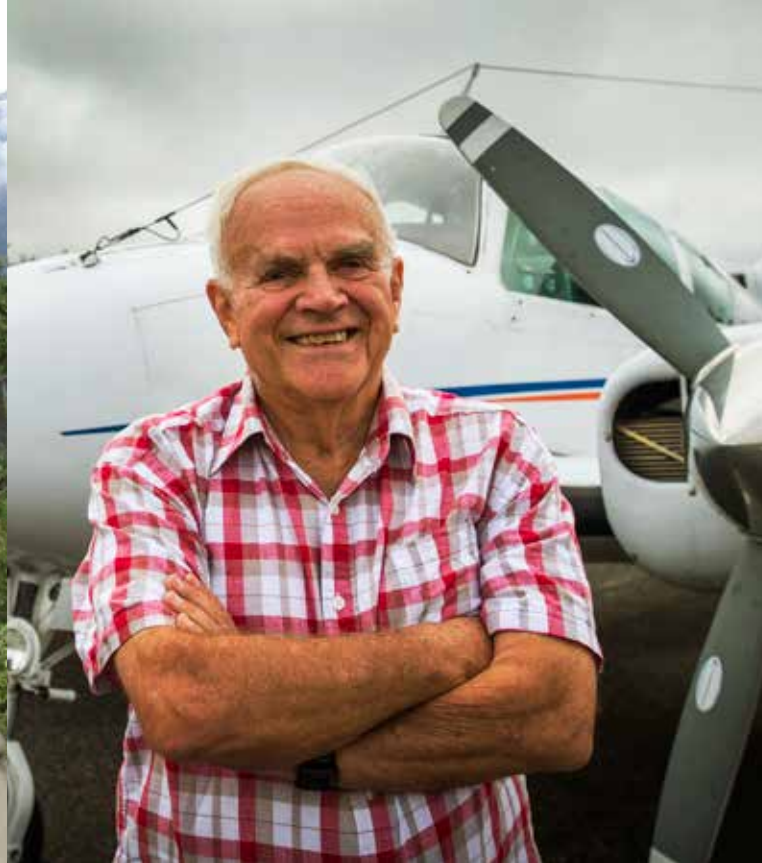


CHARLIE LYNN
@ ADVENTURE KOKODA



BOB BATES
@ TRANS NIUGINI TOURS



PETER BOYD
@ NIUGINI DIRT

BLAZING THEIR OWN TRAILS

Ian Lloyd Neubauer

The first exposure to tourists of the then colony of New Guinea was in 1884 when Australian shipping magnates James Burns and Robert Philp launched a five-week South Pacific cruise that took in the coast and islands. Almost 140 years later a small but determined number of expatriate entrepreneurs are following in Burns and Philps' footsteps with lodges and tours that show tourists such a

good time, many of them become goodwill ambassadors for the rest of their lives. I'm one of them. But running a tourist business in rural PNG is no walk in the park. To get a better idea of what it takes to pull it off, I had long chats with three tourism trailblazers who I've met in my journeys and asked all sorts of questions. Here are their stories, told in their own words, warts and all.

CHARLIE LYNN @ ADVENTURE KOKODA

"In 1991, when I was working as the race director of the Sydney to Melbourne Ultramarathon, I got a phone call from an army captain officer in PNG. He wanted my help organising an ultramarathon on the Kokoda Trail the following year to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign. I said I'd be happy to help but I soon found

out that there was no information on the trail. How long does it take? What kind of provisions do you need? Maps and so forth. There was nothing. So I flew to PNG, hired a guide and did it myself. To this day I can't describe it. It was a life-changing experience. "When I got back to Australia, I put together a business plan and went about trying to get sponsorship for the event. But I couldn't get any interest from

young marketing people because they hadn't even heard of the Kokoda Trail.

Half of them thought I was talking about Kakadu. That was a big shock for me. My

Right: Charlie Lynn (centre) in May 2009 at Bomana War Cemetery with Scott Morrison (right), Australia's Prime Minister who was then just the Liberal MP for Cook (NSW), and Labor MP for Blaxland Jason Clare. The trio had just completed a 'mateship trek' inspired by the 2005 race-related Cronulla riots in Sydney. "Jason and Scott are good mates but belong to different political parties. They decided to set an example, with Jason selecting a team of young Muslim leaders from Bankstown (Sydney suburb) and Scott selecting a group of young surfer leaders from Cronulla to trek Kokoda and experience 'mateship'. It was a great success," Charlie said.



Charlie crosses a river during a 2010 mapping expedition on the Kokoda

"Running a tourist business in rural PNG is no walk in the park"

father served in PNG during the war so I'd grown up hearing all of these stories about the heroism on the trail. I also served in the Australian Army and during that time I visited every single civil war memorial in America and saw how they honoured their military history. So I came to the conclusion the only way I could get people to appreciate Kokoda and what happened there during the war was to get them to trek it themselves. That's

how Adventure Kokoda was born. "In April of 1992, I took my first group of 20 trekkers. The morning we arrived at the starting point of the trail, we met our porters for the first time. There were about 20 of them and they didn't even have backpacks, just sausage bags slung across their shoulders and a frozen chicken in each hand. When we reached the first campsite that night, we had chicken and rice for dinner. The trekkers said this is all pretty good. The second night we had chicken wings and rice. On the third night, it was just chicken juice and rice and for the next five nights, it was just rice. There were no campsites, no





In 1999 with the late Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, Ovoru Indiki

infrastructure, but the trekkers took it all in their stride. This goes back to what it means to do Kokoda. Even today, the conditions are basic. "My business grew very little in the first few years. I hit the break-even point in 1996 when Channel 9 in Australia asked me to take a group of celebrities along the trail: rock star Angry Anderson, Grant Kenny the Ironman, AFL legend Dermott Brereton and a few other big names of the day. It wasn't easy. I said to myself if I ever had to do the walk with

celebrities again or take on the Japanese infantry in the jungle, I'd fight the Japs any old day. "The documentary aired on Anzac Day and was one of the highest rating programs they'd ever seen: it reached three million people and led to hundreds of inquiries from people in Australia interested in visiting PNG. "We got another wave of attention in 2002 when the Australian Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, visited the trail for the 60th anniversary of the military campaign. That set in motion



In 2002 leading a climb out of Naduri village

the campaign to build a large memorial at Isurava, a battleground I discovered. What's interesting about Isurava is that when trekkers get there, they begin acting almost as if they are in a cathedral or holy ground. They contemplate and meditate. It's a very powerful place. "After Isurava opened, visitor numbers soared from less than 100 per year to a maximum of 5600 in 2007. Now it's the number one tourist destination in PNG although they don't publish numbers anymore - in fact,

they don't do anything that we are aware of! I would estimate 2019 figures were around 3300, about the same as the year before. After we started up lots of other trekking companies joined the fray and the Kokoda Track Authority was established to manage them. They're still going through the process of figuring out the best way to do that. More importantly, more than 50,000 Australians have now walked Kokoda. I've done it 99 times. This year for Anzac Day (April 25) I'm going to try for my 100th."

• To join Charlie on his 100th trek (April 13-25), visit kokodatreks.com

BOB BATES @ TRANS NIUGINI TOURS

"In 1964 I saw an ad for an engineering job with Australia's Department of Public Works in Port Moresby. I thought it would be a good job for a year or two, applied and flew over. That was more than 55 years ago. "I just fell in love with the place I guess, not with the city but with the Highlands. We don't have big mountains in Australia and I just loved walking around the hills because I'm a mountain man at heart. The people were friendly, the food was good, the weather was pleasant

because it's always spring. All those things combined just made me want to stay. "A few years later I started my own civil engineering firm. Business was good, but in the early 70s, I started thinking about tourism. The Mt Hagen Show was really big back then. Every year the airlines in Australia would fly in 10 DC-3 airliners from Cairns packed with tourists. So in 1973 about half a dozen of us expats got together and opened the Bensbach Wildlife Lodge in a remote corner of the country near the border with Australia and Indonesia. There are lots of deer there, it's a great place for birdwatching and is the barramundi fishing



Bob in a battle-scarred cut-down Toyota Landcruiser he once used to meet arriving tourists after they'd flown in to visit Karawari Lodge deep in the East Sepik wilderness. The vehicle was finally replaced in the mid-90s

capital of the world. All the other original investors have passed away but Bensbach is still running. "I expanded very slowly over the years. In 1977 I bought Karawari Lodge

on the Sepik River. In 1984 we built Ambua Lodge in the Highlands from scratch. In 2006 we built Rondon Ridge Lodge overlooking Mt Hagen. Both of those have water turbines

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Bob (right) at Saddle Camp, about an hour's walk from the summit of Mt Wilhelm, during a 1998 trek. He has climbed the mountain more than 80 times

that generate pollution-free electricity. Any power we don't consume we give to the closest village. The last lodge we built is on an island in the middle of Lake Murray in Western Province.

"I borrowed the idea for my business model from safari camps in Africa. Visitors don't just stay at one of our lodges; they visit a few of them to experience different parts of the country. But in most places it's impossible to just hire a bus and expect the driver to turn up on time with everything nice and

clean. The same thing applies to boats - there is simply no company in the country you can hire them from. So I had to get into the boat and bus business. We have 10 or 12 minibuses and I don't know how many boats. And, because most parts of the country aren't connected by roads, we had to start our own airline. I qualified for my pilot's licence back when I was still working as a civil engineering business so in the beginning I flew in lots of our guests. Now I have fulltime pilots on three Cessna aircraft.

"We don't have big mountains in Australia and I just loved walking around the hills because I'm a mountain man at heart"

"My greatest achievement? Well, we employ 250 people and many of those jobs are in outlying areas where there are few opportunities outside of mining. That makes a huge difference. But something that's probably even more important is the work we did at Kuk, a World Heritage site near the airport at Mt Hagen. Archeologists discovered evidence on the site of gardening dating back 9500 years. That puts Kuk on par with ancient Mesopotamia as one of the first places humans raised crops. Kuk gained World Heritage status in 2008 but because there was no infrastructure in place for visitors it was threatened with delisting. So I found the archeologist who discovered it, he's 92 now, and we built an interpretive centre on the site and trained the locals how to run it. Now they do tours for visitors, charge entry fees, give them a little spiel and basically



ExxonMobil PNG utilises virtual reality technology as a learning tool for the local community to be engaged in biodiversity program.

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Jane Mogina, Biodiversity Advisor at ExxonMobil PNG.



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The luxurious bar, lounge and dining room at Bob's newest lodge in Western Province overlooks Lake Murray - PNG's biggest lake



Karawari Lodge was built on top of a ridge about 100m above the Karawari River in 1972 along the lines of a Sepik 'Haus Tambaran' (Spirit House)



Pilot Bob prepares to depart Karawari airstrip in his light plane with a tourist passenger in 1990

have their own sustainable business."

- Trans Niugini Tours offer discounts for PNG residents. See pngtours.com

PETER BOYD @ NIUGINI DIRT TOURS

"In 2007 I was at home in Lae watching TV with a couple of mates when a show about an

enduro [off-road] motorbike race caught our attention. We thought, 'That looks like a lot of fun' and the very next day we went out and bought ourselves some old Suzuki dirt bikes. "Our first ride was a real eye-opener. We had no idea of the conditions we would face and were woefully unprepared; we took only a small water bottle each. After a couple of hours, we got stuck on a really steep hill in the pouring rain. We couldn't go forward, couldn't turn back, and had to abandon two out of the three bikes. It was the first of dozens of times I've had to call my wife in the



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middle of the night and ask her to come to rescue us. Another time when a mate's motorbike went off a cliff, I rode back to

Lae and convinced a guy who owns a chopper to help me rescue him. Later on someone in Lae told us when they saw a chopper carrying half a motorbike, they knew it was us getting into trouble again. "Around 2012 I hit a snag. A few mates had moved out of town and I had nobody left to ride with. So I decided to organise an enduro race, threw in K40,000 in prize-money and took out ads in motorbike magazines overseas. I had 14 riders enter and they all told me they had the time of their lives. "I think that was when the penny dropped. I realised there's so much on offer in Morobe Province for adventure tourism, not just on land but on the water too. Came up with a great name too - Niugini Dirt. The idea was to take riders on top-of-the-line European dirt bikes to incredible places like Lake Wanum, Betty's Lodge, and

"We've been on hundreds of rides and experienced nothing but love and kindness from locals. They're always happy to help us carry our bikes up hills, give us food and water and shelter for the night"

to see the smoked corpses in Aseki, meet all the villagers, stay in lodges and cap it all off with some fishing and a few beers on a nice big boat on the Huon Gulf. "But it was a really hard sell. There's not much in the way of affordable accommodation in Lae, the airfares are very expensive and I wasn't able to muster any support from the



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government. We also have a major problem with concerns about security here in Lae. I can't tell you how many times I got phone calls from people overseas keen to come and ride until someone's wife or



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mate put a stop to the idea because they've heard stories about someone getting killed or robbed here. But as I always tell them, in 12 years of riding I've only had one incident: a drunk tried to throw a car battery

at me, and that is obviously a very hard thing to do. We've been on hundreds of rides and experienced nothing but love and kindness from locals. They're always happy to help us carry our bikes up hills, give

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us food and water and shelter for the night. "I had a good start in 2015 with four tours, including a group with nine riders from Japan. The next two years were a bit lean but

things started picked up again in 2018. This year (2020) we've had one tour already and four others booked. We have eight guys coming here in March from Belgium, six Army guys

from Australia in May, six bankers in August, and eight freestyle riders in September, plus I'm talking to a few people... so a lot more popular than last year when we only had five groups all up. One of these was a three-day tour with the family of the Australian High Commissioner in PNG and his family. We also had our first female customer. We're also now getting enquiries from people in Port Moresby interested in doing weekend tours. "My advice to anyone who wants to start a tourism business in

PNG? Well, you need to do lots of research to identify the attractions in your area and you'll need a significant amount of capital to chew through in the first few years. This is my sixth year and Niugini Dirt is still many hundreds of thousands in the red. I have to work full-time in another industry to make ends meet. But I'm confident the investment will pay off. There's a change in the air with the new government and prime minister. We've heard they really want to get tourism dollars into the country and here in Morobe Province, we're really keen to be a part of that." ▲

• Want to go riding with Peter and his mates? Log in at niuginidirt.com

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