

# Kokoda Trek Report - 8 May 13- Justin Kibell

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From the Gippsland Region of Victoria to the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea, 17 trekkers took on the mental and physical challenge that is the Kokoda adventure. This private expedition was organised by Harvey World Travel in Traralgon with a good mix of people from fathers and sons, close friends and work colleagues.



With an early 4:30am breaky and 7:00am flight over the Owen Stanley Range to Popondetta the group was in great spirits. Our flight left on time and we were off. The Dash 8 flight was a quick 30 mins hop over the mountains followed by three 4WD shuttle runs over a flooded creek next to the airport. During the next 3 hours we travelled by PMV (truck with tray, seats and canopy) following a similar route the Japanese did when advancing through to Kokoda.

As the group took in the Kokoda Plateau and the war museum, our porters prepared lunch and their backpacks ready for the short 3 hour journey up to Deniki, campsite for day 1. Everyone was in good health and travelled well on the first day except me, the expedition guide. I didn't realise it, but I had a nasty virus that played havoc with me. Feeling very dehydrated and unwell, I went to bed early whilst the group had dinner and chatted about their first day.

With an amazing fog blanketing the Yodda Valley we all set off to along the muddy, winding track passing through the village of New Isurava, the Isurava battlegrounds and then through to our campsite at a lovely small village called Alola, perched on the side of the valley above the Eora Creek. With cooler weather, the group powered along having lunch at Isurava, previously a bloody battle site with many Japanese and Australians soldiers losing their lives in a desperate battle. Later in the afternoon we crossed a number of landslip areas where heavy rain had caused the whole side of the mountain to slide down into the valley, an amazing sight.



Over the next two days the expedition followed the Eora Creek, a powerful watercourse with several amazing crossings over log bridges and some nasty climbs up and over the sides of the valley. These climbs and descents certainly tested some of us but with newly found jungle legs, powered on through to Templeton's Crossing and then up and over the side of Mt. Bellamy through to the Myola Lakes. These lakes are huge grassed areas nestled on the plateau in extinct volcanoes, the location of the air drops by the biscuit bombers during the war. On our way through to Kagi, camp for day 4, we dropped in to see a Fuzzy Wuzzy at Naduri that is reported to be over 100 years old (seems to change each year though).

Kagi is our home village for No Roads where most of our porters have family and call their home. It is wonderful seeing how excited they are to see their partners and kids when they are approaching the village. Sadly that night one of our trekkers reported his feet were so painful and damaged that he would be unlikely to continue trekking with intense pain in his feet, very distressing for him given his mental and physical toughness being still there, just being let down by his feet. That night we were all entertained by the local kids singing songs and receiving gifts from the trekkers.

In the morning of day 5 the expedition group said farewell to our injured trekker who was scheduled for a 9:30am helicopter evacuation. I stayed with him to ensure he was evacuated safely. The expedition left with our local team lead by Gui and made good time through Efogi 2 and Efogi 1 up to Mission Ridge and then onto the Brigade Hill battlefield for lunch. Following the successful evacuation of our injured trekker, I continued on to catch up to the expedition, 3 hours behind them. As the day heated up I struggled to catch them feeling very unwell again and began to become very dehydrated again. An hour later I organised my own helicopter evacuation suffering from severe dehydration at Efogi. It turns out I had been walking over the past 4 days with my kidneys suffering from a severe toxic chemical imbalance and I needed hospital treatment ASAP. My trek was over but the expedition continued under the leadership of Walter and Gui, our local experts.

Over the next 3 days the expedition group passed through the swamps and crossed the Brown River, climbed up to New Nauro (with amazing views of the valley below), over the Maguli Range and down into Hoi, then up to Ioribaiwa Ridge, the site of the furthest Japanese advance during the war. The campsite for the last night was the beautiful Ua-ule Creek, nestled at the base of Imita Ridge. To get there the group trudged through 11 creek crossings, heaps of mud and down some steep root covered hills, all part of the Kokoda experience.

Aiming for lunch at Owers' Corner, the end point of the trek, the group first climbed Imita Ridge, a formidable steep climb with the knowledge that it is nearly all downhill from the top to the end. The 30m wide Goldie River was the next major waypoint, a spot for a quick swim and cool down before climbing the last small obstacle up to the Kokoda archway marking the end of adventure on the Track. The final 300m climb often knocks the wind out of you but the elation of knowing you have made it makes the pain go away. I was able to meet and greet the expedition team at Owers' Corner after 3 days in bed, congratulate and share in their excitement upon completing the trek.

With a yummy BBQ lunch consumed, our three jungle inspired decorated buses took off towards Port Moresby via Bomana War Cemetery to pay our respects and spend some time remembering the sacrifices of our men and women during war. That night we all had dinner, including our injured trekker who was still using his walking poles to assist in walking, and with our massive porter team at the Holiday Inn taking over most of the restaurant with 51 people. After a buffet dinner we moved to the gardens for a short awards ceremony and to listen to the porters all singing amazing songs, all in perfect harmony with each other.

Papua New Guinea is an amazing place, with the stunning jungle and wonderful people. Members of this expedition all commented on how amazing the porter team was, from the personal porters through to the cooks and general porters, they are truly amazing people and clearly continue in the tradition of lending a hand to Australians making their way along the Kokoda Track.

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