

20SHORT.DOC

Somewhere about the end of the third week of July, I began the descent from the Southern Highlands of New Guinea to Mandang on the coast of the Bismark Sea. The small plane flew under cloud cover so low that passengers pointed out family villages.

Early morning hikes and stumbling on slippery trails had brought on a case of travel fatigue that would have made the A.A.A. travel folks think the Baja California run was a short traipse across a tulip bed. I slept lodged against a cold, vibrating cabin window frame, padded by a raincoat, and only awakened at landings.

The hotel outside of Mandang was once a plantation. The surf roars against seawalls enclosing gardens of floral splendor of red bouganvillas and dozens of varieties of orchids. Lunch was served in a dining room open on two sides, facing the sea. Medium range field glasses reached the busy shipping lane of foreign ships and magnified the islands across the bay.

Twenty-four dollars in U.S. currency bought the luncheon special, and dinner cost twice that sum. The aura, however, was personal; the managers mingled through the guests, meeting their needs and showing off such pets as parrots and tree pythons.

I soon discovered why the hotel's menagerie was such a hit. Extensive logging in the 1970's switched the rain

forest around Mandang to a reforested stand of tall planted trees that offered no fruit or nuts for the wildlife, but oddly made excellent material for 2 by 4's and 2 by 6's. The change of vegetation moved the flying fox (fruit bats) and tree kangaroos and most of the birds up into the mountains out of reach of the villagers.

On morning walks, I watched small children gathering green bananas and coconuts to exist on until the stands of wild sweet potatoes matured.

The innersoles of my walking shoes slipped loose from being wet so much, and rubbed my feet. So I spent a lot of time sitting on fallen timber, watching red- and green-bodied fruit doves glide overhead, avoiding the villagers' bows and arrows. Just the sound of axes chopping or calls by little boys hacking off bananas flushed the birds out ahead of the people.

The fruit dove makes the same warning calls as mourning doves do in Texas. For sure, those boys were meat hunters, not sportsmen. Chainsaws and diesel trucks had stolen their livelihood. The loggers did leave them a good caliche road to walk along to hope for an open shot at a bird.

Families passed by my vantage place. The men nodded, but the women carried heavy enough loads of babies or green bananas to curb social contact. Bulletins warn travelers to New Guinea never to contact the women.

Second warnings are unnecessary out in the bush where women are followed by a wiry gent carrying a cutlass or a

machete with an 18-inch blade. Such nuances as keeping dead ancestors out in front of their huts also reduces social calls by visitors from other hemispheres.

Snorkeling in the bay at Mandang afforded the best waters of the whole trip. Hotel personnel paddled the guests out to a small island to swim from a spotless beach. Sun rays lighted the clear water into clouds of all the tropical-colored scales and fins and forked tails of blues and blacks and yellow-orange hues found in the seas.

Snorkeling adds a new dimension to travel. Floating along looking through a simple glass mask justifies the jealous dominion of the seas between Indonesia and New Guinea.

After we beached the canoe on the return trip, we spotted a native standing out on a dead trunk over the simple dock, holding a dart gun or a cross bow. He stood as implacable as the tree limbs. Frozen, I supposed, to fool the fish, but the type of carnivore we are, I cannot know what looks appetizing to a legally reformed cannibal.

I know all that bunk packers put out about smooth barrels versus bellied-down carcasses on old bulls and old cows. However, commercial grade body type affords no consolation to someone sitting in a dugout canoe armored by two black rubber snorkel fins and clothed in a seersucker bathing suit.

He wouldn't have been fishing if he hadn't been hungry. At air terminals, big signs warned that spitting betel nut

juice on floors or sidewalks was punishable by 100 Kina fines and jail sentences up to five years. Further posting stated the penalties against dynamiting fish. But I entered and left new Guinea without knowing whether violating the law against cannibalism was a felony or a misdemeanor.

Just imagine that the well-armed fisherman spotted a flank steak on a white swimmer that fit his taste. Suppose the law of his stomach would rule. I've seen, and had enough diets fail in my time, to know how quick good intentions can turn into a raid on the refrigerator.

I stopped worrying over how much my feet hurt and hoped the catch of the day came from the sea.