

# Trekking to the Shadow of Trikora

Bare, spectacular mountains stretch across the horizon, a long rocky backdrop culminating in Gunung Trikora, at 4,743 meters, Irian's second-highest mountain. In the foreground is Lake Habbema, wide and cold, reflecting the mountains and sky. Habbema sits in a broad alpine marsh, a sponge of mosses, tea-brown streams and strange vegetation. The air is thin and cold, and at night every star is visible. The nearest village is a hard day's hike below.

The trek to Lake Habbema requires no mountaineering skills, but it helps to be in good physical condition. At a good pace, from Wamena to the lake and back takes five days, but we suggest planning on 7 or 8 days to enjoy the scenery and keep the trip from degenerating into a test of endurance.

You will need a guide and several porters to lug your gear. The guide (\$14 a day) and porters (\$3 a day) will make life as easy as possible for you, cooking hot meals two or three times a day, making fires, arranging your bedding and lending a helping hand over tricky spots—such as the long, slippery logs which constitute the path through sections of the thick upland rainforest. For two people, we suggest four to six porters. June, July and August, the driest months, are best for this journey.

Boots with good grip are essential. You will also need a tent (there are no permanent settlements in the area of the lake, and the shelters are sometimes in very bad shape), sleeping bag, food and cooking utensils. You should also bring a rain-proof jacket, and some plastic to waterproof your gear, and a sweater and even long underwear will not go unused at night.

## Daelah Village

To save time (2-4 hours), start your trip by chartered minibus for you and your team, \$18 and 13 kilometers to the end of the bridge just past the village of Elegaima, near the

eastern edge of the Bahem valley.

From here, it's an easy two hours along the Bene River, to the village of Ibele Atas where you could overnight with the school teachers if you started your hike at Wamena. But we suggest pushing on to spend the night at Daelah village, the last one before the long hike to Lake Habbema. It's 3-4 hours from Ibele Atas to Daelah, following ridge and side contours above the Bene River. Lots of little creeks cross the path, offering no drinking water.

The views improve considerably as the gorge narrows. A short, but steep uphill stretch opens into the valley, with Daelah compound scattered at the bottom. You could overnight at any of several compounds on your side of the river or cross it on a suspension bridge of rattan and planks to pick an inviting place on the far side of the Bene.

Our second day started with a steep half-hour through yam gardens to the uppermost compounds of Daelah, which offered a great panorama of steep forested slopes and gardens. Then an unpleasant hour of mud brought us to the Dagum River, one of two joining to form the Bene. On the far side of the Dagum, the path became much drier as we entered the dense forest which reaches up to the high swampy plateau on which Lake Habbema sits.

## Pandanus madness

No one lives permanently in this forest, as the altitude and thick vegetation preclude sweet potato cultivation. But the men of Daelah, who own most of this forest, know it well for it provides them with cuscus for meat and decorative fur, birds for flesh and feathers, and timber for their houses and to sell in Wamena. And, most of all, here grows the highland pandanus.

The fruit of these distinctive trees (*Pandanus julianetti* and *P. brosimos*) produces great quantities of tasty, oily nuts. The trees are immediately identifiable by their thin trunks, crowns of strap-like leaves, and downward-pointing prop roots.

As grown men elsewhere go crazy over the durian, so do the Dani over the pandanus. When the fruit ripens, between March and August, men are known to neglect their pots to fields and families to gorge themselves on pandanus. Our porters were not in the least immune to pandanus-mania.

Shortly after we entered the forest, our lead porter stopped dead in his tracks: he had spotted a couple of men from Daelah, cutting

up a pandanus fruit trailside. The spiky, oval-shaped fruit, 40 centimeters long and 25 centimeters across, is made up of hundreds of shelled nuts. These taste something like brazil nuts when eaten raw, and more like almonds when roasted. Our porters got busy shelling up the owners, who were chopping away the outer husk.

After their bargaining had bottomed out at 2/3 the price it would have cost at the market in Wamena, I was informed) I was asked for some money to buy several already roasted chunks and a whole fruit, the latter weighing 12 kilos. The fruits were split into halves for ease of portage. The curved shape balanced perfectly on a man's head, and this was how they were always carried by our men.

This scene repeated itself several times on the way to Lake Habbema, and from this point on our expedition had a soundtrack: the constant cracking of nuts.

After only about three hours out of Daelah, it started drizzling and our guide suggested spending the night in a pondok we had come across. These shelters, used by hunters and pandanus gatherers, vary from quite comfortable huts to mere lean-tos of bark and mud. Pondok Yapokuema, a couple of hundred meters off the path, was of excellent quality, with a tight, overlapping bark roof and well joined sides. There was another pondok some 2-3 hours further and we were not tired yet. But we gave in and decided to

spend the night there. (This proved wise: when we passed the pondok the next day, we noticed it was a very skimpy affair, and the higher altitude here and last night's rain would have made us most uncomfortable.)

But to reach the first pondok, we had to climb up a huge, long trunk, with only slight notches for footholds. Our porters walked up as if it were a flight of stairs, but we inched up the slippery wood, grateful for constant stabilizing hands.

## Our team

As we relaxed that afternoon, we got to know the men on our team. Markus was our cook and my partner's personal porter. He was always solicitous for our comfort on the trail and in camp, laughing and hugging us at the slightest pretext. Markus was tireless and always high-spirited, and his command of Lani (he is from a village west of the valley) often came in handy.

Jery was my personal porter, and even though he was stuck with a heavy camera bag which had to be always within my reach, was the liveliest of the bunch, constantly cracking jokes in Dani and Indonesian. He is also more than a little vain, decorating his hair, armbands and beard with flowers, bits of moss, leaves and whatever catches his fancy. When

**Above:** Just past dawn, wood smoke filters through the thatched roofs of Daelah.





he spotted an attractive tuft on top of a tall pandanus tree, he bound his ankles with a hoop of rope, and scampered up in record time to bring down the coveted ornament. Needless to say, he loved to pose for photos.

Izack was the most reserved and intellectual of the group. As a former school teacher, he was always called "Pak Guru" (Father Teacher) in spite of his youth—24 years. He always thought things through before speaking, and expressed himself articulately in either Indonesian or English. Izack was born near the coast, in the Yapen-Waropen district. He put himself through school in Jayapura, then taught in the Baliem Valley, learning Dani and taking great pride in his students' academic success. He has adopted the Grand Valley as his home (although his coastal blood shows: he packed on as much clothing as we did against the highland chill.)

And there was Beni, my old friend and guide of many a trek. Although never overbearing, it was always obvious that he was in charge. I was his first client years ago, and we have been friends since. At the time he spoke only Dani and Indonesian, but he is working on English. He knows the trails, the weather, the plant and animal life, how to build a *pondok*, how to fry up rice, noodles, salt-fish and vegetables into a crowd-pleasing dinner, and just about any other skill one might need on such a trip.

That night, as we all huddled around the

fire in the *pondok*, our normally talkative crew was silent. They had roasted the pandanus fruit and settled to one of the great pleasures of life. We drifted off to steady tapping sounds of nut-shells being hammered between two smooth stones and cracked by strong teeth.

### Up to the swampland

The next morning we hit the trail early under clear skies. The forest was unusual here, made up of huge trees, their trunks draped in moss of several colors. As always in rain forests, the undergrowth was sparse, as little sunlight reaches the jungle floor.

The track was fairly level for the first hour, then began a steep climb. We followed as the creek followed the course of a creek, crossing and recrossing it many times. A couple of hours of this, including one brutal, near vertical climb, and the trail crested. Here the vegetation thinned, and we entered a field of moss and lichen, with only a few tree ferns and scraggy conifers. Lake Habbema gleamed in the distance.

The trail quickly deteriorated, however, and we discovered this strange field was a swamp. Eyes glued downward, we sought to place our feet so as to keep our boots from sinking out of sight in the muck. It was all very frustrating. A bit of moss (green, silvery, copper, or even red) might yield solid ground, or it might be floating on a foot of water. It was almost impossible to tell. Bits of fine white sand usually offered surprisingly firm footing, but occasionally would part like quicksand. Since visual cues were unreliable, some of us stabbed the ground with our walking sticks like blind men.

The landscape here is truly eerie, like something out of a dinosaur movie. Most of the vegetation hugged the ground, including strange mosses and tiny ground orchids. Clumps of tree ferns, stout trunks supporting a crown of fringed leaves, sprang up here and there. Weathered conifers sprouted tumor-like growths: anthouse plants (*Myrmecodia* sp.). These epiphytes have a swollen base the size of a watermelon, honeycombed with narrow sagesways which serve as home to a colony of ants. A rosette of stiff green leaves pokes out from one side, and the whole swollen base is covered with spines.

But we had little time to concentrate on

**Above:** Beni Wenda, a guide in the Baliem Valley. **Opposite:** Jerry, mistaking himself for a movie star, adjusts his decorations in his ever-present pocket mirror.

the swamp's fascinating ecology—our bodies had to move to campsite. This took a couple of hours which we finished with boots thoroughly soaked. To cross some sections, near the lake, we had to wade through knee-deep water. It was of little consolation to us to find that during the rainiest months—October through December—this entire swampy meadow is knee-deep in water.

### Camp Habbema

The *pondok* at Lake Habbema sits atop a hill on the north side of the lake, overlooking it and the mountain backdrop. It was a most welcome sight. We got there exhausted and in strangely bad humor.

Only after a bit of rest did we determine we were angry with the world. It was the altitude (3,300 meters). Once we realized that was affecting our mood, we cheered up. Our crew was busy preparing for the cold—patching the the low shelter and mending the roof with plastic tarps and benches, gathering firewood and setting up tent. We took a barefoot stroll down to the lake which, we were told, is locally called *Wana*. (We were also told that it used to harbor crocodiles, but decided to take this information with a grain of salt.)

The shore is partially fringed with reeds. The water, stained brown with tannins, was cold for extensive wading or swimming. Ducks swam in the lake, diving periodically

for what we assumed were juicy tidbits, but they kept a respectful distance. We had read in Archbold's journal that the lake was full of large crayfish and had looked forward to a tasty meal of the crustaceans. But our crew was evasive when we tried to encourage them to catch a batch of crayfish for supper, saying that they had never seen any in the lake.

In the late afternoon, a chilling rain began and we took refuge in the *pondok*, where two fires were keeping the cold at bay. But we were soon driven outside by the thick smoke from the wet wood, coughing and eyes running. When we recovered and got cold again we ducked back in for a dose of warmth—and more smoke.

The Dani are oblivious to a level of smoke that would suffocate a western mortal. In most *honai*, it isn't a problem as the design pulls the smoke upward, and guests usually sleep on the straw floor. But the low roof of the *pondok* greatly compounded the ventilation problem, and we sucked at the walls for air, eyes tearing profusely.

Matters cleared up for supper, but it was still too smoky for comfort so we exiled ourselves to the tent. We could barely sleep for the brutal cold, despite several layers of clothing and a sleeping bag for one and a heavy blanket for the other.

But the awful night was followed by a warm, sunny morning, revealing Trikora and the rest of the mountains in back of the lake.



Tri Komando Rakyat), takes its current name from an acronym for the three-branched Indonesian military: Tri Komando Rakyat.

We took advantage of the photo op offered by nature. And then our porters put on their penis gourds, decorated themselves with materials at hand and insisted on group photos with Habbema and the chain of mountains in the background.

By noon we broke camp and started back, deciding to take a different, slightly longer route back to Wamena. According to Beni, this way offered more spectacular scenery. As usual, he was right, although it did not seem so at first as we slogged our way across the swamp for a couple of hours.

Getting up from a quick rest stop, we spotted a group of men armed with bows and arrows heading toward us. A magnificent set of lean bodies, carrying nothing but their weapons. A quick chat with our porters and they were on their way, heading for some distant village, keeping an eye out for cuscus along the way. They were the only people we saw during three days in the high plateau around Habbema.

### The Valley of the Tree Ferns

Coming up on a ridge, we looked down on a



green valley, far below, which sloped upward to low hills and the base of Trikora. Most of our porters scrambled ahead, and we carefully picked our way down a narrow, steep-walled canyon that opened into the valley we saw from above. The men were already setting up camp, just across a small river winding its way along the near side of the valley. These were the headwaters of the Uwe River, which, swollen by many tributaries, reaches the Baliem River at Wamena. (It is sometimes called the Wamena river).

Here it was little more than a wide creek flowing through a bed of smooth stones. When we relaxed on a bit of dry ground we took in the sight of the valley, covered with extensive stands of fern trees. From our position below, Trikora barely peeked above the hills on the far side of our depression. We dubbed the site the Valley of the Tree Ferns. As the sun lowered itself, it crossed clouds of dark shade interspersed with tufts of white. It was a magical moment.

The moment was not so magical for our porters. We had our tent, but there was no *pondok* here, and they had to build a shelter for the night. While a two stayed behind to make supper, the others disappeared up a steep, forested hill. Soon we heard trees toppling over. Logs were hurled down the almost vertical face of the hill, picked up and hauled across the river.

Sharpened at one end these became posts

which were stuck into the spongy soil to form the *pondok's* frame, with thick branches lashed to them to support roof and sides. Two men came back from the forest under large, rectangular strips of bark—these became the roof. The sides were created from tree fern fronds, loosely woven and tied in place. Presto, a *pondok*.

Gathering the materials took almost three hours; the *pondok* went up in about 15 minutes. Profiting from our previous night's experience, we placed our tent in front of the open *pondok*, close to the fire. That night, the clear sky was filled with stars as bright as we had ever seen, so much that it seemed we were within touching distance of the Milky Way.

Next morning, everyone was up bright and early, but we insisted on staying around until the sun filled the valley for a series of photos. This mistake we were to pay for later in the day. Most of the porters took off before we set things up at Babililok village, the one on the way to Wamena. We took off after them, slogging through some four hours of swamp before entering the forest again. On the way, we crossed the path to Trikora, whose base-camp was about a half day away.

Our joy at leaving the swamp was fleeting, as the dry path soon became a series of large, slippery logs joined end to end. Steadying ourselves were always ready, but that did not prevent a well-bruised coccyx, not to mention even the porters fell several times.

Darkness dropped and still no village in sight. Now we realized the importance of an earlier start. As the darkness grew, the forest, which had been quiet all day, came alive with sounds of insects. The porter carrying the flashlights was one of those who had gone on ahead, but fortunately we had a flashlight with us. Not much for four people, but better than nothing. Our already slow progress became a snail's pace, and it took another hour to reach Babililok. Having learned our lesson, we got a very

early start the next day, content to breakfast on a cup of coffee and a handful of pandanus nuts. We crossed the Uwe River on a shaky rattan suspension bridge to face a path of more slippery logs—indefinitely easier to negotiate in daylight. A couple of hours of relatively level trekking brought us out high on a ridge top with the Uwe, now a considerable river, rushing through rapids far below. About three hours of steep downhill followed, hard on aging, operated-on knees.

Great expanses of yam gardens and small



Dani compounds marked our downwards progress. Shortly after we reached the Uwe River, we crossed a big government school. A bit further, a hanging bridge over the Uwe—stopping at an island in the middle—provided the perfect place for lunch. We washed our clothes and lounged around, watching the butterflies.

### Downhill to Wamena

From here on, the path is in good shape, mostly downhill. Even so, we were quite happy to get our first glimpse of Wamena. We crossed Walesi village, where there are clusters of "modern" houses put up by the government. These were to replace those burned during a conflict with a Dani group from Wamena. The houses were almost all unused however, and new traditional huts had been built behind them.

We were nearing the end of our second 10-hour day, and growing anxious for the comforts of civilization. Within an hour we were rewarded at our hotel with a delicious hot bath. No cold beer or Glenfiddich to celebrate, however. Wamena is "dry" for Dani, tourist and trekker alike.

Opposite: Lake Habbema, with the rocky peaks around Trikora (at far left) in the background.

Above, left: A tannin-stained stream in the alpine marsh near Habbema. Above, right: Gunung Trikora, Irian's second-tallest peak

to a saltwater spring called Pueramma (or just Iluwe). The salt pool is about 300 meters above the valley and the steep climb takes about an hour. Beware of the slippery footing.

The brine pool is frequented by Dani from the valley as well as Yali living to the east—for whom the trip is a two to three day walk. The same procedure is used by everyone to gather the salt. Banana trunks, peeled and cut into segments, are soaked in the brine for about half an hour, then carried home. The saltwater permeates the fibrous trunks which are dried and then burned, yielding salty ash. The ash, wrapped in blocks, was formerly an essential trade item, and is still preferred for its taste.

At Waga-Waga, further north from Jiwika, is a limestone cave called Kontilola. Minibuses let you out within a hundred meters of the cave entrance. A dark passage-way (bring a flashlight) leads from a large chamber to a pool of water and a section of the cave filled with bats. The cave-keeper will charge 75¢ to \$1.

#### 4. South to Kurima: the Baliem Gorge

Some of the Grand Valley's most spectacular scenery lies southeast of Wamena, where the mountain wall parts in the Baliem Gorge. Public transportation (about \$1.10) leads as far as Sugokmo village, 20 kilometers from Wamena, where the road peters out. From

head of the gorge, and the scenery all along the way is well worth the effort.

The easy, level walk from Sugokmo to you across a long and narrow (but solid) suspension bridge over a steep-sided gorge. A bit further ahead, you will have to cross the stream, the Yetni, which is easy when the water level is low, but tough when the level is high. Willing porters will carry you on a piggy back. A porter weighing 60 kilos can carry a bulky 85-kilo westerner. It may seem a bit ridiculous, but it's a lot easier than slipping into the rushing current.

Kurima is a tiny, spread-out town with schools, military and police posts and an administrative center of the kecamatan. It has an airstrip and a mission perch on a flat area above town. Tuesday is the weekly market day here. If you stay overnight, reports will be checked and the information laboriously copied down. Possible places to sleep in Kurima include the military post, the police station, or one of the schoolteachers' homes.

Hikes out of Kurima lead to incredible mountain scenery. Good boots, drinking water, and a porter/guide with knowledge of the local trails are all absolutely essential. The hike described below can be covered in eight hours by experienced mountain hikers but to photograph and enjoy the scenery you should plan on two or three days.

and a half hours' walk up into the hills to the west of Hetegima, there are salt springs similar to those above Jiwika.

#### North to Pyramid

A mostly paved road now runs the entire way from Wamena to Pyramid (and beyond, to Tiom) in the northwest corner of the Baliem Valley. You can also find public transportation leading there.



On the way to Pyramid, a side-trip leads to Lake Habbema (where Archbold landed in 1938) and Mt. Trikora, which, at 4,743 meters, is one of Irian's highest peaks. This excursion requires organization: tents, a warm sleeping bag, food, and porters. (See "Lake Habbema," page 130.)

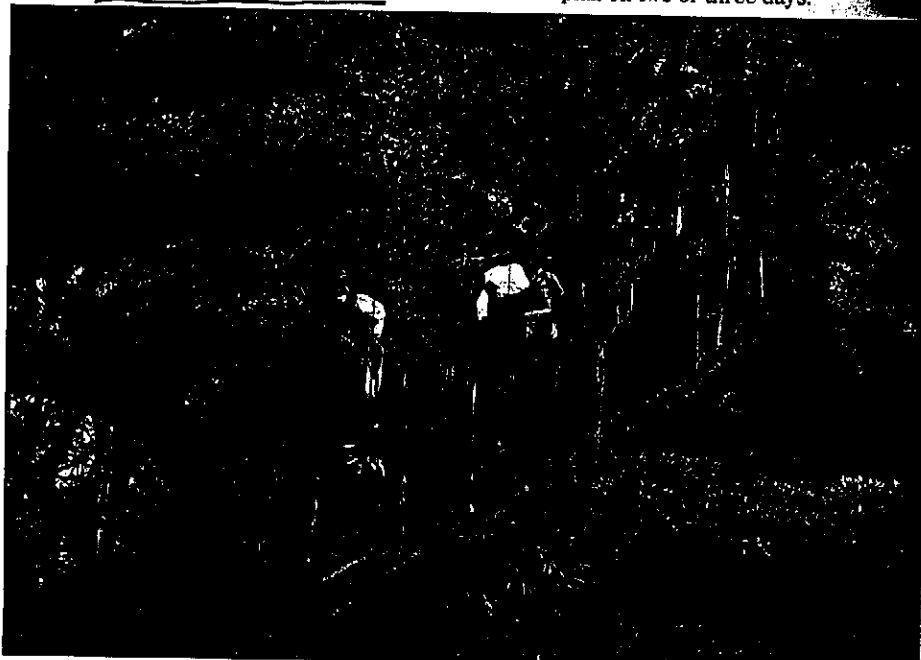
One can stay on the road all the way to Pyramid, the site of the main highland base and conference center of the fundamentalist Protestant Christian and Missionary Alliance (CAMA). Here there are clapboard houses, lawns and American creature comforts.

If you decide to stay overnight here, ask a schoolteacher and don't pester the missionaries. A better idea would be to spend the night at Kimkim, the district center, just 5 kilometers south of Pyramid. You have to report to the police there anyway. The camat has spare beds and so does the school. Figure on \$5 for accommodations and meals.

From Kimkim, there is a good trail—about one and a half hours—to the village of Wo'ogi, where your hosts will show you the village and its mummy. Very few tourists ever stop here.

Opposite: Flimsy suspension bridges like this one near Karubaga span the many rivers and gorges in the highlands. Above, left: The mummified remains of Werapak Elosarek at Akima. Above, right: Pulling a truck back onto the main road, just past Elegaima.

BALIEM VALLEY TREKS:



# North to Western Dani Country

One of the best ways to see the highlands north of the Grand Valley is to fly to Karubaga, in the home of the Western Dani, and trek back to Wamena along relatively easy trails, staying along the way at friendly villages. The trip takes several days, and the scenery is magnificent.

Weather permitting, Merpati offers a weekly flight from Wamena to Karubaga on Tuesdays, for \$17 one-way. The window of the De Havilland Twin Otter displays the highlands in all their panoramic splendor.

Tin-roofed Wamena quickly gives way to the valley's neatly arranged sweet potato gardens, here and there dotted by the thatched roofs of Dani compounds. The creamy brown Baliem River snakes its way along the valley floor. Flying north, the valley floor rises and becomes covered in forest, yielding only occasionally to painstakingly cut agricultural

fields. The small plane barely clears the 2,000-meter peaks, and the land below opens again into a huge valley with long missionary airstrips.

Twenty minutes out of Wamena, the plane makes a short, bumpy landing on Karubaga's grass-and-dirt airstrip, steeply inclined and at an elevation of 1,400 meters. An expectant crowd rushes forward to unload the plane, embrace relatives or stare at the white strangers with their strange gear and heavy hiking boots.

## Karubaga Town

The tiny town of Karubaga, like the other sub-district centers of the Jayawijaya *kabupaten*, is the administrative center of a wide area and, in this case, a scattered population of some 20,000 Western Dani. Karubaga snuggles just below the mountains at the head of a wide green valley, ending in the distance in steep mountains, shrouded in blue haze.

Three rivers—the Kano, the Konda and the Kurege—spring from the mountains back of Karubaga, flow through the valley and eventually empty into the Mamberamo River which then winds its way down to Irian's north coast. The town started as a missionary outpost in the 1950s, shortly after the arrival of American fundamentalists. The whites are gone now, replaced by Dani pastors of the Indonesian KINGMI Protestant denomination, overseeing some 50 churches

near town and more than 100 district wide. The legacy of the missionaries in Karubaga includes an end to tribal warfare, the eradication of diseases such as yaws (a debilitating condition), the introduction of a variety of fruits and vegetables, and the end of witch-burnings. While in the old days missionaries were dressed on penis sheaths and bare breasts, the current and more rational policy permits more conservative attire, taking into account that many of the Dani are too poor to afford shampoos and soap to keep them clean.

Some local pastors allow a bit of the old ancestor and spirit worship by some of the few remaining pagans—but only if a fine fee is paid to the church. Weddings and funerals and other ceremonies connected with the Christian calendar, such as Christmas, are celebrated in the traditional ways. And groups of villages periodically hold huge feasts in the old style, which result in the slaughter of 500 or more pigs.

Although missionaries have successfully stopped witch-burning, they have not ended a widespread belief in witchcraft. Many of the Western Dani continue to believe in hereditary occult powers. Black witches can become bats in order to eat people, or can become the wind that blows away a whole village. One recently acquired power allows black witches to burn airplanes, but fortunately this technique has not yet been tested.

The American missionaries also left a legacy in Karubaga of a more material nature: many neat wooden houses surrounded by lawns and flowers. One of these buildings serves as the best little guesthouse in the highlands. The mission-built complex on the highest part of town gives way to the police and administrative buildings, an army outpost, two primary schools and two junior high schools. The church and government maintain separate school facilities, which include a board for children living too far away to make the trek to Karubaga each day.

## Arriving in town

The first thing to do is check into the *rumah tamu*, or guesthouse. With five bedrooms, a sit-down toilet and a bucket shower, this is a bargain at \$5 a night. Mattresses, pillows, sheets, blankets, mosquito netting (not needed most of the year) and towels are provided. In the daytime, the well-lit living room offers comfortable chairs and a couch, a rug and lots of uplifting missionary literature as well as old *Readers Digests* and Peanuts cartoons. At night, you can read by candlelight and if it gets chilly, start a fire in the Franklin stove.

**Opposite:** Crossing the Jekni River near Kurima. While some visitors prefer doing things the hard way, sure-footed porters are always willing to carry their clients across. **Below:** A Western Dani couple pause on the trail above Wunin.





The guest house kitchen is equipped with a wood stove (the \$5 includes wood) and a full set of pots, pans and crockery. You can cook your own meals or delegate the chore to either your guide or the guest house caretaker, who is available to do all kinds of domestic work for a very reasonable rate.

After settling in, you should report to the police station, a short walk on the other side of town. They might want to look at your passport but the critical item is your *surat jalan* or travel permit. On the back of this essential document, they will stamp the Karubaga permit, then fill out various forms with an antique typewriter. The clean-cut young policemen are friendly chaps with little to do in life except play ping-pong and check out the occasional tourist. Give them a chance to practice their nonexistent English.

Police business over, see to the logistics for your upcoming trek. If you have not brought a guide from Wamena, a local one—as well as porters—can be found, but none can speak English. Even for tough walkers carrying their own backpacks, we suggest at least one guide because trails around villages and gardens can be confusing, requiring frustrating backtracking.

If you did not fly into Karubaga with all the essentials, there are a half-dozen small stores around town to buy basics such as batteries, candles, tinned food, biscuits and instant noodles. You do not have to buy food

here for the whole trek as vegetables and fruit—including, of course, sweet potatoes—are available along the way. To make the walk enjoyable, hire a porter (about \$3 a day). Taking only essentials, one porter should be enough for each person's load, with another for food and cooking gear.

Karubaga hosts a market on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, which brings to the town the produce of the subdistrict. The first transactions take place in the uncovered market area around 8 a.m. and by 2 p.m. most of the action is over. Peanuts are the biggest local cash crop, selling here for 25¢ per kilo, half the Wamena price. Other marketables include pineapples, 10¢-20¢ per fruit; oranges, red onions, chickens and the occasional pig. Local government employees stock up here, and some of the produce is flown to Wamena at subsidized rates.

The Karubaga market makes a great place for photographs, with lots of Western Dani men and women gossiping, buying and selling. Outside of the Baliem Valley, you don't have to pay to photograph the locals. They love to have their picture taken. The problem is obtaining natural poses, although this can usually be accomplished with patience and a telephoto lens.

**The trail**

The trail between Karubaga and Wamena lies along a planned, but not yet built road. The



entire trail of way leads from Nabire (near the coast at the base of Cenderawasih Bay) to Wamena, through the western highlands.

Many sections of this trail have been hardened enough to allow sunshine through, but they are still muddy, especially on the steepest inclines. Even in the driest season, a shower, lasting a couple of hours or more. And after a good rain, there will be mud (not very deep). But, unless you have absolutely awful luck, day-long rainfall is most unlikely. On the contrary, chances are better for a sunburn. Bring a wide-brimmed hat, long sleeves and pants, and sunscreen.

The level distance between Karubaga and Wamena—through Wunin, Bokondini, Kelila, Pyramid and Pyramid—is just 70 kilometers.

This does not account for laboring up the mountainsides or easing one's way down the valley on the other side. A strong hiker can make it in three days (the Danis do it in a day or two), but it is much better to allow yourself four or five days. Then you can enjoy the changing scenery, take lots of breaks and snapshots, and arrive at your sleeping destination early enough to bathe, relax and dine during daylight.

While tennis shoes will probably do, hiking boots offer ankle support, keep mud out of your toes and grip better on slippery surfaces. Some rivers are spanned by bridges

but small creeks and mudflats are traversed on a round log or two, which are more likely than not to be slippery. If you don't think you can manage, let your porters give you a hand or carry you across. They are tough chaps, well able to carry even an overweight body across a waist-high raging river with only loose, slippery stones as footholds for their bare feet. (Make sure someone gets a photo!) Even if you can make it across on your own, the lift prevents wet boots or wasted time taking your boots off and putting them on again.

Along the trail there are many places to drink clear mountain water but take a canteen for those stretches of two hours or more under the hot sun. And have your guide bring along some pineapples, delicious at break-time. Keep your camera handy, because you will often meet locals along the way. Only one word of Western Dani language suffices for close encounters: *Wah!*

**Wunin**

Get an early start, 8 a.m. at the latest, and in six easy hours you will reach Wunin. The early start is important—each day begins with an uphill climb (towns are generally in

**Opposite:** The spectacular Baliem Gorge, south of Kurima. **Above:** A group of Dani girls at Wunin. Dani women do not wear the distinctive low-slung skirts until they marry. Until then, they wear grass skirts such as those

valleys) and you don't want to be making this during the heat of the day.

From the edge of the Karubaga plateau the trail drops to a river, with a well-maintained, rattan and cable bridge. Most of the floor planks are in place. After the crossing, be ready for a two-hour climb. The slopes, near and far, are covered with gardens and highlands forests. Once the climb is over, you pass through a village of thatched huts. This signals the beginning of two hours of flat trekking. Towards the end of this part of the stroll, Wunin will appear, but it's further than it looks. First a long drop, then a river crossing on a solid bridge, and finally a short level stretch before Wunin comes back into view. Another short drop and you are crossing the Warom River, the last before Wunin. The river makes an excellent place for a swim before the short climb to Wunin village.

The altitude here, 1,460 meters, is just slightly higher than Karubaga. Wunin is dominated by a huge airstrip, flatter than Karubaga's, which receives sporadic MAF flights when building materials or supplies are urgently needed. The village hugs one side of the airstrip. All the buildings are "modern"—clean, tin-roofed and without character. The inevitable church, school and teachers' houses hold together this tiny mission-built village. During clear weather, the upper end of the landing field affords a fine view of the brooding mountains.

At Wunin you can sleep at a school-teacher's house, but first take a look at the bed offered and agree to a price. Expect to pay about \$3 per person, but you might have to bargain. Forget about sit-down toilets—a little outhouse over a hole in the ground is standard. You can relieve yourself anywhere away from the houses, preferably at night.

#### Commissioning a Dani festival

There are also several Dani compounds just off the main trail, which starts at the upper end of the landing field, where you can overnight in a honai or men's house. The huts have no beds, but soft grass on the floor makes a decent mattress. (Foreign women are also allowed to sleep in the huts.) A central fire, double wood walls, and a number of bodies ward off night time chills. The disadvantages of a Dani hut include the possibility of fleas or ticks. And it can get quite smoky, but it is usually not too bad if you keep your head close to the floor, and stay away from the door. Pay \$1-\$2 per person for the honai stay. Dani guests (your guides and porters)

are usually put up on a complementary basis in the forest. At the bottom of the mountain is a stream that makes a perfect resting place for sore knees. Then it's flat again for a while before dropping down to the Bogo River near Bokondini. There is no bridge here, so your porters will either build a temporary one or carry you across. A short, steep climb leads to the little town and subdistrict center of Bokondini—six easy hours from Wunin. The urban "center" of Bokondini resembles Karubaga, but with an important difference: A Cessna plane owned by MAF has its home base here, along with its pilot and missionaries. They live in neat wooden alpine houses surrounded by fences, lawns and flower boxes—in the American style. Don't expect missionary hospitality—they are not in the business of putting up hikers. Try a school teacher or the infirmary staff house, just across from the clinic (rumah sakit). Again, ask to see the facilities and agree on a price before settling in and reporting to the police with your passport and surat jalan.

In the "show" my guide organized, the pigs were killed (\$75) and about 140 men and women took part, all in traditional dress. My guide got things going by visiting four Dani compounds at daybreak, and by 8:30 am the things were underway.

First the tribesmen dug a pit about one meter-deep and 1.5 meters long and the nearby, arranged huge armfuls of firewood into a rectangular pile and covered the pit with stones. The traditional method, rubbing a tough liana against a piece of softwood started the fire. When the firewood under the stones was blazing, each pig was held by two men while a third shot an arrow into its head from close range. Bamboo knives quickly cut up the meat. After the pigs were dispatched the Dani lined the pit with leaves, and the stones that had been heated in the fire. More leaves were laid over the stones, and then sweet potatoes and chunks of pork.

While the food steam-baked for two or three hours, the men and women danced and whooped, yelling and singing with abandon. The men organized themselves into teams and staged an enthusiastic mock battle with plant stems as spears. A few of the men were superbly decorated with soot and grease, white lime paint, flowers, cuscus and feathers. Everyone had a good time, and I took plenty of photos before the food was cooked and divided among the participants.

#### On to Bokondini

From Wunin, it's a flat stretch for a half hour before coming to the mountain at the head of the valley. Another half hour and you reach the topside forest and begin a nice, shaded stretch. The trail touches the edge of an artificial lake, a fairyland opening in the high misty forest. The water is stocked with catfish and tilapia. An hour of hiking brings you to the top of the long drop to the Bokondini Valley. If the weather is clear, the looming mountains appear through openings in the

Opposite: A arrow shot at close range is the traditional way to dispatch a pig. This one became most pork for a feast at Wunin.

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#### Back to Wamena

To get the earliest possible start out of Bokondini because there is a long day ahead. The first part is easy: a stroll of some two and a half hours with little climbing and one solid bridge crossing lands you in Kelila, another subdistrict center where you report again to the police. Kelila has a regular Mepati flight once a week (on Friday) to Wamena, and

occasional missionary flights. From Kelila you face the trip's toughest climb, 2 to 3 hours uphill on a wide road to the top of the pass.

Here you are on the island's divide. The watershed to the north drains into the Memberamo and the Pacific; to the south all the rivers head to the Baliem and the Arafura Sea. The wonderful view of the southern valley is your reward as your knees take a pounding during the 1.5 to 2 hours downhill to Tagime, a 6-hour day. The pastor in Tagime runs a guesthouse.

From Tagime, it is an easy 3 hours to Pyramid, the missionary center at the head of the Baliem Valley. From Pyramid, you can catch a flight (10 minutes) to Wamena. Or continue to Kimbim, one hour further. The camat (subdistrict head) has guest rooms where, for \$5 a day, you can room and board. Kimbim requires a police stop.

From Kimbim, Landcruisers and trucks take passengers to Wamena once or twice a week for \$2 a head (\$60 for a chartered ride). You can also walk, flat but hot, another 4-6 hours to Sinatma, where there is regular bemo service to Wamena. Or walk across the valley to the Baliem River, cross on a small raft or a canoe, and from Uwosilimo, just on the other side, take a public minibus to Wamena. Minibuses from Uwosilimo make the run several times a day, and the fare is less than \$1 (\$15-\$20 charter).

