

Australian GEOGRAPHIC Australian GEOGRAPHIC Outdoor



A highlight of the Kokoda Trail are the lush moss forests surrounding the extinct volcanic crater of Myola, where each footfall depresses a metre-wide depression upon the layers of rotting foliage as though walking on an enormous sponge.

Image Credit: Mark Watson

Walking among ghosts

BY Mark Watson February 21, 2017

With just a high school level of war history and new boots, a rather underprepared Mark Watson follows in the footsteps of our Diggers. In PNG, he discovers a new challenge – and a whole lotta pain.

STEPPING ONTO THE TARMAC in Port Moresby, I register how underprepared I am at the precise moment the humidity envelops me. Only two days prior I had been sipping café latte's on Sydney's northern beaches pondering the question, "Can Kokoda really be that hard?" I still don't know the answer.

Last year I was trekking at 5000m above sea level in the majestic Andes so it was easy to impudently write off Kokoda as an occasional war story, a celebrity trail and quite possibly an over-exaggerated jungle trek, presumably offering a few muddy challenges, but nothing too crippling. Or so I anticipated.

And so it wasn't until my flight took off from Cairns that I gazed out at the expanse of ocean below and realised that in the same time it takes to fly from Sydney to Melbourne, I would now cross into an entire new world, a foreign culture, and by all accounts, including a travellers warning by the Oz Travel Advisory, a world far from the stability, safety and comforts of my northern beaches coffee shops.

My research bordered on nil, my PNG language skills non-existent and my war history, inexcusable. My intention to trek the infamous Kokoda Trail originated with the skewed view to try and absorb the amazing natural history, allowing the wartime aspect only as an afterthought. My plan was to walk into the PNG jungle with little more than a fading high school history lesson echoing in the back of my mind. There would be no preconceived ideas but rather an open mind and a clean slate – I would be a sponge. But supposedly I needed to be a fit sponge.



Philip NcNamara negotiates a rare 'flat' section of one of Charlie Lynn's infamous original wartime trails between Templeton's crossing and Abuari. (Image: Mark Watson)

My first hint that the Kokoda Trail might truly be as brutal as its reputation was when I noted I must supply an Electrocardiograph (ECG) graph signed by my GP to prove I might at least survive the first ascent. My second clue is perceived somewhere over the Gulf of Carpentaria when I finally peruse all the unopened paperwork that arrived a few weeks back. It appears I should have been undergoing an extensive exercise program for the entire past month. "If you haven't made enough deposits into your fitness account then you will go into debt on the trail – from my experience this is not a pretty sight," 20-year veteran of the trail, and the bloke who happens to be my guide, Charlie Lynn writes bluntly.

"Bugger!"

My trekking boots are less than two days old and my pack is overweight by too many kilograms, but my aim is simple: Just go with the flow... For I am about to step into a brutal right of passage and pilgrimage for many Australians and to walk in the footsteps of our Aussie diggers.

Preparations

I meet Charlie Lynn for the first time at Port Moresby airport. Among the throng, a tall khaki-clad figure with an impressive silver handlebar moustache strolls up to me, thrusts his hand in mine and exclaims, “I didn’t bloody know whether you were gonna make it or not, mate!” Obviously he’d already heard of my very-last-minute travel plans.

If you threw Chuck Norris and Indiana Jones into a blender and added a few Anzac badges (not biscuits) for good measure, most likely it would be Charlie who would emerge. He carries a distinct air of confidence, a hard as nails approach but with a hint of larrikin in his eyes. I liked him already.



Relics of the war lie scattered only metres off the trail. At this site, helmets reveal hidden bunkers while other sites are littered with unexploded mortars and hand grenades. (Image: Mark Watson)

We head straight out of Port Moresby, a city that still appears as an unruly frontier town contrasting extreme poverty with the gated, razor-wired communities of the mining companies. Unfortunately, this mix breeds some rather dangerous grounds for the wandering traveller adorned with camera, watch and GPS unit – all worth a year's wage to the first rascal bold enough to confront you.

Into the hills the diesel-fume-throwing bus carries the small crew of trekkers who almost all hail from Orbost, Charlie's former hometown in eastern Victoria. Most appear related, however I am embraced into what seems an odd family reunion, albeit in PNG. The bus finally stops at Sogeri Lodge. Our last luxury before setting out on the trail.

There is enough time for a quiet ale before Charlie gathers us once more to scare the crap out of those still bold enough to consider themselves a hiking hero. "If your pack weighs more than 12kg then you need to start throwing things out," Charlie states. "If you aren't on your anti-malarial tablets yet then you better bloody hope you don't have any reaction to them and for Christ's sake, if you have any illusion that you want to 'do it like the Diggers' then speak up now so I can issue you with a pair of hobnail leather boots, a canvas backpack, half a blanket and rifle and ammunition... Oh, and leave your tent, underwear and toiletries here at the lodge."

I try to hide behind my beer acknowledging that I had only begun my anti-malarials a few days ago and, with my camera gear, I was well over the 12kg limit. I go straight to my room and start squeezing excess toothpaste from the tube and my three pairs of socks now become two. It is 2am when I finally ration my last piece of liquorice into one of 10 tiny zip lock bags and collapse into bed.



On the plains of Myola a five-star bridge replaces the usual ford or log crossings found at the majority of waterways on the Kokoda Trail. (Image: Mark Watson)

The trail

The initial outing from Owers Corner is fairly mellow in terms of Kokoda brutality and the descent to the Goldie River stretches the legs while eyes are drawn to the endless expanse of sheer rainforest clad inclines that form the Owen Stanley Range and our route over the coming week. It doesn't take long before the sweat begins to drip rather than evaporate, and the realisation soon hits that these are only the foothills. The real stuff is yet to come.

I look forward to straying from what appears to be the trekkers-highway as I have never been one for follow-the-leader adventures. Charlie has promised to get off the Eco-Trail (most visited and shortest route to Kokoda) and onto the original 'wartime trail'.

My only uncertainty with this plan lies with the glint in Charlie's eyes when he suggests he isn't sure of the condition of some of the tracks or even whether they still exist or not. Of course this spurs on my inner explorer and I begin to wonder, "How hard will it really get?"

We notch up a miniscule three hours on day one and my diary reads, "Presumably it will get a lot harder?" At 5am the next day, "Cooooee" echoes throughout the camp. Apparently this is what the trek notes refer to as 'reveille'. Until now I didn't know what reveille was except to expect it at 5am. I was hoping it might mean "chai latte" but instead I realise it is just a trendy word for "rude awakening".



Yet another steep climb; this time among a sea of green on the way up to Bombers Camp, via the Kagi and Naduri villages on Day 6 of the trek. The Kagi Gap climb was one of the more brutal sweat-fests of the trek. (Image: Mark Watson)

A few hours later and I am halfway up the infamous golden staircase, gasping for breath and cursing myself for the jinx of that single phrase written in last night's diary. It was here in 1942 the 39th Militia Battalion forged their way up a gruelling slope of makeshift stairs amid a quagmire of sludge

towards a rapidly advancing Japanese army. A few became heroes... too many became martyrs. Today the staircase exists only as a sticky, muddy, tree-root strewn climb.

My sweating and panting has been worthwhile however as it allows me to stretch out a gap on the main group so I can photograph the iconic climb towards Imita Ridge which overlooks Ioribaiwa Ridge... the closest the Japanese got to Port Moresby before turning back in WWII.

I rest for a moment and close my eyes to the pounding of blood vessels in my temples where faded images of muddy, exhausted soldiers stare back at me, perhaps subconscious images from documentaries and articles seen in recent years.

As I sit in silence enveloped by the New Guinea rainforest, wartime Kokoda encroaches on my open slate. Waiting for the rest of the team, I sit motionless in the bush like a sniper so as not to attract attention to my lens... I want to capture the sweat, mud and exhaustion of Kokoda.

But my life as a sniper evaporates before it has even begun. I feel a tingling on my neck, then another and suddenly I become conscious of the tiny green ants scurrying all over me. My camouflage dissolves as I dance from the undergrowth swiping at the biting buggers. The ants carry only a small sting but my golden staircase photos are solely of trees, tree roots and mud. In hindsight probably a true reflection of what this brutal ascent appears to most who tackle it... a muddy, sweaty and unyielding climb, welcoming you to the real Kokoda Trail.



The gentle Koiairi and Orokaiva porters (descendants of the famous Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angles) form a human chain only meters above a sheer waterfall. (Image: Mark Watson)

Routine

Life on the track settles into a rhythm. The 5am reveille becomes the norm and dressing in cold, damp clothes in the dark is not so daunting anymore. Fellow trekkers become comrades and bet on whose trekking pole will be the next to bend or snap.

Fast-flowing rivers are crossed on sketchy bamboo bridges fastened with liana vines or if the water is shallow enough to wade, we plunge in fully clad and booted. Our boots are as wet from sweat as they are from river water. Each night we bathe in crystal-clear streams that flow beside every camp. Some even brave the icy waters when temperatures fall to single digits in the mountains before down jackets are quickly donned.

Each day offers up to 600-plus metres of vertical ascent over 10 hours, among greasy footholds of sodden earthen steps held together by a vast array of spider-web like tree roots more akin to a trip wire than any form of natural flora. A number of 45° inclines force us to grasp at roots and branches to pull up to the next easement. The going is tough.

My morning routine becomes more and more complex with the rinsing, bathing, powdering, antiseptic swabbing and taping of feet and toes to avoid fungal foot. The painful condition is synonymous with trekking the Kokoda Trail and, together with blisters, is a sure way to stop you in your tracks.

However, the blisters and chafing are all worth it for sights like Myola. Deep in the high mountains of the Owen Stanley Ranges, Myola appears as a prairie of perfect grassland surrounded by impenetrable forest. The amazing natural depression is an ancient volcanic crater, but now the long grasses ebb and flow with the cool breezes at 2000m. Myola means 'break of day' but it is taboo to linger here for many of the local indigenous population who believe in witchcraft and sorcery. Other than the sound of the wind, perfect silence hangs in the air of this isolated plateau where a rusting Kittyhawk fighter plane lies to rest, the last remaining remnant of a battle that raged in the vicinity in the not too distant past.



Another brutal tree-root-strewn section designed perfectly by Mother Nature to snap expensive trekking poles. (Image: Mark Watson)

As we climb out of Myola I manage my daily dose of alone time. A time to trek, absorb and reflect without the distraction of others. On this occasion however, I pull alongside Charlie to take in his enthusiasm and listen to his tales.

It doesn't take long to learn the former Army Major now tour operator has more than 50 outings on Kokoda. He has been there, done that and seen it all. He discovered many of the battle sites we now visit. Charlie is Kokoda and Kokoda is Charlie... He is welcomed with outstretched arms by the village elders while the grinning coffee-coloured faces of joyous children swarm to meet him as his personal porters, who have been his carriers for decades, look on with a smile.

Charlie may be about as passionate as they come, but he is also the inflictor of pain with the tell-tale call, "It's a bit of an arse-buster but its f#*king beautiful!" Often announced on the cusp of what will become a two-hour arduous ascent of mud, stinging foliage and dense undergrowth to reach a

deserted clearing of nil significance to the eye. That is until a grinning Charlie appears, sweat dripping from his classic silver moustache before directing novice eyes to hidden gun-pits and corroding mortars. He then recites a poem of suffering and sacrifice on this very patch of dirt that brings tears to the eyes of even the most hardened traveller.

A balancing act

Sitting atop Brigade Hill, I am totally drained but content, having just inhaled an entire pineapple I purchased from a village woman who had walked half a day just to sell her wares. It is evident that the growing popularity of the Kokoda Trail is slowly influencing those who call the Owen Stanley Ranges their home.

The open slate I began with is filling with experiences, but also with questions and a newfound appreciation for the confronting war history that accompanies this iconic trek. On this exact position where I now sit, men fought and died less than a lifetime ago. Today's Trail is about the people, the places, the history and the beauty. But in 1942 it was about beliefs, hardships, comradeship, and the hell of surviving one of the most unforgiving environments on the planet.

Kokoda's beauty and brutal past are inseparable. The two contrasting features of this unique pilgrimage come hand in hand and one cannot ignore the respect owed to those whose graves adorn the beautiful, but haunting, Bomana War Cemetery in Port Moresby. Surprisingly, all this dawned upon me in what exists as an unyielding 10-day sweat-fest of 45° inclines, tree-root strewn jungle paths, muddy swamps, bamboo bridges and raging torrents.

But in between the gasping, sweating and dripping, brilliant blue Ulysses butterflies as large as birds fly by, pristine untouched moss forests reveal themselves and hidden waterfalls thunder into deep tropical pools. These immense pleasures are a constant reminder of what Mother Nature has to offer those willing enough to push themselves that little bit extra. And then, of course, there are the people of PNG.

Village life

The fierce warlike reputations of the highlanders melt into the brilliant smiles of the Koiari village children. Trekkers are greeted with big grins and glinting brown eyes peering from Hendrix-sized afros, while the village women offer fresh bananas, sweet, musky papaya and juicy passionfruit to those in need of sustenance. The men continue to hunt and farm just as their ancestors had, however the recent influx of trekkers now offers a regular income for village men as personal porters.

The Koiari and the Orokaiva tribes are the inhabitants of the small villages that scatter themselves among the rugged peaks and dense forest where the Kokoda Trail snakes its way. Western civilisation's influence is noticeable but still relatively new to the Papuans and each greets the other with a hint of caution. But it only takes a kick of the village soccer ball to draw masses of energetic giggling kids and in turn the smiles of parents... the ambience is a far cry from the border town atmosphere of Port Moresby. Here in the mountains, once the sun has set, the villagers come together to sing. Traditional songs have been replaced with church hymns following Seventh Day Adventist and Anglican missionary influence from both before and after the war. Whether it a native

song of the highlands or a gospel hymn, my occasional trail-humming is put to shame as the entire village perfectly harmonises in flawless unison.

The smiles, the singing, the immaculate villages, the pristine rivers and cascading falls. The history of both the indigenous inhabitants of this land blended with that of those who fought and fell on this trail.

It is the same fragile, but incredibly spectacular, environment that grabbed me on day one that leaves me looking back in reverence from the Kokoda airfield. The ridges are knife-edge, the rainforest damned near impenetrable and the gradients ridiculous. How could anyone be expected to trek such contours, let alone fight a war within these precipitous peaks and deep valleys? But both have been accomplished.

The essentials

Getting there: There are flights from most major cities in Australia to Port Moresby. Buses are available to transfer hikers to the start of the Kokoda Trail at Owers Corner. Tours must be organised in advance.

Time to go: Expect plenty of mud on Kokoda. It's best to walk during the dry season – from April to October – although the track is still wet in the early months of the Dry. If you really keen to walk in the rain, it is possible, but ensure you and your fellow hikers are equipped with proper gear.

Walking there: You must have a trek permit, purchased from the Kokoda Track Authority (KTA). It is possible to organise an independent crossing, it is advised to walk with a KTA-licensed trek operator. When picking your tour operator, make sure they: a) have a license with the KTA; b) adhere to the voluntary code of conduct (which promotes sustainable tourism, duty of care, and support for local communities; c) has first-aid training and equipment; d) carries satellite phone and gear; e) has public liability insurance.