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An Ambitious Journey into Bougainville Turns Adventurous by Lachlan Joyce

Story and Pictures by Lachlan Joyce



Traveling to Bougainville had been a long-held ambition for me since, as a small child, I had heard of my aunty, uncle and cousins living in this unimaginable place. As a child this wonder had been tempered by concern for their extended family as the crisis had ravaged the island. More recently, however, a journey to Bougainville seemed the perfect opportunity to travel to an area less visited and to avoid being just another in a long line of travellers visiting a certain place. This we certainly accomplished, when in July and August of 2010 myself and my friends James, Riley and Matt traveled to Bougainville. For the first two weeks of our journey we were joined by a very special traveling

companion; my grandma, Sheila, who was very excited to visit her son and daughter-in-law in their island home.



After a night in Port Moresby the six of us - my uncle, Peter, had met us in Port Moresby and would escort us to Bougainville - we made the short flight to Buka, the current provincial capital that sits on the smaller of the two main islands. At the airport in Buka we met a number of relatives variously described as sons, nephews, brothers and cousins (such distinctions as "brother" and "cousin" seemed trivial, and it took us a while to understand who fitted in where!), and after a quick meal we were escorted to a banana boat to make the short trip across Buka Strait to Kokopau. From here it was a four hour ride in a public motor vehicle (PMV) to Arawa, where my aunty Barbara was eagerly awaiting our arrival. This trip gave us an opportunity to see some of the development occurring in Bougainville, as almost every river crossing had a construction crew beside it erecting a bridge or improving the road. It also gave us our first glimpse of the incredible fertility of the land, especially compared to the quite flat and dry country surrounding our home town in northern Victoria.



At my aunty and uncle's place in Arawa we were introduced to another group of unspecified relatives, and then the five newcomers were treated to a traditional welcome by my aunty's sister, Christine. This involved washing our faces, arms and legs with some local leaves - a very refreshing introduction. The next week was spent acclimatising to our new surrounds and meeting our newfound friends and family. Grandma adjusted immediately, helping around the house, meeting the members of the household and ensuring that we four boys didn't disrupt proceedings. Most of our days were spent touring around the district; helping deliver timber and other building supplies to friends or family; unloading goods for the family's shop from the ship that arrives every two weeks at Kieta Wharf; shopping at the local market or just wandering around Arawa town, marvelling at how quickly a bustling town of over 20,000 people can decay. We saw the rusted frame of what was once a first-world hospital, now unrecognisable. What had, twenty years ago, been a golf course was pointed out to us - to me it looked like virgin forest. On one of these days my uncle took us all to see the site of the Panguna Mine. Standing on the rim of the massive crater it was hard to believe that man could make such an impact on the earth, and easy to believe that Arawa had once been one of the richest towns in Papua New Guinea. Walking around the abandoned machines I was simultaneously struck by disbelief at the scale of the mining operation and at the ability of the jungle to regrow and reclaim the land. Towering "shovels" ten stories high, rusting and wrapped in jungle vines, offered a stark example of this contrast.



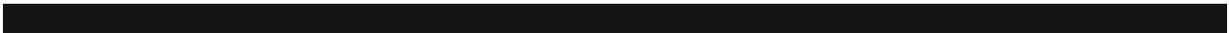
After over a week of our presence at the house it was decided, perhaps understandably, that we should go elsewhere for a while. We said our goodbyes and ventured off to the nearby village of Pidia, situated on a peninsula near Kieta and accessible only by boat. This village is the home of the late William Takaku, a well-known actor, and his family there provided us with accommodation and food for three nights. Our days were largely spent snorkelling over the coral reef that lies just offshore, walking around the gardens uphill from the village or meeting the locals. As with everywhere we were to go in Bougainville, we were amazed by the local children. Initially shy, their curiosity would eventually win over and we would put their knowledge to good use. They alerted us to the existence of many weird and wonderful sea creatures, impressed us with their accurate spear fishing and helped us to learn some Pidgin. In return James treated them to a near-capsizing of an outrigger canoe, which sparked great laughter. One day was spent on the nearby Arovo Island, which was home to a luxury resort before the crisis. Here I discovered both the delicious galip nut and that spear fishing is a lot more difficult than the local children made it appear.



On arriving back in Arawa we were greeted by my cousin, Brian, who was visiting from Brisbane. I was shocked to see upon greeting him that he was chewing betelnut, or buai, which until then had held no appeal for me. I was even more shocked, a few days later, to see my aunty's seven year old nephew with red-stained teeth. I resolved that there must be something behind this habit, if it was so popular, and tried my first buai. Needless to say it was horrible, but I persevered and before long the four of us were seasoned buai chewers, much to the disgust of my aunty. We were never far away from a bag of fresh buai, daka and kamban (mustard and lime) and, besides the novelty, we found this was a great way to meet locals. Countless times we were approached by a laughing local with "ah, yupla

save kaikai buai!" and, after sharing our buai, we had invariably found ourselves a good friend. Likewise, our (admittedly very limited) knowledge of Tok Pisin helped us to make many friends. Although most of our conversations consisted of being asked "yu save tok pisin?" and replying "lik lik, tasol," our limited knowledge came in very useful when talking with children or those who knew little English. We also attempted to learn a few words of the local "tok ples" wherever we went, which always pleased the locals.





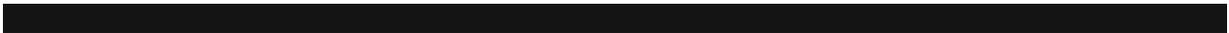


Our next journey away from Arawa took us to Pok Pok Island, where we made a wonderful friend in John, the caretaker of the guesthouse there. We would twice return to visit John, and found Pok Pok a wonderful place in which to relax and explore. After returning to Arawa we were put to work on the family's cocoa block, clearing weeds with the ubiquitous bushknife. After half a day of our "help," it was politely decided that we would be of better use elsewhere, or not at all. On one excursion we did manage to make ourselves useful, collecting ferns to cook for our standard culinary fare of kumu (fresh, leafy greens) and rice. This dish came to be a personal favourite of us all, one which, despite its apparent simplicity, I have never been able to replicate at home.





By now we felt the need to venture further from the Kieta region, and decided to head down to Buin via a friend of my uncle's in Banoni. My aunty felt that a guide would be of use to such a clearly incapable bunch and one of her neighbours, a Buin local, agreed to come with us. Our departure for Buin was a classic lesson in "island time," as it was delayed time and time again by weather, road troubles and general relaxedness on the part of all involved. Unfortunately, my cousin chose the night before our eventual departure to introduce me to jungle juice, or JJ. After an eventful bike ride home, a short nap and some makeshift repairs to my damaged face we hopped in the PMV for an uncomfortable, albeit scenic, journey to Karoga, a village in the Banoni region. Here we met Denise, who, with her husband Guy, had come from Belgium as aid workers and later decided to settle in Bougainville. We stayed one night in Karoga and were treated to tama tama, a typical Bougainvillean fare, used a homemade bow and arrow and were given a tour of the cocoa drying facilities. After dinner our host's daughter and her friend, both around twelve years old, took me down to the stream near their house and demonstrated the fine art of shrimping. While I followed on the bank, one of the girls waded through the water, torch in one hand and three-pronged spear in the other, and collected a number of large shrimp, up to twenty centimetres long. These we took to the house and fried for a delicious midnight snack.





The next morning we were collected by three young men from the brickworks, where Guy worked. After a walk of an hour or so we arrived at the brickworks. This was one of the strangest places we visited in Bougainville. A brick factory in central Bougainville, where all houses were made of natural materials, seemed incongruous and perhaps unnecessary. However, before long we realised that the site was about much more than that. Guy had brought together young men from all over Bougainville, from Buka to the north to Buin in the south, and encouraged them to live, work and learn together. On our final night at the brickworks the young men there put on a small performance for us and we heard a wonderful mix of traditional and gospel music, with a particularly impressive pan pipes display by John, one of the students at the brickworks.





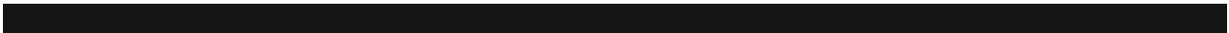
After leaving the brickworks we caught up with our driver, Steven, and travelled the rest of the way to Buin. Although, as four young white men, we had always been a bit of a novelty wherever we travelled, our arrival in Buin was particularly momentous. Along the road children would scream and point upon seeing us in the back of the PMV; even Steven said he'd never seen such a thing. We spent two nights in Buin before heading south to the coast and Kangu Beach. Here, after losing our aunty-appointed guide and having no place to stay, we were rescued by a local former Bougainville Republican Army commander, Thomas Tari. Thomas agreed to put us up for a few nights and we certainly felt safe in his capable hands. After a couple of nights with Thomas and his family we ventured offshore towards the Shortland Islands. With our skipper we journeyed forty minutes by boat towards the Solomon Islands, and spent the night on an uninhabited tropical island with only some local fisherman for company. The next day, after circumnavigating the island and racing a few hundred hermit crabs (a very underrated spectator sport) we headed back to Kangu Beach.



On our way back to Arawa we stopped at the Buin Market. This market was a real eye-opener, with dozens of types of smoked fish, often carefully wrapped in coconut leaves. There were also live turtles and handicrafts and vegetables from both south Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. Perhaps the least expected item was a smoked possum, which we purchased along with a smoked King Fish, some vegetables and the ever-necessary buai. The rest of our journey home (as Arawa was beginning to feel) was uneventful.



After a few nights' rest in Arawa we were off again, this time on a shorter journey to the peak of Mt Billy Mitchell, an extinct volcano whose crater had filled to form a lake. On this journey, as on others, we encountered the ever-present complications surrounding land ownership. Although we had (through my aunty) attempted to settle these problems before we set out, some stakeholders were still not satisfied and our departure was delayed for several hours while we sorted through these difficulties. Although never nasty, such hurdles did present themselves a number of times during our trip, constantly reminding us that we were privileged to be allowed to see what we did, and making every journey much more significant. Eventually the landowners agreed to let us climb Mt Billy Mitchell, although we would have to use a different route to that which was originally planned.





With our complement of local guides we tramped up the mountain, following and occasionally crossing a river upstream, until it petered out and we eventually made our camp. Initially our guides, amazingly capable bushmen, began to erect a sleeping shelter for us out of saplings, vines and other native materials. Unfortunately this amazing display of architecture was cut short when we pulled out our tents. Our guides then decided their efforts were better spent elsewhere, and the structure remained unbuilt.

A two-hour scramble the next morning took us to the top of the crater. When the mist cleared the view was spectacular, and we were only sorry that we hadn't allowed more time to descend down to the lake. As it was we had to leave before too long, as we had to return to Danto village at the base of the mountain to collect our vehicle and return to Arawa. After a tiring descent we arrived at the vehicle (the family's trusty old truck) and all crowded into the cabin, as it was beginning to rain. From here we were treated to an impressive display of driving prowess from Nauku, one of my aunty's most trusted nephews who often accompanied us on our journeys. In the dark, with pouring rain and swollen rivers, Nauku managed to carry us safely back to Arawa. Unfortunately, despite Barbara's best ministrations,

the aftermath of our hike revealed two damaged knees and innumerable sore muscles. We decided, therefore, to spend a couple of days back on Pok Pok island, recuperating.



On our return from Pok Pok we were taken immediately to 3 Rocks, the local pub in Arawa. An eventful night at this fine institution ensured that we were in no fit state to rise at 3am to catch the PMV to Wakunai for our last big Bougainvillean adventure. Fit state or not, however, we boarded the PMV and arrived safely at Wakunai. Here, we changed vehicles and travelled the two hours inland to the village of Togarau, in Rotokas. This area is at the foot of Mt Balbi, the tallest mountain in Bougainville and, at 2715 metres high, almost 500 metres taller than the tallest mountain in Australia.



Rotokas was perhaps the most spectacular area we saw in Bougainville. Sitting much higher than the coastal areas we had mostly visited, Rotokas had a very cool, pleasant climate. The village of Togarau was picture-perfect, with well maintained lawns and gardens and a waterfall and hot springs just a few minutes' walk away. As always, we were warmly welcomed into the village and were soon introduced to Luke and Peter, two locals who were largely responsible for the great time we had in Rotokas. After a short nap to compensate for our early start that morning, Luke took us down to a nearby waterfall, the engine for a planned hydro-electric scheme. Back in the village Luke showed us his house, a stylish take on the classic village style, and his impressive orchid collection. Having planned our trek up Mt Balbi for the following day, we had an early night.



It rained all night and into the next day, and Luke decided that it was too wet to risk landslides and attempt to climb Mt Balbi. He and Peter instead decided on a shorter trip taking in some of the sites around Togarau. We left Riley behind (his knee was still injured from our trip up Billy Mitchell) and with the usual hefty contingent of guides we headed off. After a two or three hour walk taking in hot springs, thundering waterfalls and a neighbouring village we made camp. Here we spent the evening marvelling at the our guides' bush skills and ingenuity. One of them disappeared for a short time, to reappear with hundreds of small yams, found nearby and transported in a harness made of banana leaves and vines that he had strung over his back. Water was collected from a nearby stream in bamboo tubes, and sweet potato was cooked inside a bamboo tube sitting on the fire. We surprised the men by eagerly trying their supper of fried grasshoppers; and in return Matt cooked a damper, which was well received. Peter spent the night regaling us with stories and songs and the three of us retired early.



The next morning we woke up to an astonishing sight. While we had been sleeping Mark, Peter's brother, had climbed a tree and captured a possum. Its tail had been tied to a stick and it was staked just outside the shelter, calmly accepting food. We were informed that it was destined to be a pet for Mark's children. We had a good laugh trying to imagine any of our Australian acquaintances of Mark's age – around forty – shimmying up a tree to grab a wild possum.





We left camp and, a short distance away, shimmied down a steep hill to the base of a very tall waterfall, which Peter informed us that we were the first non-Bougainvilleans to see. Here I tried my hand at wielding the busnaip, or machete. After much merriment at my ineptitude, Peter took over and, two seconds later, two banana trees were down. We set out again in search of another, even larger, waterfall. After alternatively scrambling and falling down a very steep hill, it was decided we could go no further and we began to head back up. At this moment it began to rain heavily, making the climb all the more entertaining. Fortunately our spirits were high, and we stayed relatively dry thanks to some hats fashioned from nearby leaves. The rest of the walk back to Togarau was a muddy affair, with James and I often choosing to toboggan downhill on our backsides rather than lose our footing attempting to walk. Once again we felt quite inept next to our Bougainvillean companions as they patiently waited for us to pick our way along.



The next day, our last in Rotokas, was spent relaxing around Togarau and walking down to nearby Ruruvu to watch the local soccer teams compete. Our departure the next morning was, unfortunately, marred by a misunderstanding over the price of our accommodation and food. Although this was resolved fairly amicably, it was another reminder of the difficulties associated with travelling in such a non-touristic location. One of these difficulties was that the few foreigners who had preceded us tended to represent either NGOs or government bodies. They therefore had a much bigger budget than us, and had often set a higher standard than we could maintain.

Our trip was drawing to a close, and the next week or so was spent around Arawa. This was an emotional time, as we had become very close to aunty Barbara and her extended family. We had also spent much of our time in Arawa playing with the children from the nearby houses, swimming in the river and learning Pidgin from them. We'd made a number of friends around town and did our best to see them all before we left. On our final night in Arawa Barbara celebrated by inviting the extended family to the house and putting on quite a feast. This was a great way for us to farewell all those who had made our stay so enjoyable, and it was good to know that we had made an impact while we were there – at least to the extent that they would turn up for a free feed!



We were up early the next morning to catch the PMV back to Buka. Uncle Rex had offered to come with us to show us around and make sure we got away safely. Rex, Matt and I travelled in one PMV, while James and Riley had the privilege of riding with William Takaku in another, listening to stories of Pierce Brosnan and hearing jokes that didn't survive the retelling. We spent the day wandering around town, being impressed by the relative cosmopolitanism of Buka and enjoying some of the simple pleasures we had missed over the last two months – cheese and meat pies foremost among them. In the afternoon Rex took us to the newly built home of his friend, Clarence, where we would spend the next few nights. The next day was a highlight, as we contacted the family of our neighbour in Arawa, Rose, and they took us out in their boat to visit some neighbouring islands. Some of these were the archetypal “paradise island,” and we could understand the enormous potential Bougainville has as a tourist destination. After Buka we spent a few days in Port Moresby before heading home, tired and thrilled to have visited such a unique place as Bougainville, and determined to return before too long.







