

PUT YOUR FITNESS TO THE TEST...

IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

TONI KRASICKI PUSHES HER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL BOUNDARIES IN PNG'S STEAMY JUNGLES AND DISCOVERS THERE'S MORE TO THE KOKODA TRACK THAN JUST A DEMANDING HIKE.

'PORTERS ARE YOU READY?'

'Yes!' 'Trekking are you ready?' 'Yes!' 'Hippy hippy shaky shaky let's rock'n'roll!' bellows Charlie our local Koiari lead trekker. What a brilliant way to start an invigorating day of Kokoda trekking. Charlie's daily mantra brings a smile to our faces even though most of us have been awake since 2.30am when the village rooster, who clearly doesn't have a watch, begins his wake up call.

The thought of rising at 5am for eight consecutive days isn't usually on my holiday agenda, but it's definitely the best part of the day to start hiking. The skies are clear, the temperatures are lower and our bodies are rested and energised after being horizontal since 7.30pm the night before.

After leaving the high humidity of Port Moresby, it's a welcome relief to reach the start of the track: Ower's Corner at 685m above sea level. What unfolds over the

following days is a wonderland for outdoor enthusiasts: pristine jungles with towering skyscraper-like trees; mossy forests; refreshing crystal clear creeks; and sleepy villages with friendly locals and grassy campsites on prized real estate.

On the flipside, Kokoda is no 'walk in the park'. You're basically traipsing up and down ridges, peaking at around 2,220m at Mt Bellamy and depending on which end you start or finish from, either at 685m at Ower's Corner or 300m at Kokoda. It doesn't take long to

find your rhythm on the track. Days are spent either sloshing through or sidestepping across narrow planks to traverse creeks, and when the track is slippery and muddy, calculating your foot placement all the way actually means you spend around 95 per cent of the time looking down!

I'd be a liar to say that it's not mentally tough and physically challenging. The very word 'Kokoda' has been known to instil fear in even the most avid thrillseeker.

Novice walkers may find that the

trek is 50 per cent physical and 50 per cent mental, whereas the more experienced and fitter may find it's more a 30:70 ratio.

Of course, like anywhere in the world, things can happen. By day two, our group of 14 trekkers (which includes our faultless trek leader, Gareth Ward) shrinks to 13 after one of our fellow trekkers is airlifted out due to health issues.

Of the 27 local crew who carry (that includes packets of Tim Tams for dessert!), cook, pitch tents, lend helping hands and generally make our life on the track as comfortable as possible – most are from the village of Naduri. Their random bursts of singing, as much for themselves as for us, are harmonious and melodic and weeks after returning home, I am still humming PNG's national anthem!

On day five, our crew are happy to be home in Naduri for the night. For us it's a village feast of local vegetables including taro, sweet potato, corn on the cob and choko vine (that tastes like spinach) and, a real treat, homemade pizza. It's a welcome change from our staples of noodles and pasta.

It's also an opportunity to meet one of the last Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, 106-year-old Indiki. Indiki, although resigned to a wheelchair, still commands respect as the village chief and elder. He proudly displays his medals of service received from his efforts during the Kokoda campaign when the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels assisted the Australian soldiers.

As with any challenge undertaken in life, the true impact and importance is sometimes overlooked. While it's all 'one foot in front of the other', on the Kokoda track, the history is everywhere and the consistent reminders and interpretations from our guide make it impossible to miss the overwhelming sacrifice made by Australians here. It soon becomes

TREK LEADER, GARETH WARD'S ON-TRACK TIPS

- Eat
- Drink
- Breathe
- Find your rhythm
- Watch where you walk
- Look after your feet.

clear how trekkers can have such 'life-changing' realisations.

2012 marks the 70th anniversary of one of Australia's most significant campaigns, when in 1942 a handful of young Australian soldiers clambered through the jungle in PNG's Owen Stanley Ranges. With limited supplies and experience the 1,500 soldiers fought more than 14,000 Japanese in a relentless six-month battle that was a pivotal turning point during World War II.

So, if you choose to tackle Kokoda, you're bound to find a newfound respect and/or knowledge about the challenges and historical significance of the infamous track. And, when you need inspiration to keep putting one foot in front of the other, the Aussie Digger's spirit of courage, endurance, mateship and sacrifice will inspire you to keep going, even when your feet or body would prefer otherwise.

KOKODA TRAVEL TIPS

- ✦ Listen to and take onboard, advice from others who have done the trek. Though remember, your experience will be unique and individual to you.
- ✦ Read and read again the item checklist provided by the trekking company (to ensure you don't forget to take the vitals, such as anti-malarials and water purifying tabs).
- ✦ Make sure you have a good base fitness level. If you are out of shape and have health issues, start training well in advance and know your limitations.
- ✦ Train in all weather conditions and on all terrains and inclines. For example, wear your boots in mud, heavy rain, train on uneven and muddy slippery terrains, and tackle those hills in the lead up to your trip.
- ✦ Try to do training hikes in warm/hot conditions if possible and/or in the middle of the day.
- ✦ Pack earplugs if you want to block out the snoring, roosters and noisy nocturnal birds.
- ✦ Take a comprehensive first aid kit; something for every possible scenario.
- ✦ Be aware that although tents are erected for you, it's not glamping – there are no hot showers or crisp sheets at the end of the day!
- ✦ Keep in mind that the fitter you are, the more you will enjoy the track.



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