

John Stokes goes back to the island of his boyhood, where he meets old friends and documents a traditional canoe race. *Kathy Mexted reports.*

Balancing act ... one of the sleek outriggers, typical of the Ninigo Islands.

PICTURES: TOM PARTIDGE

A RETURN TO CHILDHOOD

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About a dozen large rectangular sails cut across an endless ocean horizon. Below them, the sleek handmade outrigger canoes of Ninigo slice through azure blue waters and squatting barefoot on the outrigger, their occupants provide balance and ballast in an old tradition.

The canoes are made from driftwood and the outriggers are an intricate framework of poles lashed together with rope. Each provides a thrilling ride under sails woven from pandanus leaves.

It is 1971 and from the shore, 10-year-old John Stokes watches this spectacle with his schoolmate. As soon as he's able, it is Stokes perched on the outrigger. As the wind picks up, the boy with the blonde curls clings for dear life as he flies through the air in an exhilarating ride that is tattooed into his memory. The indelible image is one of many from a storybook decade that was his childhood in New Guinea.

The remoteness of the islands has kept life to a steady amble. Located 260 kilometres north of Wewak, there are seven atolls in the Ninigo Islands and around 50 small islets splayed around in a 34-kilometre curve, like droplets in the ocean. In an almost cashless economy, the Ninigo islanders and their near neighbours live off subsistence agriculture and, rather than trade, will generally share what they have with visitors.

Returning to the Ninigos on the slow boat from Manus Island 40 years after he left, Stokes found the journey almost as memorable as the races he was coming to film. He and his colleagues got lost at sea, were in danger of being swamped, almost sank and were then stranded for 72 hours on Luf Island in the Hermit Group, east of Ninigo.

Though they were well cared for by the villagers on Luf, at that point they felt a very long way from home.

Their rescue and eventual arrival at Ninigo provided an emotive return for the cinematographer, who relished the graphic landscape awash with turquoise and aqua waters that cast a sharp relief on white beaches.

The gentle islanders, who are reserved and self-possessed, were as happy to see Stokes as he was to arrive.

“We Westerners don't understand the static nature of island living because we always have to be progressing and upscaling. Though they are well aware that their life is at odds with the cracking pace of the Western world, they are quite unperturbed by it,” he says.

Not only do the Ninigo islanders still rely on their traditional outrigger canoes for transport, they continue to use the knowledge passed

A return to childhood



Schooldays ... (from left) kids at a tree planting on the island in 1971; filming canoe races (centre); the sails go up in the annual Niningo canoe races.



A return to childhood

down through generations to make and sail them. It begins with driftwood logs occasionally deposited onto the beaches by the ever-returning tide. The boat builders score any viable log to claim them for future use as hulls. The same goes for tarpaulins and plastics that have long since replaced the traditional pandanus sails. Each boat is furnished with a few different sized sails that are selected for racing according to conditions on the day.

Using materials either washed up or sourced especially for the race, these masters of recycling double-stitch the tarps for extra strength then, after their racing service is done, allot them to everyday use.

Meanwhile back on the beach, the driftwood that has already been hand-sawn and shaped into hulls then secured to the keel using handmade wooden dowels, are carved and painted in crisp racing colours in preparation for the coming race.

"Theirs is very much a circular life," says Stokes who came to begin documenting the Great Ninigo Islands Canoe Race but was instantly forced into slowing down. "I woke on the third morning and went nowhere near my camera. Instead, I sat on the beach listening to the waves and slowly became very aware of things around me. It was like a decluttering of the mind and I suddenly thought, 'what has happened to me?' When it hit, it was a very powerful moment," he says.

In a place where electricity comes from a generator and petrol has to be carted in, most of life's activities rely on solar and wind; and wind is all that propels those colourful sails. The sight of 96 sleek canoes was enough to stir Stokes into hoisting the camera onto his shoulder again as around 300 race-day spectators and competitors gradually appeared. Most came from other islands, bringing their own food and camping out under their various sails, which double as protection at night.

The canoes race in five classes: six, seven, eight and nine metres and the Open class, which are the larger rigs with double sails. The races are over one and a half hours and the competition spreads across a few days. While the government's prize money is no doubt an incentive, Stokes says it's really just enough to keep things going. There is also a real advantage in the ongoing interest and canoe building skills that are vital for survival.

Chris Omen from the island of Patexux says, "The government can't move petrol from island to island and so the only reliable means of getting about is in a canoe. Without these canoes I don't think we would do very well. We must continue with doing this. It's the only way to sustain our transport system."

The village hierarchy underpins a strong community focus that includes a monthly week of communal work on gardens and facilities. They also collectively turn their back on alcohol, with an overriding awareness of the damage it can do in a very short time. And time itself is unencumbered by alarms or timetables, but enhanced by a tradition worth preserving in a remote and self-reliant world.

Visitors – mainly yachties cruising the Pacific – are slowly becoming more regular and a little bit goes a long way for the islanders who hope the annual races can draw more attention and some much-needed income for basic supplies such as sugar, rice, clothes, fuel and medicines that must be brought in.

For Stokes, the forced slowing down as he re-entered the island's time and headspace was something of an epiphany and prompted a relearning of some valuable childhood experiences. He returned to document the Great Ninigo Islands Canoe Race but came away with much more. Capturing the spectacular races on film will hopefully share that other world with those of us not adept at catching the slow boat to Ninigo. ■



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