

# THE CAVES OF POMIO, NEW GUINEA

- Chris Harries\*\*

In the rugged Nakanai mountains, situated in tropical New Guinea, lies one of the most spectacular cave systems on planet Earth – known generally as the Caves of Pomio. For over ten years caving expeditions from Switzerland, France and Japan have been coming here to explore these wonders of nature, astounded at what they have, and haven't found. In 2003 the full extent of the Pomio cave system is still unknown. They are of World Heritage quality without a doubt, but as yet unrecognised and unprotected by the world body.

What is known about the Caves of Pomio, and their surroundings, is that they are world beating - in sheer scale, apart from any other superlative features. The Caves of Pomio boast the largest sinkhole in the world, Nane cave, (also known as Minye) having an estimated volume of 60 million cubic metres. From the air its surroundings are breathtaking. Framed by the smoking Alawan volcano to the south east and the very rugged Nakanai mountains to the north west, this sink hole is no less than a kilometre wide and 500 metres straight down, an utterly awesome thing to behold.

For anyone with the kind of money to pay for helicopter flights, a chopper can take you right down into the bottom of Nane, as if entering the bowels of the Earth. As one visitor put it: "This has to measure 9.9 on the scale of truly awesome sights".

Way, way down at the bottom of Nane two rivers converge, then disappear into an underground cavern, but from the air you can see the river re-emerge in a distant valley towards Mt Alawan. On its own, Nane is a world wonder, yet it is just one of thousands of sinkholes here, many of them best viewed from a helicopter or light plane.

And there is much more besides. On the ground, not far from beautiful Jaquinot Bay, visitors can quite easily travel on foot to the Kavakuna caves. These lie at the bottom of a spectacular gorge that is deeper than it is wide – 300 metre across, 500 metres deep. The bottom of the gorge can be reached by a negotiable, but very steep, path which takes an hour to climb down. One end of the gorge is a sheer cliff rising 600 metres straight up. At the base of the cliff a swift flowing river runs out of one of three immense caves, the main cave known as Kavakuna. Even with present knowledge of its extent, Kavakuna is the deepest in the Southern Hemisphere.

Also accessible on foot is another spectacularly huge cavern mouth, lying roughly north east, and 5 minutes flying time from Kavakuna, amongst a series of gigantic sinkholes. Over half a kilometre across, shaped like a huge corkscrew lying on its side, its entrance is higher than two full scale cathedrals, and is shaped like the entrance to a gigantic snail shell. A river flows straight out of its mouth and disappears into the ground some 200 metres away.

## Location of New Britain, Papua New Guinea



And what of the surroundings? The Nakanai ranges are very rugged. On the North Western side the range drops sharply down and a magnificent waterfall drops 200 metres down to the escarpment, then running into the broad plains of Open Bay.

This is surely the place where tales of hobbits and goblins, wandering giants, wild forests and great underground lakes and torrential rivers were born. Pomio gets no less than 8 metres of rain each year, a phenomenon that has created this great underground system of subterranean rivers and lakes.

The integrity of this world treasure is somewhat diminished and threatened by nearby large scale logging operations. The people of Pomio mostly live in scattered villages. They are mostly subsistence farmers, growing mainly kao kao (sweet potato).

These charming people are an easy target for the Malaysian forestry giant that is relentlessly killing PNG's tropical forests.

Here straight bribery (offerings of a health post, a road or a bridge or an outboard motor) are enough to sway a community to give up its forests, only to regret it later on. That is the sad story of logging that has been happening throughout PNG.

Tourism is not a big industry in PNG, and the country is well behind most other countries in preserving its natural treasures. Conservation status is painfully slow and not easy to achieve anywhere in the country. Needless to say, the world has yet to discover the Caves of Pomio.

However, the need for protection of the cave system and environs has been recognised by many local village people and the local level Pomio government people - as yet with little success. In a small way the locals have built a guest house near Palmalmal

alongside a beautiful coral bay (Jacquinot Bay) and it is from here that the visitor can sample the delights of this very special area.



\*\* The Caves of Pomio lie in the middle of the island of New Britain to the east of the PNG mainland. The above descriptive notes are partly excised from various people's observations. Statistical data on the Caves of Pomio has been recorded by various speleological expeditions, most of them in the last ten years.

## STAFF EXCHANGE

- Steve Bourne

It is now many years since a multi lateral exchange has been arranged between guiding staff by ACKMA. Some exchanges have been arranged between two parties including Naracoorte Caves' exchanges with Buchan and Jenolan Caves and I feel sure there have been others. As staff exchange facilitator for ACKMA I would like to initiate an exchange that will include as many sites as possible.

Of course there are many issues to consider including accommodation, travel, wages and training. The first three can readily be overcome with a little advance warning and planning but the most critical one is training. So much information that is delivered on a cave tour is site specific necessitating several days of on site training before the guide is able to satisfactorily guide in the new location. To have a meaningful exchange, this time needs to be reduced. All cave sites have (or should have) a training resource manual or at least a substantial resource of site-specific information. If this information is supplied to the guides participating in the exchange well before the exchange occurs, the on site training period will be shortened thereby reducing the burden on both host sites.

To assist in reducing travel costs for all parties, I suggest that the next exchange be planned for immediately after the next guides workshop (Gabfest) planned for Mole Creek, Tasmania next May. It will be a quiet time for most areas and will enable staff to catch a ride with others to the cave system they are exchanging with. Unless there are violent objections to again initiating this process, I shall plan for an exchange to occur at this time. Why spend money on training like this when the guide may leave? What if you don't and they stay?!!