

PICTURE: GEMMA KATE KING

“

At some points, I am on my hands and knees, using all of my strength to pull me up sheer granite surfaces.

”

Into the clouds

Marisa Howden tackles a tough ascent on PNG's highest peak, Mount Wilhelm.

“Mount Wilhelm will be fun,” I declared to a friend, thinking a trek up Papua New Guinea's highest mountain will be a good fitness goal after the birth of my second baby.

At 4509 metres, Mount Wilhelm is no easy feat. It's half the height of Mount Everest and, for someone who's never done any mountaineering before, it is a huge undertaking. But I wasn't going to let that scare me off.

THE JOURNEY STARTS

One Friday morning, we set off from Lae, our group excited for the weekend ahead. The drive to Goroka takes us into Kassam Pass and through a countryside of rolling green hills.

We see the heart of PNG come to life through the small villages that line the Highlands Highway. The faces of the women and children light up with the awe of seeing foreigners in such a remote part of PNG.

But the drive is a feat in itself. The highway is in poor condition and it may be a good idea to save it for another time and, instead, fly into Goroka or Mount Hagen.

Betty, from Betty's Lodge at the bottom of Mount Wilhelm, can arrange to collect you at either town.

After a night in Goroka, to help accommodate our arrival in Keglsugl by early afternoon, we head straight to Betty's Lodge, conscious we only have a few hours to get to base camp before sunset. Betty and her husband, Peter, meet us on arrival and organise our porters and gear for the journey.

With a guide each, and enough porters to move a mountain, we set off, limbs quaking and hearts racing for the adventure. >



Into the clouds

BASE CAMP

As we make our way up from Betty's Lodge at 2800 metres to base camp at 3550 metres, the scenery changes from lush forests to open valleys with picturesque views of the mountainous Chimbu Province.

We listen attentively as our lead guide, Paul, points out the sound of a bird of paradise.

Paul tells us he has summited Mount Wilhelm more than 500 times, which invokes some confidence as I push towards base camp.

There are four rest stops along the way, and it takes a bit over three hours to get there, where a stunning sunset over Lake Aunde meets us. It's a strenuous hike through moss forests, across alpine grasslands and up muddy waterfalls, but well worth it for the beautiful scenery.

Don't underestimate the effects of altitude. Several people in our group are struck down immediately and can only make it this far. If time is on your side, consider a night at Betty's Lodge before the trek to help acclimatise.

An old university monitoring station serves as our accommodation for the evening, which includes a gas burner and a drop toilet. We repack our bags, load up on carbohydrates for dinner and go to bed early.

SUMMIT ATTEMPT

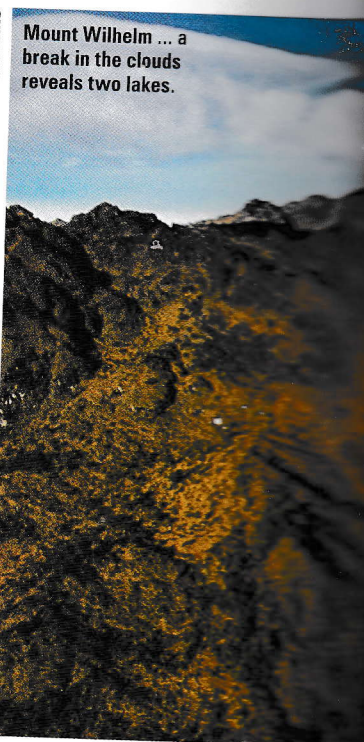
We wake just before 1am, the early morning chill gnawing at our limbs as we gear up.

Layered in thermals and heavy jackets, with our head torches shining bright, we set off at 1.30am, hopeful to reach the summit for sunrise.

The trek starts moderately as we make our way up beside a waterfall that connects Mount Wilhelm's top and bottom lakes. The terrain is muddy and the sound of the water whooshing past is a little scary.

Our guides lead us past the top lake (not that we know it's there as our head torches offer the only light). We break, fuelling up on muesli bars and bananas as we strip back layers, the pace of the hike serving as a warming agent.

PICTURE: DAVID KIRKLAND



Kongo Coffee

- ROASTED WHOLE BEANS
- PROFILE ROASTING
- CUSTOMISE ROASTING AND PACKAGING
- GROUND COFFEE AND GIFT PACKS
- GREEN BEAN EXPORTS
- COFFEE BREWING MACHINES AND ACCESSORIES



*** BEST QUALITY * BEST PRICES**

Available in all Leading Supermarkets and Stores throughout PNG

Direct enquiries to: Sales: (675) 276 7507 Office: (675) 276 7500 Mobile: (675) 7218 7500
 Email: sales@kongocoffee.com.pg / enquiries@kongocoffee.com.pg Website: www.kongocoffee.com.pg



We continue on, and begin to spread out as our fitness levels begin to show. I'm in the middle with my guide, who holds my hand up every rocky step, ensuring my footing is correct, especially up the nearly vertical rock walls we begin to face.

My heart accelerates each time we come across these steep faces, as I try not to think of all the wrong ways this could go. At some points, I am on my hands and knees, using all of my strength to pull me up sheer granite surfaces.

We take another break, this time on the side of a grassy cliff. I'm panting, my heart trying to keep up with my lungs, the piercing pain of climbing at altitude constricting every breath I hadn't noticed at first, but the weather has turned as an icy wind whips across the mountain.

I layer back up, this time with every single piece of clothing I have brought. But even with a beanie, neck warmer, hooded ski jacket and ▶



The place to stay in Kokopo

Kokopo Beach Bungalow Resort is the place to stay when you are in Kokopo, and access to your own private beach. Featuring:

- Airconditioned Bungalows with ocean front, pool or garden views
- Private Beaches, Bars, Banks, Shops and Market
- Restaurant style Haus Win Restaurant and Bar
- Entertainment facilities including Satellite TV and Wifi
- Buses and Chauffeur Driven Vehicles on request
- Land and Marine Tours including Historical Relics, Cultural Activities, Fishing, Snorkeling, Dolphin Tours and Island Adventures

Phone: 982 8788, 982 8789, 982 8902 to find out
www.kbb.com.pg

Kokopo Beach Bungalow Resort

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Website: www.kbb.com.pg Mobile: (675) 7122 7688 Fax: (675) 982 8700

Escape Explore Enjoy

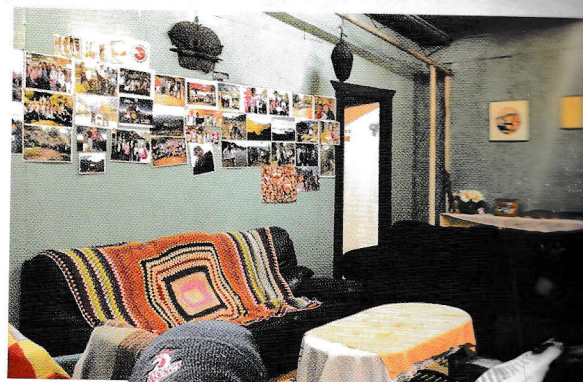
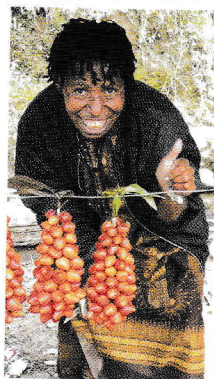


Into the clouds

PICTURES: MARISA HOWDEN, GEDDIMA KATE KING



High and mighty ... (clockwise from top) steep terrain surrounds a mountain lake; home comforts at Betty's Lodge; Betty; a local vendor; a PNG flag above the clouds.



two pairs of gloves, I'm still freezing, wind and sleet thrashing at my face. So we keep moving, my only reassuring thought that we're going to be at the summit soon.

We make our way through another tricky bit, climbing up with our hands. My nerves really start to come into play, the thought of falling and leaving my children without a mother debilitating.

We pause halfway up a very arduous bit and I check the time – 5.30am, less than an hour until sunrise, less than an hour to go. But for some reason I ask my guide, 'How much longer?' and I am met with the worst possible answer.

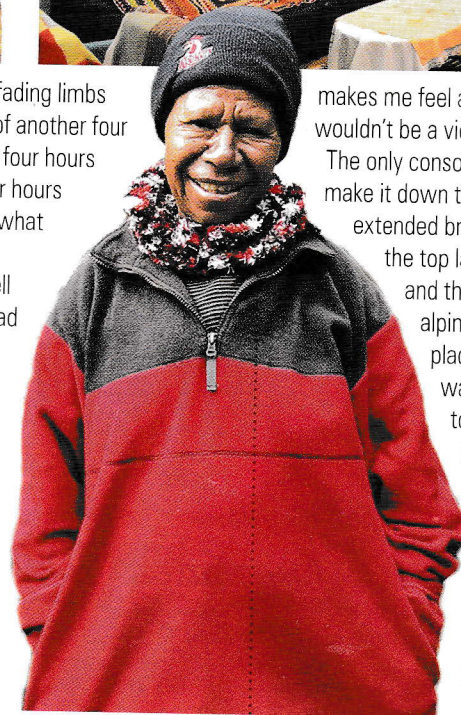
"Another four hours," he answers.

"What!" I am in a state of shock. "That's not possible. It's nearly sunrise. We should be there by sunrise."

He shines his torch up the mountain and reiterates, "another four hours".

My heart sinks, my fading limbs weep at the thought of another four hours of this. Another four hours up means another four hours back down, on top of what we've already done.

Done. I am done. I tell my guide I want to head back. I break off from my friend Sean, who is determined to keep going, and I make my way back down. It's a slow descent, my muscles weak. And then out of nowhere it's light, but the mountain is covered in a grey cloud. This



makes me feel a little better. I know I wouldn't be a view from the top. The only consolation is when we make it down the mountain we get an extended break on the hill. I take the top lake. The clouds are gone and the view is breathtaking. The alpine forests surrounding the placid lake are calling. I don't want to leave, but I have to put as much distance between this mountain as possible. I'm pushing myself down the slope. When we get back to base I am beyond exhausted and defeated by my Mount Wilhelm.



Into the clouds

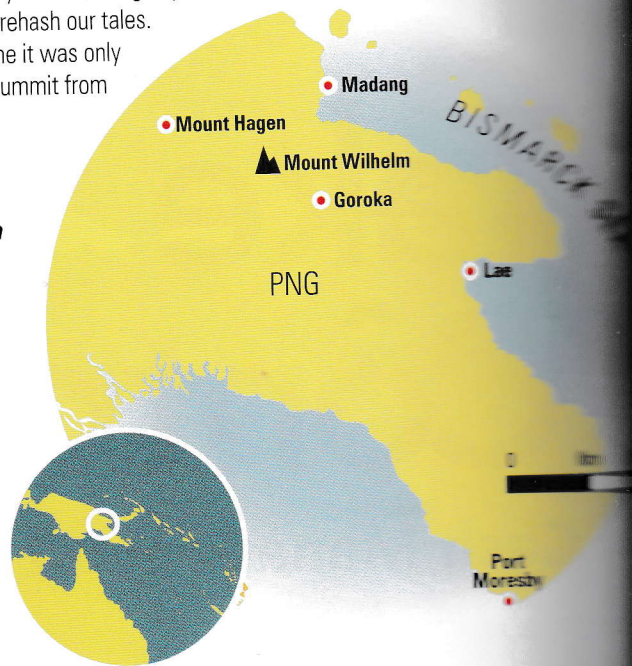
BETTY'S LODGE

A warm and hospitable Betty meets us when we arrive at her lodge later in the day. The cute cottage is filled with beautiful hydrangeas from the garden, and the smell of fresh trout from her farm sizzles in the kitchen. Tea and coffee

are served as we cosy up by the fire, our group slowly coming together to rehash our tales.

It's here that Sean tells me it was only another two hours to the summit from where I left him. ■

 **Air Niugini flies from Port Moresby to Mount Hagen and Goroka daily. See airniugini.com.pg.**



IF YOU WANT TO GO

DOING IT Betty's Lodge (a new lodge is opening in August) is PGK300 per night, including all meals. Guides are PGK170 and porters PGK60.

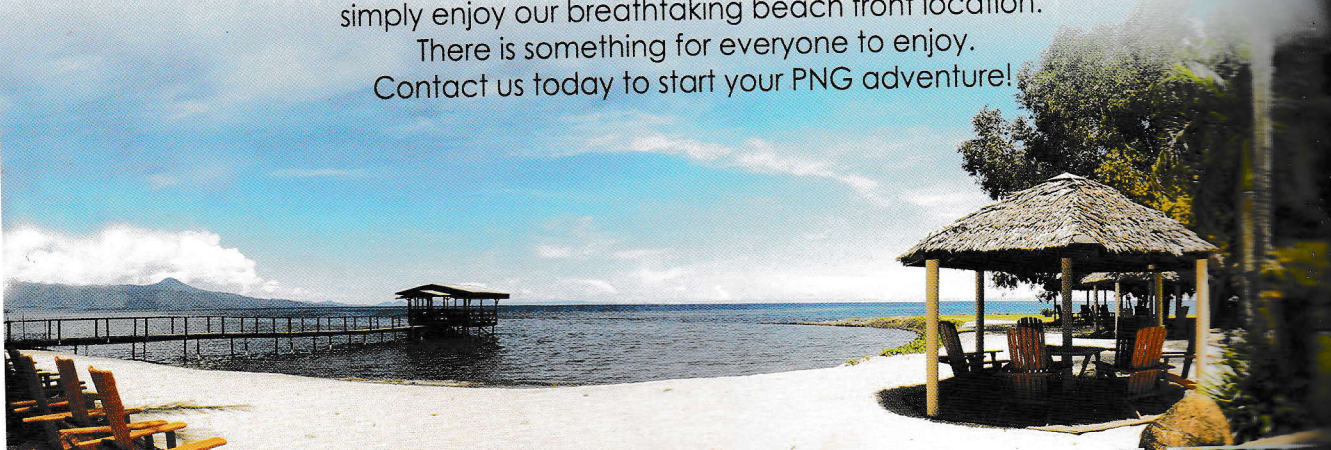
EMAIL bhiggins905@gmail.com or see [facebook.com/bettyslodge/](https://www.facebook.com/bettyslodge/)

LIAMO REEF RESORT

KIMBE | WEST NEW BRITAIN | PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Explore the best of PNG through our fantastic holiday packages. Visit exotic islands, enjoy Black Bass fishing, snorkel pristine coral reefs or simply enjoy our breathtaking beach front location.

There is something for everyone to enjoy. Contact us today to start your PNG adventure!



www.liamoreefresort.com | (675) 7391 1918 | reservations@liamoreefresort.com

