

Kokopo Mask Festival

July 2011

In the last blog posting we were in Buka having joined up with the rest of the Arawa VSA contingent and met Lloyd Jones, the author of "Mr Pip". We took the opportunity to buy food that we couldn't get in Arawa and Lyndsay who was not accompanying us kindly took it all back to Arawa, along with Lloyd. A small insulated "chilly bin" that we had brought back from NZ proved its worth and we now have mature cheese, lamb shanks, sausages and chicken thighs in our freezer, which hopefully will keep frozen.

Our flight out to Rabaul on the Tuesday evening was uneventful and we caught a PMV from the airport to Vunapope in Kokopo, where we were met by Hannah, the area rep for Papua New Guinea who took us to an empty VSA house in the complex which was to be the home, for the best part of a week, of Norah, Virginia, Rosie, and me from Arawa, and Sera from Buka, who was heading back to New Zealand at the end of her assignment.



*Vunapope Cathedral
(Norah's photo)*

The house suited us admirably – basic, but within walking distance of the festival grounds, the market, main town shops and the PMV terminus. One crusty old man among 4 intelligent, confident, and capable women of various ages was something else! They soon had him firmly in his place- one step from the dogbox!

The festival was fun, in the usual chaotic PNG way. There was a nicely printed programme that no-one took any notice of- the first item each day was usually late getting going and whatever group was around followed on from the previous act. If there was no-one we inspected the stands or sat and waited, making sure that the piece of ground you chose to plant your behind on hadn't been used by someone to dispose of their mouthful of bright red betel nut juice. The commentator spoke mostly in Pidgin, which I suspect the tourists might have battled with, while the spectators with their assorted digital cameras in turn were at times intrusive to the point of rudeness. It seems that everyone with a digital camera is a semi-pro photographer now, out to get that special picture from an unusual and intimate perspective, so it was hard to see a dance performance without having some sunburnt tourist sticking their Nikon up the nose of one of the performers – or expecting the warrior group advancing into the arena to split and walk around the lady determined to get *the ultimate* close-up shot.

We received little explanation of what the dances were all about which was unfortunate, but the spectacle was good.

On the Wednesday morning we rose early and joined the crowds for the arrival of the "dukduks" onto a nearby beach- they looked a little like oversized kiwis and in earlier years women were forbidden from seeing the proceedings. We finished the proceedings with a nice breakfast picnic on the beach, care of the local VSA and their friends, which was an unexpected and pleasant surprise.



The following pictures are a selection from the show grounds where the main festival took place. Included in the proceedings was the killing of a couple of poor unfortunate live pythons, then skinning – snakes still looked pretty alive to me - and cooking in a traditional umu. (very similar to Maori Hangi – the food is buried in the ground with heated rocks) Tourists were later offered pieces to sample – we had left by then so unfortunately missed out (yeah, right!!). One of the “mud men” also demonstrated firemaking using the traditional methods – in about thirty seconds he had a flame. Some of the decorations had been updated to make use of more modern materials – one of the series of hats included plastic Virgin Mary statues!



Virgin Mary hats, Mud Men and Tumbuan (Dukduk on land I believe)

(Also Check out videos from the posting title page)



Making fire and ramming long reed up the backside of the python prior to skinning it

Friday evening was our opportunity to see the Fire Dancing – an enjoyable but quite expensive exercise – but the day shows were cheap to compensate. We had to travel by car for more than an hour into the mountains to get to the venue (per kind favour of VSA and their friends again) and were treated to a couple of hours of semi-naked and costumed men dancing, chanting and leaping through fire or kicking the embers around to the rhythmic beat of drums.



(Un?) Fortunately there weren't too many tourists at the festival but it deserved more. However Rabaul is quite an expensive place to get to and accommodation, while a bit cheaper than the exorbitant rates of Port Moresby, is not cheap. Nonetheless with its mixture of cultural, natural (scenery, coral reefs and volcanoes) and historical features (Rabaul was the headquarters of the Japanese advance towards Australia in WW2) it is an interesting place to visit. Besides the locals are friendly and welcoming and the crime rate seems quite low – we never felt threatened in any way.

While there we also took time to inspect some of the tunnels built largely by Chinese slave labour for the Japanese invaders to protect them from Allied bombing. There are many kilometres of them, as well as a modern memorial built to replace an old Chinese cemetery for those who died during this time.



The local tourist association had built a walkway past the barges stored by the Japanese in a tunnel and assisted the locals to set up a booth and charge visitors to see the tunnel. Unfortunately the plank decking of the walkway had been removed – probably to help build a house or for firewood – so we could only see two of the five barges there. They still charged us the full K5 per person admission fee!

We also took a trip into Rabaul one morning when nothing was happening at the Mask Festival because it had rained the night before and the venue was very muddy.

Rabaul town is about 40 minutes from Kokopo by local PMV at a very reasonable K4 per person each way. Large areas of previously lush residential areas are ash covered wasteland and the old Rabaul hotel is still hanging on - but looking a bit shabby. We also went to the local museum housed in the former PNG Club building. All are just over the hill from the eruption crater, which still looks pretty active, so I imagine it will be a while (if ever) before Rabaul gets some serious restoration work done.



There are still a few more things to see and we would like to go back again some time – maybe with son Robert in November?.

On Sunday – after the festival was over and our last day in Kokopo – local VSA volunteer Janna drove us a group of us down to the Raukoko resort for some R&R – we needed to take it easy after a busy week. We had been planning to take a banana boat to an offshore island for a bit of snorkelling but the wind got up, making the journey unpleasant and possibly hazardous, so we lazed around the pool, snorkelled off the beach and enjoyed a hotel meal as a special treat. I thought that I had succeeded in destroying our second camera and only remaining camera! It is the very nice little waterproof Canon and I took it snorkelling when it suddenly stopped working. I thought I might have somehow got sea water into it, which would undoubtedly have been fatal. Anyway two days later it started working again, much to my relief, and all seems well– let's hope it stays that way!



Weird 1.2m long sea slug photographed off the resort just before the camera conked

Monday morning was time to go back to Arawa. Our 6.30am taxi was 20 minutes late (frantic phonecalls - including to kind VSA Rep Hannah to try to arrange an alternative); we approached the airport down the “out” ramp, rushed to the checkin where we were ushered breathlessly to the front of the queue. Our bags were weighed (well under allowance), dumped in a heap behind the counter, and the frowning check-in lady disappeared around the back for a further 45 minutes while we and about 10 other passengers waited (nerve-racking because Air Niugini is not averse to bumping booked and paid passengers and/or their luggage off their flights, especially if they have a big cargo on board – one consolation is that it is better than falling out of the sky!) We were finally confirming on the (1 hour delayed) flight to Buka. When we climbed aboard to our separate seats all over the plane we trooped past the President of Bougainville, who was quietly seated in a front row seat, and the full plane took off and safely deposited us (and our luggage) in Buka. Our ride back to Arawa was delayed for about 3hours because Buka's solitary bank had lost its satellite link and was unable to process any transaction until it was restored, and the driver had some important business to do there. None of the rivers were up, so we eventually arrived safely back to our house in Arawa just after dark, to find the electricity was off and the man who operated the Women's centre generator nowhere to be found. Routine day at the office!



Rabaul Volcanoes across the Bay from Kokopo