

BONGOMACHI TRIP: 23-26th April 2010

Well, how can I describe last weekend's adventures?

Wow? Awesome? Amazing? None of them seem to cover the entire gamut of what we experienced and what went on.

I'll try to start at the beginning, but summarise so that this doesn't turn into too much of an epic.

The reason for the trip came from David and Jenny Wilkinsons' association with the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC) in the 1980s. The church leaders at Bongomachi, the village we were going to, had invited him to come and take part in some celebrations they were having. A team of four of us came together, David and myself, and Godfrey Sim, another neighbour and husband of our HR Manager, and Rick Velvin, another pilot and one who flew with MAF in the 1980s out of Wewak. In short it was the geriatrics expedition; I was the youngest by several years.

Early on Friday 23rd April we departed Mount Hagen and flew to Ambunti, a district administrative centre right beside the big Sepik River. Although in length the Sepik isn't among the top rivers of the world, it is up there with the really big ones in water volume. From the air it looks wide and twisty as it meanders across the lowlands, but get close to it and the flow is not so sedate.



After a bit of a delay some folk from Bongomachi met us at the airstrip and we wandered down to the river and hung around for a while as they needed to purchase some fuel and a new spark plug for their outboard motor. Everything then needed to be loaded into the dugout canoe - a hollowed out tree trunk that I would guess was about 9m (30') long. The fuel drum, a water tight drum holding some of our stuff, other boxes, our film projection equipment and generator and about a dozen people in all - there wasn't a whole lot of legroom.

One brilliant idea of Godfrey's was to use a softly inflated exercise ball as a chair, so I borrowed Nicki's and the two of us were probably the most comfortable on board.

It was immediately obvious that the canoe was heavily laden. On the Sepik this wasn't a problem, but going up the more rapidly flowing tributary that led to Bongomachi, it could be, so a decision was made to stop at a small community called Avatip, just where the Yimmi River, the tributary that we were to follow, joined the Sepik and get a second canoe.

Chugging up the Sepik was enjoyable, watching a few villages pass by, most of them flooded by the high water level due to the prolonged and heavy rains we've had recently. After a while we left the Sepik, about 1km wide at that point, and went down a side channel to Avatip.

Like other villages we'd seen, the whole community was flooded with knee-deep water. Dugout canoes were the main means of transport and children played in toy versions, splashing around and laughing when they fell off them. Some families were making saksak, or sago, the pure starch staple food of the lowlands which I have never learnt to enjoy. The sago palm is felled, the outer bark removed on one side and then the soft inner part chopped out in small pieces. This pulp is then pressed and strained and the extract dried into a coarse powder that is then mixed with hot water and eaten. It is more or less tasteless by itself and has the consistency of soft rubber.



A fishing net lay across part of the open area between the houses (all of which are built on long poles because of the flooding) and while we were there several fish were caught, attracted in from the river by the pulp from the sago.

While we were watching this a second larger dugout canoe was procured and some of our belongings moved into it along with some people, including Godfrey. The river-worthiness of this canoe was not inspired by the obvious colony of white ants living in it, and some cracks in the bow plugged with clay. Perhaps the white ants would help bale out the water if things really got moist.



Our confidence was not increased as the journey went on and it became apparent that there was an engine problem on this canoe, as well as on the other one where the new spark plug had not solved the problem of the engine cutting out. On this second canoe we later realised the fuel pump wasn't working and had to be pumped into the carburettor manually.

If we'd known everything we did by the end of the trip before we started I suspect we wouldn't have gone, but then we'd have missed out, so it was probably a good thing that ignorance was bliss.

All this took about an hour and a half, and since we'd been late leaving Ambunti with the time taken to buy the drum of outboard fuel and then load the canoe, it was already obvious we wouldn't reach Bongomachi by the evening. Time in PNG is much less of an issue than in western society, in fact in bush places it really isn't an issue at all. Even though this would mean their programme for the weekend would have to be changed, then that was not a problem.

The start of the Yimmi River was fascinating. I had my binoculars with me, but in a bag stowed under a tarpaulin. I'd chosen to keep my camera and camcorder more immediately to hand. Huge fish eagles soared overhead, and all the way along the river many different varieties of parrots and birds I never had the chance to identify flew away at the sound of the outboard engine. Pairs of large hornbills also took flight and lazily flapped away into the forest. We never did see a crocodile,

to my disappointment, though there were some tracks on a mudflat we passed, and one villager held up a 2m long one as we passed that he'd obviously just killed (crocodile meat makes excellent eating).

The water level in the river was high and fast, bringing with it large amounts of debris from leaves and small branches to entire trees, adding to the hazard. We soon learnt that dugout canoes are not very stable having a round bottom and no keel. If the outboard engine is turned too quickly it creates a rolling moment that can easily capsize the boat. The length also made it very difficult for them to turn back into the current if they went broadside to it. The adrenaline began to flow.



Now the real fun began. With two lighter canoes we anticipated making fairly quick progress, but that was dependent on having two functioning engines. The one on our canoe regularly cut out when the skipper flooded the carburettor when he slowed the engine, which he usually did when we'd just gone through a fast, debris-strewn patch of river while he pondered where to go next. His river skills were not inspiring and we learnt that the Bongomachi people have only started using canoes in the last few years as a means of taking cocoa out for sale.

Then the engine on the first, smaller canoe died completely. The canoe I was in had gone on ahead (despite its own periodical failures) and when we'd waited beside a mudflat for a while we went back kilometre or so and found the other one at the side of the river with the engine cover off and the information that the boatman couldn't get it going at all.

So, everything in the smaller canoe was put into the big one and we set off again, back to one longer, even less manoeuvrable 10 metre long dug out canoe. Don't rock the boat, and pray that the engine doesn't quit at a critical point, and if it does, pray even harder that it'll start again before you turn broadside into one of the numerous trees caught in the river, and end up getting swamped.

Towards the end of the afternoon we stopped at a small village called Gumanje where the local people put us up for the night. The village was another SSEC community in the same district as Bongomachi and well-known to Albert, the district superintendent, who was one of the people who'd come to meet us and who was experiencing the canoe trip with us.



As is almost invariably the case with remote communities, we were welcomed warmly and accommodated in one of the church member's houses, a big open plan wooden building inside which we put out our sleeping mats and erected mosquito nets. Fortunately I didn't see any mosquitoes and didn't get any major bites, though I'm still taking antimalarials as a precaution for another week or so.

During the evening we brought out the generator, laptop and projector and showed the Jesus Film. In a village community like that where the church presence is strong but literacy is not high, probably one of the greatest values in the film is making the story of Jesus more visual and comprehensible, more a teaching tool than the evangelistic one it is used for in other contexts.

When Jesus is tortured and crucified, the identification of village people with what happened is very strong, and tears and cries of anguish are very common, something that doesn't happen much in western cultures more used to seeing the infliction of pain and murder on the big screen.



Later in the evening, after we'd packed everything away, we went back to the house and found that our hosts had prepared a meal for us of rice, noodles, vegetables and corned beef. This makes a pleasant and filling meal, but by now we were all ready to go to sleep, so we ate what we wanted and turned in for the night. I slept pretty well.

By 7:40 the following morning we were back in the canoe and heading up the river. Whereas the day before had been dry, but mostly with a high overcast

protecting us from the full effect of the sun, now the cloud was heavier and before long it started to rain. Down in the lowlands it wasn't cold, but it's never pleasant sitting in an open boat in the rain. Some of us were able to huddle under the tarpaulins which protected us from the worst effects, but dugouts don't have bilge pumps and what rain didn't land on top of you soon slopped around in the bottom, requiring periodic removal with the aid of coconut shell balers and wiping out with large rags.

Progress up river was slow. The snags became more numerous, the bends tighter, and in some places, the current quite treacherous. At one point one of the twists in the river had been broken through at the neck creating quite a downhill rush of water which we avoided by going all the way around the oxbow. Another piece of information that came out in passing was that the canoe had capsized at this point on their way down to collect us, as well as on two other occasions. What we consider as abnormal is normal for others if it's the only experience they've ever known. The fact that somebody could get swept under a tree and not be able to get out is just a fact of life, rather than seen as a risk to be mitigated. Hmm.

The heavily laden canoe generated quite a strong wake, much more than I'd expected. As we went round one bend a large tree, obviously already teetering on the edge of the bank where the river had undercut it, crashed into the water behind us. Hopefully there weren't any just ahead of us just that little bit further advanced!

The engine continued to die at inconvenient moments. We continued to be unimpressed by the skipper's ability to pick a good line and stick to it. Every now and then a hidden log banged the underside of the canoe or knocked against the outboard.

Most of the way up I felt pretty relaxed, in contrast to at least one of my colleagues who felt that the whole thing was getting out of hand. However, after one particularly tight turn, another engine failure, more knocks from debris and looking back and thinking about how uncontrollable a dugout would be trying to navigate with the noticeably downhill current rather than against it, I thought, "This is getting silly!"

Fortunately this was about the worst place, but the thought of going back down it stuck in our minds and became a major factor in our decisions later on. At about 3 p.m., considerably later than planned, we arrived at Bongomachi, and we scrambled our way up the steep bank through wet, slippery mud.



The welcome was incredibly enthusiastic and warm. Throughout the whole weekend I cannot begin to express how overwhelmingly generous, warm and thoughtful the people were. Our feet were washed; a singing group in traditional leaves and feathers greeted us; we were given kulau to drink - the delicious liquid from a green coconut and then taken to the church for a more formal welcome.

The church was large, seating well over 300 people with nearly as many again standing around the sides

or just outside. Songs were led by the church youth group and then we each stood up in turn and told everybody our names, where we came from, how many children (and grandchildren) we have and so on.

Our accommodation was in Albert's house, where beds had mosquito nets had already been prepared for us. We were humbled to realise that new mattresses, sheets and nets had been bought specifically for us; these folk who have so very little, and who struggle to get cash, wanted to do their very utmost to look after us well, and they succeeded incredibly well. A wash house had even been constructed with a slatted floor, so we could douse ourselves with water and wash properly. It is difficult to convey to anybody who has never been to a remote village just how much all this means and



what concern for our care it expresses.



After we'd cleaned up, sorted ourselves out and been incredibly well fed with chicken, rice and vegetables followed by fresh pineapple, we got the projector equipment out again. As well as the Jesus film, David showed some clips from film footage taken when he was last in the village over 20 years ago. Seeing people who'd died, or who were children in the video but now with their own families was very popular and had a repeat showing the following night due to popular demand, despite the poor and rather jerky quality due to the age of the original film.

During this time we began talking earnestly about how we were going to get back. Going back down the river obviously held considerable risk, especially as we had expensive equipment with us and no personal flotation aids. It's one thing to do something like that when you only have a small amount of equipment that can get wet, but quite another when you have a lot that will get damaged or destroyed. Additionally, our late arrival meant that our time in the village would be extremely short since we were due to leave by canoe early on Sunday afternoon, now only 24 hours after we'd arrived. David particularly wanted to spend some time with the church leaders, finding out in depth how they and the church were getting on as there were reports of serious problems with cargo cults in the area.

An interesting theological discussion also came up. Since we believed that God had led us to go on this weekend, and he'd obviously looked after us on the way up, then shouldn't we trust him to look after us on the way back? Against that is the argument that coming up we didn't know what the river had in store, so we had to trust him for protection. However, to knowingly canoe into a hazardous situation would just be putting him to the test. I don't think that we all adequately resolved the dilemma, but the overall consensus was to find an alternative way out.

Here we are, miles from anywhere, and with no working airstrip close by, and a practical demonstration of how PNG has changed in the last two years became very apparent. Although the signal was weak, it is possible to use the Digicel mobile network from Bongomachi. I was able to call Nicki, and Jenni Bottrell our flight co-ordinator, and later speak with Patrick Williams our Programme Manager as well as send text messages. This communication capacity has made a huge change in the villages able to get a signal, and for us it was incredibly valuable.

Jenni got to work, and to cut a substantial story short, arranged for New Tribes Mission to pick us up in their helicopter on Monday morning. Although it seriously blew our budget for the trip, it was undoubtedly the safest way out. For me it starkly contrasted the options that we had with the local people who have to depend on the river as their sole means of transport.

Now here's an interesting fact. I used my mobile a lot over the weekend. Although I charged it before I went, during the whole weekend the charge never went off full, despite having well over 20 minutes conversation time and numerous texts. It's never done that back in Mount Hagen.

As well as the quicker and safer transport, the very big plus of using the helicopter was the extra time it gave us to talk with the church leaders. I thoroughly enjoyed, greatly appreciated, and felt not a little privileged to sit and chat with these men who have such a real faith, but who face very great problems because of their geographical isolation. It was an honour to listen to them and maybe make a few helpful suggestions.

Before the decision to use the helicopter was finally made, one option was to see whether a nearby airstrip that had been closed for a couple of years, could be made sufficiently serviceable for a small aircraft to land and take-off. When I said I'd go on this trip I'd wondered whether I might be able to walk over to the airstrip, called Arkosame, as it was such a good opportunity with me being so close.



While David, Godfrey and Rick took part in the celebrations on Sunday, I was taken by a small group of local men over to Arkosame. I decided not to take my camera with me because the trip involved fording the river we'd travelled up. Although I was assured that everything would be looked after, carrying a camera does make it more difficult to negotiate slippery terrain and it tends to act as a barrier between yourself and people you're trying to talk with. Arkosame turned out to be one of the prettiest and most beautifully kept villages I've seen in PNG,

but while I'm sorry I don't have any pictures, it was the best decision not to take my camera.

When I left the ground was still very wet and slippery. I cannot but admire the sure-footedness of the local people who seem to be able to grip the ground with their bare feet. Both with shoes and without (I tried both) I couldn't get a purchase on the wet mud and moved around more like an old man propping myself up on my stick, or relying on their hands to keep me upright.

Crossing the river was fun, especially coming back, when the cool (but certainly not cold) water was very refreshing. By the time we'd come back the sun had dried up the mud and the walking was very much easier.

The time in Arkosame was very worthwhile and I had a really good chance to chat with the people about what they needed to do to get the airstrip working again. They seemed really eager to do so, but it was very obvious to me that it is a very big project that will take several months, and there was no way the strip could be made serviceable overnight just by cutting the grass.

Once back in Bongomachi I relayed the news about the airstrip and the final decision to use the helicopter was made.

That evening David and the others were preparing to show the repeat performance of the old footage plus some video clips that Godfrey had taken on his camera during the weekend. A bright moon lit up the village and stars dotted the sky that was nearly clear of clouds. There was no wind at all and the silvery light made the palm trees silhouette against the sky, and gave a sheen to the leaf thatching on the church and other buildings nearby. Over the mountains in the far distance lightning occasionally illuminated a thunder cloud. While preparations were still going on the music group led the people in praise songs that filled the air. I just stood there marvelling at the beauty of my surroundings and feeling immensely privileged to be there. The words of the hymn came clearly into my mind:

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works Thy hands have made.
I see the stars, and hear the rolling thunder;
Thy works throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee,
how great Thou art, how great Thou art.



Back in the house afterwards we chatted with Albert and the church and community leaders, and did the same the following morning. The helicopter arrived two hours earlier than expected at 11:30 rather than 1:30, which meant a rushed scramble to get everything together, but fortunately we were mostly packed up and ready to go.

The whole community was out and waving as we took off. It had taken us about 12 hours in a canoe, about 14 hours journey time in all with stops en route, to travel from Ambunti to Bongomachi, a total of 150km. It took us 17 minutes in a helicopter to get back to Ambunti in a straight line.

There are hopes to build an airstrip at Bongomachi and while we were there we had a look at the ground they are hoping to use. Time will tell, but they may not have sufficient length. Just imagine what a difference an airstrip would make. In the meantime they'll help get Arkosame serviceable again.

What an amazing experience this trip has been.