



Poria, Papua New Guinea

I saw a man standing alone on the runway as I got off the plane. The trickle of other tourists was packed away into a van and shipped off to some nearby jungle resort. The man seemed to be waiting politely for me to approach him, so I did.

“Hello. My name is Patrick. I’m a guide.”

“I came here to find the Huli Wigmen.”

“Sure. No problem.”

“I’d like to dance with them if that’s possible.”

“Yeah, okay. No problem. Car is over here.”

I was anticipating more of a challenge.

Until fairly recently, the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea remained one of the most remote human habitations on the planet. While the sweaty, mosquito-infested surrounding coast had been settled and partitioned out amongst European colonial empires for centuries, the cool, mild, mountainous inland region was deemed impenetrable and assumed to be sparsely inhabited—if at all. The advent of flight changed all that. In the 1930s, airborne explorers discovered a vast and prosperous network of agricultural societies living in isolation from the outside world.

The region has remained reasonably unmolested since its “discovery.” Concessions have been made in clothing, language, and religion, but much of the tribal structure and attitudes remain intact.

The flight to Tari lands a couple times a week. When it does, the entire village stops what it’s doing to watch. Here is the arrival terminal.

During the Second World War, tribespeople watched planes descend from the sky carrying vast resources for the war effort. Soldiers shared materials such as canned food, medicine, and weapons with the locals, who found them to be spectacularly useful.

Naturally, there was speculation about how the strange foreigners managed to summon these planes from the sky. When the war ended and the planes stopped coming, “cargo cults” emerged. They began imitating the rituals and practices they’d observed from the military in the hopes of producing the same results. Ad hoc runways were built, as were control towers, imitation radios, and communications headsets. Alas, no planes, no cargo.

Outside the airport, Patrick flagged down his friend, William, and convinced him to drive us around for the day.



William had to stop and drop some of his kids off at his village. He invited me along for a visit. This entailed crossing a river on a bridge that appeared to be made out of branches and coat hangers.



Halfway across, I remembered I was carrying my laptop and all my camera equipment on my back. It also dawned on me that I'm at least fifty pounds heavier than everyone in the village. I made the mistake of looking down, then compounded my stupidity by trying to take a picture.

The villagers were amused by my presence. I pulled out my camera and tripod and invited them to dance with me. They thought that was pretty hilarious.

We continued on to the village of Poria, where Patrick knew a group of Wigmen who would put on their ceremonial garb for paying visitors. The process takes several hours, so we had to wait a while, but it was raining anyway. I sat under a thatched hut and read *Into the Wild*.

When the time came, I was led into a clearing where five Huli Wigmen were waiting for me.

The Wigmen play a spiritual role in the community. Only a select few Huli tribesmen are elevated to Wigman status. The wigs that give them their name are sculpted from their own hair and can take more than a decade to create.

I explained to Patrick what I wanted to do and he translated into Huli. Everyone seemed perfectly comfortable with the idea.

We tried things a number of different ways. To ease into it, I mimicked their dance as best I could, beating one of their drums and jumping alongside them. After doing that a couple times, I asked them to keep doing their thing while I transitioned into my regular dance. No one seemed offended in the slightest by my flailing. I showed them the playback and they soon got into it, debating which formation was best and choreographing their own variations.

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After a half dozen takes, I figured I had what I needed. Though everyone seemed happy to keep on going, I thanked each of the Wigmen and paid them for their time. I augmented their fee by picking up a couple of their incredibly awesome souvenir action figures.

