

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Words & Photos: Gemma King

“Knowing you are at the highest point in Papua New Guinea feels pretty good... you can almost forget about the muscle fatigue starting to set in!”



Obligatory photo opp at the top

“Want to go the shortcut?” our guide asks, looking at us eagerly. I glance around at my comrades and can tell we are all thinking the same thing: A shortcut *now*? So close to the highest point of PNG? Before we can really answer we’re on the shortcut and suddenly I round a corner to find a sheer cliff face to my left and a sheer drop to my right. “Where the hell are you going?” shouts our group leader Grant, who has already made it to the top, “you’ve gone the wrong way!” My husband Angus groans, “If that’s the only way to the summit I’m happy to stay right here,” and I hear the

shuffle of feet as he and the others turn back. I, on the other

hand, find myself hugging the cliff face and for a few moments

I freeze. In order to get to Mt Wilhelm’s famous summit –



The final stretch to the summit



Breathtaking view from the top of Mt Wilhelm

which at 4509m is the world's 107th highest peak – I will have to take a step over that sheer drop. The step isn't too big but I can't find anywhere to get a strong foothold in order to leverage myself across. "I'm not sure I can do this," I say to Grant, who is on the other side with his hand outstretched. After some rather strongly-worded encouragement from Grant, the guide lowers himself through the gap so he is wedged between the cliff face and the summit, and casually instructs me to step across on his head. Our trip to Mt Wilhelm started with a plan between friends to drive in convoy from

Lae to Goroka, the capital of the Eastern Highlands, where we would spend our first night. Leaving Lae early on a Friday morning, we crossed the spectacular Kassam Pass then made our first stop 170km into the journey at Kainantu. Primarily a market town for local produce growers and cash-croppers, it has basic facilities but is better known for its historical significance as an airstrip town during WWII. One of our group, Stan, took this opportunity to see some customers while his partner Mikal, Angus and I visited the cultural centre. The centre is on the left, just as you enter town, and sells local

pottery and artefacts. It's probably the most popular reason to visit Kainantu and

"It's a magical feeling being above the clouds, with the yellow from the sun beginning to streak through and a view as far as the coastline starting to appear"

definitely worth a look, but what they have on display really depends on how many people have passed through

recently or if they are expecting tourists. We were a bit unlucky with not too much on offer but a basket did catch my eye and Mikal chose a pottery vase that was a bit battered and unfinished but still uniquely beautiful. Kainantu is particularly famous for its hand-woven rugs that come in all sizes and make a striking centrepiece for any room. These are woven onsite at the centre and I was sorely tempted – but my husband reminded me in time that we already have two! At nearby Kainantu Lodge, a popular lunch stop or overnight stay option, we ordered coffee, ate the sandwiches we had packed and enjoyed the cooler air


sitting in the well-kept gardens. There are two rather sorry-looking tree kangaroos in a cage that you can say hello to, but be careful of the spider webs – both Mikal and I almost walked into one very

unfriendly looking spider! It wasn't long before Stan joined us and we were on the 90km road to Goroka. 'One Speed Stan' set the pace and had us off to a good start but

it wasn't without a few hairy airborne moments for both cars as we hit some deep potholes that popped up from nowhere. In my three-and-a-half years in PNG this was only my second visit to

the leafy trading hub that is Goroka (the first was for their annual Nori Kori Rugby Sevens tournament) so I was looking forward to returning. After picking up a few supplies including

- Cafe
- Guided Tours
- Souvenir Shop
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water and beer we drove straight to the home of Grant, our hiking pro and host for the evening. As I was born and bred in Scotland, the cooler climes are always a welcome change from Lae for me, not to mention the wonderful fruit and veg on offer, and of course the coffee, Goroka's main cash crop. It wasn't hard to put our feet up that afternoon and enjoy a few cups while resting up for the next few days! We didn't let what was to come affect our Friday night too much however, enjoying a few beers, BBQ and catch-up with some familiar faces at a favourite local watering hole, the Aero Club. Another member of our hiking party, Sam, was unfortunately delayed leaving Port Moresby on Friday so on Saturday morning we left Grant behind to await his arrival and the rest of us set off as planned. The pair would catch up with



Betty's Lodge and Trout Farm

us at Mt Wilhelm's base camp late that afternoon. Our first scheduled stop at the two-hour point, 80km down the Highlands Highway, was dusty Kundiawa. The capital of Simbu Province with a population (at last census) of just over 8000, it is the last town before the turnoff towards Betty's Lodge where we would begin our walk. Here we were joined by our remaining team members, Neil, Rutgar and Adrian, who had driven that morning from Mt Hagen. We found a bakery and after buying a few coconut cookies the proprietor didn't mind us using the bathroom! Of equal importance was finding some strong tape to keep the lid on the bolognese that was to

be tonight's dinner. We found some in a store along the main street so could continue in the knowledge we wouldn't go hungry! The next 40km stretch of road would take us to Kegsugl, at the base of Mt Wilhelm, and Betty's Lodge. Although half the distance of the first leg of that day's journey, Grant had warned us to expect at least another two hours of travel due to its poor state. We were all pretty pumped by this point so nobody seemed too bothered about the bumps; all part of the adventure and there was plenty to look at. The contrast of the orange dirt road, the vegetation growing all around, the rolling hills and the piercing blue sky made for picture-perfect scenery – if only I could

hold my camera still for long enough to take a photo! A few bruises later and our three cars arrived to the excited cheers and waves of local kids. After a quick stop to buy strawberries from a roadside meri – who pointed out the lodge 'untup' – we found ourselves at Betty Higgins' acclaimed trout farm being warmly welcomed by the owner herself and her partner Peter. Phone coverage here is pretty hit and miss so it had been a stroke of luck that we had managed to get through to Betty to book in with her a few days before. There's plenty of room and she welcomes anyone passing through but it's a lot easier for her to prepare with at least a day or two of notice.

This also allows her time to put out the word for porters and guides keen to pick up work. The plan had always been to leave in our cars here anything we wouldn't need on the walk, mostly clean clothes for when we returned. We combined all our belongings for the porters to carry to base camp – namely sleeping bags, warm clothes, food and a few fishing rods – had a quick lunch of roast chicken and wraps brought from Goroka, sorted our day packs, used the loo, stuffed our pockets with lollies and headed off. The initial walk from Betty's to base camp takes you through mountain rainforest and along an alpine

grassland glacial valley. It's a gradual incline with a pretty clear-cut path for a good few hours. We started pretty close to one another in single file but it wasn't long before distance grew between the energetic leader of the pack and the person taking it easy at the back. There are four picnic benches in good resting spots, the first not far from Betty's. You probably don't need to stop at each one but we took it as an opportunity to close the gap in the group, have some snacks and take photos. As the forest ends, the sky appears and you're walking along open landscape where tall trees form a canopy in



The bumpy road from Kundiawa to Kegsugl

the distance. The lush green vegetation and trees jutting out from everywhere create an impression of walking through a set from the movie *Jurassic Park*. It's very cool! It was around about this time that Angus had a blowout in both shoes. I was worried. How was he going to manage the climb that

night? He said he'd be fine so I pushed it from my mind and enjoyed the scenery. On a clear day, one of the beautiful spots we passed will show you a view right down to Betty's and the Kegsugl airstrip. We didn't see much on the way there but on our return the next day it was really something

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Walking through the alpine grassland

and of course a nice reminder that we were almost home! The whole walk to base camp took us just short of three hours at an easy pace. You could push on through the resting stops and

pick up speed to make it in less than that. It's certainly a good warm-up but doesn't compare to what lies ahead. As we rounded the final hill of this part of the valley, we were

greeted with the spectacular sight of Lake Piunde, the lowest of the twin lakes and the official Mt Wilhelm base camp. There are two huts here; one, an old Australian National University monitoring

station, and the other an 'A-Frame'. It was about 4pm now and a low mist hanging just above the lake looked almost mystical; not too unlike a loch in Scotland and certainly with a temperature to match, making me feel quite at home! Needless to say it was time to layer up with whatever we had in our day packs as we waited for the porters to arrive with our extra clothing. The jumpers, jackets, hoodies and hats were going on as quickly as the temperature dropped and the wind picked up.

Not deterred in any way by the weather, the boys were champing at the bit to try their hand at some trout fishing. I was more than happy to take it all in from the picnic table next to the water's edge. Not a bad spot to hang out and one we all agreed would make for a very pleasant camping base for a weekend away with friends.

The porters weren't too far behind and once they arrived I was keen to check out our eating and resting place for the night. The hut is basic but has everything you need, including a kitchen with stove, cooking gas and a table large enough to seat 10 people. An adjoining room is big enough to comfortably sleep up to 12, while off to the side are two smaller rooms with mattresses that can take another four. To give you an idea of

the altitude, Goroka sits at 1500m and Kegsugl (Betty's) at 2500m. Base camp lakes sit at 3500m. We could feel the air thinning for sure but it wasn't until the next morning after little to no sleep did I realise just how much.

We had all packed a sleeping bag and a mat, not the most high-tech gear but enough to see us through one night. The guides already had a fire going outside and water was boiling on the stove. It was late afternoon before Grant and Sam arrived and by this time it was starting to darken outside and get pretty cold. With everyone back at the hut I boiled up some pasta and got the bolognese on the stove; the sticky tape had worked a treat and dinner arrived in one piece, as did the chocolate brownies. None of it lasted very long! After much chat, cups of tea, hot chocolate and Milo (during which time the head lamps started to appear), we all started to think about sorting what we would need

"The hut is basic but has everything you need"

for the next day, then headlamps off by 7.30. I would love to say the alarm woke me at 1.30am but I am pretty sure I was already awake - a combination of the altitude, Neil's snoring, and sleeping on possibly the most uncomfortable mat I've ever experienced. Needless to say this

Base camp



mat stayed behind. Mikal pulled out some pre-boiled eggs, which made for a great breakfast with some

bread rolls left over from the previous day. Not that anyone was particularly hungry. We layered up, got our day



Twin lakes Piunde & Aunde

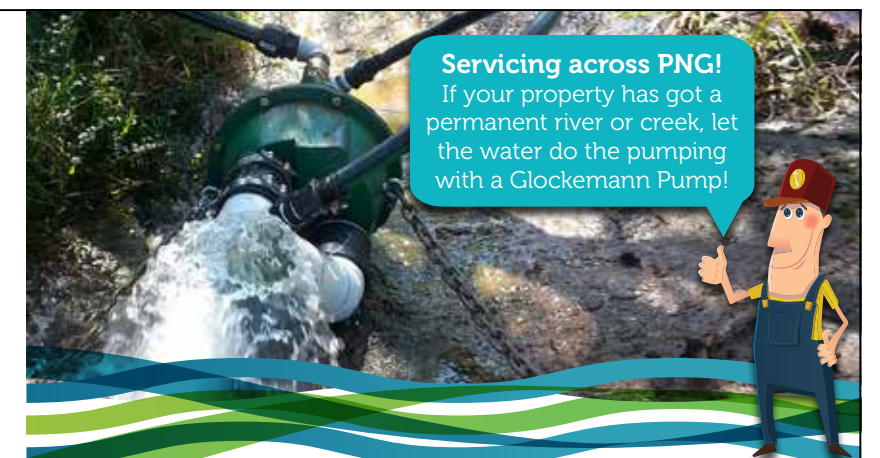


The writer Gemma (right) with Mikal against a backdrop from *Jurassic Park*

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Angus (front) and co resting at the base camp picnic table



Neil (right) warms by the fire

packs together, head lamps back on and we were off. I had noticed the full moon when I made a trip to the long drop around 10pm but despite how clear it was, we still needed our lights to see where we were walking. It was all up! Through diverse terrain, across rocks, along rugged paths and around slippy mud

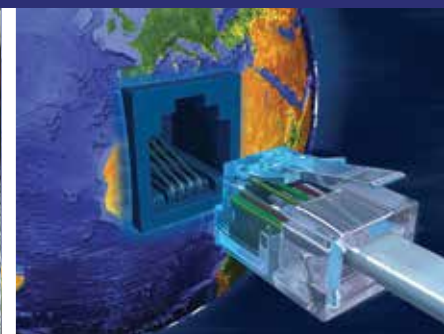
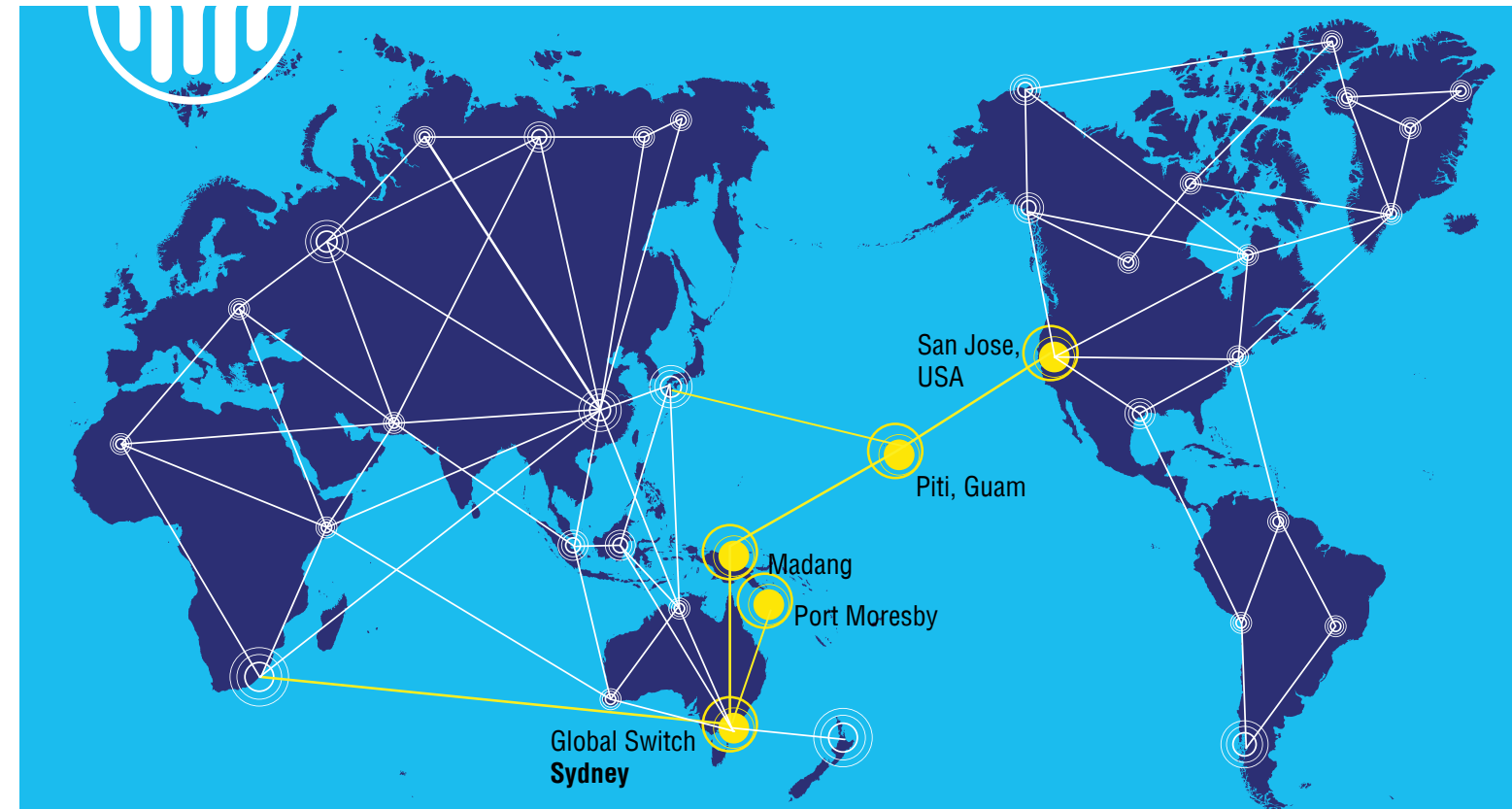
we went... for the next four hours. It is not a technical climb and as someone who enjoys regular exercise for general health such as walking, jogging, light weight training and yoga, I was able to do it without too much trouble but there is no doubt it is a challenge that requires strength,

endurance and cardio fitness. I was able to keep a good pace but welcomed the rests too and when we did stop for a breather it was the cold that had me keen to get moving again before too long. I was so happy I wore gloves the entire time, using my hands to lift myself up and over rocks and through narrow areas of the path. Mikal used walking poles, which took the pressure off her knees and allowed her to go at a steady pace without slipping. Starting the ascent during the night means you can't see what's ahead of you; which on this occasion was just one big mountain after another. There's nothing else to do but put one foot in front of the other, enjoy the

chat and keep moving. Various sections are considered treacherous in wet weather, which we were lucky enough not to experience. It was still a little hairy at times, where the path is non-existent. I didn't suffer from any altitude sickness but Grant had mentioned it can make you a little unsteady so it's really important to concentrate the steeper you go. We arranged for five guides to join us, which was a good number. I was never too far away from one and was often lent a hand to steady myself at trickier parts. My best walking companion was Wan, the little mountain dog, who took to those peaks like a duck to water! It was his first time to the top, with his master and guide watching on with pride; truly numba Wan, what a team. People have asked me how hard on a scale of 1-10, I would rate the walk. It's difficult to answer but if I really had to I would score it a seven. There was never a moment when I felt like I didn't want to go on or had any doubt that we would make it to the top and everyone else in our group agreed. I was able to hold a conversation (and a sense of humour) most of the time, which wasn't mutual all round. My husband, who keeps fit playing a decent level of squash three times a week and has always been active



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Numba Wan mountain dog with his master



in many sports his whole life, admitted there were times when he just wanted it to be over – and he certainly wasn't up for any banter! Not to mention his shoes disaster, which made those muddy areas no fun for him at all.

The increase in altitude left me with a dull headache at times, and a piercing one when I returned to base camp but nothing that two Panadol and an electrolyte drink couldn't fix. Aside from unpredictable weather, you want to be as prepared as possible to have the best experience. I would suggest regular walking, including stairs and hills for a few months beforehand. For that must-needed energy boost, pack plenty of snacks and electrolytes!

Walking through the night also allows you time to reach the peak at dawn with a better chance of clear weather. We left base camp just after 2am and arrived just below the summit

close to 6.15am. At this point we were surrounded by a thick pinkish fog, with the sun not too far away. It made for a great photo of Mikal who looks as if she is walking on a different planet! We pulled back a little at this final stage and took some refuge from the cold. This was a great decision. Had we pushed on too quickly we would have found ourselves hovering on the summit waiting for the sun to come up and freezing ourselves to death!

When the clouds began to part, as I was standing on the summit, I had already forgotten about those terrifying last steps that took me over our guide's head. What I was looking at was truly breathtaking. It's a magical feeling being above the clouds, with the yellow from the sun beginning to streak through and a view as far as the coastline starting to appear. Couple that with the great sense of achievement and knowing you are on the highest point in

Papua New Guinea and life feels pretty good at that moment... you can almost forget about the muscle fatigue starting to set in! Mt Wilhelm is part of the Bismarck Range and the point where the three provinces of Simbu, Western Highlands and Madang intersect. The peak is also known as Enduwa Kombuglu in the local Kuman language. When you look east down towards Morobe on a clear day, you can make out Mt Chungol, the highest point (2752m) in the Hertzog Ranges that lie to the west of Lae. Mt Wilhelm's summit sits at 4509m above sea level. Just to give you an idea, Mt Kosciuszko is the highest mountain in Australia at 2228m and the peak of Mt Everest is 8848m. We had just climbed half of the highest mountain on earth! We collected our thoughts and our breath, took a million photos each and decided it was time to get out of the cold and begin our descent. Of course it's only on the way down that you can really see where you've just been. It was still quite misty at this point but for the first time we saw the peak and couldn't help but smile, knowing it was now behind us! I even caught Angus with a smile on his face, even though he was pretty spent and now having to concentrate even harder than on the way up as the risk of slipping was much greater. The mud got the last laugh out of most of us at least once, with me sliding right down on my backside! It's also only when the sun is up that you can appreciate the ground underfoot and how close you come to the edge to manoeuvre through slim passages and across unsteady rocks. Because we would be spending that night at Betty's we were in no rush, stopping to take photos of the valley and enjoy the beauty of where we were. As it got hotter, the layers came off

and the twin lakes came into sight. Seeing those lakes for the first time on the way down plays tricks on you – you can practically touch base camp but it doesn't seem to get closer... that goes on for a good few hours!

I joined a few of the boys who had raced down to Lake Aunde and were now relaxing on a picnic table shedding more layers and enjoying the break. Grant and Sam stripped off to their undies and went for a very refreshing dip. I opted just to wade in to my knees and although the water was absolutely freezing it felt so refreshing on my tired feet. We hung around here with our high spirits, sharing snacks, waiting for the others. Turned out they were too keen to get back and kept walking.

It took half an hour or so to walk the final stage, along the edge of Lake Piunde back to base camp. I found Mikal in the kitchen hugging a hot drink and knew that was exactly what I felt like too. Angus went straight for his sleeping bag for a lie down. After an hour or so of relaxing, sharing stories from the last eight hours, eating and slowly gathering our things, we left for the walk home. This stands out as one of the most memorable parts of the adventure for me as we took it really easy, chatted lots, stopped often and basked in the glory of what we had just achieved. I can honestly say I loved every minute and one of the best things about my time on the track was having no phone or internet. Back at Betty's we were pleasantly surprised that she had enough hot water for everyone to enjoy a shower. Once clean and changed there was nothing left to do but enjoy a cold beer on the veranda, share our individual experiences and look forward to the fresh trout being prepared



“We were surrounded by a thick pinkish fog, with the sun not too far away. It made for a great photo of Mikal who looks as if she is walking on a different planet!”

by Betty's wonderful girls in the kitchen. To start we had carrot soup with kaukau fritters and to accompany the trout were delicious potatoes, broccoli and beans all from her garden. Everyone made room for some of her famous strawberries,

which were so good we all left with a few boxes! Betty's Lodge has two double rooms and three rooms with single beds and bunks. It's very comfortable with inviting couches and armchairs in the living room in front of the



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Beers on the Betty's Lodge verandah post-trek, and below, the homey lounge area



fireplace. Postcards, photos and newspaper clippings decorate the

walls and show how many people pass through from all over

the world. You could race back, hitting the highway all in one day but why would you want to miss out on this final night with your comrades in the comfort of this rustic home? With full bellies we parked our tired selves next to the fire for a cuppa before bed. There was no problem sleeping that night, that's for sure!

It's a long day of travel from Kegsugl to Lae but lunch in Goroka makes for a good

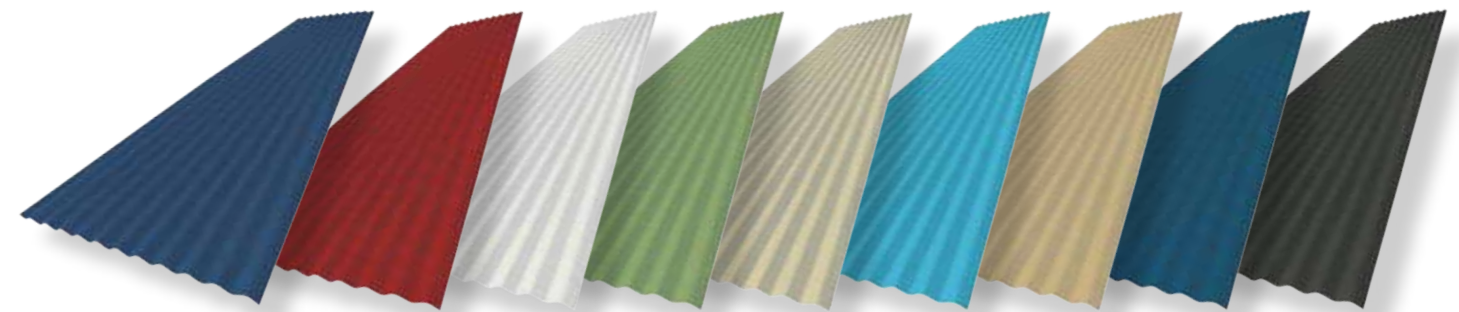
break. We arrived home not long before 6pm, a little sore and a lot tired! Despite the mountain of dirty gear to sort through the next day it was good to be home and good to reflect.

Seasoned hiker Grant has been to the summit nine times and prepared us very well with a list of what to pack and pre-warning about the altitude and the cold. Not much you can do about altitude sickness but having plenty of Panadol and all our warm gear was a godsend. The weather was on our side but it's not hard to imagine that wind and rain could turn things around very quickly. After all this is a mountain that has taken a number of lives in the past. It wasn't all about reaching the top of PNG's highest mountain, far from it. Spending the night in Goroka on the way there and at Betty's on the return both added to how much we enjoyed the whole weekend. Grant's experience, along with our fantastic guides and porters, and having great friends to share it all with, made this adventure from start to finish one that I will never forget. ▲



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Need to know...

Goroka to Kundiawa – 80kms, 2 hours' drive
Kundiawa to Kegsugl (Betty's Lodge) – 40km, 2 hours' drive
Betty's to base camp (twin lakes) – 2-3 hours' walk

For accommodation options in Goroka visit www.rainylae.com/things-to-do-in-lae

Anyone wanting to make it to the Mt Wilhelm summit needs to be in good physical condition. Several tour companies include Mt Wilhelm in their itineraries or you can do-it-yourself like we did by organising guides and porters through Betty's Lodge. Budget for around K1000 per person for guide, porter, dinner, bed and breakfast. Betty can be contacted on +675 7100 5432.