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Introduction

Papua New Guinea is the most diverse nation on earth, rich in resources, natural environment and cultures – 800 indigenous languages have been identified and others may exist, spoken by peoples not yet known – a complexity that has developed over some 60,000 years of human habitation. The country is an enigma that defies consistent description and there are still white patches of ‘unknown’ on maps and flight charts that not even Google Earth has penetrated. Like the bird of paradise, just when you think you have it fixed in your camera lens, it flits to another branch in the canopy.

While isolated tribes sustain themselves with their taro gardens and jungle hunting grounds, largely disengaged from the rest of the world, their sons and daughters may be young graduates in the cities, using Facebook and Twitter accounts to participate in a global society. Epitomized as ‘the land of the unexpected’, most people’s idea of Papua New Guinea goes little beyond sensationalised travellers’ tales of cannibalism. A single book cannot explain this extraordinary and exciting country and this is not an attempt to do so. *Inside the Crocodile* shares my roller-coaster ride of five years living and working in the remote border province of West Sepik – Sandaun – and travelling to other areas and islands of Papua New Guinea. And it is not only my tale, but that of the Papua New Guineans who became my colleagues and friends. I arrived in Vanimo in 1987, twelve years after independence, to work as a member of the local administration, implementing a development project with World Bank funding.

Of all the countries I might have chosen in which to participate in rural development, this was probably the ultimate test, yet at the time, it seemed the most natural step to take.

I suppose it was inevitable that I would one day work in some far flung corner of the globe. For four generations my forebears had left their roots in the Isle of Man to travel the world. Great-great-grandfather went to Kansas before getting a place in a covered wagon and following the Oregon Trail to San Francisco in the 1800s. His son also went out to Kansas, and was ordained in Topeka. Later generations made extended visits to China, India, Africa and South America. My parents didn't travel, but my handed-down childhood toys included a ball of raw rubber from the Amazon, a single wooden clog from Japan, and a fierce Chinese deity with an arm missing.

While the ancestors had been missionaries, my interests were quite the reverse: I was studying anthropology, I wanted to understand other ways of life and alternative cultures, not convert anyone, but their influence created in me an image of the world as a place to be explored, a curiosity to see what was there, and an attitude that anything was possible.

But interest is not enough. To survive as an alien in unforgiving environments and other cultures one has to be flexible, to accept discomfort and uncertainty. In some cockeyed way, my chaotic childhood in what would nowadays be called a 'dysfunctional' family had prepared me for my future. Constantly moving from one place to another in a state of perpetual insecurity – financial and emotional – working part-time to pay off household debts while still at school, I was an adult before my teens. But those were the days of education grants in the United Kingdom, not just to stay on at school, but to attend university. Inspired by a teacher to aim beyond my reach, I studied for a joint honours course in anthropology and geography at Durham University.

Armed with a master's degree, I began a career in Scottish regional government, starting as a junior administrator where the skills of filing and tea-making were finely honed. Working up to senior positions and broadening out to management, training, and some freelance consultancy, I was seconded for three years to work on an EEC (now the European Union) exchange programme for young workers. In the cracks of all this work, I became a part-time tutor in the Open Business School and wrote a column for a management magazine and articles for

the press. It was all very haphazard; none of it had been planned, things just happened and opportunities arose. But by imperceptible steps, I developed a stronger sense of self with the realisation that I could, and should, create the next phase of my story myself.

In a classic example of Sod's Law, the same morning my boss handed me the fax confirming my job in West Sepik, I heard that a publisher had accepted my proposal for a book on staff development. In a final burst of 'gung-ho everything is possible', and fitting in a night shift to my programme, the book was written in the three months while I waited for a contract from Papua New Guinea. I sent off the manuscript. Whatever happened next would have to follow me to the other side of the world.

The contrasts with Scotland were extreme: from historic cities, snow covered hills and twinkling trout streams, to mountains and ravines smothered in tropical forests two degrees south of the equator, and an average of five people to every square kilometre.

I came to Papua New Guinea with an open mind and no specific expectations other than a completely different life and environment, and I'd read enough to know it would be a huge challenge. It hadn't been a rash decision. Unattached and without dependents, I was free to strike out, to recapture an ambition from my days of student optimism.

As it was my first overseas assignment, I had no illusions that I would know what to do on arrival in PNG, or that my experience would miraculously solve problems in another culture. I had first to listen and learn, let people pick over my knowledge like a rag-bag, finding bits that might be useful, ideas or methods that could be adapted, stretched or shrunk, to fit local needs. One way in which my childhood had helped was my ability to stay still, to postpone reaction in order to watch and gauge what was happening. Even if this meant spending time in an emotionally shut-down state, it had important survival value.

So did my journal. However exhausted, jubilant or dispirited I felt, I wrote every day – it became a vital catharsis. Letters to family and friends were guarded, things that might worry them were edited out, but everything went into the journal. By the end of the five years, it took up more than 600 pages of single spaced typing – without margins to save paper. Among the events, adventures and people's stories that it

recorded, were my attempts to understand what I was doing there, to review my failures and successes, and to relate these to the wider picture. To let you peep into these diaries, and into my state of mind at each stage of my time in Papua New Guinea, I have added a quote from them at the beginning of each chapter.

Studying anthropology had left me ambivalent about ‘development’ and sensitive to the vested interests of old colonial power structures that often drove it. People talked vaguely about ‘donors’, but this project was funded by a loan from the World Bank; Papua New Guineans were paying interest to the Bank’s wealthy clients. At that early stage I knew no further details, but as local decision makers in West Sepik, and in the capital at Port Moresby, seemed to think I had something they could use, I was ready to join them and see how we got on.

Inside the Crocodile shares that experience, and while it is pointless to generalise about a country where lives are in constant flux and the culture of one village can be significantly different to the next one over the ridge, it is uncanny how humour and basic human truths emerge from the most unlikely situations. And to bring you closer to this fascinating country with its many cultures, I have quoted local people in their own voices, in Tok Pisin, the Pidgin *lingua franca*, when they spoke to me in that language. Most of the time it is quite easy to translate, but there is a glossary of Tok Pisin words and phrases in the appendix if help is needed.

Reptiles, sorcery and a push start

“At the hotel poolside after dinner. Bats circle to a chorus of crickets, palm leaves fall with a clatter onto the paving, but everything will change after I get the balus to Vanimo in the morning.”

A crocodile glared from under the blackboard where I was expected to stand. A young one, less than two metres long, but half its length was jaws. They said it was the best place; its snout and legs were tied with vines, but if it broke free they would see it before it got too far. Its skin would pay for their children’s school fees.

The eight patrol officers were meeting for a workshop in a remote district in West Sepik. A comforting breeze came through frayed holes in the plaited-palm walls, but the heat striking through the tin roof was merciless. Looking up was like peering into an oven. Reluctant to turn my back towards the reptile, I sat with the small class for a discussion on ‘staff management’ which they had requested.

Discipline was an issue for all of them. When asked to identify their main problem in dealing with it, they said, “*Sanguma*” – retaliation by sorcery. Their subordinates would put a spell on them and they would get sick. They knew people who had died from *sanguma*.

Only a few months earlier, I had run a similar workshop in Scotland for senior managers who had rather different problems. And that day my fate was sealed when the boss called me into his office.

Silvering at the temples, a twinkle in his eye, he was a distinguished looking man. The chief executive of a regional authority the size of Belgium with a payroll of thousands, his ready smile hid a will of reinforced concrete, but we understood each other and made a good team.

He waved a fax towards me, held distastefully between finger and thumb. “Are you sure you want to go through with this, Trish?”

The fax read: ‘SORI TRU LONG YU WETIM STOP TELEX MASIN I GO BAGARAP STOP DPM SENIM KONTRAK KWIKTAIM STOP’

Knowing he didn’t want me to leave, I tried to conceal my excitement. This was not – as he seemed to think – bad spelling; it was Tok Pisin, Papua New Guinea Pidgin. It meant that my job application was successful and my contract would be sent – once the telex machine was fixed.

Travelling and working overseas had been my childhood daydream. Fascinated by geography at school, I had opted for a degree in social anthropology at university, and was surprised how relevant tribal studies were to my first job working in British local government. They were even more helpful in a steaming hut under the baleful gaze of a crocodile, because I knew that for those who believed it, *sanguma* could kill – it was a genuine management problem for which my years of training experience had no easy remedy.

Having worked my way up through various management jobs in the UK and Europe, and headed a regional training unit for the last few years, I had been looking for an appointment overseas to fulfil my youthful desire. But it was my deputy who spotted the advertisement, for a staff development trainer in Papua New Guinea, handing me the press cutting with an ambitious gleam in his eye.

It said the post was part of a wider development project, but I had to wait till I got home, and rooted out the atlas, to discover that Papua New Guinea was the eastern half of a large dragon-shaped island just north of Australia, and included a shoal of smaller islands. Port Moresby, the capital, was on the underside of the dragon’s tail in the south. Vanimo, where the job was based, was way up north, close to the Indonesian border. The poorest of nineteen provinces, and covering an area of 36,000 square kilometres, West Sepik was slightly larger than the Scottish region I was working in.

I sent off my application. It all seemed a bit unreal and I almost forgot about it, until an invitation arrived for me to go to London for an interview with the Crown Agents who were organising recruitment.

A week later, they phoned to say that I was their recommended candidate, but we would have to wait for confirmation from DPM (the central Department of Personnel Management) in Port Moresby, and they hoped that my being the only female on the project would not stand against my appointment.

Apparently not, but it had taken three months to receive that fax from my West Sepik colleagues, and several more weeks for them to persuade the bureaucrats in Port Moresby to fix their telex machine and send a contract. When it arrived, I gave a month's notice to my boss and started packing. In the middle of June 1987, I again boarded the sleeper train to London, but continued on a long journey to that dragon-shaped island in the Pacific.

The UK did not have a full embassy in Papua New Guinea, but Andrew Davies from the British High Commission met me at the airport. We drove through miles of suburbs and finally reached the tall office blocks in the suburb of Waigani, passing the university, the magnificent parliament house in its 'pineapple building', and a huge complex of central government offices.

"I didn't realise Port Moresby was so big. Glad I'm not working in it."
 "You'll be back here often enough."

I laughed. "I'm not likely to crave city entertainments. Not my scene."

But that was not what Andrew meant. Although government had been decentralised to provinces for the last ten years, most decision making and resources were still held in the capital. He warned me that almost everything I needed to do would have to be approved by DPM – the Department of Personnel Management in Waigani with the *bagarap* fax machines – and meant following things up personally.

Before independence, in 1975, PNG had been an Australian colony. The old colonial network – patrol officers, *kiaps*, working in the bush and reporting to district commissioners – had been replaced by provincial departments, working to their elected provincial governments. New patrol officers were mostly national staff, but a few of the old guard had been absorbed into the system; they had been in the country most of their lives, some becoming PNG citizens.

Andrew warned me to pace myself. “It’s not an easy job you’ve taken on, Trish. Give yourself a break sometimes.”

As he dropped me off at the Gateway Hotel, he added another bit of advice. “Vanimo is probably the safest province to be in, but don’t walk about here after dark on your own.”

Despite his briefing, a two-day stopover in Port Moresby, sitting by the hotel pool while waiting for the twice weekly flight on the ‘big *balus*’, in no way prepared me for my arrival in Vanimo.

Coming as I had from the Scottish highlands, the promise of sunshine was exciting, but I emerged from the plane into a sauna that drenched me to the skin before I reached the bottom of the flight steps. The long imagined fragrance of frangipani lingering romantically in warm tropical air was rudely swamped by the reek of aviation fuel. I knew it was Vanimo, because the name was painted on a small shed nearby, which turned out to be the airport building, straining at the joints to contain the crush of people inside.

Heat radiated down off the corrugated iron roof into fetid air that throbbed and echoed with the gabble of half the town’s population. Among this bubbling stew of dark limbs and faces, and splashes of bright coloured clothing, were a few white faces, sickly pallid by comparison. One of them came towards me and introduced himself as Richard, in a very English accent which seemed at odds with his drooping shorts, flapping threadbare T-shirt and rubber sandals.

The development project I was to work on had several components, including health, education, infrastructure and primary industry (agriculture and fisheries); my role was part of ‘institution building’, training and assisting local staff to manage and implement the project. Richard was in agriculture but had been asked by the project manager to meet me off the flight. We were joined by Glenda, a thin, energetic looking woman who greeted me in the friendly, quiet tones of someone accustomed to being listened to. She was headmistress of a high school in one of the remote districts and had been in the country for over twenty years. Also in the welcoming party was Clarkson, a sturdily-built young man, the project manager’s local counterpart, with whom I would work closely. As Glenda and Clarkson each had other business to deal with at the airport, Richard steered me through the throng to the front entrance.

His old Suzuki was parked outside. It was dark red, a good colour: only up close could I see it was at least thirty percent rust. Vanimo is on a peninsula jutting into the Pacific – the airstrip crosses the neck like a parson’s dog-collar – only two degrees south of the equator where salty winds speed up the corrosive mixture of constant heat and moisture.

Richard loaded my two small cases into the boot of the car (my trunk would arrive by sea), fixed the door with a twist of wire and smiling apologetically explained, “You’ll have to push it, I’m afraid. Battery’s no good, haven’t had any in town for months.”

Fortunately, a couple of locals readily gave me a hand. It seemed funny at the time; little did I realise it was a metaphor for my new life.

As we bumped along the road – made of crushed coral rutted by torrential rains and erratic driving – Richard expanded on the trials of keeping a car in working order. With little more than 45 kilometres of road in any direction – only one of the province’s eight districts could be reached by road and only in the dry season – it seemed an extravagance. But the town, mostly of one-storey buildings, the newer and better ones on piles, was spread over the peninsula and the hills behind it, with various government offices scattered widely among them. I was soon to learn how tiring it is to walk everywhere in the searing heat and high humidity that leaves skin perpetually wet.

We talked briefly about the project. It had been running for two years. Expatriate specialists working on each component already had local counterparts who would eventually replace them. For some reason, my part of the enterprise had been left till last – I would need a jump-start to catch up.

Richard took me straight to the provincial headquarters. Although it was Sunday, the expat head of the project was doing something in his office and would meet me there. The headquarters was a long, low building on a rise, with wooden steps leading up to a veranda extending the whole length of the second storey, from which a row of doors and grimy, glass-louvered windows indicated each room.

The muffled echo of our sandals scuffing wooden boards lent an eerie quality to a building more accustomed to the rattle of typewriters and babble of workers. We stopped about halfway along the row where a door stood open.

“This is yours. I’ll drop your cases off at the house. Jim won’t be long.” Richard’s footsteps receded along the veranda and down the steps until finally silenced in the dust. Relieved to have a few moments to myself, I stood in the doorway and surveyed my new office.

One corner of an old wooden desk was propped up on a couple of beer crates. In the front of it, two yawning cavities longed for drawers, and a backless chair covered against a deeply dented filing cabinet that looked as if it had been run over by a heavy vehicle. There was no telephone and, apart from a peeling bamboo table in a corner, curiously covered in red stains, that was it.

My drooping jaw snapped shut when I felt something warm and soft brush against my leg. Looking down warily, I met a pair of dark shining eyes, set well back from a long furry muzzle, while the tail at the other end swayed uncertainly. So unlike the bony creatures patched with mange that huddled in the shade around the airport, this dog had a beautiful coat the colouring of a German Shepherd, but was smaller, more the size and shape of a sheep dog. Its nose, not as cold and wet as I’d expected, investigated my proffered hand and the tail wagged with greater conviction.

A shout from the veranda made us both jump. “Hey, Frisbee, get outa there!” The dog’s eyes swivelled calmly towards the sound but the ear stroking was too good to miss. A few seconds later the voice joined us in the doorway. It belonged to a tall lanky man in running shorts and T-shirt, his reddish-blond hair retreating so far from a widow’s peak that his forehead formed two pink, shiny cheeks. “Ah, you already met Frisbee here, she’s okay.” He grinned and patted the dog, who revelled in double the attention.

So this was Jim, the project manager, who obviously hailed from somewhere in the deep south of the USA. “Richard pick you up okay off the *balus*?”

I nodded, but couldn’t help my attention turning back to the room.

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll need to get some things sorted out. Can take a while to get a hold of stuff out here.” He jangled the keys in his hand and Frisbee skittered out to the veranda, watching us impatiently. “Okay, let’s go. I’ll take you to your house.”

Weevils, broken pots and the *longlong* man

“Everyone talks in acronyms, it’s worse than a language barrier. I’m not used to not knowing things, not being in control ... and there’s no milk!”

Lulled by a syncopated chorus of tree frogs, I slept remarkably well on my first night in Vanimo – perhaps not so surprising after four days travelling. Although ceiling fans helped to cool the house, it was tempting to sleep on the veranda: it overlooked the town and its palm-fringed bay, the jungle-green hills behind it cloaked in moody purple at dusk, and a sky draped in cerise silk – I was reluctant to go inside.

My accommodation was a pleasant surprise after the office. A single storey, of wood clapboarding with glass-louvered windows and a tin roof, it was set on poles tall enough for a store below, and contained three small bedrooms, living room-cum-diner and a kitchen equipped with bottled-gas cooker. It also had a large, electric refrigerator with a freezer compartment. In the weeks that followed, I learned not to depend too much on such modern amenities because of intermittent power cuts.

The house was of a more or less standard design from the colonial era; some new ones had been built by the project for both local and expat staff scattered all over the town. The only difference was in the colour of interior woodwork: mine was puce, or more accurately, a deep ‘puke pink’. Everything was spotless. In fact, it was brand new and that was the problem: apart from a table, chairs and a bed, it was empty – not even a teaspoon.

Before cooking me a meal at his house the previous night, Jim had taken me to the Chinese trade store to get a few basic provisions; I’d

been planning pancakes for breakfast before I remembered there was no pan to cook them in, or plates to serve them on. Instead, I sat on my veranda, picking weevils out of the bag of flour, ready for when I could use it, and didn't expect to see Frisbee scampering up the steps, quickly followed by Jim.

“So, howya doin’?” His loud greeting was accompanied by a broad grin. Jim was obviously a ‘morning person’ – it was barely 7.15 a.m. “I’ll drop you off in town. You can buy stuff you want and come up to the office later.”

I put the flour back in the fridge, hoping it would be cold enough to curtail weevil sex life. Jim gave me a lift down to Steamships, the larger of the two trading stores in town. Alongside these stood a bank, a truck merchant called Ela Motors with a repair garage, and the Milk Bar, which had a pool table – clearly the local ‘dive’.

Steamies, little more than a small hangar dressed in peeling blue and yellow paint, was remarkable for the orange dust covering everything on the ranks of metal shelving that filled the space inside. It was impossible to keep dust out of anything in the drier season. The assortment of goods appeared to be entirely haphazard, with imported tinned mackerel making the largest display. But there was a rationale: the stock consisted of whatever cargo happened to arrive, mostly by boat, some by plane.

There were knives and a few large spoons but no forks, massive enamel bowls in garish floral patterns but no crockery, and the attendant could not say when there would be any. Although sent weeks earlier, it could take another month for my trunk of essentials to arrive, and desperate for something to cook in, I browsed with the locals in the noisy clatter and chatter of the store, shuffling around the rest of the shelves.

In the middle of a pile of plastic beakers, I spied a colourful box sporting a picture of a casserole dish. The top flap was loose. Inside was a luxurious stone-ware dish lined with glass, decorated tastefully on the outside with stylized leaves. The description on the packaging was in French. I had never seen such a magnificent piece and marvelled at how it came to be there. It was expensive and my first pay day would not be for a few weeks, but I had to have it.

I lifted the box tenderly with both hands, realising that the bottom of the box was missing only when its contents slid down the sides and exploded on the floor. Bits of glass scattered like shrapnel along the aisle. In the silence that followed, you could have heard a feather drift and settle in the dust.

The crowd that gathered in mute horror around the crime scene seemed to share my sorrow and embarrassment. The manager, an Australian, elbowed his way through to see what had happened.

“Bugger!” He must have seen the expression on my face and the welling-up in my eyes because he added, “Aw, no worries mate. Accident, eh?”

I paid for my few purchases, including my first *bilum* – the traditional, expanding string bag that hangs habitually from some part of the Papua New Guinean anatomy – and walked out into the blinding heat. Hibiscus, bougainvillea, frangipani and six-foot hedges of poinsettias blossomed everywhere, their colours intensified in glaring sunlight.

Only a few wide streets made up the centre of Vanimo so I had no trouble finding the office. Scuffling along the crumbly surface of the road on the way there, I tried to avoid the great globs of red-stained spittle that lined the road and wondered, in my newcomer’s ignorance, if tuberculosis was endemic.

Jim stood under the veranda talking to a man equal in height but twice his girth, whose shirt buttons strained unsuccessfully to conceal patches of dark belly. His stained, baggy trousers were frayed at the cuffs; stray threads extended to his feet which were hooked into thongs squashed into slivers and curling up at the edges. We were introduced: Sinur was a senior civil servant in the provincial administration. His fleshy face folded into a warm smile as we shook hands. I had a fleeting impression of a cuddly bear, but it was his mouth that attracted my attention.

He was chewing something that bulged in his cheek and glistened bright red on his lips. In the middle of saying something to Jim, he turned away and a glob of red-stained spittle hit the ground. After *bilums*, this was the second distinctive feature of local culture – *buai*, or betel. Actually the nut of the Areca palm, a chunk is cut off and chewed

with a pinch of *kambang* (lime) and *daka* (pepper vine) to bring out the flavour. *Buai* is a mild stimulant used by almost everyone, and kept handy in the *bilum*, but chewing it in the provincial offices was forbidden.

In spite of his disregard for regulations, in which he was in the majority, I was not far wrong in my initial impressions of Sinur; he turned out to be one of my staunchest and most reliable allies among the constantly changing cast of senior officials in the province.

We were interrupted by an expat in a well-pressed, short-sleeved beige shirt and extremely short shorts of the same colour. Scrubbed and pink as a new schoolboy, he giggled as he handed Jim a set of keys. “I had to divert him with a meat pie while I yanked them from his pocket. He was so disgusted he threw it in the bin.”

Jim chuckled, “Thanks, Terry,” and turning to me, he added, “That was Sebby. You’ll meet him soon enough – the *longlong* guy. Watch your keys.”

“*Longlong?*”

Terry tapped his temple with his index finger.

With the keys to his project Land Cruiser returned, Jim drove me down to the customs office to see what was happening about my trunk. On the way, he told me that Terry had come to PNG from Australia twenty-five years ago as a patrol officer and was on the permanent staff; he was the only person who could persuade Sebby to give up the attractive-looking things he took from offices, mostly keys or calculators. Sebby might have been a teacher at one time, too, because he liked to draw on a blackboard, or any papers that were left lying around.

Although Sebby belonged to a nearby village – his *as ples*, or place of birth – he hung around town most of the time and had become something of a mascot at work. He seemed to like the company of white males and sat in either Jim’s or Terry’s office for hours, rolling his smokes in strips of newspaper. Usually no one bothered him. One or other of the trade stores sometimes gave him food; he was tolerated, benignly neglected, like the dogs lingering in patches of shade.

We went via the post office, picking up an armful of mail. Jim tossed a small package to me. “Hey, you got mail already.”

I noted the Scottish post mark, aware of a slight tremor crossing my diaphragm – Scotland already felt like a place from a different lifetime. I tucked the packet into my *bilum* for later.

Standing behind an enormous desk, rummaging through countless layers of papers secured against a draught from the overhead ceiling fan by an assortment of tea mugs, the customs officer finally produced what looked like a freight manifest. My trunk still existed, at least on paper. It would be shipped on the *Clydebank*, he told me, but only as far as Madang; I would have to clear it with customs there and arrange transshipment.

Madang, on the coast about half way between Vanimo and Port Moresby, was a town I would visit anyway to meet with regional staff of DPM. It all looked achievable. Estimated date of arrival on the manifest was only four weeks away, but the customs officer shook his head with a wan smile for my newcomer's expectations. The ship was already two weeks behind schedule.

For the rest of the day, I sat in Jim's office being briefed, trying to follow his flow of project jargon which was constantly interrupted by phone calls, and staff wanting his signature, passing on information, or asking what was happening about some meeting or other.

During these respites I watched people pass the open door. Women wore *meri* blouses, long shapeless tops billowing out from gathers at the shoulders and around the neck, with colourful *laplaps* wound around their waists and extending to their ankles – a dress introduced by missionaries scandalised by the naked body. The local men wore long trousers and brightly-printed, loose shirts – only expats seemed to prefer shorts. And a few were dressed in dark suits stretched to ripples across the back and obviously pinching under the arms, which must have been uncomfortable in the heat; this latter group, I later discovered, were provincial politicians.

I met so many staff in such a short time it was difficult to remember them. I had been told elsewhere that 'white people' all look alike, and I understood why. When we are surrounded by people of a different skin colour, we have to readjust our perception and recognition – tones diverge from what we are used to, shadows create new proportions – and we have to seek different signals. What saved me from too many

embarrassing mistakes during those first few days were distinctive hair styles. Characteristic Melanesian hair is black and crinkled, making it springy when long and very tightly curled when short; my colleagues used many creative ways of cutting and dressing it.

Some men had their hair clipped so close it looked like a skull cap, others teased out the curls to give a bushy effect and had it cut fairly short; the fashion among the younger men was to have it trimmed in the shape of a crew cut. Most women teased their curls out to what the West calls an ‘Afro style’ of various lengths: a popular place to tuck pens and pencils. A few tried to straighten their hair with oils or gels.

By the end of that first day my *bilum* had expanded to three times its resting size with documents to read and forms to fill out and, among other things, I had picked up that the locals called West Sepik ‘*Sandaun*’ (‘Sundown’), and that the chief executive of its civil service was called the Secretary. I was supposed to meet him – although Jim controlled project funds, the Secretary was my immediate boss – but when Jim stopped by his office, he had a politician with him and we were waved away till later. That turned out to be more than a week, because the Secretary left for Port Moresby the following day and was unable to get a flight back.

Within days of my arrival, the country was in the throes of only its third national election. It took three days and nights for results from outlying areas of the province to be recorded. Terry had recruited Jim to help with the counting, so I tagged along. A control centre had been set up in the middle of the recreation ground to receive calls from staff in district offices and remote outstations phoning in the results. Some of the counts came in via mission radios, messages crackling with static and having to be repeated several times. Terry chalked up the names and locations of all forty-five Sandaun candidates on a series of blackboards covering the entire length of the grandstand. Nationally, 109 seats in parliament were contested by 1,515 candidates. Surprised at the high number – PNG’s population was a little over 3 million at that time – I asked Terry how many political parties there were. “There’s about eighteen, but most candidates stand as independents. People vote more for personalities ... especially members of their community who are successful.” He explained that voters’ fingers were

dipped in indelible ink to prevent double voting; if they could not write or make a mark, they whispered their choice to the election officer.

An air of tension and excitement increased after dark when lights rigged up for the purpose illuminated the board; some people sat on benches, watching, others milled around, fewer as the night drew on. Trucks were parked haphazardly. Cables, connecting the bank of temporary telephones, tangled and trailed across the ground. Even the National Broadcasting Corporation was there, and the local Sandaun Radio station gave out *tok save* through loud-speakers as the figures came in. It seemed that anyone could stand for election; some candidates had less than a hundred votes – probably from their own village – one or two had less than twenty. It would take at least three weeks for ballot boxes from each province to be collected, votes individually counted and a final result announced in Port Moresby. We left Terry and the others to continue, Jim dropping me home about 2 a.m.

Next day, Jim was expecting to cook for three British volunteers attached to various parts of the project, and invited me to eat with them; he'd lent me plates, pans, forks and a kettle, but everyone was so hospitable to a newcomer, I'd hardly used them. I played with Frisbee on the veranda while Jim rattled pans in the kitchen, having wisely declined my offer to help.

The three volunteers all carried *bilums* distended with cans of beer or a bottle of wine, and wore the standard shorts and T-shirt in varying stages of fade. The only variation was in footwear, automatically removed before entering anyone's house. Greg, in desert boots, had just flown in from Telefomin – a high, muddy valley in mountains to the west – where he was helping to set up a small marketing unit selling locally grown vegetables to Vanimo and the mine settlement in Tabubil. A tricky operation: everything had to be flown out and flights were always uncertain. Vegetables could fry on the airstrip waiting for a plane.

Ricky, a few years older than the others and probably in his mid-thirties, worked in Vanimo in the commerce division, but I was hazy about what he did there. He was the only one of the three who was married (his wife was in Madang that week). Ricky's PVC mission sandals were the same as Jim's; scrubbable, and made with stainless steel rivets so they wouldn't rust, they looked indestructible. Ideal. Jim had

told me they were called ‘Kaydees’ and were imported from New Zealand. I’d tried to buy a pair but there were none in town that week.

The one wearing ‘flip-flops’ (‘thongs’ to Aussies, ‘jandals’ to Kiwis) was Mike. From his conversation, I learned that he had a background in mechanics or engineering, and had just built a cacao drying shed in one of the districts. His current base was Oksapmin, another mountainous area that already had a vegetable marketing scheme which he helped local people to run.

By the time we had eaten Jim’s delicious, deeply layered pizza, my energy was flagging, but it perked up when I realised the volunteers were discussing a bushwalk they were planning to do in a couple of months time. They would meet in Oksapmin and walk from there to Lake Kopiago, about 40 kilometres further south along the Central Range according to the map, and then fly back from Kopiago on a mission plane. It was expected to take about three days.

“You could come with us, Trish. Why don’t you? Give you a chance to see more of the country.” Mike’s invitation was echoed by the other two.

“Don’t go givin’ her ideas.” Jim spoke before I had a chance to reply. “She only just got here. Anyways, it’s a real tough trail.”

“Have you done it?” I asked him. I’d trekked in the Himalayas a few times, but you never knew how hard a route was until you’d walked it.

“No, never have. Would be interesting to do some time,” and he dismissed the matter: “Anyways, you’ll have other chances to do it when you’ve been here a while longer.”

I wasn’t so sure. Already I’d heard enough talk to know that people came and went constantly: long leave came due, contracts ended, folk got sick and left suddenly. The chance of three able-bodied companions, one of whom had been there nearly two years, was ex-army and had some experience of the mountain terrain, seemed too good to miss.

Ricky lived nearby and would walk home; the other two from out-stations were spending the night at Jim’s place, so Jim offered to drive me home. But before we left, I told the volunteers: “Count me in on the bushwalk. I’ll start training tomorrow.”

It was late by the time Jim dropped me off, but I sat on my cool

veranda for a while. Such a full day, it felt more like a week. Suddenly remembering my package from Scotland, I took it out, recognising the writing of an old friend. Opening it, I couldn't suppress a watery smile: worried that I would go 'jungly' in my new surroundings and anxious for me to stay in touch with my own culture, he had sent a cassette he recorded for me – an omnibus edition of *The Archers*.