

6SHORT.DOC

Missionary Airlines provided the charter from Wewak up to the Karawari River. The date must have been the 19th of July. Dates are unimportant in the jungles. The people living in New Guinea go back to the stone ages, and, in cases, have only been known to the outside world since as late as 1950.

The pilot landed and assured me the lodge upriver was usually reliable to send a boat for guests. I spent an hour in a thatched lean-to, among little dark children who giggled every time I made my hearing aids squeal.

Two decades ago, these Kundiman people trophied human heads like deer hunters collect antlers. Whether they wasted the rest of the kill or not depends on the storyteller. I wasn't afraid of them eating me, as I'd been saturated in repellents and sunscreens for so long, the only person able to stand me would have been a research scientist.

After a second plane landed, the boatman appeared to go upstream to Karawari Lodge. Backpacks had to be held in our laps to stay dry. Thick jungle lined the banks and families in dugouts fished on the shady side of the river.

Karawari Lodge rests on a high hill overlooking the wide muddy river and the green expanses of the wildness of the territory. The rooms were of woven straw, supported by bamboo rafters. The shower sheltered a luminous green tree

frog, who hopped behind the commode to hide. Frogs are all right as roommates as long as they don't attract frog eaters, like the hundred or so species of snakes living in New Guinea.

After lunch, a big barefooted guy took two of us climbing up a slick, caving-off trail to an upper level, overlooking the valley. For the next two mornings, he walked from his village to take special hikes back in the bush to watch the jungle awaken. He knew the calls of sulfur-breasted cockatoos and birds of paradise better than a city man knows the sidewalk. We slogged in mist and mud, but saw the wilds in a private state.

Passing through his village, he called to his aunt or his cousin. Men hauled logs for canoes and groups of three and four naked children hovered around fires cooking fish. For part of a walk along the river, he carried his son and talked to him in a soft voice.

One afternoon we passed by an abandoned government building. Big chains secured the falling-down two-story log and thatch building. In front, each tribal clan was represented by a carved spirit pole.

The guide belonged to the Bird of Paradise clan and was married into the Hornbill clan. He said his brother-in-law and he had a hound killed while wild boar hunting in the spring. Being members of the bird clans, cash retribution had to be paid to the Dog clan even though the victim belonged to their own dog pack.

Close by was a schoolroom without desks or windows or chairs. Tattered pieces of crayon drawings hung on a bare wall. The small blackboard bore a few words chalked in English. Parents pay 150 Kinas (approximately \$180 U.S. currency) a year to send their kids to school. Besides tuition, the children must wear clothes. High school requires living away from home and a 300 Kina fee.

Two decades removed from hunting human heads mutes the question of illiteracy rates. Up a fork of the Karawari, we boated to a tribe who lived in caves two decades ago as they had thousands of years before. The government forced them to move into grass huts closer to school and the modest medical advantages.

Further on up the other fork of the Karawari, and on into Yimas Lake, kids floated out in canoes to stare at the white people. These burnt-looking tribes live from smoking fish to trade downstream. Incessant cigarette smokers, the fishermen and the women kept close watch, hoping for the chance of bumming a smoke.

The dugout frightened up common terns, and a nimble-footed bird called a Jacana walked on the lily pads and water weeds. This new guide was a surly sort, lazy and indifferent. However, he did point out white-crested cockatoos perched high in the trees and bright-plumed parrots flying overhead and glimpses of hornbills flicking across the river.

In the evenings natives came to the lodge to dance and play a drum made of bamboo poles. Painted like spooky hornbills and masked spirits, the troupe brought an emotional end to the day. Of all sights to top all indiscretions, the tribesmen wore a big gourd over the genital area and rattled around the room, wilder than a *National Geographic* story cut loose from the editors.

We had crocodile meat for dinner. Before the meal, the bartender spun a yarn about finding a Japanese army buckle in the stomach of a crocodile killed in 1989 on the Karawari.

That night was the worst of the whole trip. I rolled and flounced and awakened several times up on my hands and knees. About dawn, the frog croaked and I plunged head-on into the mosquito netting. I had to have help to free myself.

On the last morning, I photographed the guide's son, clothed for the moment, holding his only toy, a bent bicycle wheel. His old grandfather would have been disappointed to know he had allowed a size seven and three-eighths skull to escape without a fight....