

BAGARAP!

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR COMPLETE WILDERNESS, YOU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK MUCH FURTHER THAN NEW GUINEA.

WORDS & PICS IAN LLOYD NEUBAUER

If ever in your travels you make it to Papua New Guinea, the wild and wonderful country on Australia's northern doorstep, 'bagarap' is one of the first words in the Tok Pisin, the local language, you should now. It comes from the English 'bugger up' and is means broken.

You'll doubtlessly hear in it your travels – though hopefully not too many times – because things don't last as long in PNG as they do in other parts of the world. Blame it on the heat, the rain or the bad roads, but things go bagarap there all the time.

It's a problem Peter Boyd of Niugini Dirt – PNG's only motorbike touring company – faces every day as his fleet of KTM and Yamaha trailbikes are tossed around the jungle, flipped around tracks, raced through rivers and dropped an endless number of times in an endless number of ways by customers and staff.

"Any component with rubber seals degrade much faster because of the humidity," Tossa explains when I meet him at Niugini Dirt

headquarters in the east coast city of Lae, a sprawling underground complex with 30-odd bikes stashed in different rooms and corners. "Brake fluid turns into water three times the normal speed. Lithium batteries die in months. And because we continuously ride through water, the bearings in the wheels constantly have to be changed."

But Peter, or Tossa as his mates call him, can't just call the dealer when something goes wrong with his bikes because there is no motorbike dealer in Lae. So he's had to learn how to fix them himself. Niugini Dirt now has the largest and best-tooled motorbike workshop in PNG, where Tossa and his mates spend their spare time tinkering on half-disassembled dirt bikes.

"The good thing about not having the luxury of being able to go to a dealership is that we've had to become self-sufficient mechanically speaking," he says. "So when something on a motorbike goes bagarap in the jungle, we know what the problem is because we've already fixed it before."



WEATHER BAGARAP

The plan today was to ride to Lake Wanum, a stunning blue lake surrounded by round grassy hills with fantastic views of the lake and surrounding countryside. The hills are steep. Climbing them on foot is difficult. Climbing them on a dirt bike is scary as shit, as Tossa and his mate Chris once learnt while trying to nail the highest peak.

"The ridge leading up to it had a drop-off of about 80m on one side – almost a sheer vertical descent," Tossa recalls. "I tried going up three times until I gave up. It was too difficult. Then Chris had a go on but he gave it too much power and his front wheel went up in the air. His bike, a Honda CRF 450 he'd only picked up a week before, went over and just bounced over the edge, 10 to 15 big hops, it was almost totally destroyed, landed in three parts, the frame was cracked, handlebars had come off, the seat was up the hill somewhere, he'd broken some spokes, the mudguard was in the lake and the toolbox had exploded."

Chris was OK but with his Honda totalled, they needed to figure out how to get back to Lae and there was no way two big guys were going to fit on Tossa's skinny KTM. So Tossa rode back to Lae alone. His plan was to return with some water,

some running shoes and a hat so Chris could walk out to the highway and hitch a ride back to town. But Tossa came back with something else.

"As I rode past the helipad in Lae a chopper had just landed. So I went in and talked to my mate who owns it and in half an hour we were in the air. Chris was crapping himself when we got there. He'd run out of water hours before, there was no shade whatsoever and was in a hurry to get back to Lae because we'd been invited to a mate's birthday party. So we chained the largest part of the Honda to the chopper, flew back to Lae and went straight to the party. Chris had a bit of a thirst on as you could imagine and we kept the story quiet until someone said, 'I swore I saw a chopper towing a motorbike on the way here. You guys know anything about it?'"

It's the kind of story that makes Lake Wanum the stuff of dirt biking legend. I'd wanted to see it last time I visited Papua New Guinea in 2015, but heavy rain had flooded the access trail. And now, two years later, history was repeating itself. The rain came down in sheets last night and Lae Wanum will have breached its banks. We could look at it again tomorrow, but as for now we had a few other options. "The Bumbu River," Tossa says. "It's always wet out there anyway."



INJECTORS BAGARAP

The best thing about riding motorbikes in PNG is the reception you get from the locals. Everyone in this country seems to love motorbikes, everyone runs out and cheers. I'm talking hundreds, sometimes thousands of people, smiling, screaming, waving and jumping up and down as though Santa Claus and his fleet of red-nosed reindeer had just hit town. Motorbikes, you see, represent freedom and dreams. They empower people and make them independent, which is why everyone wants one in developing countries like PNG. They know in their hearts and bones if they only had a motorbike, they would be free. Those hopes and dreams light up our route as we tear through the cracked concrete backstreets of Lae towards the Bumbu River.

Soon the concrete disappears and we find ourselves riding through deep muddy ruts. Splash! Burrrooom! Ning ning ning! I scan the trail ahead of me looking for the path of less resistance – a clean line to muddle through the muck and logs and roots and rocks and branches ahead of me. But often there is no line and I have no choice but to ride into two feet of water or up and over a slippery log. At one point I find myself wedged in a meter-deep ravine, my front wheel above my head, my rear wheel stuck in muddy leach-infected jungle water. My KTM begins to tip to the right and it takes all my strength to steady it as I fight for air through my clammy wet helmet. Drawing on the deepest reserves of my energy, I reposition myself over the front of the bike, say a prayer and twist the throttle – catapulting myself over the lip and clearing the ravine in one beautiful swoop. Then I rip off my pressure-cooker of a helmet and nearly have a bloody heart attack. Doing this stuff would be hard anywhere. Doing it in 34-degree heat and 100 percent humidity is torture.



Soon the trail altogether disappears and the terrain advances from difficult to ridiculous. Every metre gained is a battle against roots, stumps, branches, logs and dangling vines that latch onto our bikes and bodies like the many arms of death. We wrestle with our handlebars, dig our boots deep into the mud, tear at vines and swear through our helmets about our damn helmets and the lack of air as we churn our way through the muck.

I can't overestimate how relieved I am when we punch through the jungle and hit the Bumbu River where I rip off my helmet so I can stop breathing like Darth Vader. But now I have a new issue to deal with. My motorbike is coughing and spluttering as though it is running out of petrol. So I stop and check the fuel tank – no problem there. But when I restart the bike, it keeps on coughing. Tossa doubles back, takes a quick look and clocks the problem: dirt in the injectors.

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FACT FILE

GETTING THERE

Qantas flies from Sydney to PNG's capital Port Moresby with fares starting from \$955 for a round trip. See qantas.com. PNG Air flies from Port Moresby to Lae four times daily, with round trips for \$310. See pngair.com.

RIDING THERE

Niugini Dirt offers weekend and multi-day off-road motorbike touring in Lae, the second biggest city of PNG an hour's flight from the capital Port Moresby. Riding destinations include Lake Wanum, Betty's Lodge on the foothills of Mount Wilhelm and the fabled smoked corpses of Aseki – or you can make an adventure of your own. Rates are \$400 per day and include use of a KTM 300 EXC, KTM 350F EXC or KTM 450F EXC plus safety gear if need be, accommodation, meals, multi-lingual guides and support vehicle – basically everything but your own insurance and beer. See niuginidirt.com.

DO YOU NEED A LICENSE?

No. You can pull wheelies in front of cops. In fact, they'd be disappointed if you didn't.

IS IT SAFE TO RIDE IN PNG?

Tossa gets asked this all the time. His answer? In 10 years riding in PNG, he has never had a problem with the locals.

"These are high-performance bikes that need the best quality fuel – 97 or 98 octane. But in PNG the best fuel is 91 octane – an extremely poor grade that does not detonate well. It's classified as 'dirty fuel' and it turns to jelly inside the fuel injectors," he says. "The nozzles on the injectors are a fraction of the width of a pinhead, so it doesn't take much for one to get blocked, and then for the engine to be starved of fuel, which is happening to your bike now."

I limp back to Lae and reach the city's outskirts before my bike bagaraps and refuses to dire up. Tossa pulls out a tow rope, ties it to my bike and tows me to his garage. The workshop is going to be busy tonight.

ENGINE BAGARAP

I receive two pieces of good news the next morning. First, the injectors have been cleared and my KTM is running up to speed. Second, it didn't rain last night, which means we can try to hit Lake Wanum this morning.

The sun is burning high in the sky as we tear out of Lae and hit the Highlands Highway, the longest road in PNG. At the 20 kilometre mark, we veer left onto Wau Road and cross the 515-metre long single-lane steel bridge over the Markham River, which happens to be the longest bridge in PNG.

On the other side of the river is the Bululo Highway. It follows the river west for a few kilometres to a truck stop called Gabensis before veering south towards McAdam National Park and the Black Cat Trail. But we only go as far as Gabensis, where an unmarked trail takes us through the middle of thick jungle surrounding the hills that surround Lake Wanum.



THE HILLS ARE STEEP. CLIMBING THEM ON FOOT IS DIFFICULT. CLIMBING THEM ON A DIRT BIKE IS SCARY AS SHIT

The terrain isn't as technical as the muck we got caught in yesterday. But bit by bit the trail altogether disappears under elephant grass. The grass grows to one metre, two, then three metres tall and is so dense in parts I feel I can nearly rest my motorbike against it.

After half-an-hour or so, Tossa dismounts and admits he is lost. None of this elephant grass was here before or if it was, it wasn't this tall. The trail has gone cold and we have no choice but to turn around.

But there's a problem. One of the bikes, a Yamaha YZ 450 ridden by Ve'ar, a New Guinean member of our crew, chooses this exact moment to bagarap. Tossa takes one look at the steam coming off the engine block and conclude the engine has overheated. "Engines like going fast with long steady outflows of power," he says. "What they don't like is getting the crap revved

out of them while trying to push through 3-metre high elephant grass."

We try towing the bike out but there are too many obstacles and the tow rope seems to get caught on every single one of them. We then try pushing the bike out, but it's too damn hot and clammy and after a few short minutes, our energy is gone.

"Stuff this," says Ve'ar. "We know what the problem is; the engine has overheated. I'll stay here and rest while the rest of you ride back to the truck stop at Gabensis. Once the engine has cooled down, I'll come and meet you there."

It's an easy enough solution, but it means I'm once again denied a chance to see Lake Wanum, the holy grail of dirt biking in Lae. Yet all is not lost. On the way back, Tossa detours into a field that leads to the base of a spine of rolling green hills. These hills don't touch the lake, he says, but

they may give us a good view.

My first attempt at a hill climb ends with the front wheel of my motorbike going over my head and the bike on the ground. I lose my inhibitions on my second attempt, cranking it second gear and learning forward until the crest ahead of me dissolves into a hilltop. From there, we crawl down the back of the same hill before shooting up a second hill, and a third, and a fourth and so on, over and over like two crazy kids on a self-drive rollercoaster until we reach the highest peak in the cluster.

The views, all 360 degrees, are breathtaking. We can see most of Lake Wanum, its little islands, the crocodile-filled streams that feed it and the crazy steep ridge that broke a motorcycle into three pieces. I won't get the chance to test my mettle on it today. But there's always next time. **TR**