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.

Writer Michele Travieso  Photographer Jackson Lowen
IN PAPUA PROVINCE.

DOWN ON A MOUNTAINSIDE AIRSTRIP HEAD MOMENTS BEFORE TOUCHING IT. THAT’S THE ONLY THING IN MY MIND.

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

As we get closer, Matt Dearden, a 35-year-old Brit, eats 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, causes the plane up the hill and onto the runway’s small plateau, then kicks the rudder to the left. We waltz 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 stalk 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 real 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 is 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 Kodak – 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 cargo on the ground 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 oversees handlers loading a cargo of squealing pigs packed into wooden crates.

As we get closer, Matt Dearden, a 35-year-old Brit, eats 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, causing the plane up the hill and onto the runway’s small plateau, then kicks the rudder to the left. We waltz 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 stalk 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 real 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 is 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 Kodak – 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 cargo on the ground 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 oversees handlers loading a cargo of squealing pigs packed into wooden crates.
you better have pigs as a local marker of wealth. "If you hit one, worth more," interjects another pilot, describing a pig it’s worse than if you hit a man – they’re planes) to debate aviation safety procedures in explains, but few would risk their lives (or their aircraft moments before landing or take-off, he Fault may be obvious if somebody runs under an airplane on a mountainside are priceless in an age of pervasive cockpit automation. 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 sun rise, 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.”