

A WORLD APART

The guesthouse of Orotoaba village. Opposite: Children living along Papua New Guinea's coast are skilled paddlers.

**ON THE
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STORY BY
BROOKE MORTON

PHOTOS BY
ZACH STOVALL



From left: The locals of Orotoaba call this dirt path the “main road.” View of surrounding fjords from the guesthouse.

Clockwise from above: A boy and his kitten; a typical village breakfast; cooling off at the community pool.

ANTS THE SIZE OF PUSHpins work their way up to my belt loops in the time it takes me to catch my breath. They’re making better progress than we are — or so it seems. Their route is direct while ours has been circuitous, the destination perhaps unknown. For the first time in three hours, we rest, a fallen tree in the jungle serving as a bench.

Our group of four, two dogs in tow, had set out at first light from the village of Orotoaba, high atop a fjord finger jutting off the northeastern half of Papua New Guinea’s main island. A ruddy footpath guided us down past the settlement’s 30 or so thatch-roof houses, through yam patches and gardens of banana trees and watermelons, then out into the wild canopy of trees curtained with vines. Our intention was to slay a wild boar or two, but now I wonder if we’ll carry back anything more than the mud on our shoes.

Leading us is Jackson Borime, Orotoaba’s 41-year-old village chief and the owner of the guesthouse where I slept last night. He and his brother-in-law, Leslie, carry spears — actual spears. Like everything else here, they are handmade. Jackson keeps a wrapped fist atop the foot-long metal point; the other pops betel nuts into

his mouth. Instead of coffee, this wild-growing nut is the stimulant of choice here, chewed with lime powder and a mustard seedpod. The concoction stains their teeth a deep red that can’t help but remind me of blood, which, I recall, is what we’re out here to see.

Like a child weary of a road trip, I ask Leslie how much farther. His response is barely audible: “When the dogs meet the pig, they bark. We kill the pig.” This is how most conversation in Orotoaba happens: straightforward, no jokes, no figurative language. Just facts.

“So ... how far will we go?” I ask.

“It depends on the dogs.”

It’s this simplicity of speech, of daily life, that led me to this village. I’d first learned of the Oro Province when I happened upon the blog of a bareboater who had anchored off the coast. She arrived with no paper money and managed to exchange batteries and ball caps for local produce. In her photos, she beamed a transcendent smile, which I suspected was triggered by much more than the ripeness of the produce.

It was perhaps a year later that I found Tufi Resort while

researching out-of-the-way scuba trips. With its air-conditioned rooms, swimming pool and fridge full of South Pacific — the brand of beer that locals call SP — the lodge regularly welcomes scuba hobbyists and hikers finishing the Kokoda Trail, a grueling, muddy, 60-mile stretch where Australians fought off the advancing Imperial Japanese Army in World War II.

But what intrigued me most about coming to the resort was that it facilitates visits and coordinates guesthouse stays with nearby villages — six of them — where you’ll find no paper money (aka *kina*), no electricity, no TV, not even radios; no signal stretches so far. These communities have almost no contact with the outside world, save for spotty cellphone service and the few travelers willing to journey to this remote corner. Village chiefs have pay-as-you-go cellphones, not smartphones, but little else in terms of technology. They certainly don’t own computers — and yet, it was a chain of emails that landed me here on this hilltop.

The hunt might have continued if Jackson was with just family, but he has a breathless Westerner in tow. Kindly, he makes the decision to head back toward the village. After all, the dogs have succeeded only in finding an egg laid by a startled bush chicken alongside some bandicoot scat. No pigs in sight.

So, with tree roots and vines as railings, I pull myself back up the hill. Technically, the hunt is over, but Jackson pauses along the way to listen for telltale snapping of twigs or swishing of dried leaves.

As we navigate down into a ravine, Jackson’s head tilts to his shoulder, and, after several minutes of studying the canopy, he raises a finger. There, with dangling plumage red as a hibiscus flower, is a bird of paradise. This ornate species is among the world’s rarest, found primarily only in this country, and, on our return walk, we happen upon it easily. I smile. Today, in this jungle, what could stand as a birder’s lifetime achievement proves easier to find than a common boar.



WHEN TO GO

MAY

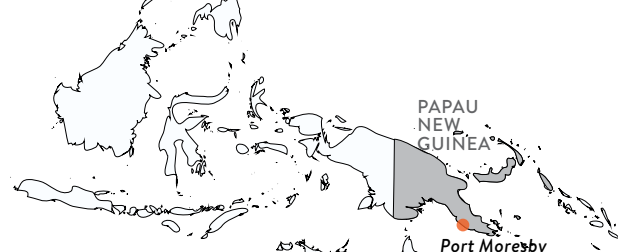
May to October brings flatter sea conditions and cooler, drier weather ideal for hiking. In May, during the sing-sing gathering near Tufi Resort, tribes and villages convene to share dances and songs.



A 600-foot drop.

Dawn the next morning comes slowly to the village. From within the gauzy mosquito netting canopied over my bed, I look out through the propped-open window of the simple bamboo hut that I will call home for the next four days. Cool blue light reveals trails of cirrus clouds originating far offshore and gathering overhead. I feel a chill as I dress. Jackson brings breakfast to a separate dining hut where I manage a cup of instant coffee, a pair of fried eggs, biscuits and several tiny bananas before he returns to lead me on a hike.

We climb over the fjord to a waterfall spilling down a cliff on the opposite side, then follow a sliver of stream to where it stops short at an overlook — with no guardrails. Below, the Solomon Sea pushes in. When I've snapped my fill of photos, we turn. A muddy pool shaded by a bamboo thicket had been empty when we passed moments ago. Now, a dozen boys and girls from the village, wide eyes trained on us, stand quietly in a circle around it. The older children hold the hands of the littlest ones, perhaps 6 and 7 years old. Clearly, they're waiting for something.



GETTING HERE

Most travelers route through Australia, flying direct to Port Moresby from Brisbane (Virgin Australia, Qantas and Air Niugini), Cairns or Sydney (both Qantas, Air Niugini). Air Niugini, PNG's national airline, connects the country with Singapore, Manila, Bali, Hong Kong and several other destinations. As of

October, Philippine Airlines offers two flights a week — Fridays and Sundays — from Manila to Port Moresby; rates for this five-hour flight are currently more affordable than Australia-based routes. Tufi is accessible by air from Port Moresby via Airlines PNG; flights are on Wednesdays and Fridays.

I'm still not sure what they're waiting for when I peel out of my sweaty hiking clothes and, in my swimsuit, pad across the algae-slick rocks and plop in. After a few moments submerged, I gesture to a little girl to join, but, ducking her head, she scrambles back a few feet. I then turn to ask a few more kids if they want to play in the water. It seems so odd not to share this communal pool, one that clearly belongs to the villagers. The kids practice English in school, but they're too shy to acknowledge they understand my request. So, after a while longer in the pool, I towel off.

The second I'm dressed, the kids thunder in. A few boys remove their shirts, a few get naked, but most wear all the clothing they wore on the walk down: brightly colored polos and T-shirts, sarongs and shorts. They leap from the muddy banks. They climb the bamboo and somersault in. They laugh and cheer and splash. Jackson, who'd been sitting on the shore while I enjoyed a swim, slips into the water.

"Sure, now you go in," I tease.

He flashes a sorry-I-ate-the-last-piece-of-pie grin.

That the villagers waited to enter the water makes me wonder: Paper money might not have circulated in the community, but some sort of us-and-them assumption about tourism has. Or perhaps it's shyness mixed with the intent to be polite.

I ask Jackson about it that night over dinner: a spread of grilled cuttlefish, plantains, pumpkin leaves in coconut milk, and thick, chewy pancakes made of sago flour and water.

He opened his guesthouse in 2005. When he asks me to sign his visitor logbook, I do a quick scan. Last year, he welcomed a total of 63 people, or roughly five per month.

"They sleep one night and go back," he says. "They should stay."

The logbook confirms I'm one of the first travelers to spend more than one night here. Perhaps the only to spend four days.

TRAVEL TIP

Bring a small backpack, ideally waterproof; short rain showers are common here.

SAY OUR EDITORS



Armed with only spears, the men and boys of Orotoaba ready for a trek through the jungle to slay a boar.



THE OUTPOST This dugout canoe is both the Papua New Guinea minivan and the only connection to the outside world. Tufi Resort, in the distance, is the mall. In search of the basics — sugar, a knife, a prepaid SIM card — locals pack up their families and paddle for hours, if not all night, to reach the simple store. Once there, they stay awhile, erecting tarps for shelter and washing clothes and dishes in the waterfall.



The main way that villagers of Jebo travel is by boat — even children paddle outriggers to reach school.



From left: A young boy from Jebo shows his day's catch; the dining pavilion of Tufi Resort overlooks the harbor.



In the lodge at Tufi, in a pamphlet describing the village treks, Orotoaba is summed up as the home of the bird of paradise. And maybe you need only one day to admire the jungle fowl, but more happens in this village than you can appreciate in 24 hours.

It's Wednesday, two days after arriving, when I become more deliberate in attempting to connect with the children. I start for the swimming hole without Jackson, an authority figure. Before setting off, I kill time in the village center, pretending to fiddle with my camera. The sight of me draws so much attention that it's not long before a few children wander to my side, taking my hands.

They pull me to the swimming hole as more kids fall in behind us. At the water's edge, I smile a lot and overly mime asking a question, shrugging my shoulders and widening my eyes in appeal. One of the older girls can't wait and jumps in. Seal broken, they laugh and tumble into the water. At one point, the children link arms and jump in, calling out together in English, "Ready, set, go." It's a village-style pool party, with everyone taking turns to outdo one another with flips and midair poses. I ease out my camera.

The kids pause, but just for a moment. When I flip the screen to show them their own faces, they giggle, then pose, trying outdo whichever child had just flashed a goofy mug.

Come Thursday, I pack up, trekking down the hill to Jebo, the village that will host me for a final night. This community sits along a golden-sand beach where a speedboat from the Tufi Resort first dropped me. Much more accessible than Orotoaba, Jebo is reachable from the resort via a 30-minute boat ride. It doesn't require an additional hour of hiking, so it sees dozens more tourists, mostly Australians.

I sit at the picnic table that night with the owner of Jebo's sole guesthouse, Lancelot Ginari, 34, and his family. A battery-powered floodlight illuminates the sand beneath our feet. It's high tide, so waves wash in mere yards from our plastic chairs.

While I savor a cup of tea and Lancelot's wife, Winnie, chews betel nut, I share my experiences on the beach that afternoon. I walked up and down the shore, trying to engage the children. Instead, I was met mostly with furrowed brows and crossed arms. One of the older boys kept cracking comments in Karafe, the

local language, causing the other children to erupt into laughter. I didn't feel welcome. Still, I took a stick of driftwood and drew alligators, native to my Florida home, in the sand. The pictures confused the kids, luring them in. I took a few photos, but I sensed hesitation. I didn't force a connection.

Lancelot said this didn't surprise him. Within the last year, he explained, a few kids in his village had started asking for dollars in exchange for having their photos taken. When the propositioned travelers declined, the kids simply ran off, but it signaled a shift. Clearly, something had begun to infiltrate this village.

Friday morning, Lancelot raps on the guesthouse door. He reminds me that a speedboat will beach at 11 a.m. to collect me. "Most guests leave something behind for us, maybe shoes or hats or sunglasses — a gift," he says, eyes fixed on the sea.

"Oh, is that so?" I say, flashing back to when I readied to leave the hilltop village of Orotoaba. The kids had gathered on the guesthouse lawn, and when I pulled out pencils and notepads as gifts, they seemed surprised and were shy in accepting them. Before leaving the States, I'd asked the Tufi Resort what presents

to bring and even if such a gesture would be appropriate. I was told no gifts were necessary, but showing up empty-handed felt too much like attending a dinner party without a bottle of wine.

So when Lancelot stands outside my door in expectation, part of me knows that he's merely trying to survive. Even smaller cruise ships land so infrequently that he has to hustle when he can.

I understand. And yet, I sense something in me struggling to hold on to the magic from earlier in the week. I think of Orotoaba, realizing I'd never been to a place so free from modern distractions, where my connection with others felt so untethered, so pure. And maybe that says more about how I fill my own days — with the pings of email, a constant barrage of news and other barriers to authentic human connection.

I make a choice: In my mind, I create a space for the memories of this little village high atop the fjord, allowing for a return whenever I'm in need of a pause to still my soul.

Tufi Resort charges \$80 per night to stay at the village guesthouses, which includes all meals. Village transfers cost \$90; tufidive.com.