

ACTION

Asia

February 2004

Myanmar
Kayaking
the impossible

On foot across
West Papua

Birdlife of
Hong Kong

Treating
snakebite



9 771019 463001 >

Hong Kong HK\$35
Singapore S\$4.95 (inc GST)
Malaysia M\$9.50 • Thailand B120
China Rmb35 • Philippines P120
Guam US\$4 • Indonesia RP30,000 (inc tax)
Japan ¥600 • Korea W4,900 • Nepal NPR200
Taiwan NT\$128 • Others US\$4

FEATURES *Asia* ACTION

F E B R U A R Y 2 0 0 4

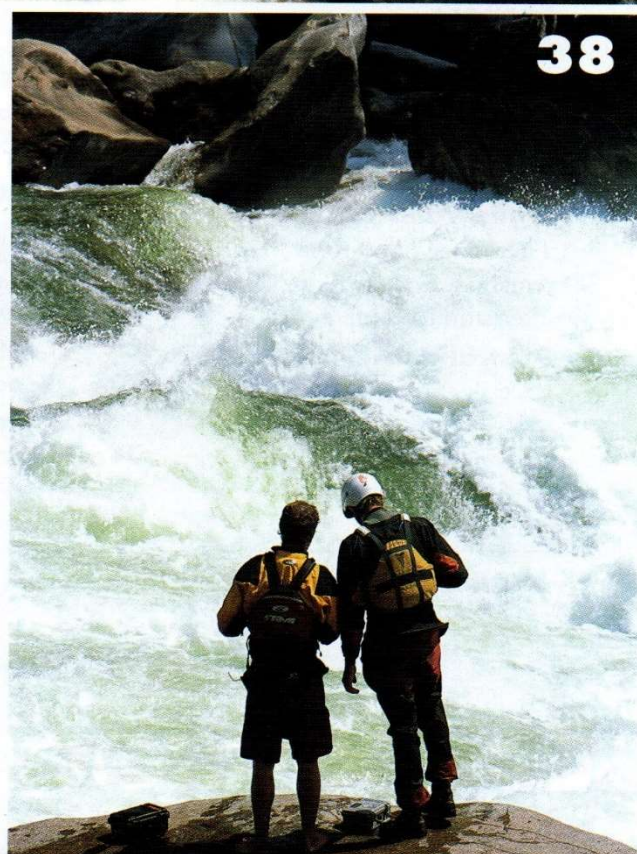


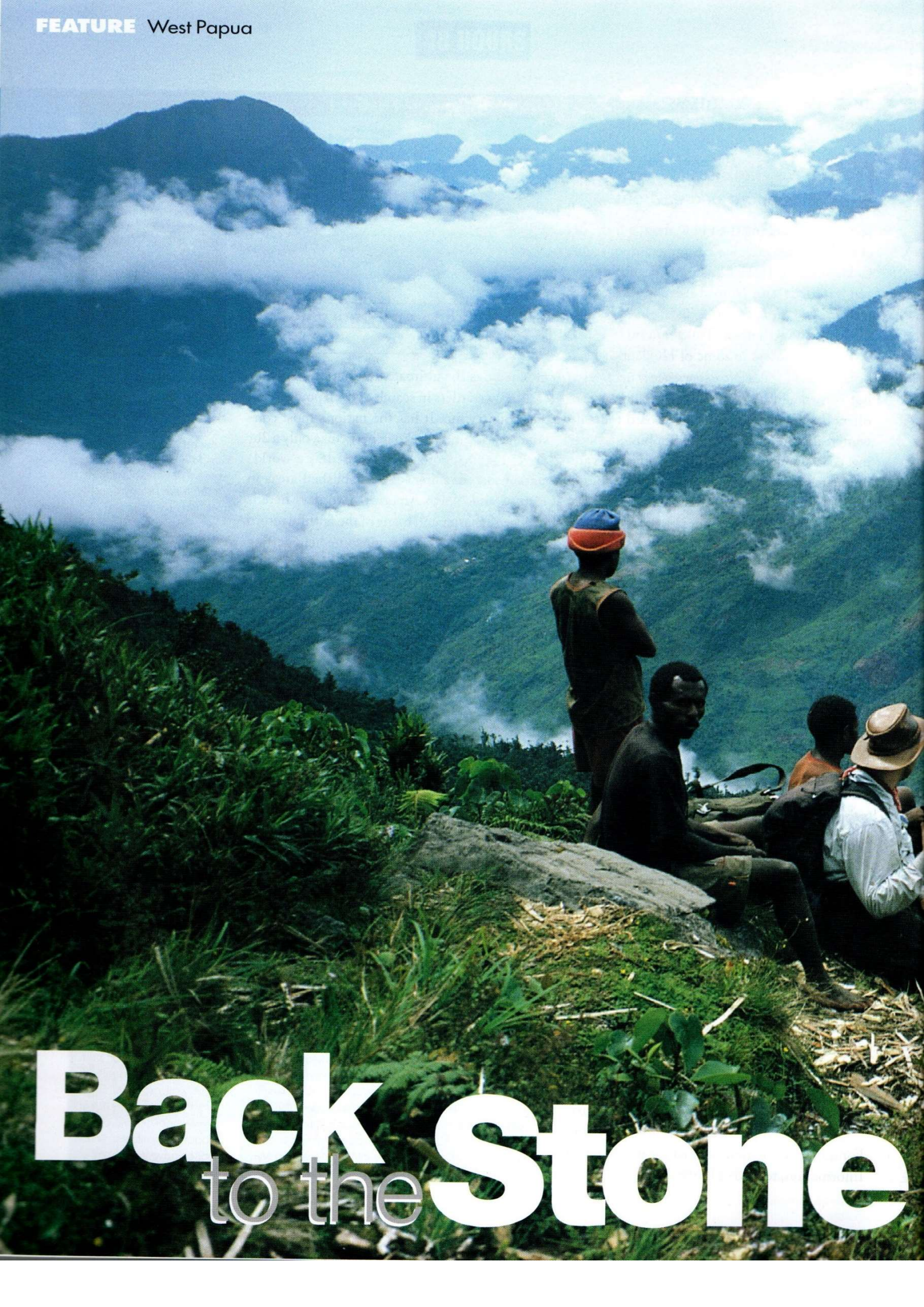
26 Back to the Stone Age

Christian Rommel follows in the footsteps of Heinrich Harrer on a series of gruelling treks through the heart of West Papua to meet its peoples that time forgot

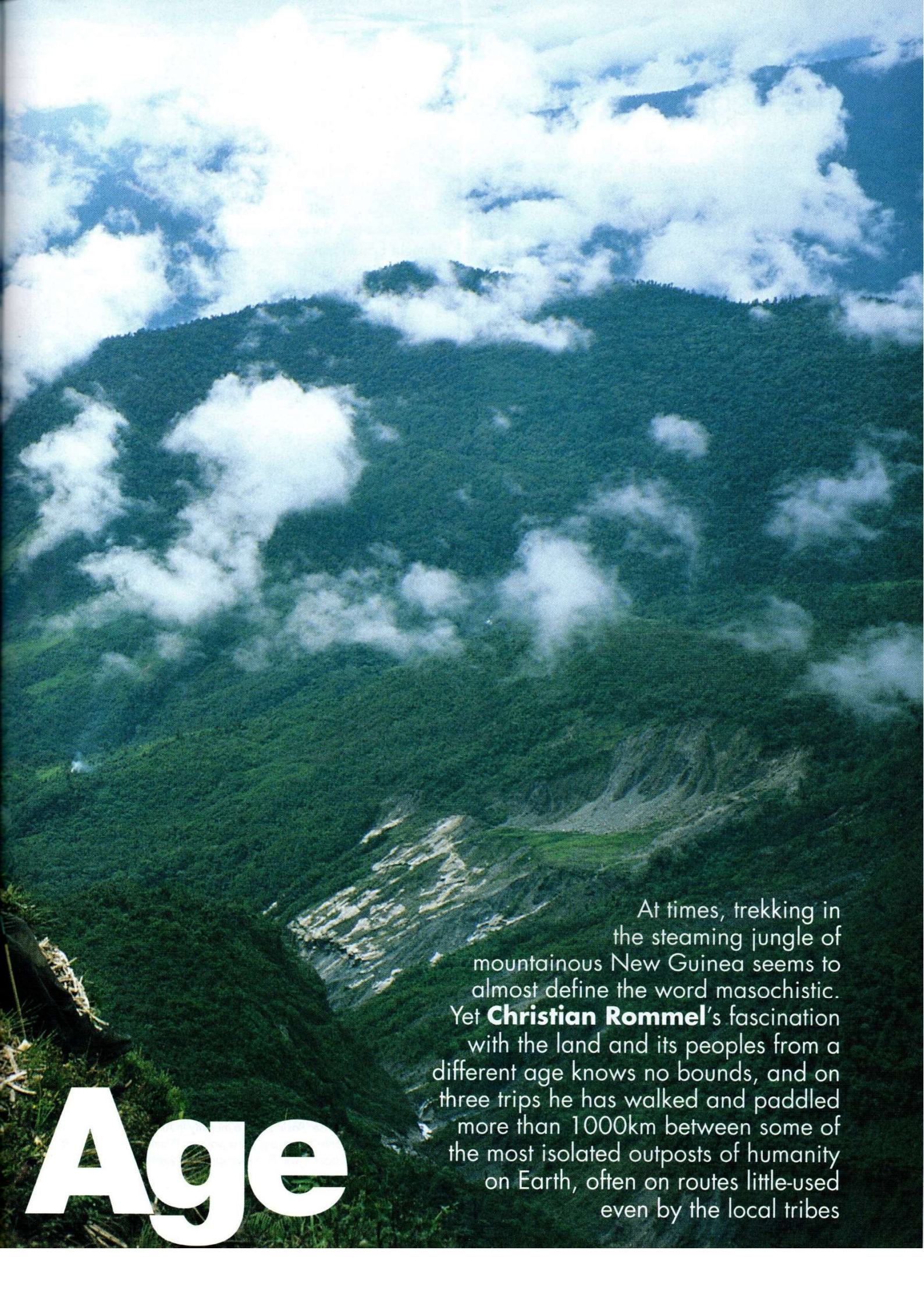
38 Kayaking the Impossible

A group of veteran whitewater kayakers and rafters complete the first descent of an intimidatingly named river in northern Myanmar





Back to the Stone



At times, trekking in the steaming jungle of mountainous New Guinea seems to almost define the word masochistic. Yet **Christian Rommel**'s fascination with the land and its peoples from a different age knows no bounds, and on three trips he has walked and paddled more than 1000km between some of the most isolated outposts of humanity on Earth, often on routes little-used even by the local tribes

Age

The beginning of an obsession

The most ethnologically varied and at the same time one of the least explored regions of the world, the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya – now called West Papua – forms the western end of the island of New Guinea. Thickly draped in untouched rainforest, with mountain ranges up to 5,000m high (the ice-capped Carstensz Pyramid is the highest point in Oceania) and expanses of mangrove swamps, it is sparsely populated, with just small villages and a few scattered missionary outposts. Next-to-no reliable information is available on routes connecting one settlement to the next. Many tribes live almost completely isolated lives, making New Guinea a fascinating linguistic and cultural jigsaw.

This jigsaw has captivated many explorers of the past, including the Austrian Heinrich Harrer, more famous for his Tibetan exploits, who came here in the 1960s and became the first person to summit Carstensz Pyramid. Harrer came into contact with many of West Papua's tribes and afterwards wrote a book about his experiences: *I come from the Stone Age*.

After many years of travelling in remote regions of the world, I had increasingly found myself drawn to indigenous peoples and so to cross West Papua became my next plan. My aim wasn't simply to walk from one settlement to another however. I chose the longest and most difficult routes that I thought I could manage within the allotted time: my object was to explore as much virgin territory as possible and hopefully come into contact with native peoples whose lives are as uninfluenced as possible by "civilisation". Furthermore I wanted these journeys to be primarily on foot. In our society we seem to have lost our connection with the human dimensions of time and space, our personal sense of scale lost. I wanted to see how societies that live in such a remote and rugged environment view these concepts.

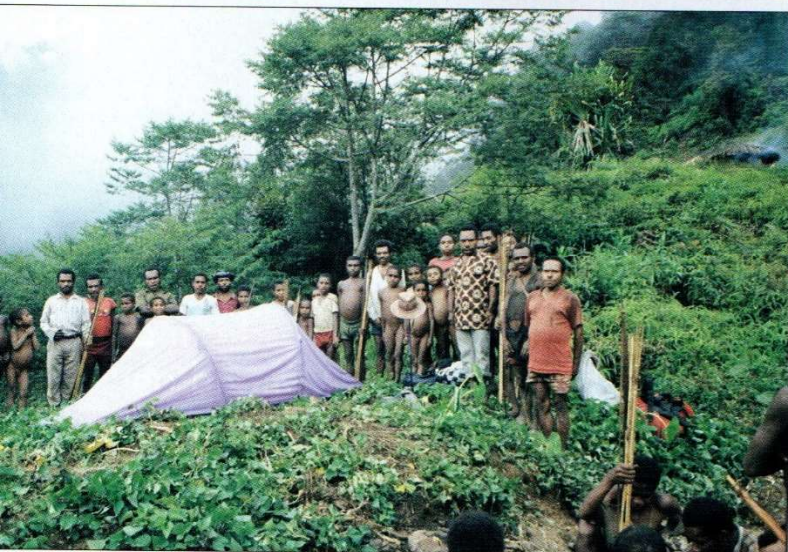
In 1994, I embarked on the first of a series of journeys following in Harrer's footsteps, trekking and paddling for a month between Wamena and Senggo via Nalca, then taking a motor canoe down Wildemans River to Agats on the south coast. This was followed by an aborted trip in 2001 which took me only from Abmisibil to Bime, and then a trip that joined Bime and Nalca in 2003 before turning north to reach Jayapura. In all, four months and more than 1,000km.

Logistical challenges

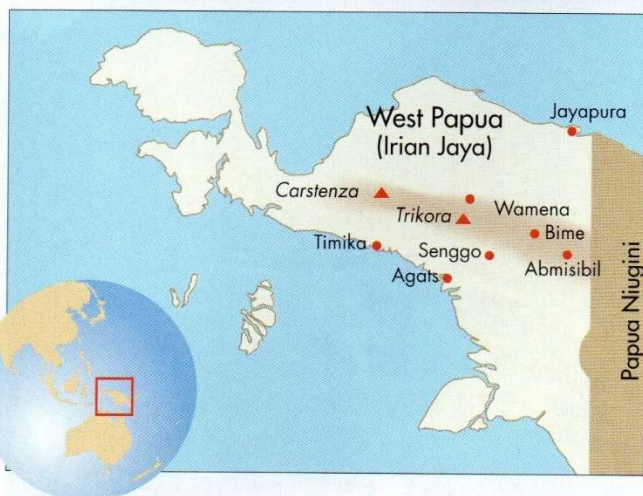
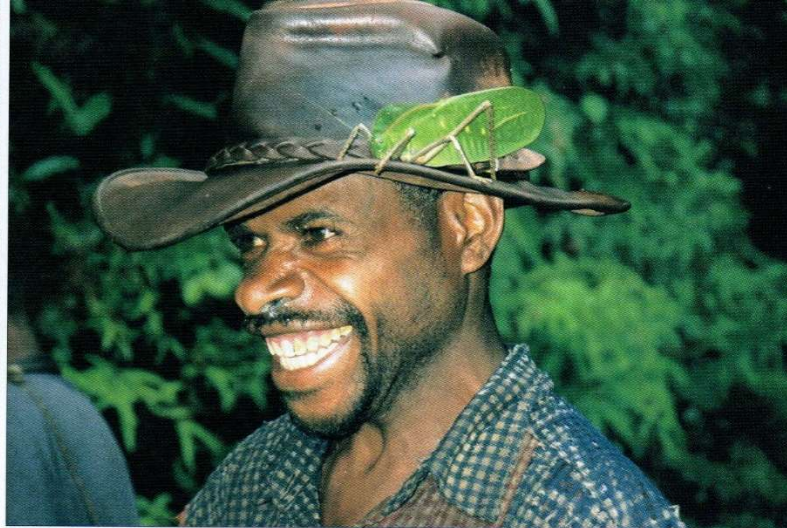
One of the biggest problems I had was to find suitable maps that would give a destination to head for or a route that would lead there. The maps I had bought in Germany turned out to be completely useless. So, to get a general bearing, my companions and I used a variety of local maps and hand-drawn sketches given to us by missionaries and ethnologists. None of these was completely reliable or even to scale. Most of them didn't even show where north was. We just had the names of individual places or rivers marked for us, but these were often rendered differently to other maps we had according to the prevailing dialect of the area, while some sketches entirely omitted features we knew to exist.

It was frustrating. To get some form of reliable overview, we combined all the information we had through equal measures of research, guesswork and sheer inspiration. We planned routes only to change them again and again, new paths opened up in front of us and others led us nowhere. New destinations were suddenly decided on only to turn out to be impracticable. At times there were no answers, only questions. Did any routes exist at all? Would we ever find them? How much time would we need to do so?

One thing was for sure: no matter what route we decided



Left: A village of thatched huts . . . and a more modern residence. Facing page, clockwise: Posing with a mummy in Aikima village; giant insect adorns a porter's hat; pig on a pole at Wamena market; raft building on the Sobger River. Previous spread: Northern Jayawijaya.



on, we needed a permit. Without this *surjat jalan* it is impossible to travel through the hinterland, and bush pilots in particular insist on seeing one of them before taking a group on a charter flight. As practically the entire eastern highland region near the border with Papua New Guinea is a restricted area, you have to use all your cunning and charm to persuade the Jayapura immigration authorities to issue you with the required permits.

Before departing we bought additional equipment and provisions in Jayapura. Nepal this isn't: the natives accompanying us usually had virtually no equipment of their own and almost no experience of trekking tourism, but their will-

ingness and ability to improvise was. An essential item was tobacco, which not only kept our porters in a good mood, but was also used as a welcome gift for our hosts.

As we marched through the jungle we made use of every opportunity to stock up on supplies for the next stage of the trek. I remember once arriving in a village where a weekly market was in full swing. Our guide simply stood in the middle and shouted "The market is over. We'll buy everything you have!" Suddenly our supplies were replenished with 70kg of vegetables and tubers. As a proud rupiah millionaire, I ran around, paying the locals from a linen bag, as the mountain of notes we had was far too big for my money belt.



Luminous worlds

Friends sometimes say to me how boring it must be to spend all your time just walking through jungle for weeks on end. But the rise and fall of the terrain, the hundreds of water-courses to be crossed, and even just the unimaginable variety in the greenery that enveloped us, kept us far from bored.

One particularly spectacular day in 1994, we were hiking through a section of forest in the mist with the trees covered from top to bottom with a dripping wet layer of moss as thick as your arm. It was a mystical and bizarre sight and at times we felt like we were moving through the cavities of a giant saturated sponge. We had long since got used to the constant pale twilight, so when we suddenly emerged from the forest, we were practically blinded. In front of us lay a wide crystal-clear river, sunlight sparkling on the crests of the waves like a million tiny diamonds. In silent awe we stood for several minutes, drinking in this dazzling wonder of nature.

But then out of the blue came the monsoon rains – dense, grey and heavy. At the same time as the rain came, the temperature dropped faster than I had ever experienced before. We struggled up the mountainside reaching over 3,500m, to find not an inspiring all-round view to lift our spirits, but a dreary plain, swamp-like and uninviting. We all stood searching helplessly for a landmark in the pouring rain, freezing with cold, but while we could quickly change our shirts and tug on our rainproof gear, our porters stood to one side in the only shirts they had, now drenched and shivering themselves. With our kerosene we quickly made a little campfire, then we all crouched under a plastic tarpaulin and tried to get a bit warmer. For three hours, the thick fog blocked our view of the jungle that we knew lay before us across the plain. Then when the first rays of sun broke through, we were suddenly in a different world again. Giant ferns heavy with the recent rain were all around us, a fairytale landscape that made me feel like a Lilliputian in Gulliver's Travels. The strain of the ascent, the rain, the cold: all were forgotten.

We camped that night and proceeded to cross the highland moor the next day, marvelling at the unexpected spongy ground, the yellow clay soil and black bubbling puddles. Then a sudden fog descended over us reducing visibility to only a few metres. Our group, which had quite naturally spread out as we walked, no longer had visual contact with each other. Calling out, to make sure that at least smaller groups of us could stay together, we stumbled on. Never before in my life had I been so lost. I literally held on to the coat tails of a porter and trusted blindly in his sense of direction. In conditions like these I was utterly dependent on my local guides. I was not back in Europe, yet a bigger contrast with the images of New Guinea in my mind's eye could not be imagined.

Left: Often wild, the trail also, at times, bore the mark of man. Facing page: An emerald valley in Northern Jayawijaya swathed in mist.

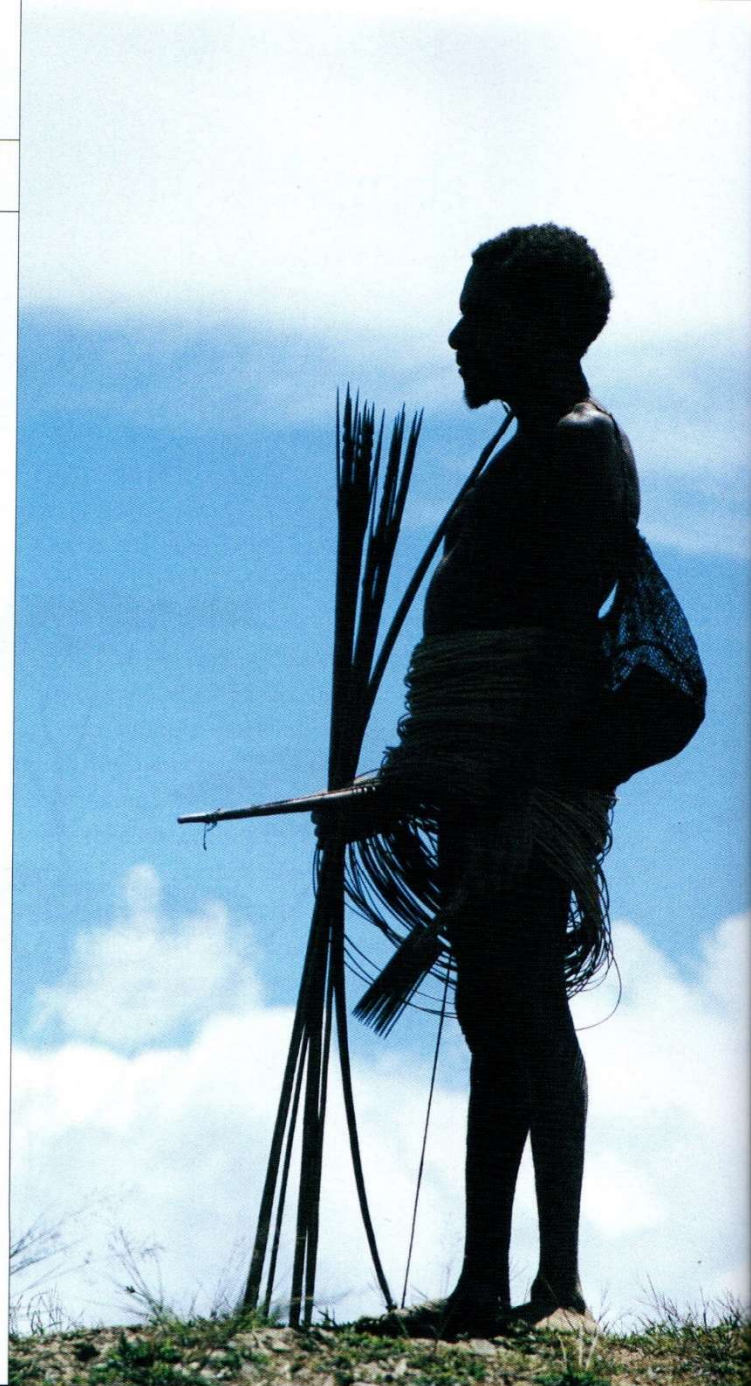
Peoples out of time

At the turn of the 21st century, it is gratifying to know that at least in remote fastnesses, such as these valleys of New Guinea, there exist a patchwork of peoples who remain isolated enough to be largely unchanged by the modern world without. Tribes like the Dani, Yali, Lani, Mek, Ok, and the inhabitants of the Asmat region that I met are just a few of those peoples.

The most populous and well-known group of the central highlands are the Dani. Taller than many other tribes, with kauri shells around their necks, colourful feathers in their tangled frizzy hair, impressive wild boar tusks through their septum and shiny black pig fat smeared over their faces, they are the archetype of the exotic, wild tribe of West Papua.

Westerners are always fascinated too by their penis gourds made from dried pumpkin-like fruit – the only traditional item of clothing they wear. It's more than just decorative however: the *koteka* is also used to store tobacco, which is held in great stead by the Dani. In the gourd it can be kept dry despite the area's frequent torrential rain. No one seems to mind that tobacco is apt to pick up surrounding aromas and tastes. In any case I don't regret the fact that as a non-smoker I was able to refuse the tobacco that was offered to me with a clear conscience.

The Yali, on the other hand, are very short and their men wear huge skirts of rattan hoops, covering the area between the navel and the back of the knee. I never could quite see what advantage this peculiar clothing custom could have. The rattan skirt is relatively heavy, bulky and restricts the wearer's movements considerably. In addition, the material has very sharp edges and the skin on the legs and

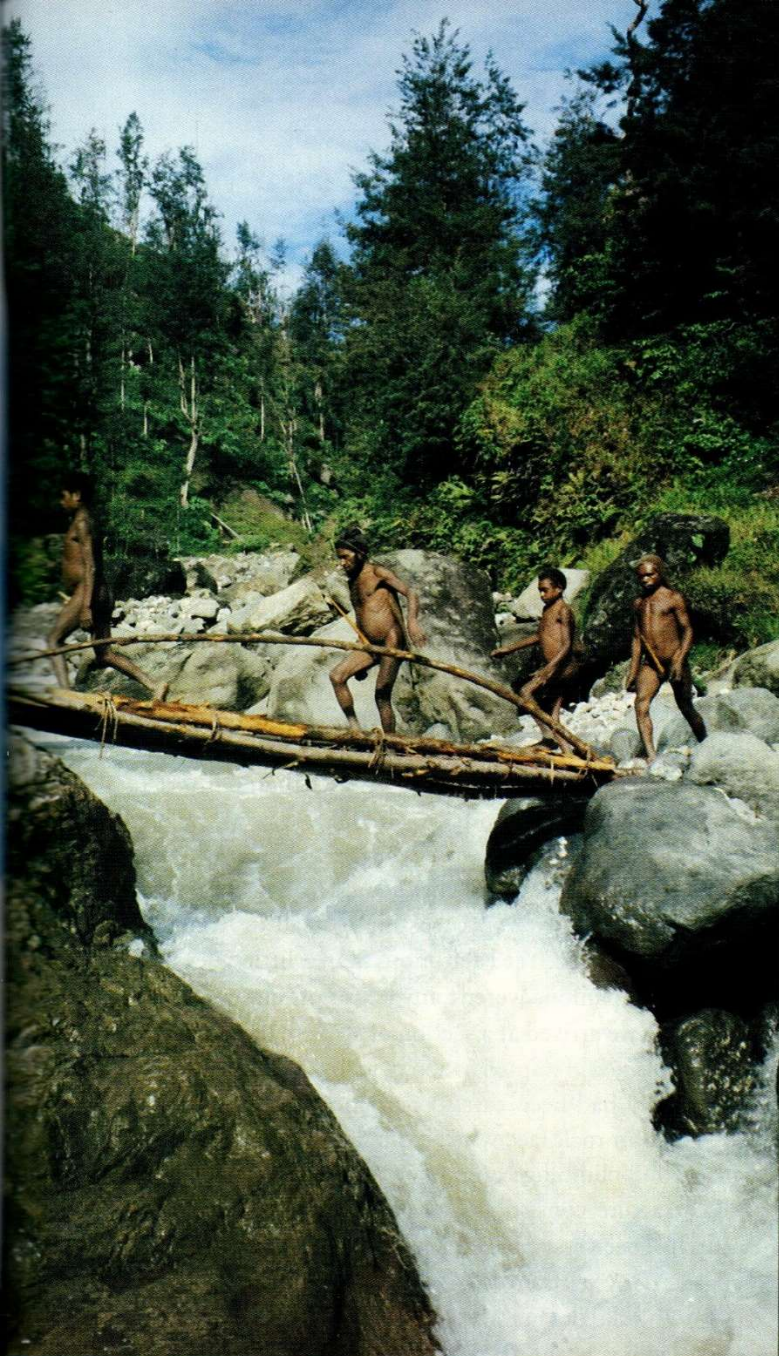


waist of Yali men is extensively scarred from the constant rubbing of the material against it.

This tribe's *koteka*, which can be up to 60cm long, protrudes from under the front of these rings and is decorated with a clump of fur or a red pennant. Despite all this encumbrance, the men are able to move through even the thickest undergrowth with astonishing skill. Only once did I see a man accidentally bang his protruding penis gourd, and that was against one of the wooden supports of a crowded meeting hut.

Other Yali accoutrements include a bow and arrow, which even children carry. The Yali always have an ornate comb for continual hair care and then there are their

Left: As custom dictates, this old woman had lost her joints as her family members died, Northern Baliem Valley. Above: A Yali man in Angguruk village. Facing page: Crossing a bamboo bridge; and a Dani man decked out in all his finery, Eastern Baliem Valley.



famous head baskets. These artistically woven baskets are used for carrying anything from fruit and vegetables to firewood, live piglets or even their own children.

What my contact with these people taught me was the fact that we were not just strangers but intruders. We had come uninvited, and would later return home full of impressions of their world. But the Yali or Dani don't have the chance to escape their cultural and social environment, even for a limited time. Most will never leave their immediate surroundings: they will die where they were born, whether they want to or not.

More than once I had the feeling that despite the unfamiliarity of our equipment, our presence made them suddenly aware of their lack of material possessions, their own limited knowledge of the world and the geographical limits to their environment. In this respect our presence was a first step towards broadening their intellectual horizons –

although I would not like to say whether this was a positive insight for them or not.

The mixed feelings with which the people of remote regions welcomed us were quite clear. The traditional hospitality was warm, but their body language and facial expressions often spoke a different language. The people were astonished, excited, fascinated, sceptical, enthusiastic, mistrustful, warm-hearted and distant at the same time. In regions that had never been visited by white people before, we often encountered children who ran away from us, crying in fear at our daunting sight, and we frequently entered villages that seemed to be deserted, only because the inhabitants had hidden away as we approached. We tried to deal with these reactions as well as we could – with a high degree of tolerance and understanding, always acutely aware of our own privileged situation. It was an unfailingly humbling experience.

Trial by trail

The paths we travelled on rarely looked like paths at all. Forward motion was a combination of sliding, jumping, crawling, stumbling and scrabbling – it could hardly be called walking. Every day we climbed for hours over gigantic fallen trees, sometimes balanced several metres above the ground on a frail carpet of aerial roots, wound our way through dense curtains of ferns or felt our way on all fours across loose landslides and slippery stones in gushing streams. Eyes moving in all directions at once like a chameleon, hands and feet continually in use to grab a branch or bush for balance, yet trying not to constantly be snagging yourself on thorns, hooked tendrils or nettles. An impossible task for city folk and so, at the end of every day, I was absolutely filthy, with cuts on my hands, bruises on my legs and scratches all over my face.

As we walked, we looked out for tasty supplements to our menu. We occasionally found wild raspberries by the wayside, we tried palm hearts and picked tree fungi in the forest. We were sometimes offered fresh crisp sago bread or the crimson juice of cooked panda nuts in the villages we stayed in. With a little luck we managed to catch fish, found frogs, trapped snakes, captured iguanas and even killed the occasional small tree kangaroo, which we then boiled or roasted. Thus we made use of almost all the living creatures we encountered in New Guinea, where animals are relatively rare. Luckily we didn't have to worry about water, as the



streams are so clear and clean that we were able to drink from them without filtering or boiling.

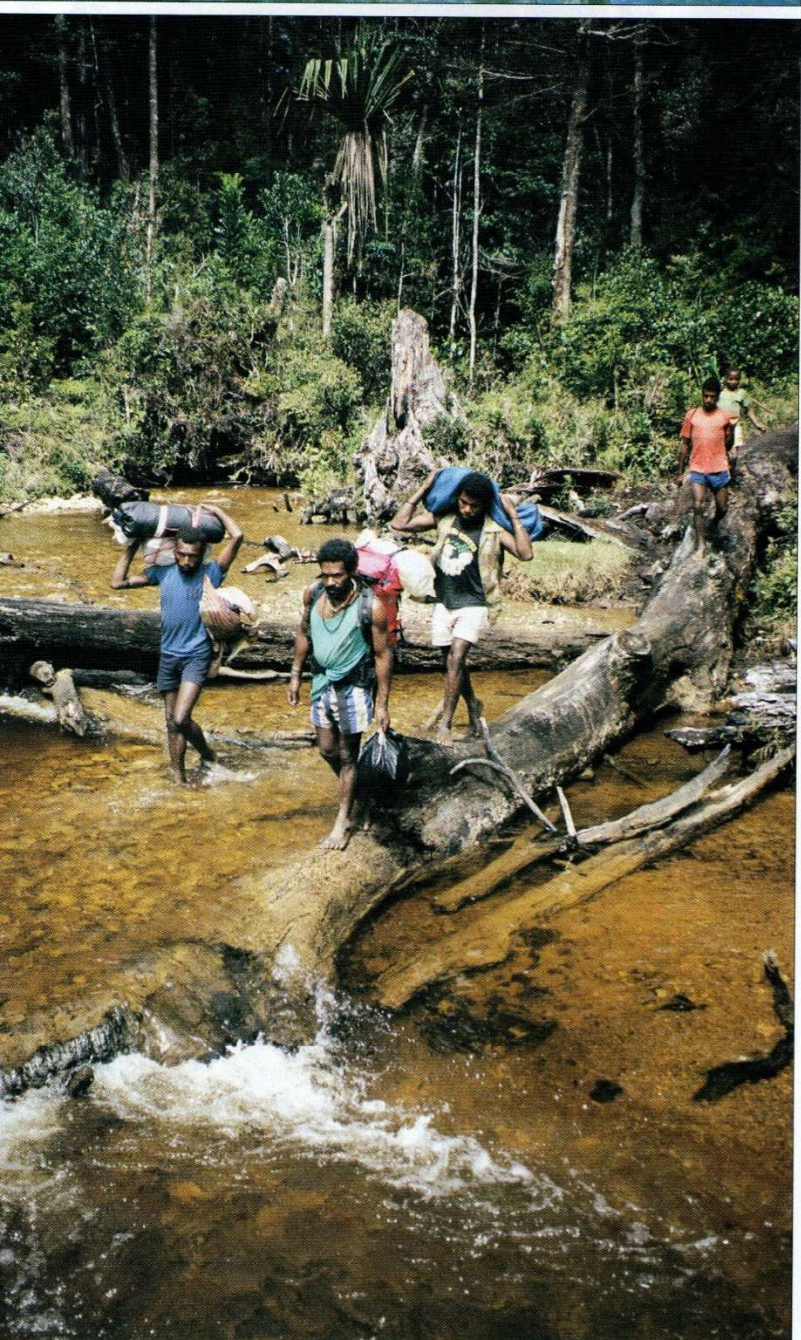
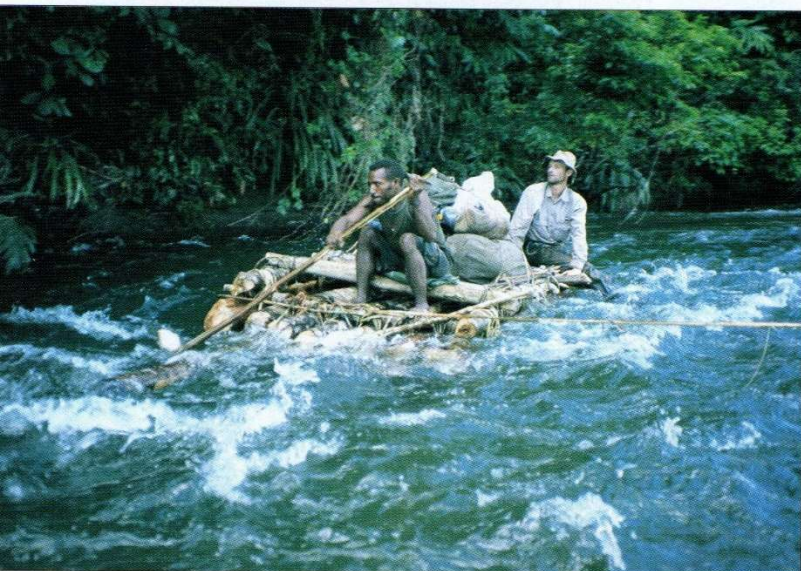
Through all this, our guides moved through the forests with the ease of a sleepwalker, filling me with boundless respect. The tiniest sign was enough to show them the way forward: broken branches or machete marks on tree bark, even though the routes we chose weren't used very often, even by the natives.

On one occasion we had been travelling through the central Jayawijaya highlands for several days, when we were confronted with an unbelievable 2,000m descent on slippery rocks – a gruelling strain on our knees. In parts the descent was so steep that I thought of using my climbing rope to secure myself, but it was always just a matter of descending a few tricky metres where it was touch and go, just difficult enough that I could manage at a stretch. So I did without the rope, trusting instead in my limited freeclimbing skills. Yet I felt more than a little queasy and my two companions weren't any better off either.

Finally we arrived at a section of steps that the people in the last village had warned us about, telling us that only make-shift repairs had been carried out since the last monsoon. Down a 20m rock face which would have been impassable without full climbing equipment, an adventurously improvised structure consisting of planks, branches, boards and beams had been assembled that really didn't deserve the name "steps". Many parts had rotted away, completely fallen off and slid down the mountainside, or were swaying for metres in the air over a gaping drop. The few nails, ropes and vines that were holding it together didn't inspire much confidence. But there was no way back and no way around it. We watched in fascination how agilely and seemingly effortlessly our porters slid down, managing to keep their balance at all times despite their rucksacks. Then it was our turn: we all had to grit our teeth and go through with it. "I hope I'm not too heavy for these steps", I thought as, plucking up my courage, I took the first step. Immediately the wood collapsed beneath my weight. I only just managed to keep my balance, frantically grabbing hold of the "railing". My heart was racing, but I pulled myself together and put my foot over as far towards the sides of the planks as possible, in order not to concentrate my weight in the middle. We descended

Above: Crossing West Papua is always a muddy business. Left: Umm . . . lunch; author loses his appetite? Facing page: "Indy" crosses a rope bridge to Borneo village.



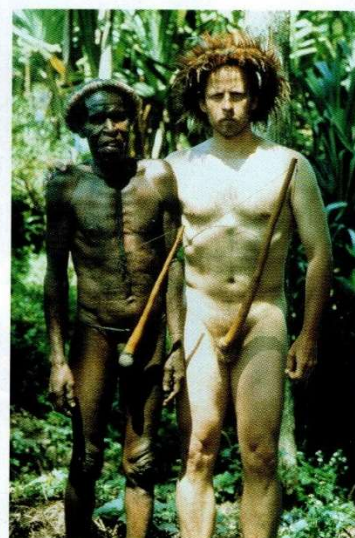


very slowly, carefully testing every step, grasping all the ends of ropes and bits of wood we could reach, constantly forcing ourselves to make the next move.

Rotten rope bridges regularly presented similar problems. Indiana Jones films became dramatic reality whenever the crooked and dilapidated slats began to sway back and forth uncontrolledly. Grabbing hold of the slippery ropes till my knuckles were white, drenched in sweat, and calling upon all the gods I'd ever heard of, I made painfully slow progress, every step an act requiring the greatest willpower, yet realising that there was no way back or around. Perversely, at moments like these you know most vividly that you are alive. Then the trick is to stay that way.

The rain pelted down for long periods every day – New Guinea is, after all, one of the rainiest places on earth. We soon got used to being drenched from head to toe all day long, if not from the rain, then from the sodden plants, the continual river crossings or the sweat that constantly covered us. The pores of our skin steaming, we fitted well into the landscape, and as a self-confessed jungle lover, I was utterly in my element. It brought to mind playing happily in the dirt as a child, and I merrily waded through the puddles, even loving the moments when we were reduced to groping through the mud trying to stay upright and keep our footwear from being dragged off our feet by the cloying morass, as often happened to our porters in their plastic sandals.

The rain also brought other problems, with hour-long cloudbursts causing rivers to rise by several metres, meaning delays of sometimes days before they could be forded. When one was available, we boarded a canoe or raft which magically gave us a completely different perspective. The jungle drew together at the river's edge, like a vast green curtain that we glided almost effortlessly past. Only occasionally was the majestic silence broken by the cry of a cockatoo, or by the sudden effort required to avoid rapids and dangerous whirlpools. Silently, people would appear suddenly on the bank, wondering where we came from and what in the world we were doing there. The children were less reserved: squealing, shouting and waving, overjoyed when we waved back.



Left, top and bottom: A well-earned respite for the feet: rafting on the Sobger River; porters crossing a stream. Inset: The author tries a penis gourd on for size. Facing page: Polly wants a cracker? Rommel with a cockatoo; children on a trunk highway, Teraplu village.

Beyond the darkness

New difficulties arose every day. The porters suddenly refused to walk any further, the guides wanted more money, we failed to get to a village by nightfall, bridges were impassable or our provisions ran out. We were often exhausted, ill or undecided on which way to go. Sometimes, several of these factors hit us at the same time. Your response depends on the type of person you are. I happen to thrive on mastering unforeseen difficulties, I find it extremely motivating, and having done what we did, I wouldn't exchange a single moment.

There was the time when we arrived at the village of Pileam after walking for almost ten hours that day, and I was incapable of doing anything other than falling into a deep sleep. The next day came the rude awakening. Everything in the tent was absolutely filthy from the dirt I had brought in with me: my sleeping bag, mosquito net and all my clothing. I could hardly move from backache, as I had put up my tent on very uneven ground. And my left meniscus – probably the result of the previous day's steep descent – was extremely sore, and vied for my attention with an unpleasant septic infection on my left toenail. To crown it all, a colony of fleas had set up home in my sleeping bag, covering my legs with a tattoo of flea bites.

Other times I was racked by severe malarial spasms, faced bouts of blood poisoning from infected legs, and had a hoard of fly larvae hatch from my right shin. But breaking off the trip and giving up was never an option.

Of course, every day I asked myself what the point was of maltreating myself for weeks on end, to crawl through undergrowth taking two months to cover a stretch that a plane would fly over in an hour. But the sense of experiencing nature at its fullest, in all its crawling, writhing and squirming incarnations as well as its serene, sublime and uplifting forms, was overwhelming, and gave me the deepest satisfaction and peace.

Many times I lay on my back in the middle of the forest, enjoying the silence and solitude, staring up through the treetops to the sky, knowing that I wouldn't exchange that moment for anything in the world. I looked then at life – my life – from a distant, neutral perspective and gained a new appreciation of its meaning.

It suddenly seemed to me that I had had to reach for this most remote corner of our globe to attain the insight that was hidden within me all along: I was the happiest person on earth. ΔΔ

