

An aerial photograph of a small village in Papua. In the foreground, a white twin-engine propeller plane with dark blue wings and tail is parked on a dirt runway. The registration number 'PK-BUY' is visible on the fuselage and tail. Several people are standing around the plane. In the middle ground, there is a cluster of small buildings with corrugated metal roofs, some of which are rusted. A dirt road winds through a grassy field towards the village. The background consists of lush green hills and mountains under a cloudy sky.

# piloting papua

DAWN FLIGHTS, CULTURE SHOCK AND THE OCCASIONAL  
SQUEALING PIG ARE ALL IN A DAY'S WORK FOR PILOTS  
RIDING THE "FREEWAY" THROUGH PAPUA PROVINCE.

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I DON'T THINK WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT. THAT'S THE ONLY THING IN MY HEAD MOMENTS BEFORE TOUCHING DOWN ON A MOUNTAIN-SIDE AIRSTRIP IN PAPUA PROVINCE.

As we get closer, Matt Dearden, a 35-year-old Brit, eases the stick back, pulls the throttle to idle and kisses the ground. He labours with the rudder to keep the fully loaded Pilatus Porter – a product of post-WWII Swiss engineering – going straight up the perilously short runway. As we near its end, Dearden adds a touch of power, easing the plane up the hill and onto the runway's small plateau, then kicks the rudder to the left. We swivel 180 degrees, the nose pointing back where we came from. A flurry of flicked switches and the big propeller slowly comes to a stop. Everything is quiet. As I open the flimsy plane door, I barely have time to thank a long list of deities for my continued survival when I lock eyes with a man carrying a spear. He's wearing nothing but a penis gourd – a dried vegetable shell that holds the genitals upright – and a giant hairpiece: a standard Papuan warrior outfit. Half a dozen people rush up behind him and begin unloading the government-issued bags of rice we just flew in.

It's a balmy July mid-morning, and this is my first bush landing. Not so for Dearden. The pilot for Susi Air has been at it since about 5am and his routine – when based out of the town of Nabire, Papua – is four flights a day. The colder, stiller air of the morning removes one worry from the dynamic equation of landing two tonnes of airplane and cargo on these short, sloping, slippery airstrips. At lunchtime, when the wind rises from the valleys, it's time to pack it in. But right now, in the tiny settlement of Pogapa, it's time to get off the aircraft, shake hands with the *pendeta* – the village boss – hear the latest about life hereabouts, and take a look around.

As soon as the villagers empty the aircraft of rice, I help Dearden install the basic corduroy and aluminium benches that transform the back of the plane into a cabin able to seat nine people. Sometimes passengers “wear nothing but the gourd”, Dearden says, as I handle a rather muddy seat. Before take-off, a crowd rushes the plane. Village chiefs pick who will fly back to the city; some have been waiting for weeks.

Switching on the turbine takes only a few seconds, and as it spools up Dearden performs his pre-flight checks. Assured everything is A-OK, we start our take-off. Despite being fully loaded again, we are in the air in a few

seconds – aided by the airstrip's steep downward slope – and we dive into the furiously beautiful landscape. We are headed back to Nabire, Susi's local headquarters, via the “Freeway”: a chain of valleys running roughly east-west from Nabire to Wamena, dotted with dozens of landing strips.

Nabire, on the north-western coast of Papua, Indonesia, is a town of 30,000 souls or thereabouts, with notably few roads leading in or out. And those few quickly become jungle tracks. Instead, the town is serviced by Susi Air, which is contracted with a mix of commercial and government-subsidised flights to carry people and cargo in and out of remote areas.

Dearden is usually the first pilot at the airfield, since he has to land in the trickiest mountain strips. Cold air and lack of winds are preferable. And at 04:30, everything is quiet. Taking off in the dead, chill air of the early morning, with just a hint of light at the horizon, is magic. But from 6am, six days a week, Nabire Airport is a chaotic transport hub. After picking up a cup of instant coffee at the aptly named *Cantin Flamboyan* – one of many hole-in-the-wall cafes right outside the terminal building where Papuans waiting for their flight can get a meal or a hot drink – I walk to the tarmac. There's a Bell helicopter whirling its blades and pulling its load up, headed for the jungle. A few Cessna Caravans – another single-engine turbine – take off with their load of a dozen people, also headed for the jungle. There's another single-engine, single-pilot Pilatus Porter taking off with almost a tonne of rice in the back; it's also headed for the jungle. There's a small twin turboprop Twin Otter, with two dozen people and cargo. A little further down the runway, there are not one, but two missionary organisations: the American/Canadian MAF and a Dutch outfit, the Associated Mission Aviation. There's a Kodiak – a bush plane designed and funded by missionary organisations – parked in front of the former and another Porter in front of the latter. All are going to the jungle. Occasionally, a siren goes off. It's a sign that one of the rare airline flights is coming in and people and sleepy mutts should leave the runway, which they reluctantly do. These are the only flights not headed straight for Papua's lush, mythic-seeming and sometimes dangerous jungles.

“The standard procedure if you hit a man is to turn the airplane and take off right away,” says Craig Rosenberg, an Australian pilot flying a Cessna Caravan for a local airline, as he overlooks handlers loading a cargo of squealing pigs packed into wooden crates.

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## THE ASTONISHING STICK-AND-RUDDER SKILLS GAINED BY LANDING A HEFTY AIRPLANE ON A MOUNTAINSIDE ARE PRICELESS IN AN AGE OF PERVASIVE COCKPIT AUTOMATION.

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Fault may be obvious if somebody runs under an aircraft moments before landing or take-off, he explains, but few would risk their lives (or their planes) to debate aviation safety procedures in remote highland villages. “Though if you kill a pig it’s worse than if you hit a man – they’re worth more,” interjects another pilot, describing pigs as a local marker of wealth. “If you hit one, you better have \$3000 ready.”

Papua can be heartbreaking. Locals seem split between modernity and tradition. Jakarta has encouraged internal immigration from places like Java and Sumatra, and Indonesians have responded, attracted by economic opportunities. But there are other forces shaping this land. Plain-clothes security forces seem present wherever there’s a gathering of Papuans – alert, no doubt, for signs of insubordination. Outside influence has also come from decades of religious proselytism by Western organisations, producing a strong Christian streak in an otherwise animistic society. On the streets, there are large posters for an upcoming arena event hosted by an American TV pastor. On the road heading to our hotel there’s a large shop selling religious supplies, including Madonna-shaped bottles, candles, holy wine and bread, and a variety of odd Christian paraphernalia.

That said, there’s room for optimism. Roads are being built. Technology is making strides in people’s lives. Mobile phones are ubiquitous, even where there’s no connectivity for hundreds of kilometres. They’re used as media players for music and photos – though this can have unintended consequences. One of the pilots mentions the story of the “ringtone war”. Allegedly, down in the city one music-loving local was walking around blasting a certain song when a fellow local took exception to the tune. Sometime later, a battle ensued. Men from one village waged a lightning strike on a neighbouring settlement, and some combatants wound up dead. The pilot in question had to fly a medical evacuation

mission with one of the survivors: he had an arrow through his chest.

Services like this cast pilots in a trusted position. The *bule* (foreigners) serve as the carriers for an informal airmail and banking system: a villager may hand them a letter addressed to “Barto, Nabire”, a stash of banknotes for “Lazarus”, or just a mobile phone. The addressee then shows up upon landing to collect their package. Pilots are a conduit to the wider world, the carriers of information and trade. Even in the case of conflict between villages, pilots are never the targets. “But if you see a rumble, better run the other way,” Dearden warns. “People may throw rocks or arrows at each other, and you don’t want to be in the way.”

Back in Nabire, afternoons are usually free. Pilots are defined more by their profession than by their affiliation. Airmen from different airlines hang out together, even though their employers discourage it. The only self-segregation is driven by seniority and, within Susi at least, by the type of airplane that one flies.

Flying the Porter is somewhat frowned upon by more airline-oriented pilots. Many, in fact, make the trek to Papua to build the precious flight hours necessary for employment with larger outfits in their home countries. Susi Air flies scheduled routes with Asia’s largest fleet of Cessna Caravans, a single-engine turboprop that seats 12 people. Flying the Caravan prepares pilots for a life of operations in the airlines, with precise scheduling and collaboration between flight crew in the cockpit. But the astonishing stick-and-rudder skills gained by landing a hefty airplane on a mountainside, four times a day, six days a week, are priceless in an age of pervasive cockpit automation. Porter “drivers”, as they mockingly call themselves, “are cowboys”, says a young Caravan first officer, conveying both admiration and a smidge of contempt.

Soon enough it’s Saturday. The weekly gathering of the “Nabire Social Club” is the one night each week when pilots can truly relax and take the edge off the rough landing strips, heavy weather, squealing pigs and everything else that constitutes the daily grind of a bush pilot. They share stories, complain about distant wives and girlfriends, discuss safety issues and, in some cases, brag about their airplanes. It’s barbecue time – somebody has brought along some unspecified local venison – and the eating and drinking commences. Mark Small, a New Zealander of 50, nurses a beer while discussing his Cessna Caravan, a slightly older version still equipped with traditional clocks and dials – unlike the digital avionics of Susi Air’s more modern fleet. “The raggedy van is like no other van,” he says. “She’s old but honest. New guys run the PT6 at 98pc; I run it at 96 and I’m ten knots faster on the Freeway!” he adds. “Some aircraft are honest, they’ll give you what you want. Even if some pilots are full of shit. The raggedy van? She just goes.”

On one of my last days out bush, I sit in the right seat of the Porter, with Dearden at the controls as usual. It’s the crack of dawn, the sun a mere speck of brightness over the horizon. He scribbles something in the logbook as soon as we reach cruising altitude. A voice crackles on the radio. They exchange a few basic pleasantries, and Dearden replies with route and location. “Freeway traffic one twenty-two point four, PK-BVM Porter Nabire Pogapa, nine thousand five hundred, point bravo, next point echo two three. Estimate Pogapa five zero.” Everything is said in flat pilot lingo – dry and informative, but somehow dripping in camaraderie. Maybe they crack a joke or two on the otherwise empty frequency – I forget. I am enchanted by the sunrise, the cloud line is 50 different shades of orange and I am still half asleep. There is a sense of adventure ahead of us and I’m reminded of something I’ve been told more than once during my time in Nabire: “It sure as heck beats working for a living.” •