

Morobe Show Colour Explosion

Gemma King

It's one of the most eagerly-awaited weekends on Lae's social calendar but – more than that – the Morobe Show (full name: Morobe Province Agricultural Show) is a hot-ticket item for visitors from right across the country and overseas.

The numbers speak for themselves. More than 200,000 people pass through the gates of Lae's showgrounds during show weekend, which this year fell on October 24-25 as the weekend closest to the month's full moon. As any Lae resident knows, the show is an absolute feast for the senses. Expats see it as one of PNG's festivals of culture that cannot be missed, and that is indeed true. But locals know it has an even deeper significance as a force of unification, bringing communities together in celebration of our beautiful country. With that comes a strong sense of pride that can be felt throughout the city, making it a truly joyous time to visit rainy Lae. The show had its beginnings in the late

1950s after a decade of rapid expansion in agricultural activity to diversify Morobe Province's economy. Before that and following WWII, the environment surrounding Lae had been completely neglected and was in a devastating state, the area's main source of income being the sale of war equipment! Even today you can be offered an old war relic to buy off the street.

“It's not long after one show is over that the planning and organising for the next year begins”

A change in government, and subsequently a change in land purchase policy, saw a significant increase in agricultural efforts throughout the country. Agricultural show societies were formed in Madang, Goroka, Mt Hagen, Port Moresby and Wau. By the late 50s, Lae had a very active group of local farmers, enough

to support its own annual show, and so the very first Morobe Show took place in 1959 and has been an annual event ever since. Fast forward to today and the current committee consists of

over 40 members, all volunteers of varying ages with a wide range of skills, who are keen to ensure the show runs smoothly. Their top priority is ensuring the show meets and even exceeds the expectations of those



Dancers keep to the beat of the kundu (hand drum)



An elaborate headdress on a performer from Mt Hagen, Western Highlands



Writer Gemma King poses with performers from Wabag, Enga Province

faithful attendees who return year after year. It is no easy feat and it's not long after one show is over that the planning and organising for the next year begins. The committee is always on the lookout for new recruits and, speaking from experience, it's a fun and helpful way for newbies in town to meet a very active, enthusiastic group of likeminded people

interested in the continued growth of Lae. Of course, the support of local businesses is crucial too and sponsorship packages are available with varying degrees of return. With such a large volume of people in one place at one time, it's a huge platform for showcasing new products. It's no wonder big names



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such as Coca Cola, Trukai and Ramu have a longstanding relationship with the show as key repeat sponsors. The buzz around town during the leadup to the show is electric as relatives and wantoks start arriving in Lae to be part of the action. A bolstered police

Seeds, grasses, shells, and animal bones, teeth, feathers and fur are all used as materials for costumes



A sing-sing group from Chimbu Province

presence is a key part of planning to ensure visitors feel safe at all times and the event is not marred by petty crime. The show is made up of a number of exhibits and events that come together to create a family weekend that truly has something for everyone. For me, the stand-out event is the sing-sing. With my camera at the ready, it is pretty much non-stop clicking as soon as I hear that first rustle of grass skirts and beating of drums. It is estimated there are more than 7000 different cultural groups in PNG, a vastly diverse populace. At least 55 of these groups – representing just about every province in the country – can be counted on to make the journey to perform at the Morobe Show each year to vividly showcase their own group’s unique traditions and customs through song, dance and elaborate costumes. With an average of 30 people in each group, the detail that goes into the costumes is simply spectacular. Each group decorates their bodies in local bilas that distinguishes their province from the rest. Groups from Morobe use a lot of grass bilas to make necklaces and bands that they tie around their arms and ankles; coastal groups wear a lot of shells; the Siassi Islanders balance

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The crowd-pleasing Asaro Mudmen of Goroka



Face-painted teens get into the festival spirit

“The Mudmen are born showmen, teasing and playing with the crowd by making sudden movements with their spears held high”

small canoes on their heads; and then there are the Highlanders, who are hard to miss in the most spectacular headdresses decorated with a rainbow palette of bird feathers. The tinkling of bells can be heard from groups who attach them to their ankles to create music as they dance around the arena and, of course, there is also the rhythmic pounding of the legendary kundu drum, said to signify the voice of ancestors. It's guaranteed to give you goosebumps! Among the easiest to distinguish are the famous Asaro Mudmen, who come from just outside Goroka in the Eastern Highlands. While their mud masks generally come with a blood-curdlingly fierce expression, other features can make them slightly comical, such as very short or very long ears that stretch down to their chin, long joined eyebrows, horns and sideways mouths. The Mudmen are born showmen, teasing and playing with the crowd

by making sudden movements with their spears held high. The kids go wild and it makes for some great photo opportunities. After the last sing-sing group has completed its lap, they all come together in a sea of colour in the centre of the arena. I wonder to myself how they manage to stay dancing all afternoon in the hot sun, with just as much gusto in the last 10 minutes as in the first, but I'm not complaining. As long as they are willing to perform, it is my privilege to watch their mesmerising show. As well as the sing-sing, the agricultural exhibits are well worth a look, with farmers able to display their best (and often most peculiar) produce of the season. Points are awarded and prizes won for the best district exhibits, tropical and introduced vegetables, fruit, commercial crops and general farm produce. A personal favourite is the horticulture exhibit where you can enjoy expertly-arranged displays of cut flowers, foliage, shrubs, decorative plants and, of course, our world-famous PNG orchids. PNG boasts the largest percentage of all known orchid species in the world and, with a cash prize awarded for Best Orchid Cut Flower and Best Orchid Plant in Flower, growers exhibit their finest. There are also

livestock exhibits (cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and rabbits) and commercial exhibits, where large industry, government bodies, service industries, and community and social organisations can promote services and products such as the latest model 4WD or water tank. This is particularly important for show-goers from remote areas who otherwise would have no access to such information. One of the biggest crowd-pleasers is the Yamaha Freestyle Motocross Team. Led by one of Australia's leading freestyle riders Joel Balchin, the team travels to Lae with their motorbikes to perform three times per day over the two days of the show. The boys definitely bring the 'wow' factor with nailbiting tricks such as the Whip, Superman and Heart Attack that see them spin, twirl



Traditional grass skirts (above and below) come in all colours and styles





A repeat guest act is the Yamaha Freestyle Motocross Team (above and below)



“As they rev their engines the crowd erupts into chants of, ‘Wan Moa! Wan Moa!’”

and do backflips. As they rev their engines the crowd erupts into chants of, “Wan Moa! Wan Moa!” pleading with the riders to continue their flips after their set is over. You can feel the vibrations throughout the stand, it’s really quite exhilarating! Each year there is also the judging of the Morobe Show Queen, a contest with a K1000 cash prize that is open to young women from all provinces. The entrants are required to wear full traditional bilas and demonstrate they have a good understanding of the traditional value of their costume. The judges base their decisions on each girl’s knowledge, personality, presentation and grooming. It is wonderful to watch such lovely and confident young women so proudly representing their provinces and showing what sets them apart. The marching competition, part of the show’s official opening on the Sunday, is a competitive event that many schools, sporting and community groups take part in. Groups are judged on ability, uniforms, precision and

Stori bilong mi

“One of my goals in life is to provide health services so that the people in my district benefit and have access to health care. The only way I can do this is through education.

I studied health service management at university. I was fortunate that ExxonMobil helped me complete my studies.

ExxonMobil has put their energy into education and because of that I can help my community.”

Kunsy Donnie
Kikori Rural Hospital
Gulf Province





A dancer proudly parades the Southern Highlands flag



Horsemanship is tested in a variety of individual and team events



Colourful bilums for sale

banner designs. The schools particularly take this element of the show very seriously and spend weeks preparing in the hope of beating their rivals and taking home a cash prize. Each group also receives a K100 appearance fee for their efforts. Another popular and “wild west” part of the show is the champion cowboy judging. As many as 80 cowboys from all over the province compete, hoping to secure the title with their galloping, jumping and



Older male performers (above and below) sport distinctive nose piercings



general horsemanship skills, with different categories including Best Presented Horse and Supreme Led Horse. The second day of the show allows the boys to show off and excite the crowd with individual and team games that are great fun to watch. If you want to be really impressed and precision is your thing, the traditional archery competition attracts as many as 30 entrants, all keen to demonstrate their skills in the age-old methods of hunting and combating. Each archer fires one arrow at three different targets, the highest-scoring 10 contestants then battling it out in the final on day two. Archery bows in PNG are traditionally made from wood or bamboo, plant fibre and split rattan, while the arrows that are produced by different tribes are considered some of the most diverse in the world; vastly different to the carbon-fibre bows and arrows common in modern-day archery. All archers in the show competition use bows and arrows made from 100% traditional materials, making it a very impressive spectacle.



Children dress up to join the sing-sing



A Sepik child in traditional bilas



Highland women in full sing-sing

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A dancer is disguised by this elaborate mask



A woman waits to perform

Over in the Morobe Show Hall, the Health Expo is one of the show's most important elements as it gives NGOs and other health-related organisations the chance to promote such vital community programs as free immunisations, HIV testing, dental check-ups and contraception. ▶

Some tips for Morobe Show-goers:

Upon arrival and before you visit any of the exhibits, get hold of a schedule so you can plan your day to ensure you don't miss any of the demonstrations. Don't be afraid to haggle for a unique painting, bilum, basket or artefact (and don't be surprised if you need to make a trip back to the car to offload all your show bags and souvenirs!). If you're game, take a ride on the ferris wheel for a bird's-eye view of all the action. Closed-toe shoes are recommended and don't forget to pack a hat, sunscreen and an extra battery for your camera!

For more info, go to www.morobeshow.org.pg while regular updates can be found on the Wantok Weekly Facebook page at www.facebook.com/wantokweekly. Several hotels offer special weekend show packages. Visit www.rainylae.com for a good range of accommodation options.



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