

## REACH FOR THE STARS

*A trek to the Star Mountains, Papua New Guinea*

*by Grant Dixon*



The tropical island of New Guinea is transected east-west by a range of high mountains which owe their origin to the active collision between the Pacific and north-moving Australian tectonic plates. In the remote far west of Papua New Guinea (PNG), near the border with Indonesian West Papua, this range narrows to just a single ridgeline which comprises the drainage divide for the entire island, the Star Mountains.

The Star Mountains were named from afar by a Dutch military mapping expedition in 1914 but the first attempt to reach the PNG part of the range wasn't until 1963, by an Australian patrol officer. An Australian scientific expedition in 1965, lasting several months and utilising many locals as bearers and track cutters, made the first ascents of Mts Capella and Scorpio, the near-4000m summits that were our targets. The only other ascents we are aware of were made in 1975, associated with botanical and caving expeditions to the area.

The Star Mountains is one of the wettest parts of PNG with daily rain (usually in the afternoon or evening) near-ubiquitous, and sometimes quite heavy. While we visited in November (within the relative “dry” season), we experienced only five days during our three-week trek with no significant rain. On other days rain fell from just a few hours to 16 hours per day. Management of the wet conditions (e.g. mud and slippery tracks, river crossings, shelter for cooking and socialising during storms, and near-continuously wet gear) is a key consideration for undertaking a trek in this region. In particular, with wet feet all day and a humid tropical climate, drying feet in the evening to prevent fungal infections is very important (as my friend Chris, who suffered painful “foot rot” on a previous trip, could attest).



Chris had visited the area 20 years previously and made an unsuccessful attempt to get to the Star Mountains’ tops and we resolved to have another crack before age got the better of us. The only reason these rarely-visited mountains are so readily accessible to two guys on a self-reliant holiday, with proverbial “back-of-the-envelope” planning, is the relative proximity of the massive Ok Tedi mine and the associated company town of Tabubil, established in the 1970s and with daily flights from Port Moresby (there are no roads to other parts of the country).

We hit a wall of humid heat stepping off the small plane and were instantly looking forward to the cooler mountains, but first we had to negotiate access. All land in PNG is “owned” by someone so a proposed journey anywhere requires landowner permission. Fortunately, we had established a local contact with the mining company who had set up a meeting for us the day after our arrival. A suggestion from one of the landowners during these negotiations that, “at our age”, perhaps we should just consider taking a helicopter into the mountains illustrated the lack of comprehension about why we were attempting this journey in the first place. Nevertheless, permission was granted after several hours of talk, protocols dictating we utilise some locals as guides for the mountain approach. As there is no trekking culture in this region, we then went shopping for their food and equipment.

The Star Mountains are not visible from town, nor in fact from much of the approach trek, lying hidden beyond the series of bluffs and 600m-high walls that comprise the great limestone escarpment of western PNG that rears above steep forested foothills and valleys.

We utilised the locals' shuttle bus to pass through the Ok Tedi mine site, hardly an aesthetic start to our trek, although damp mist enhanced the other-worldly feel of this industrial landscape, and we soon entered forest and left the environmental devastation surrounding this massive hole behind.

While the four men accompanying us were carrying some of our three weeks of food and gear, our 30kg loads dwarfed what they were carrying in their small packs. That and a lifetime traversing these tracks meant they danced over the mud, roots and rock of the rough track, most shod in gumboots but one barefoot, while the hilly first day was something of a slog for us. We spent the first night around a central fire in a bamboo hut belonging to one of our guides, welcome after a very wet day.



Several river crossings, by ford, log and rope bridge, and more hills saw us at Kavorabip, the first and only village en route, perched traditionally atop a cleared hill and surrounded by gardens, by lunchtime next day. White fellas are unusual here so we had an instant friendly reception from the entire village, but were unexpectedly told we had another round of negotiations for ongoing access. We spent the afternoon wondering if our journey might end here. The negotiations with Chief Abson, assisted by local teacher, Paul, and one of our guides, Mark, took place around the central hearth in the bamboo communal kitchen hut well into the evening. Chris' knowledge of the area from his previous visit was invaluable here. Initially it seemed we may be denied access thanks to the apparent indiscretions of some US academics who visited two years previously, but agreement to proceed was granted subject to reporting on our findings.

We were accompanied by our four guides for three more days, soon leaving the cleared garden areas and continuing on a very rough and muddy track, ascending into mossy cloud forest beneath the limestone wall of Benstead Bluff, across the 3000m Berero Pass, and into the Krom River gorge. The dry riverbed cuts through the limestone ridge and literally provides a clear highway through tangled forest to the Dokfuma grassland beyond. Here our guides left us, with two weeks' food, our agreed plan being to continue into the trackless mountains proper alone. They probably thought "abandoned" a more appropriate term but, while pleased to have come this far (they rarely visit this area and at least one had



never been to this part of his country before; it is too high and cold for gardens), they seemed happy to be heading back down to relative warmth. We were quite happy with the climate up here, similar to our native Tasmania although somewhat wetter.



The Dokfuma (“dog eat”, allegedly named for an unfortunate canine consumed during the 1965 expedition) alpine grassland is such a contrast to the forest up through which we had just climbed to get there and we spent a rest day exploring open areas dotted with tree ferns, copses of coniferous woodland, and some large limestone sinkholes. Unfortunately a major wild fire has extensively burnt rainforest and alpine country both east and west of the Dokfuma grasslands and has somewhat compromised the scenic values of all areas affected. We were told this was human-caused, an ill-judged attempt by a younger now-chief Abson to flush a cuscus from a tree on a hunting trip during a very dry 1997.

Mt Capella rises to the northwest of the grasslands as a long pale limestone ridge (hence the local name of Dain Namalock or White Mountain). We had chosen a direct approach and spent three days scrub bashing, shuttling our gear, cutting where necessary (with our shiny new machete or bush knife) and marking (with paper tape to ease our return in the mist) our way to a glacial basin just below the summit ridge. The post-fire regrowth often contained nasty hooked



vines or fern stems and was unpleasant to traverse, more so when underlain by limestone karst pinnacles. Unburnt tangled sections of lush mossy cloud forest were akin to something you might find in southwest Tasmania and, whilst also hard work, were much more pleasant to be in than the burnt areas.

The Star Mountains' peaks were glaciated during the Pleistocene epoch. Ice disappeared 13,000 years ago but has clearly left its legacy in the landscape. I mused that this and other aspects of the Star Mountains alpine scenery were reminiscent of my home state of Tasmania's Western Arthur Range, including the celestial nomenclature scheme and aspects of the scrub and rock scrambling.

On the range, even if it didn't rain much, cloud and mist generally enveloped the crests by late morning. Hence the useful part of the day for travel was mostly in the mornings and it was more comfortable to have a dry camp set up by early to mid-afternoon. With this in mind, we departed camp at dawn for our Mt Capella summit attempt.

Transverse ribs of limestone pinnacles, termed lapies karst, cross the long ridge that leads south to Mt Capella's highest point. These were up to a metre high, some razor-sharp, some cloaked in vegetation hiding the holes in between. Hence travel needed to be slow and methodical to avoid injury. In places pale marine fossils were evident in the pinnacles. These organisms were alive on the sea floor a mere 30 million years ago but now, at near 4000m elevation, offer clear evidence of the tectonic upheaval still ongoing in PNG.



We reached the summit in clear weather and, although cumulus cloud was rapidly building in the blue sky and rising up the limestone escarpment to the south, we were above all this for now. The mountain views west into Indonesian territory and east beyond the Dokfuma grasslands were extensive and, after 30 years of dreaming of the moment, Chris was very happy. The return journey was uneventful until 11am when, an hour short of our dry tents, we were pounded by a torrential hail storm.



We crossed the Capella ridge next day and continued northwest, misty conditions contributing to a navigational error that saw us battling the worst scrub of the trip, but the day ended early, before heavier rain, at a delightful alpine tarn in a saddle on the PNG drainage divide.

It was with considerable relief that we finally left the rugged and scrubby limestone terrain and entered country underlain by igneous rocks. Here the character of the range changed, with narrower ridges, summits more peak-like, and open mossy and grassy wetlands and coniferous woodland occupying glacial shelves and basins.



Easy walking and a scenic ridgetop camp preceded our descent into a low forested saddle. We had anticipated this kilometre-long saddle with some trepidation, and the descent into it was certainly very thick, with the closely-spaced stems like prison bars in places (and fighting our way back up this section a few days later provided the only real lowlight of our return). But in the saddle itself we discovered a recently-cut route and were across in an hour. We later inferred this had been recently cut to facilitate mineral exploration, an ominous thought. A long climb up grassy ridges, a sidle past alpine trees amazingly-laden with moss and epiphytes, then a squishy slog up a glacial valley saw us camped on a rare dry patch below Mt Scorpio, just as the afternoon mist rolled in.

As I still had some energy, I later wandered alone, ever-upward, bluffs and pinnacles looming from the mist, and eventually scrambled up to an obvious high point. With a degree of self-satisfaction, I thought I may have reached the summit but in clearer weather next day this proved not so, the true somewhat higher summit being further north. But my route scouting did facilitate an efficient ascent early next morning. We threaded several saddles and steep narrow ridges and both reached the summit of Mt Scorpio soon after 8am, so getting clear views until the cloud rolled in by 9am. And what views – to the north slopes fell very steeply for 2000m into the Sepik River catchment, westwards the range zigzagged onwards into Indonesian territory, and nearer at hand the summit pyramid rose above a spectacular

series of cliffs and pinnacles created by ancient glaciers eating into the mountain from all sides. We returned to camp in the mist and spent a lazy remainder of the day exploring locally.



With lighter packs and a known route, we made it back to Dokfuma in only three somewhat-wet days. We then had rather mammoth loads (supplemented by leftover food and cached gear) for a couple of days descending the rough and slippery track back to Kavorabip, arriving to a welcome that bespoke of the villagers being very pleased to see us alive.

It not being protocol to turn up on the mine site unaccompanied or unannounced, one of our previous guides, Hans, and his wife, Jennifer, joined us and carried some of our stuff for the walk back to the mine. More ill-timed heavy rain dictated an overnight stop at a flooded river but we reached steamy Tabubil next day, three weeks after leaving and very pleased to have achieved all our aims.

The current economic basis for the region is entirely based on mining and, with the Ok Tedi mine output waning, there are concerted attempts to find another ore deposit (hence perhaps the evidence of mineral exploration we saw near Mt Scorpio). What this means for the future of the Star Mountains is uncertain.

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