

Jungle, rivers & machetes

Island-hopping south en route to Australia, round-the-world cyclist **Rob Liwall** passed through the rainforests and mountains of Papua New Guinea



Before the boat docked, we followed the coast of Papua New Guinea for half a day. Green-shrouded mountains climbed up from the tropical waters and into the clouds. I planned to cycle 600 miles along the north coast and then cut across the middle to the south and a boat to Australia. I knew that PNG would be tough – not only on account of the thick jungles, malaria and the lack of proper roads, but also because of PNG's own brand of dangerous thugs, known by the misleadingly endearing name of 'rascals'.

I had received an email from an Englishman who lived there. 'I have been held at gunpoint and robbed 16 times,' he wrote, 'and have been caught in crossfire from warring tribes using M-16s and the like... I don't mean to be negative but I'm sure you'd want to make informed decisions on where you travel.'

The beach road

On my first day, the road led along pristine beaches, where children played on homemade surfboards in the waves, and smoke coiled up from huts along the shore. I stayed

that night in the town of Vanimo with an Australian called John who ran the local mini-supermarket.

The next day the road turned inland into the dense jungle, becoming increasingly rough. Thick mud on one hill stuck to my tyres and made them jam on my racks. I pushed the bike to the top and looked out over an ocean of treetops: a sudden fear gripped me that I would get lost forever in this jungle.

Continuing down, I came to a brown river, lined on the far bank with houses on stilts. A young man in a baseball cap stood watching me. I started towards him and then saw another man – holding a bow. I said hello. They seemed friendly and, like many people in PNG, spoke good English on account of the school system that the British had set up during colonial days. They invited me to stay the night in their house.

For dinner, Yagi and his cousin Anderson cooked me plantains on the fire. I explained my fear about getting lost and they offered to lead me out of the jungle to the 'beach road' to the next town. It sounded like a good idea, so the next day we walked for 16 hours until we



Rob entered Papua New Guinea at the border with Indonesia (above), but to leave he would have to cross the mountains (main picture)

emerged on the shore. The beach road was simply the beach.

Chased by rascals

For the next two days we pushed the bike through the sand. It was exhausting, and our speed was now barely 1mph. When we reached an inlet, I had to take all the bags off the bike and carry it over my head through the sea as big waves rolled in around me. Later we came to a wide river and I gave my spare T-shirt to an old man in a dugout canoe in return for a lift across.

I was grateful for Yagi and Anderson's company. They helped



With few proper roads and rivers swollen by rain, progress was slow. But people were generally friendly

me push the bike and they found places for us to stay in the villages. Eventually we reached a proper dirt road. I said goodbye to my kind companions and started out alone again. As I left, they warned me to beware of rascals on the road ahead.

Although the road was pot-holed, it felt great to have a rideable surface. I rode through a series of sleepy villages and was beginning to relax... Then I caught sight of a gathering of men sitting on the grass, near a small settlement. They were drinking. At least one held a machete.

When they saw me coming, they got up and beckoned me to stop. I waved but they looked like rascals, so I swerved over the road and accelerated hard. They started running. As I pedalled across the village bridge, another group of young men appeared and also started chasing. My heartbeat was thundering but looking back I was relieved to see that I was leaving them behind. They were giving up.

Just then, with my eyes off the road, I careered onto the verge and down into a ditch. The men saw and started chasing again. I scrambled up and pushed the bike back onto the road, leaping on, and pumping the pedals. The sounds of shouting and running were right behind me, but I picked up speed and raced out of the village ahead of them.

I continued along the north coast for another two weeks, then hitched a ride in a motorboat across the mighty Sepik River and the



mangrove swamps that lay beyond it. I made good progress on a smooth road through the cities of Madang and Lae. But then the road ran out again, and I had to turn south in order to cross the island.

Over the mountains

The climbing began from the village of Kokoda at the foot of the mountains. I had found two local guides who offered to show me the way along the local trails, and to help me carry some of my gear.

We set off at dawn and climbed a steep forest track into the clouds. We slept on a village floor on the ridge, near to a memorial to the many Australian soldiers who had died defending this route from the Japanese during World War II.

The following day it began to rain. When we reached the next river, it was severely flooded and the makeshift bridges had been swept away. A huge, stray log, however, had got jammed between the banks. With some trepidation, we scampered across it, the rapids thundering beneath us.

It was not the last river, so our crossing of the mountains, which should have taken us just a week, took twelve days. It was exhausting and we stumbled out of the other side of the mountains bedraggled and grimy. But I had made it to the capital, Port Moresby, and I felt amazing. Australia was just across the Coral Sea. All I had to do was find a boat to take me there.

Fact file Papua New Guinea



Distance: 800 miles.
Daily mileage: in thick jungle/mountains: 5-10. On good roads: 90.
Terrain: Jungle, beaches, mountains and rivers.
Conditions: Tropical, with a dry and a rainy season.
High up in the mountains it can become quite cool.
Accommodation: I took a tent but used it only occasionally. In the villages I was always invited to stay – I asked around for the local priest, teacher, or headman, who were both the safest and the most likely to speak English. I always used a mosquito net and repellent due to the rampant malaria (which I ended up catching anyway).
Maps: I never found a detailed map of PNG.
Getting there/back: I entered PNG at the land border with Indonesia near to Jayapura (I arrived in Jayapura on a Pelni ferry from Sulawesi). I left on a boat to Australia.
Bike used: Specialized Rockhopper
Further reading: *Islands in the Clouds*, by Isobella Tree. Rob's book, *Cycling Home from Siberia*, is published by Hodder & Stoughton.

