perfect for a wave-obsessed rider like myself and I got in touch with the Surfing Association of PNG, which, as opposed to most other countries in the world, works directly with the 'Godfather' of kitesurfing in PNG. Check out their website, there's a separate section on kitesurfing as well at:

www.surfingpapueneuguinea.org.pg

Jason Pini is the Godfather of kitesurfing in PNG and was incredibly helpful, assisting me greatly in putting together the details of my tour. Jason, in fact, became way more than just 'the first contact'. Photographer, host and guide, I owe him a huge thanks. My three week once-in-a-lifetime-adventure will stay in my heart forever. It consisted of three stages:



MAKING IT WORK:

The southeast trade winds blow the most consistently during the dry season, from May through to November. The wind usually starts pretty early in the day with a lighter breeze and picks up around lunchtime. Average wind speed: 18-30 knots. The wind is usually strongest between July and September, which is also the best time for waves as during that time regular swells roll onto the coasts of PNG. Take kite sizes 7-12m² to make the most of conditions. Air temperatures during the windy season average 25-30°C, and the water, 22°C.

GETTING THERE:

Port Moresby is served by Jacksons International Airport (POM), which has international flight links to Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Solomon Islands. In Port Moresby you can connect to domestic flights to over 100 destinations within PNG. Flight prices are relatively high.

WEEK ONE: MILNE BAY PROVINCE, TROBRIAND ISLANDS

The Trobriand Islands (today officially known as the Kiriwina Islands) are a 170 square mile archipelago of coral atolls peppered with palm-fringed idyllic islands off the east coast of New Guinea, that remain relatively unexplored by tourists. Also known as 'Islands of Love' the Trobriands have been fascinating scientists for decades. I took the annual 'Yam Festival' as occasion to check out the islands. As one of the most important cultural festivals of the country, tribes from the surrounding islands come together on the main island of Kiriwina, paint their bodies and decorate themselves with shells, flowers, bones and feathers in order to celebrate in a traditional 'Sing Sing'; the harvest of the Yam. A type of sweet potato the Yam is one of the most important sources of food for the inhabitants here. People sing, dance and celebrate together for many days. The locals painted my face and I was warmly welcomed to directly engage in the festivities when I got lifted onto one massive handmade wooden scaffolding and carried through the crowd at the celebration area by practically naked men!

I spent one week on the Trobriands. Happily

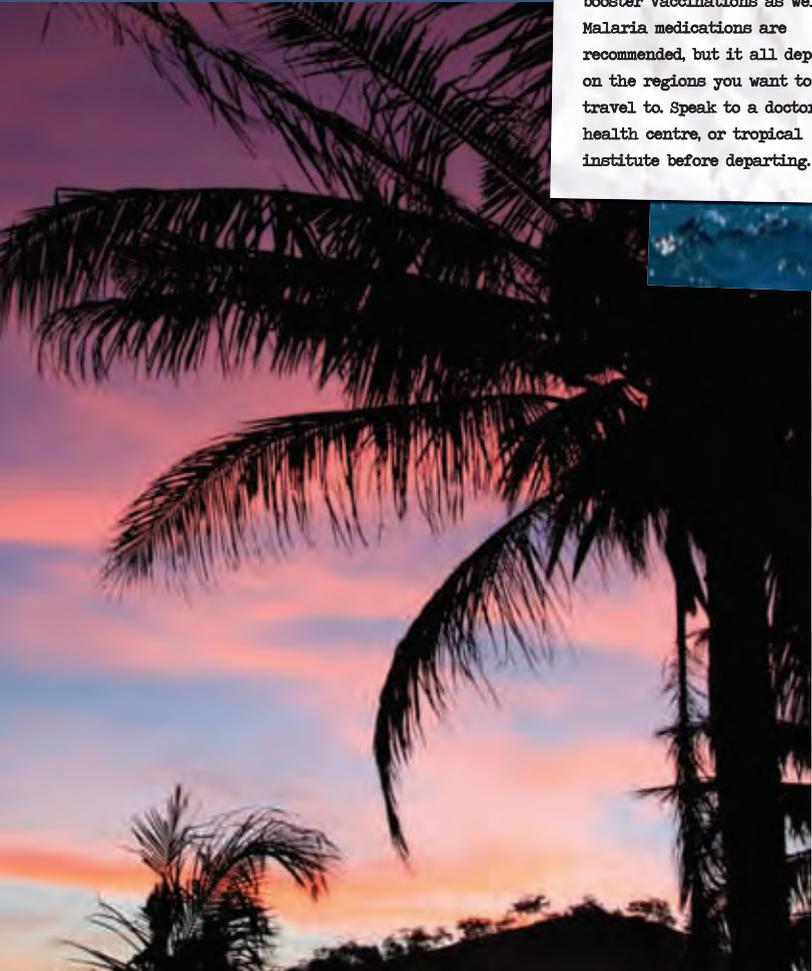




relinquishing the luxury of the only hotel on the island, Jason organised the following for me: I stayed in a tiny village in the middle of a wonderfully tropical jungle where my 'host-family' had built a mini-sleeping hut on stilts, especially for me, as well as my own 'toilet' (a hole in the ground underneath a little shack made out of banana leaves). There was no electricity and no fresh water. To shower I went with the women of the village to the nearby waterhole, or the kids pulled up some buckets of water from the village pond and I'd rinse myself off behind a 'shower-curtain', a wall of banana leaves – another facility built especially for me. My host family really were incredible. An extended tribal family of about 22 people, they cared for me in the most loving way. Before flying over to the Trobriands,

Jason had suggested to buy some Euro-similar food in one of the big supermarkets in the capital, Port Moresby, but I was really curious about the local kitchen and skipped the shopping-run. I ate with my hosts each night and loved it. Meals were simple, yet tasty and usually consisted of cooked sweet potatoes of many varieties, a lot of fish and other locally grown greens. The people here have only had one white visitor stay in the village before. That was in 2002.

I distributed the presents that I had brought with me. In addition to pencils, notepads and clothes, etc. I also brought chocolate; everyone was stoked! They were just as excited when I opened up my big quiverbag for the first time. I took out my kites and boards and



MONEY:

National currency is the Kina (= 100 Toea), pronounced "kee-nah".

TIME ZONE:

PNG is 10 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT).

VISA REQUIREMENTS:

Most people can enter Papua New Guinea with nothing more than a passport with six months validity, an onward ticket and enough money to support themselves. Make sure you have at least some cash on you to pay for your visa (validity: 60 days, costs: approx. €30) upon arrival at the airport. For most departing flights you will have to pay a departure tax in cash of Kina 30.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

PNG has about 800 languages and most Papua New Guineans speak at least two. The official national language is English and the two other most commonly used are Hiri Motu and Tok Pisin.

HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES

Apart from entries to an infectious area there are no compulsory vaccination requirements. It is advisable to keep your tetanus, typhoid, hepatitis and polio inoculations current, though. Protective or booster vaccinations as well as Malaria medications are recommended, but it all depends on the regions you want to travel to. Speak to a doctor, health centre, or tropical institute before departing.



everyone wanted to help me assemble my gear; screwing in fins and straps. It was all incredibly exciting for me, too.

The principal of the local school knew about my visit and one day dedicated two teaching hours to me, during which I taught the kids to fly my North Lizzard trainer kites on the big meadow (the school's sports field) just in front of the rather primitive school building. Everybody wanted to try and I will never forget the rays of joy and excitement in the childrens' eyes.

The first chance I got to get my 'big' kite out was at the pier of Kiriwina's main harbour. Within minutes I was surrounded by hundreds of locals. When I hit the water, pulling off some big airs, the people went absolutely crazy. They cheered, jumped and shrieked: "Again, again! Jump again for us girl!" The next day the whole island spoke of the 'flying girl' that will go down in the history books of the Trobriands.

Jason had organised for a driver to take many members of my host-family and I to explore the other side of Kiriwina Island by four wheel-drive. We found a virtually perfect lagoon for kiting on an endless white sand beach, fringed by the highest palm trees that I've ever seen and lapped by turquoise-blue, crystal clear water. Thierry, an incredibly sharp son of my host family, talked only of 'kite' from the first moment I arrived in the village. When I took him on my back for a spin in the lagoon, he said it was one of the best days of his life.

On a boat-trip to a few other islands in the archipelago, I really became aware of the full potential of these islands. Of course, one would need much more time than only a week in order to



explore and kite them all.

It was incredibly difficult to say goodbye to my host-family and all the villagers. The people here had simply overwhelmed me with their kindness, hospitality and way of living, but I had to continue on to the next stage of my trip. As sad as I was, I was stoked to find out that there were no luggage scales at the tiny airport of Kiriwina. For the first time in a nine year professional career I was able to check-in my monster-quiver without any problems or excessive charges!

WEEK TWO: PORT MORESBY, CENTRAL PROVINCE, CAPITAL OF PNG

- Seat of the government and the biggest city in the country

Port Moresby marks a crass counterpoint to the rest of the country. Modern, in some parts rather faceless, and in the business centre it's loud and hectic, but there are some

really nice corners to be found, too. This time I was hosted by Jason and his lovely family and was once more deluged by the kindness and hospitality of people in Port Moresby. I found top-kite spots on small, offshore islands as well as on several beaches right in the middle or just out of town. Turama and Ela beach are just two of the many options for kiting here. The absolute highlight during the week that I spent here was a boat-trip to Fisherman Island (or Dougo Island), a small island off the south coast and once a World War Two airfield. This spot is absolutely awesome, featuring a two kilometre-long sandbank with just one little fisherman's hut on it. It's a sheerly breathtaking setting, with crystal clear water, super white sand and perfectly shallow flatwater; a kiter's playground in the middle of the ocean. This truly perfect day came to a perfect end with a wild wakesurf-session behind the yacht that we spent the day on in Port Moresby harbour.



WEEK THREE: HULA VILLAGE, CENTRAL PROVINCE

- A small fishing village on the coast, approximately three hours south of Port Moresby I was honoured to be hosted by the family of the president of the Olympic Committee and the Sports Federation of PNG in Hula. My accommodation here was a little more 'advanced' than in the Trobes, but still very simple. Once again there was no fresh water or electricity, although I did have a room in a local village house. Jason was kind enough to bring a big mattress for me and, sleeping on that underneath a mosquito net, I felt super cosy and safe, surrounded by friendly, welcoming, curious and caring people. It took only a few days until pretty much everyone in Hula village knew my name and wanted to see 'Gabi flying!'

One windy day the whole elementary school were given a day off to spend it with me on the beach. I can't tell you what a privilege and great joy I felt. Already super early I was waiting on the beach with all my equipment and will never forget the moment I spotted all

the kids in the distance in their cute school uniforms coming running at me. Everyone wanted to be the first to arrive to help Gabi with all her toys. They were running so fast; they simply could not wait. Everyone came along, including the principle, the entire teaching staff, all the kids' families and many more enthusiastic viewers.

First I explained on the beach the very basics as to how the 'wing' (as they all called my kite) worked. I showed them how to handle the pump and got the kids to inflate the kite, to lay out the lines and to attach them and tie pigtails. After a little demonstration session I allowed the most courageous of pupils to jump on my back and to come for a ride with me. The fun came to a bit of a sudden end when I stepped onto a sea urchin just after another eager 'wanna-ride-on-your-back' student had jumped on. I had hundreds of tiny spikes in my left foot, which was very painful, but it felt so good making those kids so happy that I continued until the pain got too severe. Luckily my host-family knew the best



natural remedy: the skin of a coconut was laid on an open fire and then pressed, while still relatively hot, onto the bottom of my foot. Yes it was painful, but bearable, plus, incidents like these are part of the game aren't they? Miraculously the spikes dissolved in my foot over night and I could already run normally again the following day.

The night before my final departure the Hula villagers surprised me with a very special goodbye dance and we sang and danced together very late into the evening. Saying farewell to these incredible people the next day made big, fat elephant tears roll down my cheeks.

I could write a book about all the unbelievable kitesurf locations that I found in the three weeks that I spent in PNG; about my experiences, acquaintances, adventures and once-in-a-lifetime-moments. I have already explored a vast amount of places on my own and have realised that PNG is unmatched and truly special in so many ways. For the individuals amongst you who like to tack against the kite-mass-stream, this is the place to go to for your next holiday; the last frontier and a hidden kite-paradise between the stone and modern ages.

My trip will remain in my heart forever. A once-in-a-lifetime trip that felt like a visit to another planet and clearly proved the incredibly strong unifying force of our great sport. *ku*

SECURITY

PNG has its share of security problems just like everywhere else in the world. Most of the negative stories published in the media are mainly centred around the capital, Port Moresby.

Even then, not all parts of Port Moresby are troublesome. Unfortunately, most people overseas and visitors alike never get the chance to know the good, positive and interesting features about PNG people, culture and places because everyone hears and dwells only on the negative news from bad press. A positive piece of advice to everyone everywhere is to apply commonsense in everything that you do and do not render yourself into a vulnerable situation. Take precautions at all times and finding a local contact is advisable.

These people will be happy to give you helpful advice on a trip to PNG

PNG SURF & KITESURF ASSOCIATION:
www.surfingpapuanewguinea.org.pg

PNG TOURISM BOARD:
www.pngtourism.org.pg

IN THE LOOP KITEBOARDING (SCHOOL & TRIPS):
www.intheloopkiteboarding.com

Through Jason I also got to know Marvin, a really cool bloke from Germany who lives in Townsville on the East coast of Australia where he runs In the Loop Kiteboarding. Running frequent trips to PNG he has lots planned for 2010/11, with instruction around Port Moresby as well as boat trips beyond. Marvin and his team are a really helpful bunch of competent people.

NO LIMIT ADVENTURES:
www.nolimitadventures.eu

And of course myself:
www.kitegabi.com

Find more on Papua New Guinea on our travel pages at: www.kiteworldmag.com/travel



CAPTION → Jason's stunning images in this feature speak for themselves, but we couldn't resist a quick one here: "Everyone say cheese and grab your crotch!"

