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# THE kokoda track

**One of the world's toughest and most rewarding walking tracks, passing through magnificent PNG virgin rainforest**

**BY HELEN PITT PHOTOGRAPHY BY VALERIE MARTIN**

“JUST HALF AN HOUR TO GO,” the rope-veined Papuan guide assured us, not a bead of sweat trickling down his brow. The rest of us much less fit specimens looked at him suspiciously. Ruddy faced and foreheads raining sweat, we were panting as if we had just run a marathon after climbing what he called a hill; we called it a ravine. We were on the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea, one of the world's toughest walks. Somehow, I had the feeling our well-intentioned guide was stretching the truth a bit with his half-hour estimate to the next rest stop.

Maybe it was the twinkle in his eye or the broad grin on his face that gave him away. Or the fact that last time he told us there was half an hour to go, we had to build a bridge, ford a raging river on a single log, climb a hill, cross a swamp and take several swigs from the water bottle before we reached our destination. Sure, half an hour if your name is Grant Kenny, Iron Man. Three hours for the rest of us.

Lesson one of the Kokoda Track is that it is a track not a trail. It was US troops in World War II who called it a trail, and they are responsible for all the signs in the region that refer to it as a trail. But Kokodan etiquette is to call it a track – that is what the locals do and the Australian diggers who fought there followed suit.

Lesson two is never to say you can't do something before you try. It is mental strength that gets you to the end (with a little help from carriers to take your packs if you so desire). The strain on your muscles and mind is as constant as is the mud underfoot. Every day about 3pm it rained. Every day about 3.05pm you asked yourself, “Why am I here?”

But in the seven days it takes to walk the track you will learn more about yourself and your physical capabilities than you thought possible. You will also be passing through some of the world's most magnificent virgin rainforest. There is nothing like beautiful scenery and a good pair of walking boots to make you forget the trials of a nine-to-five existence. It gives a whole new focus to the term goal-setting. Small achievable goals, such as getting to the top of the hill,



crossing a mossy log without slipping and putting up your tent at night, get you to the end of the track. The prospect of a hearty stew cooked by locals gets you to the end of each day. After an arduous day's walk, you might just think your desk-bound job never sounded so good.

Lesson three on the track is always to forgive your guide. He may lie about the half-hour estimates but he is doing it in your best interests; perhaps it is best not to know in too much detail what is just around the corner. And besides, you need him as much as your feet to get you to Ower's Corner at the end of the track. From Kokoda Ridge, the track follows meandering paths worn deep by generations of Kokodan feet. You can see these tracks from the air as you fly to Kokoda to start the trek south to Port Moresby. The art of travelling in Papua New Guinea is to find existing tracks with the help of the local people. There is no part of that track that they do not know. It is said you can cross the whole country in this manner, going from village to village; the people are Highland street directories.

At the airstrip, hundreds of brown eyes emerged to watch and giggle at the arrival of the plane. A trail of children followed like a long black snake. We became the Pied Pipers of the track. A game of tunnel ball in one village was a great hit. A lunch of sugar cane and taro eaten surrounded by a group of mesmerised children brought laughter from all.

Thatched villages perched on mud flats dot the track from Alola to Uberi, as do Seventh Day Adventist thatched churches. Beautifully tended ginger plants, cyclamens, cannas, lilies, wild violets and orchids surround these places of worship, brilliant blue butterflies resting among the vivid display. The bush churches provided the best gardens and the most memorable characters en route. At Myola village, a man known simply as Pastor John provided the best homemade bread, beds and laughs you can get under a kerosene lamp. Fuelled by good food and spirits from Pastor John, it was easy to see why Myola guesthouse, three days into the trek, has earned itself a reputation as the "Hilton" of the track – well worth the long day's march to get there.


Every day on the track we passed locals effortlessly climbing mountains on their way to markets. A mother walked barefoot across a single log to take her sick child to a doctor. Many women passed balancing colourful string *bilum* bags packed full of yams and sweet potatoes and some memorable exchanges took place. They giggled, called us sisters and brothers, shook our hands and shared their





food. A tiny baby slept nestled against his father's chest protected from the rain by a banana leaf umbrella. A local village constable, himself a carrier during World War II, stood ramrod straight and saluted us as we walked into his territory.

It was easy to see how a bond could form between Australian soldiers in need and the generous Koiari people, known as the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels during World War II. But if this sounds like a mere frolic in the Highlands, I must add that it is not everyone's idea of a holiday. Certainly, the feeling upon completion was like post-marathon euphoria but it required stamina and a certain degree of fitness (a doctor's certificate is necessary). It would be a good idea to start training at least a month before the hike to increase aerobic capacity and condition the leg muscles. Power walk, jog, cycle, swim or walk up stairs for at least 45 minutes each day and take a tough bushwalk before leaving.

The only way to get some idea of the toughness of the terrain is to cake yourself in mud, walk under a shower and up about 100 flights of stairs then toboggan down again. It is the surprises en route that make it one of the most rewarding walking tracks in the world. Just enjoy the journey through rainforest and ravine, even if the destination is more than half an hour away. 

*Kokoda Epic, an Australian-based company run by retired army major Charlie Lynn, conducts regular treks on the Kokoda Track. Air Niugini flies to Port Moresby twice a week from Sydney and once a week from Brisbane. For further information, contact Kokoda Epic, (046) 28 4820 or (018) 473 701, fax (046) 28 3615.*

**“in the seven days  
it takes to walk the  
track you will  
learn more about  
yourself than you  
thought possible”**



**Left, a local village constable who was a carrier during World War II. Above, a mother walks barefoot carrying her baby. Below, the track passes through some of the world's most magnificent rainforest**

