

You loved your last book...but what  
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# Looking for Adventure

Written by Steve Backshall

Published by Phoenix

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

# LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE

STEVE BACKSHALL



Copyright © Steve Backshall 2011

The right of Steve Backshall to be identified as  
the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This edition first published in Great Britain in 2011 by  
Swordfish  
an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd  
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,  
London WC2H 9EA  
An Hachette Livre UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

All rights reserved. Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this  
publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form, or by any  
means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of  
reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the  
Copyright Licensing Agency.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 9780857820112  
Export Trade Paperback: 9780857820129

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd,  
Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by  
CPI Mackays, Chatham, Kent

Photographs provided by author, Ulla Lohmann, Gordon Buchanan  
and Jonny Keeling

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and  
recyclable and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and  
manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of  
the country of origin.

Every effort has been made to fulfil requirements with regard to reproducing  
copyright material. The author and publisher will be glad to rectify any omissions at  
the earliest opportunity.

[www.orionbooks.co.uk](http://www.orionbooks.co.uk)



PAPUA NEW GUINEA

BALIEM VALLEY

KOROWAI

KOMBAL

• Yanituma

• Basman

• Senggo

Siretsj River

• Soba

Mount Trikora  
(4743m)

Baliem Gorge

• Kurima

• Tangma

Heage R.

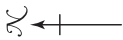
• Passema

• Wamena

Wamena R.

Baliem River

A S M A T



# Prologue

‘Get a load of that – that’s her!’ screamed our Aussie pilot above the roar of the rotors and the battering of the blessed cold wind on my face through the chopper’s open door. The broccoli florets of the forest zipped just metres below the skids, as we flew steadily upwards over the mountain’s perfect green lower slopes, before the steepness increased and all of a sudden the ridges of the outer caldera appeared, draped in a green crushed-velvet throw of forest. ‘You must be out of your tiny little mind, mate! Tell you what, you and the jungle bunnies go on down in there with the leeches and the snakes – I’ll be back at base cracking open a cold one.’

As we neared the rim of the volcano, the outer slopes became almost vertical. We swooped up to the edge, which appeared to be a finger’s breadth wide – and then abruptly, nothing, a massive drop into the underworld. As the helicopter cruised over the rim and the abyss opened up beneath us, we all experienced a full-on roller-coaster moment, hearts dropping out the bottom of stomachs. It was so epic that every well-planned thing I was ready to say to the camera just went out of the window. ‘OH MY GOD!’ I blurted. Four kilometres across and more than a kilometre deep, Mount Bosavi’s crater could have totally swallowed my home town.

From up high the inside of the cauldron looks like a perfect fruit bowl, but as you drop down inside it you become aware that it is strewn with imperfections. The inner caldera is in most places vertical rock, but there are some precipitous ridges running down to the bottom, and it’s one of these we had hoped to descend to get us inside. The ridges were anything but smooth elevators, dropping down uniformly into the bowl: broken, tangled with forest, many came to abrupt ends in sheer drops and landslides. Right now, our grand plan seemed as well conceived as that of Burke and Wills, who back in the 1860s attempted to walk across the Australian outback with twenty

tonnes of kit including a solid oak dining table, candelabras and zero bush experience.

Inside Bosavi's bowl there are also peaks and folds, many several hundred metres high, often with big drop-offs over rock walls. Getting round any one of those could take a whole dangerous day. Trees that I'd taken for spindly saplings from up in the chopper were actually fifty-metre tropical hardwood giants. Streams that appeared to be mere trickles from the height of the crater rim were now clearly rampaging hell rivers, with multiple drops over waterfalls and through boulder-choked gorges. My initial thought that we'd be able to follow a streamway was clearly hopeless optimism. There was nowhere instantly obvious inside Bosavi that you could land a helicopter, and if we did find a spot it would require several days of chopping and clearing to turn it into a landing site. Suddenly I began to see quite how badly wrong this apparently simple expedition could go.

The expedition was the focus of an international television series devised by the British Broadcasting Corporation to explore forgotten corners of Papua New Guinea, find new species and bring to the public eye the potential conservation nightmare unfolding in these hinterlands, far from the eyes of the international press. No outsider had ever ventured into Mount Basavi before; it represented a virtual island created by altitude, its near-vertical sides and its isolation held the promise of untold treasures and adventure beyond our wildest dreams. If there remained a Lost World on our shrinking and increasingly homogenised planet, this was it.

After about fifteen minutes of circling – the pilot with his eyes on the fuel gauge like a kestrel watching a vole – we had a breakthrough. Sometime during recent months a major landslide had plummeted down one of the smaller waterways, obviously propelled by a flash flood. The slide had taken with it tonnes of boulders and earth, as well as most of the vegetation that had covered the hillside. The resultant heap of bare mud and rocks looked to have consolidated, and was perhaps twenty metres across by fifteen. With a bit of clearing work, it was just possible that a very daring pilot would be able to land there. I suggested this to our pilot, who hovered over it for a few minutes, his face pursed in concentration. Eventually he nodded: 'You'd need to flatten it all out, and clear down all those trees, but then . . . it might

work ... rather you than me getting down here though ... Hell, man!'

We hovered perhaps a hundred metres above it, as low as we could get with the forest cover, and I programmed the rough spot into my GPS as a waypoint. This was all we'd have as a guide to make our way down here. Our only landmark was a huge, branchless tree trunk so pale in colour it appeared totally white. Because the understorey had been cleared out by the landslide, it seemed like a ghostly spirit tree.

With those measly few coordinates logged, we felt our tummies drop again as the whirlybird lifted up and out of the crater, and back down the outer slopes of Bosavi. A substantial distance down one of the ridges was a clear spot in the trees, so our pilot dropped a skid down. With the rotors still whirring, we pulled our kit from the cab. Crouching beneath the blades, faces blasted by the windblown leaves, we dashed for cover. As we waited for the pilot to return with our local guides, Maxi and Chocol, a New Guinea harpy eagle flew overhead, letting out its extraordinary 'bonk bonk' call, like the plucking of a hunter's bowstring.

After the last chopper drop, we pressed on up the ridge line along a tiny overgrown path, the stunted trees wrapped in a duvet of dripping green moss that deadened sounds and poured pints of wet goo down your neck every time you stooped beneath a low-hanging branch. We reached the top as clouds began to roll in, minutes before the rains bombarded us, but in time to see the crater revealed in all its majesty. It was simply overpowering. If Spielberg had seen this place first, he would have filmed *Jurassic Park* here. The jagged, green crater rim was like an inside-out fortress. The mist and clouds raging up the crater walls made it seem as if the tree-tops were on fire, or as if the volcano itself was still smouldering. I was standing right up on the rim, and the world below me was a total unknown, unmapped, untrammelled, unexplored. I would very soon become the first white man to ever venture inside. The mist-infused jungle bowl below me was for now the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns. This truly was my enterprise of great pitch and moment!

It was a genuine surprise to find that, from nowhere, I was overcome by a sensation of overwhelming excitement and emotion. Suddenly



the whole thing fell into place. For the first time I knew why I was here – it all had a purpose, a reason. I was here to make my peace with New Guinea, to lay to rest the ghosts of explorations past, and to rediscover and finally realise all my childhood dreams and fears. After earlier, humiliating, aborted expeditions here, I'd shelved New Guinea in a folder marked 'Suppressed'. Now, standing there on that ridge, I saw Bosavi as a great adventure long overdue, a chance to set the score straight with New Guinea and feel again the hunger for the place that I'd had for most of my life. With wondrous honeyeaters and fruit doves coursing about in front of me, ears alive to the cheepings and purrings of unseen frogs in the ferns and mosses, I stared down, mesmerised, into the crater below.

Seething tendrils of cloud billowed up the ravaged walls, as if witches were mixing some primeval potion in a giant green cauldron. Out beyond the mountain and off into the distance in every direction stretched a sea of cloud, with only a few taller peaks poking up through the perfect unbroken white blanket. Above the fierce whiteness, blue skies and a quickly rising sun. This is what is known as an inversion, where the usual thermocline – temperature gradient – is reversed, and cold air lies in the valleys with a layer of warm air above it. Water vapour condenses here, forming an ocean of bubbling cloud. Usually this will burn off after a few hours when the sun starts to redress the balance and air layers start to mix; but until it does, it feels like you are gods, sitting on the cumulus couches of your own private heavens above the clouded world.

Tiny colourful birds perch on the moss-covered boughs about us, chirping inquisitively at these strange intruders. Even my cynical godless Western mind can see why this place holds such powerful magic for the local people. To further emphasise the point, Chief Seguro of Sienna Falls sings us into the crater, creating a gate using a magic stick. He chants a refrain to the gods of Bosavi crater, to a giant serpent said to dwell around the rim and to the tree kangaroos within, imploring them to give our journey their blessing. I can feel the thumping in the back of my throat as we cross under the gateway, beneath our feet the unrelenting steepness and miracles unknown.

The heart of Bosavi steamed and bubbled. Of course the crater is long extinct, and the steams boiling up from below were merely

mountain mists enveloping the trees within. The mountain itself stood above the clouds, themselves a bleached white carpet stretching out towards the horizon in every direction. Beneath the cloud, the forests breathed and a billion creatures known and unknown stirred with the sunrise. But below me was the prize. A forgotten world shut off from the outside world through time, unexplored by scientists or travellers, unknown to all but the tribes that live here. My next steps would carry me down into the crater, into the Lost World inside the volcano.

# 1

*The jungle-veiled mountains are a span of infinite, mist-saturated wilderness outside my smoky plane window; dark-brown rivers carve through the valleys, reflecting the sun in sudden unexpected flashes of blinding gold. We had been flying over this landscape for an hour, and at this height the lush forest appeared like a green, velvet rug over the studded peaks. Occasional flowering vegetation spangles the canopy below with bursts of yellow and white. From up here it looks as if you could surf over the emerald waves that are the mountains, but I know that the terrain below is as tough as jungle gets – to hike even a mile up the tangled slopes would be a hard-fought achievement. Within these forests, though, were hidden all the animals I had long dreamed of finding, along with muddy, rotting, mosquito-blown torments beyond imagining. American aeronautical maps of the area delineate the land below without contours or features – merely as blank white areas the size of Greater London and bearing the legend ‘Relief Data Incomplete’. This tantalising unknown is not barren wasteland, but pristine jungle and tangled alluvial mangrove swamps that have never borne the imprint of an explorer’s boot.*

My name is Steve Backshall, and for the last fifteen or so years I have been travelling the world’s most exotic and least-known places for a living – which sounds to many people like paradise. Yet at some level I am, and have always been, deeply unsatisfied. Nagging at the back of my mind has always been the sense that I’m searching for something but have never really put my finger on what that something might be – well, until I sat down to write this book. It had been on my mind for the best part of a decade while my old faux-leather-bound travel diaries gathered dust in the loft, when I finally managed to catch the interest of a West London literary agent.

In his plush office he lounged back on burnished leather, bookshelves stuffed with the writings of his eminent clientele. Adjusting

his designer specs on his nose and sweeping back his fashionably long hair, he asked me a simple question: 'Why? Why do you do this with your life? What makes you want to continually push yourself? Most people are going to think you're completely insane.'

That was an easy one! I opened my mouth, confidently prepared to give him one of my many stored-up tales of derring-do, but faltered. Nothing came out. I was totally stumped. In the previous hour I'd already talked about how I'd been influenced by the great naturalists Gerald Durrell, Alfred Russel Wallace and David Attenborough, then about the cheap silver-fronted paperbacks of Wilbur Smith and Jack London, but to this important question I had no answer. Why is it that everything in my life has had to be a challenge? Just what is it I've been striving for? What's been the point of it all? I sat there like a guppy, mouth opening and shutting and no doubt with a stupid look on my face. I fully expected the answer to come to me on the train home, but it didn't. In fact, it took me nearly six months to figure out what it is that's been driving me all this time and put it into words, and now I have it in black and white it all seems a bit silly. But here it is.

I wasn't supposed to be here. I've been dumped out of time. I'm an anachronism, a refugee of circumstance trying to find my place in a shallow, shrink-wrapped modern world.

I know I'm far from alone. Practically every day that passes sees another of my competitors or colleagues paraglide off Everest in a gorilla suit or sail across the Pacific in a bathtub in a desperate search to affirm themselves, and to be the first at something. Anything! A couple of hundred years ago we would perhaps have been real explorers, discovering a world awash with undreamt-of miracles. However, modern explorers are not burly machete-wielding adventurers but big-brained scientists in search of 'the God particle', cold fusion or the cure for cancer. In fact just about everything about the modern world and its silicon chip, silicon chest, fast food, concrete and shining glass exterior leaves me cold, and with a deeply uncomfortable sensation in my belly. Could it be that I'm a savage dumped in modern times like Crocodile Dundee – well, except without the wit, the giant knife or the super-fit American girlfriend? Could this be why I have

the niggling sense in the back of my mind that everything around me is somehow wrong?

Walking the Saturday streets of London, assaulted by the Chelsea chiquitas with their uniform big hair and surgically attached mobile phones, as white-van-man over-revs at the traffic lights and the newsstand headlines scream out about the antics of some rapist billionaire footballer as if it really matters, with technology all about me that would have been condemned as works of witchcraft not so long ago, I'm as lost as most people would feel if they were teleported to the middle of the Arctic tundra. Something went wrong with the space – time continuum and dumped me here at the dull end of the twenty-first century, struggling to find meaning in a world that seems to have none.

I always wanted to have been born in the Golden Age of Exploration, the mid-1800s, when Darwin and his contemporaries were sailing off into the unknown, never knowing if the Kraken would awake from the depths and eat the cabin boy. Some of their shipmates must still have believed they might sail off the edge of the world, and the real dangers of storms, starvation and cannibals' cooking-pots gave every day an edge you just can't replicate today – not unless you fancy wandering through Glasgow dressed as an American tourist and wearing a fat fanny pack. The great wanderers of yesteryear drew their maps as they went, discovering new wonders with every divine new day.

That was the time for me.

But instead, I was born in Bagshot in Surrey, the heartland of normal in the south of England, and lived my formative years through the eighties, the emotionally bankrupt decade that style forgot. The options open to me (though I've never rationalised it till now) were to sit around fantasising about going back in time, or to try and make a life less ordinary, to try and be an explorer now – in as much as that is possible in our modern world. This has been both my blessing and my curse in life. It's taken me to over a hundred countries, driven me to climb to the tops of the highest Himalayan peaks, got me shot at, arrested and robbed blind, had me more frightened and more ecstatic than I could ever explain to anyone. However, it also leaves me here in my mid-thirties, single, restless, unsatisfied, sharing precious little

common ground with my contemporaries and now contemplating where on earth I go from here, what on earth the point of it all has been, and most of all where it all ends. In the words of an astute friend: 'You're an island Stevie B.'

Even as a tiny child this dominating facet of my character was evident to all who knew me. My parents describe me as an India-rubber handful, who'd bounce out of his cot at every opportunity to try and eat my way through their best glassware, attempt to cut out my sleeping sister's tonsils with the best scissors, or climb the crockery cabinet in search of the cookie jar. I pulled the whole thing off the wall in an avalanche of ceramics – my parents were so happy to find me alive in the debris I escaped punishment! Far from trying to quash my adventurous spirit, Mum and Dad saw it as their mission to give my sister and me a childhood of extraordinary experiences, filled with challenges, triumphs – and traumas.

As I'm sure is true of most kids, my most powerful memories are from family holidays. While most of my friends would be taken away to a Butlin's holiday camp or the south of Spain, we were fed on a holiday diet of frugal adventure, which more than once meant nearly floating away on an airbed inside a drowning tent. Weirdly, it was on one of these camping trips that I first became aware of the big, scary dark place that was to have such an impact on my life. In my memory, we were camping in the New Forest, but in fact it could have been in the Welsh valleys or in a farmer's field in Cornwall; we rarely holidayed in the same place twice. It must have been raining really hard for several days (Dad would never have let us be inside, otherwise), to force us into a village hall with an exhibition on. The exhibition was all about Papua New Guinea.

I can picture my sis whingeing her way around the glass cases; all she ever really wanted to do was be with horses and it would have been her idea of hell. None of my family even remember the exhibition now, but it engraved itself in my imagination like a William Blake etching. The contents of the cases are a photo album of images that haunted my dreams and nightmares for the rest of my childhood. There were sepia-tinted black and white photographs of tiny muscular Papuan pygmies who came up to the waists of the white explorers who stood amongst them. The tribesmen really did

have bones through their noses, their heads were crowned with brightly painted feathers and their groins sprouted penis gourds. Next to them were old-fashioned drawings of birds of paradise, their avian heads dipped in malachite and chartreuse oil paints, wearing Elizabethan ruffs round their necks and trailing extravagant wires and bustles. Surely they couldn't be real? There was a photo of a giant crocodile shot dead, its jaws held open by a white man with a rifle. Its head alone was over a metre long and it could have swallowed me in a single gulp – indeed, it would have had to, crocodilians being physically unable to chew.

The next case down held a row of shrunken heads. Shrinking heads is a deeply macabre process. Having viciously killed the owner, the headhunter cuts the head open at the rear and removes the skull. He then sews the eyes and lips shut with palm threads, before boiling the head in tannins and cooking the now leathery skin in hot sand. The effect is deeply disturbing, as the head is still unmistakably human. The skin is tanned dark as a well-worn Chesterfield, the nose and other features are huge and distorted, and the hair is still long and luxuriant a hundred years on. But now the whole head is only the size of a grapefruit. (This bit might be my memory messing with me, as the process of shrinking heads is more common in the Amazon basin than in Melanesia, but I still see them grinning back at me in my memory's blurred etching.)

The last glass case was the one that really held my attention, and if I shut my eyes I can still envisage it most clearly now. It was full of pinned insects from the Papuan forests. Until then, bugs to me were just – well, bugs. Ugly yucky things that ruined your picnics and seemed designed purely to make life a bit more uncomfortable. This lot, though, were a whole different world of horror. There were amethyst, amber and garnet-inlaid beetles, yellow- and black-striped spiders the size of my dad's mighty, meaty hand, and armoured scorpions whose sting must surely have meant instant death.

More scary than the scorpions, though, were the biggest, most monstrous insects I had ever seen: a foot long, and taking up half the case with their huge bulk. I know today that they were harmless stick insects, pinned with their spindly legs and colourful wings outspread to give them maximum effect, but at the time they were the most

horrific things I had ever seen. Following the visit to the exhibition I began to wake up at night, tormented by a nightmare that had me lying in the jungle leaf litter, wrapped up in a sleeping bag, with those vast stick insects crawling over my face looking for a place to begin feeding.

After the Dark Island had first been installed in my consciousness, throughout my childhood every tiny brush with New Guinea cemented my fascination with the place. My mum brought back piles of *National Geographic* magazines from car boot sales, and I'd thumb threadbare the pages about the Star Mountains, the Sepik River and singsings in the misty highland valleys. My treasured encyclopaedia of birds of the world I still have – now in pieces, its spine broken through overuse in such a way that it opens automatically at the pages featuring the birds of paradise. I learnt everything about them, from woefully inadequate adjectives describing them – 'the *superb* bird of paradise', 'the *splendid* astrapia', 'the *magnificent* riflebird' – to their courtship dances, and pictured myself as the young Attenborough sitting beneath their *lek* (dancing site), as the birds danced above me spotlighted in a sunray they'd created for themselves by plucking a hole in the canopy above. I couldn't have told you where Manchester or Leeds was on a map of the UK, but could have directed you straight to the obscure Bomberai Peninsula, the Aru Islands or the spot where Jan Carstensz in 1623 first reported glimpsing an equatorial glacier (for which he was roundly ridiculed by all back in Europe).

At eighteen years old, having finished my A levels and saved up some money from making kebabs, tedious nightclub and market-stall jobs, I set off to Asia on a voyage of discovery.

For the first couple of months I fell with other backpackers into the easy, hedonistic comfort blanket of Thailand, which offered thousands of other lost and afraid young people the chance to travel without a scrap of effort or genuine risk. To begin with I was massively insecure, and as keen as anyone else to stick to the tourist trail. I drank too much, partied lots, and kidded myself that I was finding myself. However, as my confidence grew I realised that I wasn't actually achieving anything of worth, and more importantly that the travellers around



me that appeared the coolest were no different from the cool kids back at my school. For much of my childhood I'd struggled to fall in with the cool set, but never really managed it. Now suddenly I saw them all with fresh eyes – subject to a lifelong bluff, a fixation with image concealing zero real substance. In a minor epiphany, I also realised that I preferred my own company to them, and that they were no more than a millstone round my neck. It's been a continuous battle against true misanthropy ever since.

For the next six months, though, I didn't fight it. Instead, I undertook my travelling like some frantic school project, taking myself on my own to the furthest-flung places imaginable, forcing myself to do it the hardest way possible, while forbidding myself luxuries like some sadomasochist monk. Reading back through my diaries now raises the hackles on the back of my neck – how I didn't get myself into more serious trouble God alone knows. I'd just hitch-hike out into the middle of nowhere, then start walking, sleeping wherever the day ended. Despite being robbed at gunpoint twice and stranded in nowheresville backwaters for weeks on end, I somehow managed to end up in many villages that had never seen white people before, and was the guest of honour at festivals and funerals of spine-tingling primordiality. It's a miracle I came home at all, really, but my university place was booked, and despite all efforts to scrimp and save, my finances eventually ran dry.

After finishing my three years at university, I looked around in dismay as my friends were sucked into jobs in management consultancy and insurance. They seemed to get middle-aged almost overnight. This was certainly not part of *my* life plan. My instant reaction was to do something as tangential as possible, so I took myself off to Japan. There I spent a year studying martial arts, teaching confused snotty-nosed Korean kids (who were still learning Japanese) to say 'apple' in English, and working as a model and extra in various television commercials.

It was a bizarre year, almost worth a book in itself, though spectacularly irrelevant to the things that I really wanted to do. I returned to the UK as a black-belt, convinced that my mission was to set up a dojo in Britain and get on to the British judo team. This grand plan lasted about six months, and was well countered by the fact that my

parents were rather despairing over the fact that their son was seriously considering dedicating his life to – well, to beating people up. I suppose the fact that I never made the British judo team, or anything like it, probably had a bearing on things too. So it was with considerable excitement that over breakfast one day my mother showed me a little ad in the *Guardian* newspaper asking for writers to compile the first *Rough Guide to Indonesia*, a country I'd already had an introduction to on my earlier travels.

It seemed at that moment to be the gateway to a future of incredible possibilities. Leaving my scrambled eggs to congeal on the plate, I started compiling a CV and sample piece right there. There were several thousand applicants, but I doubt any of them attacked the preparation as I did. For a week I hid away in my parents' garden shed with their hundred-year-old word processor (another car boot sale special) preparing my sample chapter, even tracing the exact font the *Rough Guides* used and relearning the decent spoken Indonesian I'd learnt in the four months travelling there during my big year out. Talk about using a sledgehammer to smash a walnut! They'd never before seen a job applicant so over-prepared, and my naive keenness did me no favours. In the interview I told them I would do the job for free.

Little did I know that's pretty much exactly what I'd have to do, guidebook writers ranking some way behind street cleaners when it comes to cash.

Indonesia the nation had great appeal for me, but there was one area in particular that had me beside myself with excitement. During all my earlier travels, West Papua, then known as Irian Jaya, had appeared like the Holy Grail: the most out-there place on the continent, a final frontier in an ever-shrinking world. Unfortunately back then it had been way beyond my feeble budget. Now that my flights were paid for, though, I was going to make the absolute most of the opportunity, and I set aside three months to travel in Irian while putting together my chapter. At the time, the chapter was very much secondary – I was in my early twenties, and was only really interested in the allure of adventure and exploration that Irian offered. This was the place where the young TinTinesque Backshall could pit himself against the environment and win, gaining enough kudos to genuinely be able

to call himself an explorer. Not only that, but the vast jungles held biological riches beyond my wildest dreams. This was not just one of the world's great hotspots of biodiversity, containing millions of species of exotic invertebrates and bizarre mammals, but was one of the most important places on earth for the history of the biological sciences.

It was the great zoologist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) who was the first to notice that as you travel east through Indonesia the flora and fauna change dramatically, with a big change happening about the middle of Indonesia. The basic premise is that New Guinea once shared a land bridge with Australia – maybe as recently as the last ice age – while Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Bali were connected to Asia. The region where the crossover occurs has been dubbed Wallacea, in Wallace's honour. Even today the gulf between the two small and comparatively close islands of Bali and Lombok is extraordinarily deep, and travelling between them you feel as if you are leaping from one continent to another. The vestigial wildlife is a result of these two ancient connections: from distinctly Asian in the west with large mammals such as tigers, rhinos and elephants, to distinctly Australasian in the east with marsupials and monotremes (mammals that lay eggs).

At this point I have a confession to make. I'd not even heard of Wallace until I started researching for the *Rough Guide*. His book *The Malay Archipelago* kept cropping up in my research, so after putting it off for some months I took it away on a trip, knowing that seclusion with no other reading material would force me to slog through it. In the event, I read it through as breathlessly as if it had been a thriller, then went straight back to page one and started again. It remains the single most inspiring book I have ever read. Though you couldn't dispute the genius of Darwin, his journals are all rather dry, with little flavour of the places he visited and little sense of the adventures he must have experienced. Wallace's books, on the other hand, have more swashbuckling and derring-do than Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle's back catalogues put together. This was a man who in the mid-nineteenth century put his life in the hands of headhunters and cannibals, discovered new and wondrous species of animal every day of his travels, and hacked his way through terrain that even today is

some of the most thankless on the planet. His collections from the trip totalled more than 125,000 specimens and thousands of new species.

New Guinea was to Wallace what the Galapagos Islands were to Darwin: a place where the greater picture of how the world's species had developed became increasingly evident, and the grand idea of evolution became a – to many – uncomfortable but unavoidable truth.

Wallace spent most of the 1850s and 1860s travelling through eastern Indonesia, and lived for several years with the natives in New Guinea. After all those years studying the wildlife of the region, while in a malarial fever in the Spice Islands he was suddenly struck with an epiphany: the theory of evolution through natural selection. The older and more cautious Darwin was probably several years from publishing his theory when Wallace sent him his own thesis, hoping for advice. The fear of being gazumped was apparently what spurred Darwin into publishing his first papers on the origin of species, and bringing perhaps the greatest idea of all time into the public domain. This aspect alone of Wallace, his astonishing but overshadowed effect on science, is enough to make him my fondest hero. However, it was his travel writings that cemented my fascination with New Guinea. I would give anything to have been with him on those journeys. But as this was unlikely to happen outside of my dreams, my only option was to follow in his footsteps.

Planning the trip, however, was to prove more challenging than any I'd undertaken so far. This was long before the days of Google and email, so I took the train up to London every day and sat for weeks on end in the British Library and the School of Oriental and African Studies library, poring over texts on the area. My best sources were the decades-old texts of Michael Clark Rockefeller, and manky dust-mite-ridden tomes on primitive art and anthropology. It made me feel scholarly and serious, but was largely pointless: practical information on actually travelling out there was nonexistent.

On the map, New Guinea resembles a gigantic turkey, with a wattled throat and blunted beak. The eastern half of the island is the independent country of Papua New Guinea, while the western half is what

was known until 2007 as Irian Jaya (now West Papua), under the control of Indonesia. What really strikes you when you look at a map of New Guinea, though, is quite how little is on it. A map of the UK shows towns, cities, roads, motorways and railways. A map of New Guinea is just green.

If you get a good map, you may find different shades of green – some to differentiate between the green of the lowland swamps and the mountainous forests of the central spine of the island – but there are barely any signs of human intervention. There are no more than a few roads around Irian's capital of Jayapura, which, if we stick to the idea that New Guinea looks like a giant turkey, lies about where its upper back would be. It's on the north shore, a fourteen-hour journey from Indonesia's capital Jakarta – fourteen hours in a plane, and you're still in the same country! Apart from those few roads, and a couple of tracks snaking out from two or three other small towns, there's nothing. Small villages are marked as tiny circles on the map, but those circles are stranded off in the mountains and swamps, often a hundred miles away from their nearest marked neighbours. If you want to get there, you walk, you paddle a dugout canoe, or you rely on the few airfields cut roughly out of the forest.

If I was going to rediscover the halcyon days of exploration anywhere in the modern world, surely this was the place.

After my fourteen-hour flight from Jakarta, my feet first touched Papuan soil in the Irian capital city. Jayapura itself will never be considered alongside Paris and London in the pantheon of great capitals. It lies at the bottom of partially forested hills, in the gully carved out by its own filthy river. You'd think the tangled mess of rusty-roofed shacks and crumbling mosques had been swept down the river gully by a huge flood, then dumped there unceremoniously just short of a merciful burial at sea. Despite the wispy sea breezes, the town is sticky sweet-hot, and the litter and human filth in the streets give off a putrid hum.

Yes, it's a bit grim, but I've trodden streets like this throughout Southeast Asia over the years, and if anything I feel more at home in places like Jayapura than in any Western towns or villages. The rules are pretty simple, and despite the grottness and poverty, people are generally smiley and friendly and will welcome you into their homes

like old pals. However, though Jayapura on the face of it seems very similar to all those other places, as I walked the streets – sketching a map of it as I went and sticking my nose into several less than salubrious eateries – there was no mistaking an uneasy undercurrent to the town. To begin with, I thought I was just being a bit of a big blouse, alone in a new place and feeling vulnerable. But the more familiar I became with it, the more certain I became that not just Jayapura, but Papua as a whole, had a deeply sinister atmosphere about it that left me feeling unsettled.

The country itself is unremittingly hard, and will always live in my memory as a cavern-like jungle drenched in rain and mud, a place where the sun is always a stranger; but it's more than that. Perhaps it's the fact that the people look so bloody scary. Whereas most Asian peoples are slender – almost fragile-looking – Papuans look as if they could pull your arms from your sockets and beat you to death with them. Though short in stature, their Melanesian physiques are powerfully muscular and lean. Flat-nosed and heavy-browed, they usually wear a serious expression, not to say a menacing glower. Even the old women look like they could step into the ring with Mike Tyson and give him a run for his money. And while most Asian peoples are deferential, studiously avoid conflict and fit a vaguely colonial model of etiquette, Papuans stare at you with often fierce and hostile eyes, unashamedly studying you and everything you're doing, distrustingly, and sometimes from mere feet away.

Often, in moments of social tension, Papuan people will take to brandishing their gigantic machetes, axes and spears, wantonly chopping at tree stumps and house timbers. It's thoroughly intimidating. Here in the cities, though, I think the unease I feel is mostly down to a genuine unfairness and inequality between locals and migrants. As I've said, native Irianese people are distinctively Melanesian in appearance, with tight frizzy hair and handsome flat-nosed features. However, all the people you see running the shops, wearing uniforms and riding the buses are slender and tall, with glossy straight hair and Indian complexions, and very obviously come from further east in Indonesia.

Continuing my wander through the streets of Jayapura, I'd frequently come across the sad sight of an old Papuan man or woman

sat there naked, skin ravaged by various tropical diseases, with a few ropey-looking vegetables on the pavement in front of them for sale. I never saw anyone even stop to look at their wares, let alone buy any, but I did see several armed policemen forcibly moving one elderly man along, though he wasn't doing any noticeable harm. He got up from the muddy gutter with the difficulty of old age, and the silent acceptance of one who's become used to such indignity. Rather than going to his aid, I scribbled the story in my omnipresent notebook, then returned to my sleazy hotel, passing the half-hearted attentions of the drunken Filipino hookers who sprawled, sweaty and sexless, over the lobby sofas in their tatty nightgowns.

My windowless corrugated-iron room, with its pathetic sputtering fan and ancient snooker-table green baize carpet, would at any other time have been a hell I'd have given anything to avoid. However, I'd written everything that could ever be written about Jayapura, reviewed every hotel and whorehouse, had my stomach turned in every *warung* (restaurant), got the lowdown on all the buses, boats and planes leaving the city, and visited the tourist attractions. These consisted of a crocodile farm no one could direct me to, and a statue of General MacArthur looking down on a lake that supposedly held six-metre-long freshwater sawfish. With my work done and nothing outside to attract me, I sprawled on my thin bed for a siesta (which would certainly not help my jet lag), staring at the cockroaches on the ceiling and wondering what the hell had made me think Irian would be a good idea.

One of the first jobs I had to do on arrival in Jayapura was head to the district police station, registering my presence as a foreigner. The only way I would be allowed to progress further inland was to buy a *surat jalan* – literally, 'walking papers'. On these papers I had to log every destination I was hoping to visit, and upon arriving there I'd have to check in with the local police. It would be down to their discretion as to whether I would then have to endure (at my own expense) an armed Indonesian military guard. The head policeman wore black knee-high leather boots snug round his calves, tight khaki-green trousers, shirt tucked into his belt causing a sizeable pot belly to spill out. It was as if he'd been squeezed into his boots and trousers like a long balloon