



TROBRIAND ISLANDS:

THE FORGOTTEN PARADISE



No doubt about it: the arrival of the Air Nuigini plane from Port Moresby is the main entertainment of the week in Kiriwina, the largest island of Trobriand, as the crowd of local people gathered behind the wire fence surrounding the small airfield.



Obweria village where many thatched huts are built on stilts around the central square, called the *Buka*.



Chieftains like to show-off that they own a lot of yams so they display them in the yam house right in the middle of the village. Yams are very important as a symbol of wealth, power and prosperity.



The house of the chieftain was easy to recognize as it was the highest one and was always decorated with shells and a *malagan*, a carved, painted totemic representation.



A hut called "bukumatula" serves as a "love motel". This type of hut is a single room where teens come in and make love. Trobriand islanders have a very free sexuality before and even after marriage.



Girls take part in battles and dance topless, only wearing red grass skirts, shells, feathers, and flower pollens.





A cricket game, introduced in 1903 by Methodist missionaries, is always the occasion for kind mocking remarks and challenges between villages. It is played with much whistle blowing, singing and dancing.



On the island, people print some money, which is called the *doba*. They scratch banana leaves on a wooden board. 50 leaves have a value of 5 kinas or 1 euro.



Little girls wore beautiful crowns of flowers and sea turtle–stud earrings, some inherited from their mothers.



I met an old woman with the head shaved. I tried to ask her why with a gesture. She mimed a child and showed me he died. I understood this woman was in mourning. A few years ago she also would have had her face painted in black.



A girl showed me the punishment task given by her teacher. She had to write down the sentence "I must not come late to school" 60 times. She was very proud.

KLLG

MARKET FEES

1. GATE FEES. 50⁺
2. FISH SALES OUTSIDE
K2.00 PER CANOE OR DINGHY.
YENA MAPULA OKAUKWEDA
K2.00 KETALA WAGA KENA DINIGA.
b. OTHER ITEMS
ITUWALI GUGUWA
3. COMMODITIES FROM OUTSIDE
LLG AREA. UGWAWAGA SI
GUGUWA OLOPOLA LLG LAVALU.
 1. BETEL NUTS K5.00 PER BAG.
 2. SAGO K10.00 PER PERSON.
 3. SAGO LEAVES K10.00
 3. COCONUTS K10.00
 - OTHER ITEMS K10.00
4. PADDLERS LICENCES
K50.00 PER VENDOR
PER YEAR.

MARKET RULES

1. NO CHEWING BETEL NUTS.
GALA KAKAUI BUWA OLOPOLA MAKETI.
2. NO SPITTING. GALA GIU
NO SMOKING. GALA PWAEKI.
3. NO LITTERING. GALA LUVALOVA
WAWA BESOBESO OLOPOLA MAKETI.
4. NO SITTING OR LYING DOWN
ON THE STALL IN THE
MARKET. GALA SISU KENA
KANUKWENU ODABALA TEBELI.
5. NO OBSTRUCTION TO AN OFFICER
OF THE COUNCIL IN THE PERFOR-
MANCE OF HIS FUNCTIONS WITH
IN THE MARKET. GALA KOMINIMANI
DELI TOYAMATELA MAKETI.
PANALTIES. KOWALOVA KAREWA
GA KALAMAPULA. SPOT FINE K20.00
OR A TERM OF IMPRISONMENT
FROM 2 WEEKS TO 6 MONTHS.
BUKU PAENI K20.00 KIDAMWA GALA
KAREWAGA BIYOSEMU WA DERI KWE-
YU WIKI NALIMA NATALA TUBUKONA.

The Market. Follow the rules or you risk up to six months in jail. "Don't worry man! There is no prison on the island," a fisherman said as he burst out laughing.



Mr Tolobuwa, head of Vaikiki village. He is always with his small wicker bag containing betel nuts and lime gourds and spatulas. His huge lime stick was made of casoar bone. In the past that spatulas used to be made of human bones.



Kaibola beach



Lemek was very proud to show me his *masawa*, a traditional canoe with its bow beautifully decorated with drawings and shells. He talked to me enthusiastically about the Kula ring system, a maritime ceremonial trade system between the different tribes of the islands.





Like the shell on the left, the Beku stone on the right is a valued present at weddings and cannot be found on the central island of Kiriwina, and comes from non coral islands thru the Kula system.



Pigs are of course eaten but they are considered as pets and get the same affection as our dogs.



Time for bath!



For some years, harvests in the island have not been good. Many yam houses are left empty and some have even been destroyed like on the left picture.



An elderly man gave me an ID of an U.S. soldier,from World War II. "Bring him back to his country, please,"

No doubt about it: the arrival of the Air Nuigini plane from Port Moresby was the main entertainment of the week in Kiriwina, the largest island of Trobriand, as the crowd of local people gathered behind the wire fence surrounding the small Losuia airfield. I received such a warm welcome after my 24-hour flight from Paris to this island in Papua New Guinea.

I got off the plane. No need to look around for a board with my name written on it, as I was the only tourist expected by John, the Butia Lodge owner, who was my guide, driver, translator and chef for the whole week. He is also one of the few who own a car on the island!

Going to the Trobriand Islands was an old dream. So many anthropologists have presented this place as a destination where culture, tradition and belief are untamed, not under the control of conventional society. Trobriand Islands, have kept their traditions unimpaired despite the presence of French explorers in the 18th century, successively followed by Australian settlers and the US Army during WW2 and especially in spite of the omnipresence of western missionaries. Kiriwina Island has not yet been a place where inhabitants disguise themselves when hordes of tourists disembark from cruise ships.

On the way from the “airport,” I discovered a garden island rich in yams, taros, bananas, tapiocas and sweet potatoes. Everything is green on this flat bit of coral, having its mountaintop at a level of... 50 meters ! John explained that there are two reasons why agriculture is so important here : it is for the subsistence and self-sufficiency of the island’s inhabitants and for the traditional barter economy, that is at the heart of local and social life. John asked if I wanted to stop at the supermarket. Actually, it simply is an open space with a metal roof. I was thinking Coca-Cola would quench my thirst. But what I found was just fish, betel nuts, sago, coconuts and...that was pretty much all! An official sign forbade spitting, chewing betel nuts, smoking and lying down on the stalls. Follow the rules or you risk up to six months in jail, the sign read.

“Don’t worry man! There is no prison on the island,” a fisherman said as he burst out laughing.

The van stopped at many villages along the way. I visited Obweria village where many thatched huts are built on stilts around the central square, called the *Buka*. The house of the chieftain was easy to recognize as it was the highest one and was always decorated with shells and a *malagan*, a carved, painted totemic representation. In every village in the Trobriand Islands, you can find some yam houses. Yam is the common name for some species in the genus *Dioscorea*. These are perennial herbaceous vines cultivated for the consumption of their starchy tubers in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. Yams are very important as a symbol of wealth, power and prosperity. After the harvest, yam houses are filled, and there are big festivities at this time. Chieftains like to show-off that they own a lot of yams so they display them in the yam house right in the middle of the village.

For some years, however, harvests in the island have not been good. Many yam houses are left empty and some have even been destroyed — largely because of the strengthening El Nino which the region has experienced in recent years.

Some smaller huts were decorated with sport posters like teenagers always seem to do in their rooms. A hut called “bukumatula” serves as a “love motel” . John explained that this type of hut is a single room where teens come in and make love. Trobriand islanders have a very free sexuality before and even after marriage !

Girls learn to control their contraception very early, virginity before marriage has no importance at all . If a girl gets pregnant her family keeps the « babu According to the local customs, men just help to open the woman who is supposed to be infused with a « Baloma » spirit provoking the pregnancy. Western education changed the point to view of some islanders, but not all of them. Relationships of married couples have not a lot in common with our culture : here a man is supposed to give presents to his wife in return for the sexual favors she provides him.

I asked Borissala, a 16-year-old girl, if she really used this hut. “Oh yes!” she said, not embarrassed as a modest European teenager might be.

Despite the fact that HIV/AIDS spreads quickly throughout the population, this premarital sex has yet remained a part of the islanders’ idyllic life here. They call HIV/AIDS “the sickness without medicine.” I was shocked not to see any ads for condoms or any signs of prevention. I asked Borissala if she used condoms. “Some have been distributed by the community clinic, but here you will need a lot more!” she said with a malicious smile. I then noticed that she didn’t have eyelashes. “Girls have their eyelashes pulled out by their lovers. It’s like a kiss, you know,” she said.

The romantic customs of the Trobriand Islanders do not extend to “outsiders.» The locals are very proud people and they value the propagation of their genetic lines.

On this island, there was no television or electricity (except in some hotels and administration buildings). On this island, you can walk, wander alone and share smiles with others. And on this island, there are no police, thieves or fear. Just flowers in the hair! Everywhere I went, I met children playing and laughing. They have to make their way through the omnipresent pigs, which gambol in complete freedom. They are of course eaten but they are considered as pets and get the same affection as our dogs. Little girls wore beautiful crowns of flowers and sea turtle–stud earrings, some inherited from their mothers. Wandering in the villages was a real nice time though old people only spoke Kilivila. I met an old woman with the head shaved. I tried to ask her why with a gesture. She mimed a child and showed me he died. I understood this woman was in mourning. A few years ago she also would have had her face painted in black. Exactly like the ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski described it in his famous book, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, written in 1922 during his long stay here.

But thanks to schools here, many of the younger inhabitants could speak English. A girl showed me the punishment task given by her teacher. She had to write down the sentence “I must not come late to school” 60 times. She was very proud.

“Let’s go to the bank, Eric,” John then said. He took me to the other side of the village. On the island, you can pay with kina, the official currency of Papua, and you can print your own money, which is called the *doba*. Take some green banana leaves, then scratch them on a wooden board that has a special carved design. The design is printed on the leaf. Once the sun has turned it yellow, put 50 leaves together, and these 50 leaves have a value of 5 kinas or 1 euro. I then understood what the weird activity, the girl were busy with was. I thought they were cooking but they were actually making money! If you meet little girls disappearing under a pile of dry leaves, you will actually meet a kind of a security guard of the local Brinks company. What kind of purse do they use? I wondered. John said the money is used for weddings, special ceremonies or for daily essentials such as food, vegetables and even fuel for the lucky ones who have a car. I thought I would be a millionaire here until John told me that a husband is the one who gives the wooden board used in making the money to his wife. “So you would have to find a husband first, Eric. Good Luck!” John said.

The next day, John drove me along some fantastic white sand beaches. Not a single tourist around, a paradise vision, barely disturbed by the bell of a school in the distance.

Trobriand Islanders are excellent fishermen and sailors. Lemek was very proud to show me his *masawa*, a traditional canoe with its bow beautifully decorated with drawings and shells. He talked to me enthusiastically about the Kula ring system, a maritime ceremonial trade system between the different tribes of the islands. It enables islanders to barter goods, food and shells, and also foster and maintain relationships between the exchange parties. One example of Kula valuables is a polished stone axe blade, a *Beku*, which is a valued present at weddings and cannot be found on the central island of Kiriwina, and comes from non coral islands.

Back in the hotel, John told me he also owned one. He went straight to the safe at the reception. No money inside, but a stone. “Nobody steals here, but I keep my *Beku* in the safe because it is the most expensive thing I own,” John said.

Exchange is one of the mainstays of society as it is the best mean those peoples found to live at peace. Each islander produces the double of his estimated needs, and the rest of the harvest is distributed and given to his brother–in–law who takes care of all children in the family. Exchange must be public so that everyone can witness it.

I was introduced to Tolobuwa, head of Vaikiki village, who invited me to explore the seacoast. He was always with his small wicker bag containing betel nuts and lime gourds and spatulas. His huge lime stick was made of casoar bone. He told me that spatulas used to be made of human bones in the past. This always had the knack of making him laugh and showing his bright red dentition. Men and women spent their time (and money) chewing. Even little children chewed. I warned Tolobuwa about the bad effects of betel nuts like oral cancer. “Not chewing betel nut is locally regarded as a sign of a serious illness!” he said. John agreed, saying betel nut can help suppress feelings of hunger.

Trobriand is just two hours away from Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea but the government seems to ignore this place as it does not contain minerals or gold. “We are forgotten,” said the only doctor on the island. “Times are hard. We want to keep our traditions and to live in villages, but many people die from typhoid, malaria and pneumonia due to scarce water supplies and poor hygiene.” I was speechless. During my stay, nobody complained or begged for anything. Though food seemed to be scarce as I met a journalist from Port Moresby covering the hunger problem on the island, no one really complained about the absence of food or the hunger. The reality behind the curtain, however, is another story. And faith in life is stronger than anything else.

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In spite of these difficulties, inhabitants are keen on partying. A cricket game, introduced in 1903 by Methodist missionaries, is always the occasion for kind mocking remarks and challenges between villages. It is played with much whistle blowing, singing and dancing. Girls also take part in these battles and dance topless, only wearing grass skirts, and flower pollens. They adopt very suggestive pauses. The Missionaries that introduced the game certainly didn't imagine that this harmless game would take such an erotic turn ! Dances always take place after lengthy make-up ceremonies. Dancers put a mix of coconut oil, mint and lemongrass on their bodies. I thought they were preparing food.

In fact, it was for make-up! I was then invited to join the circle of dancers who then took a sadistic pleasure in making fun of my hairy legs. I had no hope with the girls here though because they don't like white skin and hair — something they see as a sign of ugliness and scruffiness. The *dim dim* (the white man) is not their embodying ideal.

It was already the end of my stay. I could hear the plane engine in the distance. No panic, stress, metal detectors nor body searches at this airport. I was going to leave the paradise of freedom and return back to Port Moresby where there were armed guards on each street corner, gangs and electric fences.

Just before I was about to board the plane, a little child gave me a shell and an elderly man gave me a rusted piece of metal, which was the ID of an U.S. soldier, presumably killed during World War II. “Bring him back to his country, please,” he said. What a funny idea. Where else is a better place to rest in peace than Trobriand?

Flights are available from Singapore or Brisbane to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, and from there you can take a PNG plane to the Trobriand Islands. Schedules may be changed or the flights can be cancelled without notice.

www.apng.com.

There are only 15 cars on the main island, so book it through the hotel, or you will be stuck in your room! It is also possible to walk like the locals do.

Hotels:

- **Butia Lodge:** Very close to the airport, with very good staff, food and rooms.

T: +675 641 0900, +675 641 0999

- **Kiriwina Lodge:** On the waterfront in Losuia.

T: +675 641 1326

- **Village stays:** It may be possible to organise stays in villages. One of the best ones is the Kaibola beach village. Ask Butia Lodge, who can arrange the transfer by car.

- See the Minimala, the traditional yam festival, in July. Visit the PNG website for more information.

- No bars or restaurants outside the hotel.

- No real local craft industry. But local people are willing to sell you some skirts or lime sticks. Most of the time, they will refuse to sell certain important objects as they are deemed to be part of their traditions, so please do not insist.

Ecotourism Melanesia: www.em.com.pg

Papua New Guinea: www.pngtourism.org.pg