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SKIRTING THE SOLOMON SEA

A refreshingly authentic island experience awaits AG Society members at Nuakata Island, in the Milne Bay Province of PNG.

STORY BY IAN CONNELLAN

THE TROPICAL SUN is hidden by clouds and a cooling breeze sneaks past the shoreline trees as Gail, my partner, and I follow our guides Sine and John along the west coast of Nuakata Island – “the jewel of Milne Bay”, in the Solomon Sea just east of the Papua New Guinea mainland. We’re bound for Sine and John’s home, and on the way they’re determined to show us as much as they can cram in to a two-hour walk – bush food, crabbing techniques, the clan cemetery, century-old gardens and more.

Finally we walk into a clearing decorated by tall coconut palms, and four children rush out to greet us, all gleefully shrieking, “*Dim-Dim! Dim-Dim!*” – local lingo for ‘whitefella’. We’re introduced to the children one at a time – Pius, Bernard, Daisy and Matilda – and solemnly shake hands and say hello. Matilda, who’s six, demonstrates her climbing technique on a sapling betel palm. Sine wants to show us her garden, up the ludicrously steep slope situated behind the huts, and points out papaya, bitter greens and yam, while the children climb and shout and show off for us. We slither back down to the huts and I take two or three portraits of the children before it occurs to me to turn my digital camera around and show them the

pictures on its screen. They crane in, stop and stare for a moment – and then reel away in fabulous, whole-body laughter.

Gail and I catch Sine’s smile. Later, Gail asks: “Sine, have the children seen themselves on a camera before?”

“No,” Sine says.

“But they’ve met white people before?”

“No.”

SINE AND JOHN are members of staff at Explore PNG Community Camp, located at Gudi Bay, where AG Society chairman Gregg Haythorpe and I, and a handful of others, stayed in March this year. Gregg worked as a patrol officer in this part of PNG in the 1970s, and he’s long thought it would be an ideal destination for an AG Society community or scientific project.

Our host Daryl Byrne has the same enduring affection for the area. A decade ago, Daryl and his mate Shaun Lovelock paddled kayaks from Cairns, across the Torres Strait and east along the PNG coast. They couldn’t get over how “real” it was: in places just a few hours from major Australian cities, they stayed with people whose traditional economy was all about survival. These people grew and caught their own food, built their own houses and had no electricity or running water. ▶





Glassy paddle. AG Society chairman Gregg Haythorpe, at right, and Sebastian Hanlon kayak the gentle waters surrounding Boya Boya Wam. It's just half an hour by boat from Nuakata Island to this coral atoll. Milne Bay and the PNG mainland can be seen in the distance.



Oceanfront balcony. The bungalows at Explore PNG's Community Camp extend past the high-tide mark and into the placid, 27–28°C waters of Gudi Bay.



Daryl and Shaun sought permission from traditional owners to lease land on Nuakata and about six years ago established Explore PNG and the community camp, which is broadly a profit-share ecotourism venture with the local clan – but not of the five-star variety. They wanted guests to have an authentic PNG experience, and for the local people to benefit. The result is an island that resists classification. Guests stay in bungalows built from bush materials by islanders. These jut into the bay, and it's straight off the front steps into the water at high tide. The communal mess hut has fridges powered by a generator; most of the cooking's done over fires, and meals include produce from the camp garden and fresh fish when available. There are composting toilets and gravity showers – these are heated in the mornings, and are pleasantly tepid by nightfall.

We leap into snorkelling and are astounded by the clarity of the waters, and kayak past traditional villages and their dizzyingly steep gardens. I didn't know how to dive, and hadn't planned to, but Daryl, a fully certified instructor, trains me in the shady shallows 30m from the mess hut, and has me exploring Gudi Bay's coral bommies. Other friends venture further out, kayaking where spinner dolphins flash by. Every day brings a new experience: visiting islands further afield, snorkelling on the edge of coral drop-offs or walking along Nuakata's forest tracks. All it takes to experience the Nuakata ▶



Island home. The community camp staff (top left) are Nuakata people, who also build bungalows (above) from bush materials. Meeting local children such as Matilda (top, at right) is a pleasure – she's climbing a betel nut palm while pal Daisy looks on. Regional wildlife (left) is stunning: here, an inquisitive cuscus startles a Papuan hornbill in the jungle on the mainland near Alotau.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DARYL BYRNE (DB); IAN CONNELLAN/Areca catechu; DB; DB/Phalanger macrullatus/*Rhyteros pilcatus*



way of life is getting to know camp staff and asking them when they are available to guide us along the island's tracks. Time spent connecting with local people was the most rewarding of all.

The AG Society's Nuakata Community Adventure next January (see page 110 for details) was designed with the Nuakata people in mind. Society members have the opportunity to spend two mornings working at the island aid post, a 10-minute boat journey or a 40-minute walk from camp on the island's southern shore. Here guests will help restore the poorly funded and decrepit first-aid post, and top up supplies of basic medical essentials, which the Society will donate.

THE AFTERNOON after our visit to Sine and John's house, Daryl urges us onto the boat for a trip to Hibwa Islet. There's little to recommend this pile of sand and coral rubble, exposed only at low tide – except that it's magnificently situated, encircled by cloud-shrouded continental islands and postcard-perfect coral atolls.

An hour or so before sunset, helmsman Duncan noses the 7m tender onto Hibwa's sand and we keenly splash over the side into the tropical water – it is always between 27°C and 28°C. So warm that we can snorkel, as we've planned, as long as we like and not get cold.

We fin across about 50m of sandy lagoon to the reef rim – and into the most entrancing coral gardens we've seen in five days of superb diving and ▶



Under the sea. Community camp staff member Fred (top left) dives deep in search of underwater treasures.

Spinner dolphins (top right) are commonly encountered in the waters surrounding Nuakata Island. Coral gardens sprouting heads of soft (right) and hard species and Christmas tree worms (above) decorate the reef.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GAIL MACCALLUM; DARYL BYRNE (DB)/Stenella longirostris; IAN CONNELLAN; DB/
Spirobranchus giganteus

snorkelling. We drift above coral heads of hard and soft species of all colours, flawless plate corals, brain corals sprouting multicoloured Christmas-tree worms and delicate gorgonian fans decorated in black and yellow.

After 45 minutes Gail and I swim back to the sand spit, eyes like saucers and wearing quarter-moon smiles. The others are passing the time in their own way. Gregg has stowed his fishing gear and turned his attention to snapping frames of the encircling islands and tropical clouds, which are stacked through the troposphere and slatted with sunbeams. Daryl, Sebastian Hanlon and ecologist Geoff Kay are lounging in the shallows with cold drinks. Duncan and John keep an eye on the boat. Frigatebirds wheel above us.

We grab some drinks and join the others in the ‘wet bar’ to enjoy the last of the light, then climb aboard for the short motor back to camp. It’s nearly dark when we glide into Gudi Bay. The dim lights of the mess hut are just visible ahead. We dangle our legs over the side of the boat, and bioluminescent plankton create a galaxy of shooting stars across our feet. 



Join AG in PNG

Host: Gregg Haythorpe, AG Society chairman

When: 20–27 January, 2013

Trip duration: 7 nights (one in Alotau and six at Explore PNG Community Camp)

Operators: Explore PNG and AG Society

Cost: \$1850 plus airfares (allow about \$800 Sydney–Port Moresby–Alotau return)

Bookings: hello@explorepng.com

Information: www.explorepng.com or www.australiangeographic.com.au/society