

Some would call it luck or maybe fate, but others would define it as divine providence when something unforeseen and miraculous happens. To describe my trip from Aitape adequately, I will begin at Sunday. I had started pushing harder to arrange the boat between Wewak and Bogia. There were no flights on the horizon, therefore a boat was the quickest and simplest way back to the highlands. Dr David Mills was going via car, and had the travel paperwork, from Bogia through to Kompam for me, but he was only available for a short time. Despite my efforts, I was not making progress and struggled to actually get people to take action with confirming dates, names of drivers and boats for lockdown paperwork. Most people would tell me to check that someone else had organised a separate issue, and when I talked to that person, they would get me to check on another, or go back to the previous person. It was an exasperating chase of one's own tail – a real run around. Eventually, I got to the bottom of what was happening. Dr Atha, (the doctor I was originally meant to replace but who was unable to leave due to the lockdown) was not keen on the plan for me to travel by boat. Although it was initially his idea to go via boat, he was concerned for multiple reasons, the main one being paperwork. Once he was reassured that the documentation was all in order for the journey onward, once I had reached Bogia, he relented and I returned to trying organising boats and paperwork with some progress. Although, hampering this planning to travel by boat were rumours of a recommencement of commercial domestic flights. These rumours were partially and unhelpfully true, in that they were only one-way flights into Sepik. The region was still regarded as too high a risk for COVID spread, therefore flights would not accept passengers leaving Sepik, but only take passengers into Sepik.

Atha and I went round and round with plans. With initial plans to go via boat but then this would become too high a risk; then by charter plane, but this was too expensive; then by commercial flights as they may be restarting soon. With nearly no information online and no inside airline or boat contacts, I was unable to pull the trigger, make a decision and stick to it. I needed other people's help. With all this running around and lack of progress, I started to suspect Dr Atha may have been wanting me to stay despite my efforts to leave. In my frustration I started looking for help more widely, taking the matter up with the provincial health officer, Linda.

On Monday afternoon, after 24 hrs of this logistical arm wrestling, I was at the beach with Dr Atha, Dr Josephine, two of the HEOs and a couple of others. I had shouted the team each an icecream, as a "going away gift", despite no guaranteed date of departure. We enjoyed our ice cream and were "telling stories", the PNG equivalent of telling yarns. As we sat, ate ice cream and chatted, a navy ship sailed into the bay. I stuck up my best hitch-hiker's thumb to the navy patrol boat, as a joke. We had just heard another unverified rumour that flights may sporadically be flying out of Wewak, for passengers who had appropriate paperwork and these would only run once there were enough passengers. We returned to the hospital to complete and submit the required paperwork. As I was on call at the hospital, prior to completing the paperwork for the unconfirmed flight, I went to check on patients. I was listening to the chest of a patient, when I was radioed by Dr Atha to come home immediately. Once home he told me that I must pack my things immediately as I was to leave on the navy patrol boat. My hitch-hiker's thumb had worked. The boat had arrived into Aitape, on its way to Madang. They had stopped in Aitape to pick up cigarettes, betel nut and some water. They were filling up their water at the provincial health office when Linda (provincial health head) heard about them heading to Madang, and asked if they could fit an extra body. Within 20 minutes I was packed up, said some quick goodbyes and was taken to the patrol boat. The HMPNGS Moresby left almost immediately after I boarded.

As we departed the coast, I stayed on the deck watching both the sun and Aitape merge into the horizon. I was introduced and made very welcome by the bunch of navy officers. I was lodged in a little lounge, which had become a private room. Due to a long relationship with the Australian Navy, with training and donating equipment, they were pleased to have me on board. They really made me feel like royalty. I was given three meals a day, I had people bringing me water, making space for me, clearing things for me. It was really too much.



Tuesday, I woke at sunrise and went up to the navigation deck, sitting with the early-shift pilot. We had been travelling all night and had reached the Sepik river, the largest river in PNG, which separates East Sepik and Madang provinces. The weather was pristine, the water glassy and visibility sensational. We were due into Madang at 10am on Wednesday, and were not scheduled to arrive any earlier. Therefore, with some time up our sleeves, we travelled up the Sepik river for about an hour. The

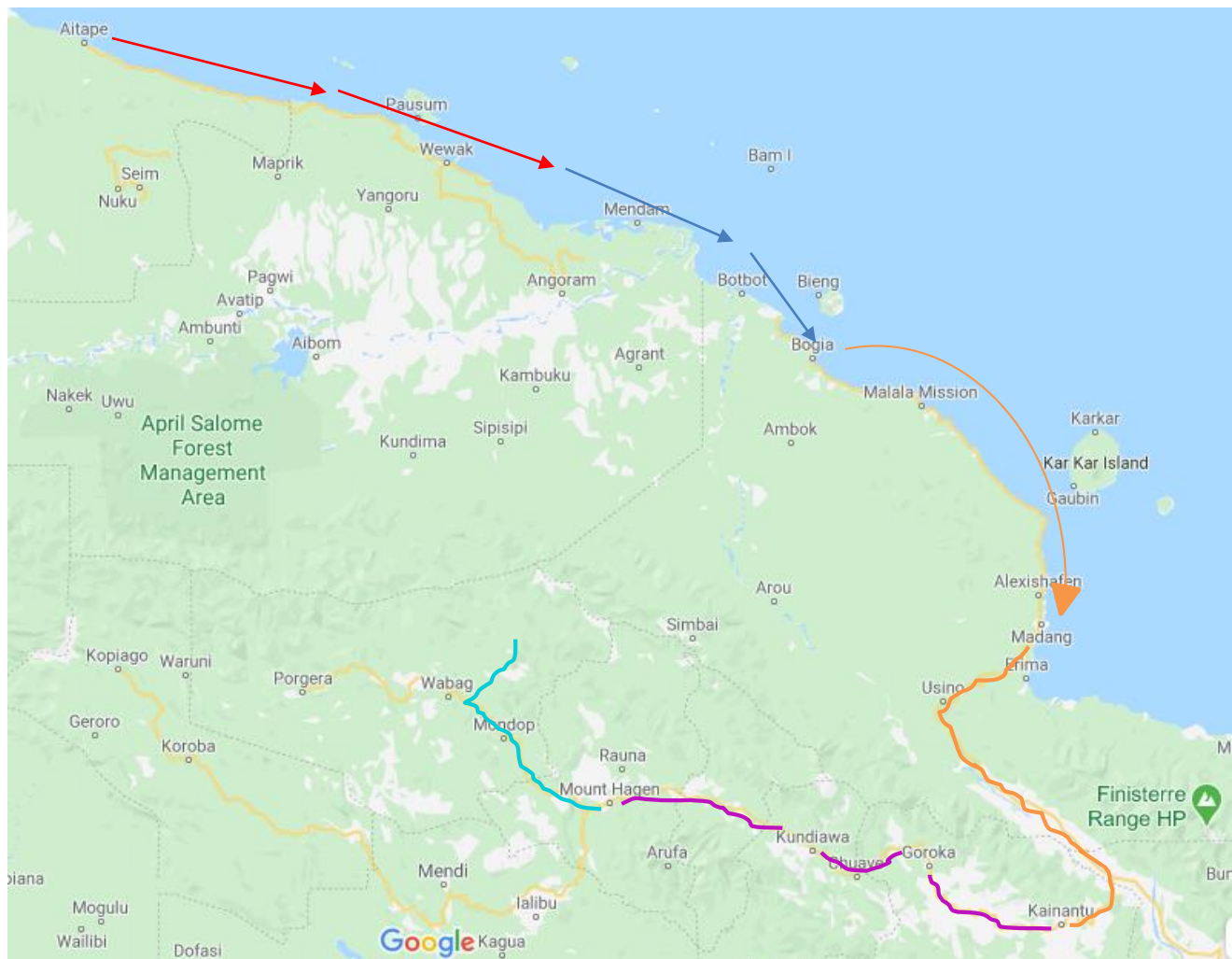
Sepik river is an impressive body of water, with a deceptively fast flow and large volume of water. The local people live along the banks and must rely heavily on fish and sago, as there was little evidence of any other staple food sources or planted crops in the swampy surrounds. We passed multiple small active volcanic islands as we continued south east. Eventually, we arrived in Bogia, which was the place that I was originally attempting to travel to via dinghy. We spent a couple of hours off Bogia, as we still had time to kill. We sat and “told stories”. Later in the afternoon we went ashore to purchase more essentials, cigarettes and betel nut.

Wednesday morning, I awoke with calm rocking, feeling quite relaxed. We had been sailing all night and were running on schedule. We tied up off at the port of Madang and shortly after that I was picked up by David. There was a strong feeling of relief in shaking David’s hand. I believe it to be a shared feeling,



as he had been working hard from his end to try and get me back to Kompam. It had certainly been a fantastically bizarre 36 hours with the navy, but it would still be many further hours of undulating road until reaching Kompam. After some goodbyes to my new friends, David and I set off for the long trip home.

Travelling via road in PNG is very unlike travel in Australia. The road is mixture of sealed bitumen and 4WD track. There are occasional stretches of good bitumen road, wedged between patches of severely pot-holed sections. This road, which is called a national highway, is in such poor condition that you will be forced to a grindingly slow pace to avoid shaking your vehicle to pieces. Multiple bridges had been washed away, resulting in river crossings. It explains why the car of choice in PNG is a Toyota Landcruiser. Nevertheless, this was the highway, the only route to travel between the port cities and the highlands. Trucks and buses make this expedition every day, which is a remarkable achievement. As we climbed ranges, crossed rivers and traversed plains, the flora would change from dense jungles to open valleys, plantations of palm oil and sugar cane to coffee and tea farms. The natural and cultivated vegetation seemed to change with every plateau and every new valley.



Monday (red) Aitape to border of West Sepik  
Tuesday (navy) Border of West Sepik to Bogia  
Wednesday (green) Bogia to Kainatu (Ukarumpa)  
Thursday (purple) Kainatu (Ukarumpa) to Mt Hagen  
Friday (blue) Mt Hagen to Kompam

Throughout the trip, there were multiple checkpoints manned by police officers, as restrictions had been placed regarding travel. Each passenger was required to have a document permitting travel from the chief police commissioner. I had thought that these checkpoints would be a standardised and time-consuming exercise of showing them our documents and discussion, with occasional progression to argument. However, those working at the checkpoints were mostly disinterested in us, and only occasionally willing to have a friendly chat. We passed through 12 check points. Most the conversations went something like this (but all in pidgin).

Dave "Hello" (with a big smile)

Officer "Hello".

Dave "You alright?"

Officer "Me alright. You come from where?"

Dave "Me go to Madang, pick up Doctor (points at me), now we go Enga"

Officer "Ok, you go" (waving us through)

We offered the paperwork to multiple checkpoints but were only taken up once. While I commend this officer, for his judicious inquiry, I suspect he could not read. At one checkpoint a jovial officer, who was up for a chat, went so far as proclaiming that he could tell just by looking at us, that we were clean. At another check point, everyone passing through was instructed out of their vehicles to wash their hands prior to proceeding. We dodged this via a quick rub with alcohol hand wash, of which the inspecting officers inquired into any surplus sanitiser we may be able to spare them. As the first confirmed positive COVID case in the highlands had been announced in the same province where we had stayed overnight, I expected the checkpoints to be stricter and movement more heavily restricted. However, the checkpoint in closest proximity to the case did not even stop the car, just ushering us through. I wondered how much of their lenience in this area was out of self-preservation and police not wanting to catch the virus themselves.

The failure of social isolation was evident throughout the trip. Closing of the gates at public markets had just resulted in the market moving to the nearest available land. The restrictions on numbers of people in public transport were not enforced, with each vehicle continuing to pack people like sardines. Even outside the health centre in the highlands where the previously mention COVID test positive patient had been housed, people were congregating and a small market was happening 200 metres up the road. It begs the question, "What's the point?" Does social isolation have any benefits, if poorly adhered to?

With three long days of driving, the battle between the Landcruiser and the pot-holes was concluded with arrival into Kompam on Friday night. I had crossed 9 provinces, travelling 627km by car (at an average of 30km/hr) and further by boat. It was an amazing experience to see the landscape, from swampy Sepik to the palm oil plains, sheer cliffs to grassy rolling hills to dense jungles. However, it is refreshing to be in Kompam. I had done remarkably little towards the trip and was uncomfortably dependent on others. I did not contribute at all to any of the driving or sailing. Dave sorted all our accommodation. It was really only possible through the kind actions of others that I had returned to Kompam.

Thank you to those in the Australian Navy, especially those who have worked directly with PNG trainees. Sincere thanks to those that have faithfully partnered with me in prayer, for through God's providence, He has provided.