

The Milne Bay missive: developing tourism in PNG

More usually at home in Melbourne, Andrew Whittaker, *The Leisure Review's* southern hemisphere correspondent, has taken some time out to offer his business expertise as a volunteer in Papua New Guinea. Here he reports on his experience of helping to develop local tourism skills.

I have been working for Australian Business Volunteers in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and placed with Milne Bay Tourism Bureau to help with sponsorship and marketing of the National Canoe and Kundu Festival, which is held annually in Alotau. The location is fantastic and visually it is the classic beautiful tropical paradise. It is also stinking hot and humid. As a result the heat and humidity build up during the day but we do get the relief of a downpour.

Milne Bay Tourism is a small operation based in a weatherboard house. They are short of space so my work area is a wide shelf in the storage room. It is functional and you make do with what is available. There is no air conditioning, just some fans on the walls. The three staff are great and very helpful but they have a huge workload as tourism is in its infancy here. The potential is great but the infrastructure and tour packages have yet to be developed. Alotau is not really set up for tourism. Even though it is in a beautiful location it is a tough-looking town. It has two short streets with basic services but all the shops have grilles and security guards. There are no restaurants or cafes and nothing is open in the evening. It is the staging post for all the movement of people coming in and out from the islands so there are people continually walking around or sitting under trees waiting for boats. Walking is a relative term. I have yet to see anyone run and the local 'walking' is a slow easy going stroll ideally suited to the climate. In the heat it is still too fast for me.

My first impressions? The best part of the day is early morning, sunrise. Milne Bay is flat and calm, warm but with no bite in the sun. It is very quiet with the odd dog barking. Go for a swim and revel in the tropical environment. Worst time of the day is midday to late afternoon. The heat and humidity build up with no relief. It would be more comfortable sitting in an oven with a roast chicken. There are no newspapers but great music, generally a sort of Pacific island reggae. One of the mini-markets has a promotional DJ situated outside their entrance with a big sound system. Heavy metal bands would be proud of him as he belts out the music at such a level you could hold a dance party in Cairns at the same time. No local government noise and environment officer to tame this guy! Betel nut chewing is widespread and it really makes the teeth red, which is disconcerting when someone smiles. I don't think it will take off in America, although their dentists would do a roaring trade in bleaching.

It did not take long to get a better understanding of the tasks I am here to do. The National Canoe and Kundu Festival is a three-day event held in Alotau each November and it has grown to such an extent that it is now too big for its volunteer committee. It is a fantastic spectacle and is being promoted by the PNG government as a major tourist attraction. The canoes come from different islands and range from war canoes and trading canoes to outriggers and sailing canoes. They are decked out in various colours and can have magnificent carved prows; some can carry as many as 30 men. They used to have races between the different types of canoes and there was aggressive, intense rivalry between the islands, some of whom are traditional enemies. The losers often did not accept the results and continued the 'race' back on the beach with all-in brawls, which is when the official racing had to cease. We now hear that the war canoes want the racing back, which may just be an excuse for a good dust-up on the beach.

The Kundu part relates to the rituals, customs and dances that are associated with the making of the canoes and their traditional cultures. This is also highly colourful and great to watch. My task is to work on the sponsorship and marketing of the festival. The product is great but there are some big problems. For example, there is no road to Alotau from Port Moresby and only one plane a day. The beaches around Milne Bay are black sand and stones, and you have to travel to find a white sand beach (essentially out on the islands). The growing tragedy is the increasing amount of 'modern' rubbish that collects on beaches near towns. Not only the naturally produced logs, leaves, coconuts but also plastic bags, bottles, white plastic and Styrofoam, opened tins and cans. It is not a good look. TV reception is variable depending on the weather. It can come through in black and white rather than colour. You can get some Australian stations but the most reliable and best reception is from Australian Network (ABC) and Aljazeera. The latter is really good on news and current affairs, and I am now an expert on the politics of the Middle East. Security is the growth industry. Every shop has at least one security guard and the supermarkets have quite a few wandering through their store as well. I am not



Andrew's working conditions: functional but comfortable

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A public convenience East Cape style

sure how well trained they are and having so many creates a siege mentality as you cannot go near any building without nodding to a guard. The security mentality dominates; my fridge in my flat even has a built-in lock with a key.

Even the most tranquil setting needs care. I was taken out to East Cape, which is about an hour's travel on unsealed road out of Alotau, for a swim at a white sand beach and snorkel at a coral reef. A beautiful location, a typical tropical promotional setting, and popular transit point for people from the islands. I noticed some little huts on stilts built over the water, all flimsy structures. I was informed these were the local toilets. The water looked clear but I gave the swimming a miss.

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