ICE CLIMBING SPECIAL!

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The Kokoda Track runs roughly halfway across Papua New Guinea in a straight, single-file line through the Owen Stanley Range, from Owen’s Corner on the outskirts of the country’s capital, Port Moresby, to the small village of Kokoda in Oro Province. Over the course of 96km, there are 20 muddy peaks concertinaed together, so despite the relatively short distance and low altitude, the total ascent is equivalent to climbing from the village of Tengboche in the Khumbu to the summit of Everest.

Though established as a postal route by the British, the trail is famous as the site of one of the bloodiest conflicts in the Pacific War. 2017 marked the 75th anniversary of the gruelling campaign that saw a poorly prepared and ill-equipped Allied forces – mostly Australian – defending against the invading Japanese.

The trail requires a license and a guide. Given the reputation of Papua New Guinea as a difficult place in which to travel (cannibals, Raskol gangs, volcanoes etc.), these tours are usually arranged from abroad, and come with a heavy price tag that I simply could not afford. I also wanted to carry my own food and equipment, so I took a punt, and when I arrived in Port Moresby, headed straight to the Kokoda Track Authority office to see if there was another way.

PERMITS AND GUIDES

On the third floor of a department store at the end of a long and intimidatingly over-lit corridor, was the office where permits are issued. I was welcomed with large, slightly confused smiles as I explained who I was and what I wanted. They led me into their boardroom and told me to wait. Over a few hours, various people came and went, conversations were held that I didn’t understand and eventually, three men – Allan, Noel and Bob – from the Association of Guides and Porters suddenly stopped their meeting to address me. A few minutes later an offer was on the table and I had myself a guide. No porters. No fuss. Just me and Allan.

We arrived to meet early to get a head start, but a problem with transport meant we didn’t get going until late morning. Tired of waiting, we hailed a local cab. As we left the dusty, littered city behind us the countryside became progressively more dense, green and impressive. A series of sharp switchbacks took us higher. The driver dodged craters in the road, his head bobbing either side of fat cracks that dissected his windscreen. Alien-like black boulders were scattered everywhere; like...
someone had opened a giant bag of charcoal at the top of the mountain and let the nuggets tumble down.

We arrived at the triple arch that marks the entrance to the Kokoda Track. The trail started downhill, a muddy ochre slide peppered with jamolice poodles. The going was quick, and although my pack felt on the heavy side (approximately 18kg), it didn’t cause too much trouble. I was walking with my guide Allan and his young son Lalo who was learning the ropes. Lalo didn’t like to talk. As I was carrying my own food and equipment, Lalo and Allan were each taking a full porter’s food load to deliver somewhere up the trail. Lalo was barefoot. Allan was in flip-flops.

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Vincent. We passed down narrow stone pathways, through a creek and down a waterfall, past shimmering red leafy bushes and under a ceiling of white translucent flowers. Another steep climb took us into Nadari where we bought bright fruit and giant avocados. Most of the walking was through the shade of the jungle, but occasionally we passed through open faces where the expansive valleys and high hills unfolded in front of us – dense green prickled with delicate dabs of colour from the endless variety of trees, and the mountain-tops always crowned with mist.

After one last climb for the day, we walked down through tall trees to the crash site of a Japanese WWII Bomber. Parts of the fuselage, landing gear and machinery lied twisted in piles. Live .50 calibre machine gun bullets were scattered on the ground. We set down for the night at Campsite 1900 in the Myola range. To beat the cold I slept fully clothed.

COOL RUNNINGS

The cool carried through to the morning and made for an enjoyable start, the air tasted fresh and crisp and we walked an hour before breaking sweat. Even the ground had firmed up and it was nice not to have to think about making adjustments each time your foot met the floor.

We climbed a spur steadily for an hour-and-a-half, finally reaching the ridge and crossing Mount Bellamy, the highest summit, at 2,190m. The summit itself was unremarkable, so we took the necessary photo and moved on quickly, down the steep path into Eora Creek and over a vine-covered wooden bridge at Templeton’s Crossing. This is where the Japanese finally abandoned the trail and retreated to Buna on the north coast.

As we got lower, we were once again surrounded by a sea of green – large lily-white ones with yellow camomile-flower spots on their wings. At Hou, the last village on the range, we took a final cold dip. Purple and blue dragonflies skittered across the bubbling water.

We had almost arrived at the end of the range; the bristly tundra expanded beneath us. As we descended, the air became humid and the vegetation took on a wet sheen; bushes of chubby, striped leaves gleamed like sucked Humbugs.

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In spite of our efforts, when we reached Alola it was just past 4pm, getting dark, and raining. To make the plane we would need to push on, but after a 10-hour day with only 10 minutes break, and with tough terrain still ahead, we decided to camp down. Allan and Lolo built a fire as I sat resting in the corner of a dark, smoky hut. Allan cooked deep green choko vine to eat. Everything smelled of smoke.

LA LO TIME

Day six, and the final morning, I awoke to the gentle crackling of battered parachutes, a treat from Allan. We left the village, crossed a waterfall and, apply for this walk, began a steep uphill. My cold legs protested at every step. We were now walking on Lalo time, which is to say that we were not dawdling. We did everything at pace, hooping around quagmires and sprinting to the firm spots where the roots were thickest. As we descended, the air became humid and the vegetation took on a wet sheen; bushes of chubby, striped leaves gleamed like sucked Humbugs.

Out of the blue Allan, got word that the Japanese had decided to leave Alola and retreat to Buna. The airfield was just beyond the next small village, Hoi, and we flew past it in a blur. It looked nice and the mountain-tops always crowned with mist. We had almost arrived at the end of the range; the bristly tundra expanded beneath us. As we descended, the air became humid and the vegetation took on a wet sheen; bushes of chubby, striped leaves gleamed like sucked Humbugs.

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After lunch Allan, Lalo and I waved goodbye to our Australian companions. We had a flight to catch and Allan had had word that they had decided to leave a day early, so we were playing catch up. We ploughed ahead, climbing without break and descending at skipping pace. We leapfrogged over and slid under fallen trees. Giant dense hardwoods too big to break and descending at skipping pace. We ploughed ahead, climbing without break and descending at skipping pace.

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The Kokoda Campaign finally ended on 22 January 1943 after six months of bloody and desperate fighting – 2,165 Australian troops killed, 671 US troops killed. Of the near 20,000 Japanese landed in Papua between 21 July 1942 and 22 January 1943, around 13,000 died there. And the Papsans, sitting on both sides, lost approximately 1,350.

After a bumpy take-off, we sailed into the clouds and flew low through the mountains. The short flight gave us one last lingering look at the crumpled green carpet we had just crossed.