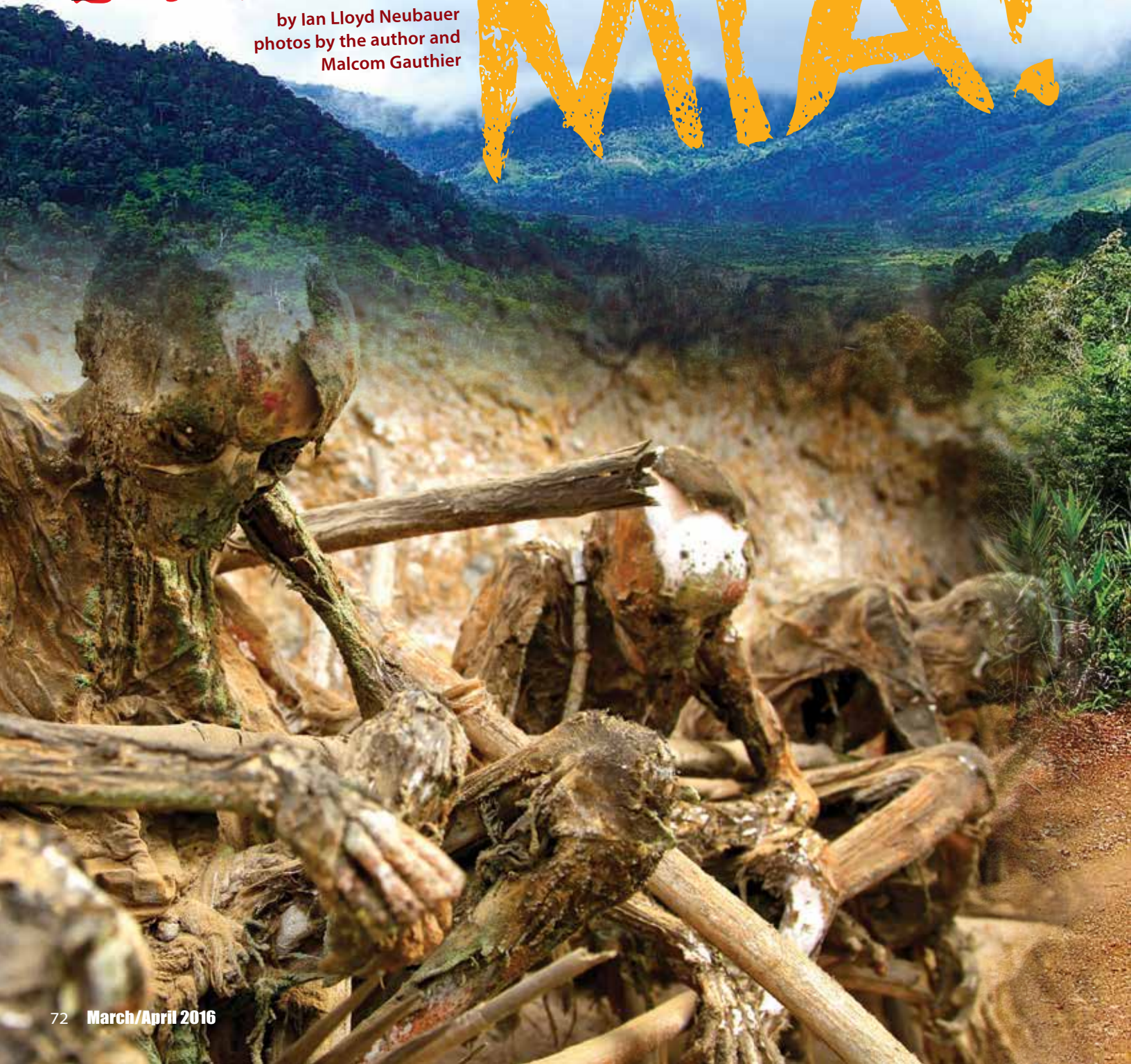



MUMMIFY


by Ian Lloyd Neubauer
photos by the author and
Malcom Gauthier

MAMA!





Back in the '80s there was a guy on TV, an intrepid Aussie explorer by the name of Alby Mangles, who traveled to the most remote and exotic locales. In one episode, he visited a place called Aseki in the highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG) where instead of burying their dead, villagers preserved bodies by smoking them in longhouses before assembling them in life-like positions at jungle shrines.



Alby's footage of the shriveled, ghoulish corpses made a lasting impression on my macabre adolescent mind. Once I even tried smoking one of my little sister's **Barbie** doll on the barbecue. The ceremony didn't exactly go as planned—*Barbie* caught on fire, I singed half my eyebrows off, my sister went ballistic, and my old man gave me the hiding of my life. Yet I continued to fantasize about following in Alby's footsteps and seeing the smoked corpses of Aseki with my own eyes. Earlier last year, that dream came true. But unlike Alby, who used a big old 4WD, I upped the ante and found a guide who said he could take me to Aseki on a motorcycle. Here's how it went...

Dirty Raskols vs. Good Samaritans

My journey began in Lae, a city on the east coast of PNG where I rendezvoused with my guide, Malcolm Gauthier of *Niugini Dirt*, a "mixed-race" New Guinean-Canadian who grew up on a mission his family founded in the highlands. Malcolm has the street smarts to handle the challenges of riding in PNG plus the Western savvy to take care of—and entertain—travelers like me. "I could move





to Canada if I wanted to," he says, "but everything's been done there. PNG is still developing and any business you open—a fishing charter, a motorbike company, even a mechanical workshop—becomes an overnight success so long as you have good management skills."

We'd planned to shoot off early in the morning the day after I arrived. But it was the middle of the rainy season, when tropical downpours set in, so we had no choice but to hurry up and wait. Just short of midday we finally headed out of town on the Okuk Highway.

The Okuk was in a terrible state—riddled with hard-edged, slime-filled potholes that slowed traffic to about 10 km. The conditions made commuters sitting ducks for PNG's notorious "Raskol" highway gangs, who simply walk up to vehicles and hold people up using bush knives or homemade guns. But the *Raskols* can't touch us—we're too fast on our *KTM*s.

About 20 km out we turned left onto a dirt road that transported us from hellish border town to an idyllic rural scene backdropped by blue-grey mountains. It led to a one-lane steel bridge that crossed the caramel-colored Markham River and then detoured along the Markham's left bank.

A second left turn took us onto a fire trail that cut deep into the mist-shrouded jungle without a soul in sight. Malcolm let me ride up front and set the pace which, given the size of the ruts and bogs, rarely surpassed 40 kph. It was hard going but good fun and within a short time we were covered from head to toe in gooey, lukewarm mud. The river crossings were a blast, though less so for Malcolm, who had to waddle in first to ensure they were shallow enough to ride across.

Two hours later we entered a velvet-green valley where we saw signs of human life: An old woman walking bent under a large pile of kindling, a farmer using a bush-knife to clear a patch of jungle, men panning for gold in a river bed, and kids kicking a can around the road.







As we stopped at the next river crossing, a woman with red rotten teeth—the result of chewing the narcotic betel nut—offered me a bunch of bananas. I pulled out my wallet to give her a few bucks, but Malcolm said it wasn't necessary; that it's their custom to give fruit to passers-by so they can brag about it to their mates. I tried giving her a five *kina* note all the same but she refused to accept it and walked away giggling. That's the contradictory nature of PNG. In the cities many people have to steal to survive. Yet up here in the mountains, where people have no money but everything they need, they're generous and life is pretty peachy.

To the Golf Club

The further inland we traveled, the narrower the valley became, and soon we found ourselves riding along a track that hugged the side of a steep ravine. Gullies that cut down the face of the ravine turned into waterfalls that spilled onto the road before pouring into a raging river far below. On several occasions I pulled over to snap a few pics until

Malcolm suggested we pick up the pace. The river morphed into a delta at the end of the ravine, he explained, and the only way across would be to put our bikes into the back of a flatbed truck. But the service only ran until around 5:00 pm and if we missed the last truck we'd have to spend the night on the floor of whatever hut we could find.

We pressed on and made good time, but in my haste I stacked it on a muddy incline. The fall wasn't bad, but a few minutes later my clutch failed. So by the time we reached the delta it was well past five and the flatbed truck was nowhere to be seen.

We were just about to turn around and head back to the nearest village when Malcolm spotted a couple of fishermen in dugout canoes and struck a deal to ferry us across. It took four men to lift the bikes into the canoes, and the commotion attracted hundreds of villagers. They cheered and whooped as we set off from shore in a scene that could've been cut straight out of Alby Mangle's old TV show.

The canoes were remarkably sturdy and had an elevated platform where I could comfortably stretch out. I looked up at the sky, crimson and lilac in color, streaked with wispy white clouds and embers of the

coming sunset. The day prior I'd been in a taxi battling my way through peak-hour traffic on the way to the Sydney airport. Now here I was with a motorcycle crossing a delta in a dugout paddled by a descendant of a headhunter.

After reaching the other side we scooted along a paved road that led to a town called Bulolo. In the 1930s Bulolo was the site of PNG's biggest gold rush, and lots of pine trees were planted to provide timber to build houses around the mine. Once extracted, the gold couldn't be replaced, but pine could be replanted again and again. Today Bulolo is home to one of the PNG's most successful sustainable logging businesses that provides jobs for 1,500 workers. They live with their families in a gated community on the edge of town with a nine-hole golf course at its center. The clubhouse has a large balcony overlooking the links, where Malcolm and I ordered a couple of T-bone steaks. We washed them down with a few South Pacific lagers and spent the night resting in cozy log cabins.

The Bones of Contention

It's a 100 km sprint from Bulolo to the Aseki district. The first half of the ride cuts through vast pine plantations before opening up to reveal a valley at the base of the Owen Stanley Ranges. The Owens are home to the infamous Kokoda Track, where 400 hopelessly outclassed Australian soldiers and their New Guinean porters defeated 2,500

battle-hardened Japanese marines during World War II.

The road dropped like a bomb into a massive valley and then rose like a phoenix through a series of switchbacks. We passed dozens of villages where people raced out to cheer and wave hello, not just children but adults and elders, too. I've ridden motorbikes all over the world, but nowhere have I seen the kind of reception riders receive in PNG. "Up him!" they yell, making the universal sign for a wheelie, cheering like football hooligans every time we indulged them.

It took us four hours to reach Angapenga, the village in Aseki Province where Alby filmed the corpses three decades ago. There we picked up Dickson, the custodian of the jungle shrine. He directed us to a small clearing about five kilometers past the village where we parked our bikes and left our jackets and helmets behind. It was a half-hour slog through the jungle to the smoked corpses, during which I asked Dickson a million questions. He didn't know when or how the custom began—only that Christian missionaries put a stop to it sometime after WWII.

The corpses were laid out along a ledge under a cliff to watch over and protect the village, and were even more gruesome than I'd imagined—arranged in life-like postures or fetal positions in bamboo frames. There are 14 adults and one infant that was cradled under its mother's chest, sucking the parched remains of muscle and skin clinging to the adult skeleton.





Dickson pointed to a corpse that he said is his great grandfather. When I asked what his name was, he said he didn't know, and I reckon he was just telling me what he thought I wanted to hear. He then picked up a foot-long bone half buried in the dirt and—I kid you not—clamped it between his teeth in a clichéd caricature of a headhunter. I lifted my camera and was about to take a shot when he realized he'd crossed a line and plucked it from his mouth. He did, however, allow me to photograph him holding the bone before tossing it aside among a pile of skulls.

It was an incredible journey to one of the most bizarre places on earth, and I still had the ride back to Lae to look forward to. When I got home it was off to visit a toy store, buy a *Barbie* and give it to my sister—along with a long-overdue apology.

D.I.Y.

Niugini Dirt (NiuginiDirt.com) in Lae is the first and only motorcycle tour company in PNG. The brainchild of Peter Boyd, president of the *Morobe Motorcycle Club*, offering multi-day trail rides and single-day enduros for \$216–\$252 per day. Fees includes bike hire, fuel, food, guides, support vehicle if required and dormitory or twin-share accommodation. **ADV**



Ian Neubauer was five years old when his parents took him to Tahiti. As soon as he finished high school in Australia, he hit the road, spending years backpacking across Europe, the Middle East, South America, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. He's combined his work as a journalist and passion for off-road touring to travel to and through some of

the most exotic countries in the region, including Cambodia, Laos, China and the Philippines. He loves nothing more than charging solo through strange lands, getting to know the locals and being covered in mud. It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it.

