



Beleni guesthouse

Kokoda: *Village Homestay*

*"...I saw the smiles
in their eyes and
felt very welcome..."*

I've been to Kokoda twice in the last two years and want to go again later this year. I just love the place. I'm not a trekker. I have no desire to walk "The Track" that links Kokoda Station to Port Moresby across the Owen Stanley Range, though thousands of people do this trek each year. I'm talking about Kokoda Station, the villages in the valley below and a couple of villages in the nearby mountains.

My first Kokoda experience was in August 2007 when I accompanied my wife, Rosemary, and stepson, Mark Atkin. It was a very special visit for them, Rosemary's first since she left Kokoda at the end of 1969. She and her first husband had taught at the Kokoda school for three years, and Mark attended the school as a very young student. As the years passed they lost contact with the Kokoda people, but in 2005 Mark edited a documentary film that showed some of the villages along the Kokoda Trail. When

Rosemary saw that film she recognised a speaker as John Beleni, one of her former students. Mark made enquiries and was soon able to contact John. In 2006 Mark returned to Kokoda where he was warmly welcomed by John and many other former school mates. Rosemary and I decided to go the following year.

As our Airlines PNG aircraft landed at Kokoda I saw a large crowd of people standing together at the edge of the airstrip with expectant looks on their faces. Some were even holding their children above their heads for a better view. I wondered what lay ahead. As soon as we stepped out a man with a huge smile came forward and shook my hand. He was John Beleni. John had been planning our accommodation and every detail of our time in Kokoda for weeks thanks to many phone calls and faxes to and from Mark. He had spread the word that we were coming and many of Rosemary's former students had gathered



"Every day they brought clean water from the nearby river..."



to welcome us. Despite the shy faces, one by one these students and their families came forward and were introduced. Rosemary hugged one former student after another. As I shook hands during the introductions I saw the smiles in their eyes and felt very welcome.

John had organised a utility to transport us and our bags to his home. There was only room in the front for the driver, Rosemary and one other person so Mark and I, along with half a dozen others, piled into the tray. Our bags made fine cushions for the ride along the

unsealed road to John's house, about five kilometres from the airstrip and Kokoda Station, with a few stops along the way to speak to more former students.

John's wife Judith proved to be an excellent cook, making sure we were never hungry and that we had fresh food each day. The Beleni family frequently caters for visiting tour groups, whether trekkers, school parties or homestay visitors. Judith's extensive experience cooking for Europeans made her the obvious person to take charge of catering. At dawn, John would ride his bicycle to

Kokoda Station's daily market to collect local produce included pineapples, bananas and vegetables. John and Judith's daughter, Ann, and other members of the family helped Judith with cooking. They served meals on a small table in front of us and later carried dirty dishes to the nearby creek for washing up. I was impressed by the way they balanced high piles of dishes on their heads without holding them. Judith made a delicious pumpkin curry that became my favourite dish, and she also made us a number of rice dishes, small pancakes and



Drummer



Foke fish farm



Foke guesthouse



Crossing

occasionally chicken.

John's extended family had built a long guest house made of bush materials with a bamboo floor. Its metre-high woven walls allowed plenty of air to circulate under its high roof. (A year later, on my second visit, I found they had built another guest house with ten rooms, each with enough space for either a single person or a couple, and a verandah at one end, all made of traditional materials. Mattresses and mosquito nets were supplied. Couples can share a room, while those who prefer to sleep alone have their own room.)

The family went out of their way to give us privacy, but were always there whenever we needed them. The village

has a toilet built especially for house guests. It was in an outhouse a little way from the long house and it even had a seat! I was glad I'd packed a torch as the dozens of fireflies weren't quite bright enough to light my way there after dark.

Everything was clean. Village women swept the houses and gardens each morning to make sure all was tidy. Every day they brought clean water from the nearby river, collected in containers which they balanced on top of their heads as they brought their precious load back to the village.

PNG's heat and humidity makes bathing one of the highlights of any day. What made it even more enjoyable was the setting. We bathed in the cool, clear

water of a stream. The walls of the men's "bathroom" were tall, tropical plants, bright green with red and yellow flowers. We could see the sky above. Across the creek lay a log on which we could balance our soap and shampoo, while our towels and clothes hung over handy nearby branches. I felt secure because the bush gave us privacy. The water rippled over pebbles and there were sandy areas where we could sit comfortably, as in a bath. We learnt that this creek was for the men and another, separate creek was reserved for women to bathe. At a nearby bubbling spring some older children taught me how to fill bottles of water for drinking. By standing downstream just a metre or so from the source and pointing



Vanilla orchid



Tree kangaroo



Ulysses

46 Airlines PNG

the mouth of each bottle back towards the source of the water they prevented contamination and maintained the purity of their water supply.

One day John escorted us to two nearby villages, Manuwa and Savaia. At Manuwa I met John Wardman Aithe, a charismatic leader who introduced me to his wife and many children. At Savaia, a village in the foothills near Kokoda airstrip, we were welcomed with flowers and children wearing traditional costumes. We saw the elevated school building made of bush materials. Inside there were no desks or table, no chairs or bookshelves, not even paper and pencils. Children sat on the floor of a bare room. From their dedicated teacher, Jean Waire, I learned that they had no resources except what they made themselves. These included books illustrated by Jean. To teach maths she gathered pebbles, feathers and other natural materials.



As an ex-teacher I wanted to help Savaia by raising money to purchase resources for the village school. At that point I knew I had to return the following year.

During this first visit to Kokoda we were asked by people from three different villages if we could help them start a business involving tourists. Each day they saw long lines of trekkers fly in and out of Kokoda. These rarely stayed at Kokoda Station itself for more than one night. As a result, the surrounding villages were not benefiting from the trekkers.

"Can you help us start a trekking company?" they asked us. Rosemary, Mark and I gave this request careful consideration. We knew that there are already dozens of trekking companies. Why start another? Would it not be better to offer something different? Why not offer homestay accommodation?

We decided to put forward this idea. Already guests from Australia, such as groups from a couple of schools in Melbourne, regularly stayed in some of the villages. It was obvious that the villages around Kokoda station had a lot to offer guests, but they needed help with advertising the idea. We knew that many people would enjoy the experience of living in the villages, even if they didn't want to walk the whole Kokoda Trail. The flat floor of the valley makes it easy for non-trekkers to do day walks. On the other hand, trekkers who have walked the Trail



Farewell

were likely to appreciate the comforts of a homestay situation at the end of their trek. We sat in a circle with men and women from Savaia, Manuwa and the Beleni family, and listened as they described what they could offer visitors. It made an impressive list which included nature walks to see butterflies and birds, opportunities to participate in making traditional crafts, World War II artifacts, traditional dancing and much more. Rosemary's ex-students from three other villages (Foke, Kebara and Misima) also embraced the idea.

I wanted to repay the village people for their hospitality so I offered to create a website. We sat and talked for a long time about what the website should include, and a couple of months later each village's offerings and a booking form appeared at www.kokodahomestay.com. In those months each village worked hard to build guest houses. It was a very hard time because of the massive damage caused by Cyclone Guba late in 2007, but somehow the villages kept up their enthusiasm.

In 2008 Mark and I returned to Kokoda to find preparations for Kokoda Homestay were well on the way. Six villages had joined the enterprise: Savaia, Manuwa, Foke, Kebara, Misima and the Beleni family. Many of the women had taken the opportunity to complete

a catering course run by the provincial government, and the variety of meals they produced was extraordinary. Gardens were rebuilt. Several villages had established fish farms to provide badly-needed protein to their diet, which prior to this consisted mainly of vegetables, fruit, rice, eggs and tinned meat. We were also able to deliver to Savaia school the money our family and friends had raised by cleaning unwanted items out of sheds and cupboards to sell at flea markets. The school now has basic teaching aids including a blackboard, pencils and paper.

This year the first guests arrived and (wisely) decided to enjoy one of the traditional dancing performances offered by several of the villages. Shared between several visitors, this happy and colourful homestay experience becomes an easily affordable option.

Sadly, John Beleni died suddenly in June 2009, but his family has carried on with Kokoda Homestay.

Misima offers unique opportunities to trekkers, who can detour from Isurawa by going into the valley below and climbing the adjacent mountain to Hagutawa. Jack and Seli Dadi, two of Rosemary's former students, live there. Not only can they tell stories about what happened in WWII, but on their land are artefacts and

significant battle sites that are otherwise inaccessible to trekkers. From Kebara, Manuwa or Beleni guests can do a day's walk up the mountain to Misima where they can sleep in its new guest house. Next time I visit there I'm determined to photograph the gigantic bird-wing butterflies that frequent the area.

Update (April 2010)

Airlines PNG no longer operates scheduled services into Kokoda. See note below.

This flight lasts only thirty minutes but it is quite an experience to fly over the famous Kokoda Track and see the rough terrain below. I always marvel its challenge to trekkers and hope that when they finally arrive in Kokoda, they stay for a few days to enjoy being with its relaxed and hospitable people. ▲

Bruce Mitchell

www.kokodahomestay.com

Charter services are available, as are scheduled flights to Popondetta. From there you can take a public motor vehicle to Kokoda, a journey of about four hours.