

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.

“**M**ount 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 base of Mount Wilhelm, can arrange to collect you from either town.

After a night in Goroka, to help acclimatise, we arrive in Kegsugl by early afternoon and make our way straight to Betty’s Lodge, conscious we have a few hours to get to base camp before sunset. Betty and her husband, Peter, will be there on arrival and organise our porters and equipment for the journey.

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



**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**

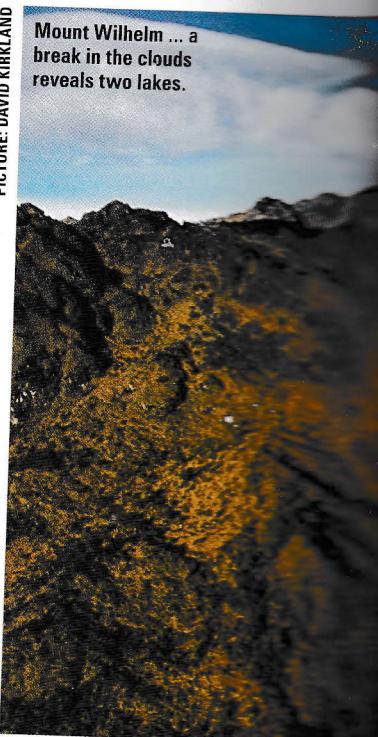
We wake just before 1am, the early morning chill gnawing at our limbs as we gear up. Layered in thermals and heavy jackets, with our head torches shining bright, we set off at 1.30am, hopeful to reach the summit for sunrise.

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

Mount Wilhelm ... a break in the clouds reveals two lakes.



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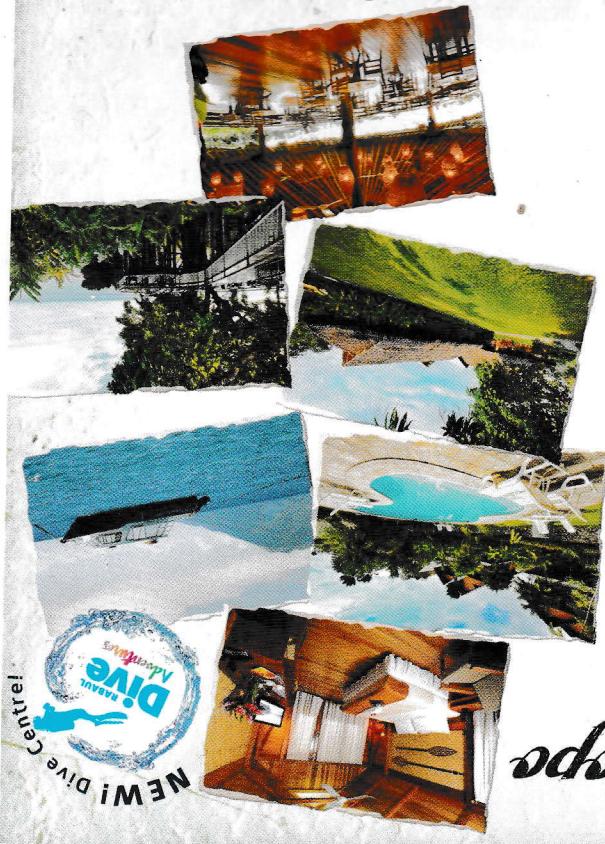
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## Escape Explorers



Wve 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 agt altitude constricting every breath.  
I hadn't noticed at first, but the weather  
has turned as an icy wind whips across the  
mountain.

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 a

place to stay in Lakepo

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An aerial photograph of a steep, rugged mountain face. The upper portion of the mountain is dark, rocky, and appears to be covered in sparse, yellowish-green vegetation. A large, bright white cloud or patch of snow covers the lower-left portion of the mountain. The sky above is a dark, cloudy gray.

## Into the clouds

PICTURES: MARISA HOWDEN, GEMMA 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.

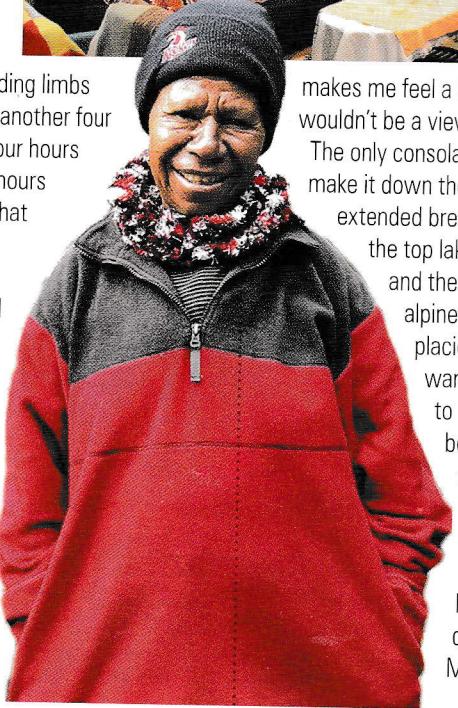
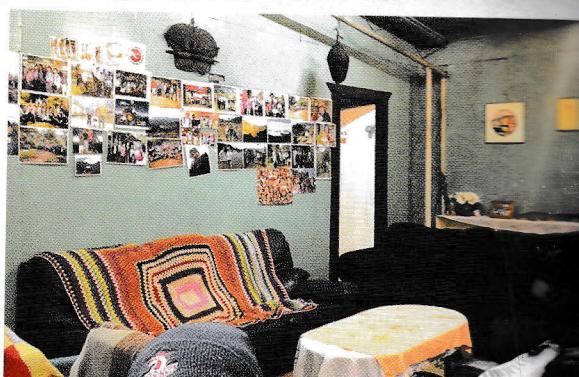
"What!" I am in a state of shock. "That's not possible. It's nearly sunrise. We should be there by sunrise."

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 know wouldn't be a view from the top. The only consolation is when make it down the mountain extended break on the hill the the top lake. The cloud and the view is break alpine forests surround placid lake are cath want to leave, but to put as much distance between this me as possible myself down the slope. When get back to the I am beyond defeated by m Mount Wilhelm.



## Into the clouds

**BETTY'S LODGE**

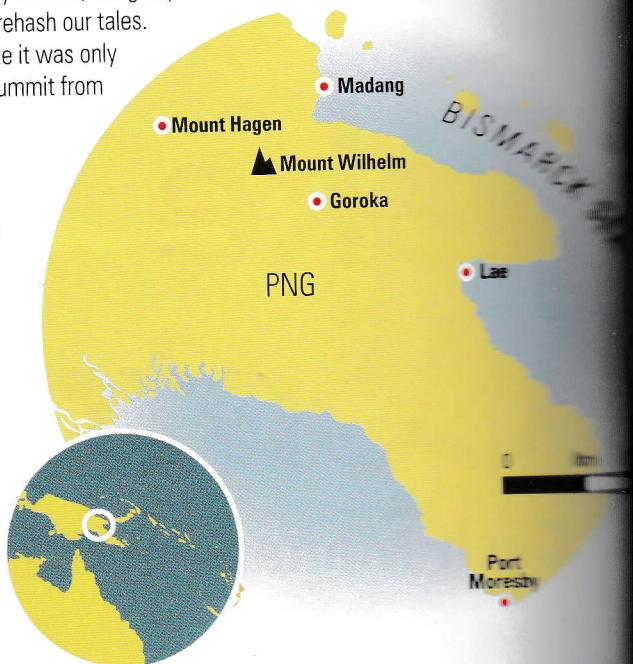
A warm and hospitable Betty meets us when we arrive at her lodge later in the day. The cute cottage is filled with beautiful hydrangeas from the garden, and the smell of fresh trout from her farm sizzles in the kitchen. Tea and coffee

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. ■



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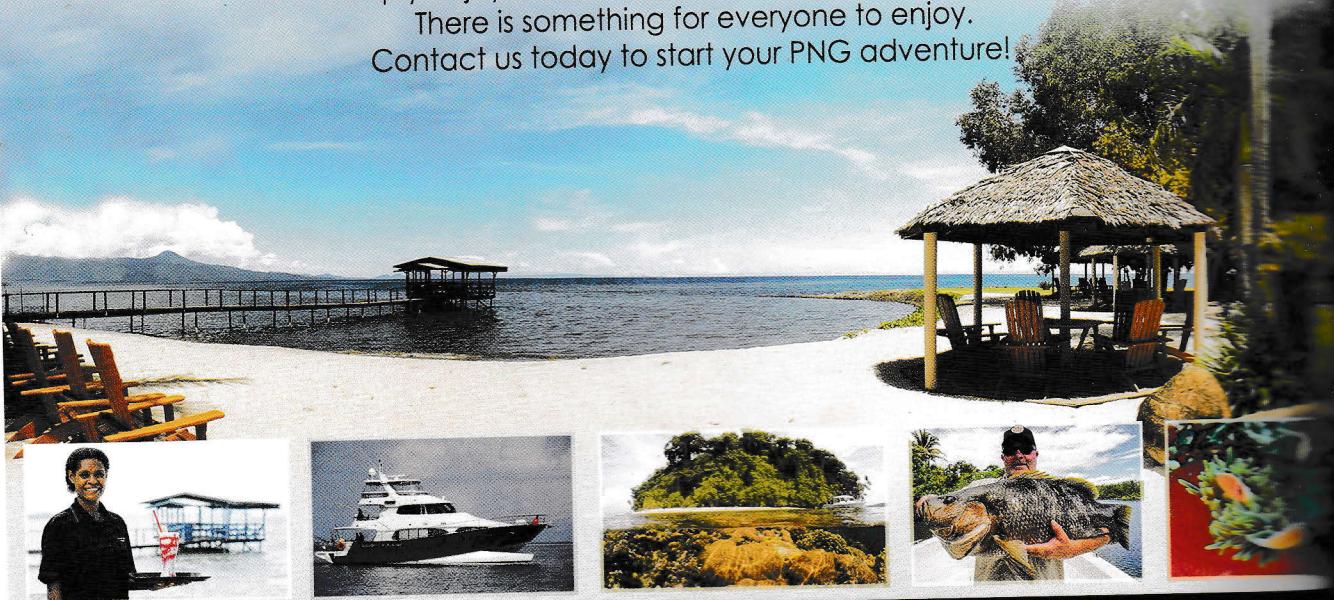


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