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'WE DON'T EAT PEOPLE ANY MORE, HONEST'

In the Upper Baliem Valley, West Papua, the local time is 2500BC. The Dani tribe live a neolithic life and rumours of cannibalism are rife. Chris Haslam pops in for dinner

The warriors come over the ridge like a tidal wave, a fast-moving wave of 12ft spears, bows and arrows, and wicked-looking stone axes. Naked but for feathered headdresses, bamboo breastplates and penis gourds protruding like horns from their loins, they run through the crackling grass in silent menace. The sun flashes off brown skin smeared with pork fat and, at a range of 300 yards, the formation changes to what a Zulu would recognise as the horns of the buffalo. The men of West Papua's Dani tribe have no idea what a buffalo is, but they've worked out a double-flanking manoeuvre that allows them to hit us from three sides.

I look round and see that a second group, maybe 15 strong, has sneaked around the back and blocked the exit. We're surrounded, then the chanting starts. "They're saying they're going to stab us with their spears and smash our skulls with their clubs," the interpreter says. By now, the war party is doing the actions to go with the threats, pointing at mouths and rubbing bellies in a gruesome mime that leaves us in no doubt of their cannibalistic intentions.

"Then," the interpreter adds, rather unnecessarily in my view, "they're going to eat us."

The Dani are among the last of the lost tribes, unknown to the world until 1939, when an aircraft chartered by the zoologist Richard Archbold flew over a 6,000ft ridge above the Baliem River, and discovered a secret valley of terraced gardens, dry-stone walls and cosy little villages, populated by a people still in the stone age.

Seven decades later, the view from that ridge — just a day's hike from the trading post at Wamena — is almost unchanged. The scene is extraordinarily bucolic: neat little villages with clipped hedges and lovingly tended gardens, coils of smoke rising from thatched roofs and, in the middle distance, a church with a picket fence. That's the bit that's changed: no sooner had Archbold announced his discovery of "the real Shangri-la" than the missionaries moved in, putting the fear of the devil into a people who had yet to invent a god.

Along with heaven and hell, the missionaries have introduced a market economy to the Dani, encouraging the establishment of collectives to grow coffee and other crops. The money is used to buy clothes, steel tools and even mobile phones — you can sometimes get a signal from the mountain peaks — but the God squad has had less success in other areas. Men and women still live apart — the men in long houses and the women in round ones — the penis gourd, tied rather painfully around the scrotum, is the preferred dress for gentlemen, and there are persistent rumours that, just occasionally, the Dani eat people.

The tribe has no regard for idle chat. They have only four words for numbers — one, two, three and many — and two for colours — *mili* for dark shades and *mola* for light. You say *la'uk* when you meet a lady, and the rest of the time you can get by with the use of the word *wa*, which translates as anything from "Good morning" to "Thank you" to "Is it safe to cross that raging torrent on this lethal-looking rope bridge?"

The Dani are equally short on cuisine. The staple is the sweet potato, and the pot bellies on the naked children running wild in the villages betray a lack of protein. "Pot bellies mean peace," the guide jokes, hinting that the only time the Dani enjoy meat with their one veg is after a ruck with the neighbours.

Much has been written about man-eaters in the highlands of West Papua, while the image of blood-soaked savages prolongs orientalist prejudice, there are no credible witnesses to cannibalism. The missionary Tom Bozeman, working in this valley in the 1960s, graphically described the butchering and broiling of a man from a neighbouring village, killed in battle. "Some of the men had begun to build a fire near the body," he wrote. "The man with the bamboo knife began to cut the meat from the dead man's calves. I became nauseated."

Similarly, the writer Charles "Cannibal" Miller — a prewar version of Bruce Parry — claimed to have taken part in a cannibal feast in the 1930s. Then again, he also

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said he'd spotted a 40ft dinosaur. Anthropologists say that cannibalism hasn't been practised here for generations — if ever — but missionaries working in the further reaches of the valley are less sure. "I've heard plenty of stories, mainly from those purporting to be family of the victims," says the Bible-bashing bush pilot Bill Greeneway. "I'm sure it happens, occasionally, as a sacred act, a kind of revenge."

One night, in the village of Haliolo, I slip into a long house to broach the matter of cannibalism. It's the Melanesian version of a stranger walking into a saloon: firelit faces peer impassively through the smoke, and the blues-like strumming of a home-made guitar ends abruptly. The air is unbreathable — the Dani's twin passions are smoking and singing songs around a fire, but they have yet to invent the chimney, and it's no surprise that respiratory illness sees off most of them before they're 50.

"The going rate for a new wife is six pigs, but she can leave her husband at any time"

I ask if anyone has ever eaten human flesh. There's an embarrassed silence — as though I've mentioned foie gras at an Islington dinner party — then the chief replies. "He says his people don't eat other people," the interpreter says.

The village chief lights a clove-scented fag from the dog-end of another, rises and beckons me to follow. Outside, the stars blink on and off as fast-moving clouds scud across the night sky. The chief points westwards across the wide valley, over a dark ridge, then another. "Those people eat people," the interpreter says, "but they are far away."

We move on, hiking through lush valleys, crossing raging torrents on dodgy bridges and traversing knife-edge ridges. In tiny hamlets, we trade cigarettes for bananas and avocados to augment a diet of rice and tinned fish, shaking hands with women whose fingers have been hacked off with stone axes to placate the ghosts of the departed.

Days are hot and nights are cold, but never cold enough to deter the fleas that infest the rattan floors of the accommodation. There's little other wildlife. Any birds we see are being worn as headdresses, and the only beasts of the field are pigs, which enjoy long, happy lives due to their role as the local unit of currency.

The going rate for a new wife is six pigs, but she can leave her husband at any time as long as she returns the pigs in good condition. The porkers — arguments over which are the primary cause of the short, bloody, largely unreported inter-village skirmishes in which the losers purportedly end up as dinner — are therefore precious, spending nights sleeping with the women and children, and days being carried around like Paris Hilton's chihuahua.

One Sunday, we join the people of Sicama for the Eucharist. Simplistic murals on the walls of the brightly painted wooden church spread the good news better than the priest, who, faced with a congregation of topless women on one side, and scowling men wearing penis gourds and bones through their noses on the other, stammers his way through the service before legging it with the takings from the collection: four sacks of sweet potatoes and a cabbage.

Once he's gone, I ask if anybody knows an anthropophagus. Again that pause, accompanied this time by a scowl. Sicama is far from the usual hiking routes, and the villagers are wary of our Indonesian guide — West Papuans, with good reason, view Jakarta with suspicion. "Not here," they growl. Then they glance across the valley, to where the clouds have parted to reveal another village. "Over there, on the other hand, in Helugi…"

By the time we reach Helugi, rain-soaked, footsore, bored with our diet of rice and cold noodles, struggling to maintain the morale of our increasingly disenchanted porters, we're fair game for chief Siamo. He persuades us to take part in a pig festival, a tradition in which the visitors buy a pig and the villagers eat it. In return, they put on their war paint, tool up and stage a mock battle.

It all seems a bit fake to me, a show put on for tourists, but the next morning, as I find myself surrounded by bloodthirsty warriors who may or may not be cannibals, I realise the subtext is rather more chilling.

The mock battle ends and we return to the village, where the pig is led out. It's a rather small pig, considering that we paid $150, and in the moment before its death, the tribe lowers its eyes and mumbles a few words in pragmatic deference to the Christian god. Then the squealing creature is hoisted aloft by two warriors, while a third shoots an arrow into its axillary artery.

It dies quickly and noisily, and as the men butcher the body, the guide whispers in my ear. "If that pig had been a prisoner, or a missionary," he says, "they would have killed him in exactly the same way."

The feast is a great success, especially for the Dani, who enjoy semi-cooked pork far more than their guests, and so get the whole pig. There's singing and dancing, back-slapping and an awful lot of smoking, but I can't help thinking that human flesh is supposed to taste a lot like pork. I sit down next to Siamo and tell him I've heard his village has a fearsome reputation for devouring the flesh of its enemies.

He sucks on his cigarette as I speak, his smile spreading to touch the pig tusks protruding from his nose, a twinkle in his eyes. "Not us," he says, shaking his

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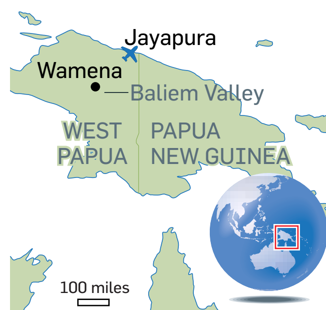
head. He points eastwards across the valley, over the far ridge, then another, to Haliolo, where my cannibal quest began eight days ago. "Those people eat people," he says. "Go and ask them."

TRAVEL BRIEF

Chris Haslam travelled as a guest of Imaginative Traveller (0845 077 8802, imaginative-traveller.com), which runs a tailor-made 15-day Into the Heart of Papua trip to the Dani homelands. Prices start at £3,000pp, including flights, most meals and all excursions.

Other operators include Undiscovered Destinations (0191 296 2674, undiscovered-destinations.com), which runs a 15-day trek for £2,299pp, including internal but not international flights, and Footprint Adventures (01522 804929, footprint-adventures.co.uk), which has a 10-day trip for £1,375pp, excluding flights.

Return fares from London to Denpasar, Bali, start at £635 with Qatar Airways; onward flights to to Jayapura start at £452 return. Book both with Trailfinders (0845 050 5871, trailfinders.com). From Jayapura, returns to Wamena cost about £40 with Trigana Air (00 622 1860 4867, trigana-air.com).



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The Dani mid-war dance. Below: Chris sits down before dinner

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