



Patti Seery travels in a longboat, the transport that has taken her through the complex river system to remote villages in the Asmat region for over 20 years (left). In every village visited in the Asmat region Patti was greeted by community leaders as if she were a member of the clan returning from long travels (below).

Patti of Papua

Story and photographs by John Everingham

Strange bedfellows sometimes beget even stranger events. The rare spectacle of Asmat warriors in Irian Jaya surrounding the amazing *Silolona* (seen on this issue's cover), the finest exemplar ever of the traditional Indonesian *phinisi*, may be seen as the result of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC joining hands with the huge mining conglomerate Freeport. The Institute needs no introduction, while Freeport is also well known as the company digging up the richest mountain of copper and gold ever found, high in the remotest mountains of Papua New Guinea.

From *Silolona's* remote anchorage, just offshore of the regional centre of Agats, in one of Mother Earth's greatest swamps, we strained our eyes on clear mornings for some sign of this amazing mine, subject of countless news reports, good and bad. We saw no great scars on the mountains, nor could we spot the snaking highway, what some have called the

most amazing road in the world, that clings to near vertical rock walls. But we could distinguish another incredible sight - the shimmering white of the world's only tropical glacier.

In 1991, the halls of the Smithsonian witnessed a strange crossing of paths as a result of this cooperation between miner and museum. Patti Seery, back in Washington after years of residence in Indonesia, was doing the morning rounds of her new museum job. Suddenly, there on the floor in front of her, she encountered a tribe of 40 Papuan chiefs: Asmats, former headhunters from the lowland swamps, and the more gentle Danis and Lanis from the highlands. Both Dani and Asmat chiefs jumped up to greet her. As it turned out, they were old friends from earlier cultural tours in Jakarta and her own forays into the wilds of Eastern Indonesia. Some had even slept in her home in Jakarta.



The Smithsonian's "Dynamics of Irian" cultural tour, paid for by Freeport, was in danger of degenerating into another 1800s-style gawking at "primitive savages" by the "civilized" rich. So Patti was assigned to take over.





Silolona, more often photographed in tropical splendour, is seen at anchor in atypical territory, the muddy river system of the flat Asmat region of southern Papua (opposite and above). Viewed from the air, the canopy of Asmat stretches horizon to horizon as a virgin blanket, one of earth's few remaining expanses of untouched, tropical forest. It's an unusual forest too, with huge trees growing out of a vast swamp. Loggers were seen cutting in some areas.



The Smithsonian's "Dynamics of Irian" cultural tour, paid for by Freeport, was in danger of degenerating into another 1800s-style gawking at "primitive savages" by the "civilized" rich. So Patti, an Indonesian speaker with cultural sensitivities, as well as established friendships, was assigned to take over.

We seven guests aboard *Silolona* in October 2007 soon realized what an incredible, life-changing experience that trip had been for those Papuan chiefs. And what lucky beneficiaries we were of the above-mentioned, globe-crossing cultural coincidences. During the numerous grand receptions by local Asmat chiefs that we would experience, stories of the great American adventure of 1991 rose time and again. Legends, it seemed, had already started to spread across the land. Those 40 Papuan chiefs had experienced a four-month cultural rollercoaster, crisscrossing the USA, seeing everything from high-rise metropolises to the prairies, modern hotel rooms, snowy mountains, and native American reserves as well as a genuine American rollercoaster and

fun park.

Patti's role evolved from hand-holding tour guide to beloved protector and even mother of this disparate band of tribal chiefs. The swamp-bound Asmats back home could only fantasize when hearing the exciting and shocking tales from the Great American Adventure. In their eyes, only a mother goddess could protect the most powerful members of their tribe in such unimaginable places. Back in 1991, with their chiefs taken away by outside forces, many people back in the swamp villages had feared their chiefs had been abducted and killed by outsiders. When they suddenly reappeared, replete with stories of terrifying mechanized monsters, Mother Patti's protective guidance was often seen as the deliverance that brought their leaders home. Now, in 2007, she evidently enjoyed a reputation approximating that of a legendary saviour.

We guests basked in reflected adulation, as group after group of locals in motley garb ranging from tribal regalia to dirty Western scraps paddled up to *Silolona*,

Patti's role matured from tour guide to protector, even mother of this disparate band of tribal chiefs. The swamp-bound Asmats back home would be astonished at the exciting and shocking tales from the Great American Adventure.

Our arrival in the village was greeted by a rush of painted warriors screaming blood-curdling war cries, firing arrows close over our heads. Would our gaggle of foreign visitors dive back in, preferring their chances with the crocodiles?

scrambling aboard as if it were home, knowing that on this boat they were welcome. The well-heeled guests from the USA were pleasantly surprised by the unexpected company, snapping away with their cameras.

How the beat of jungle drums linked with cellphone technology this writer couldn't see, but, even as we approached Asmat territory, Patti was receiving intelligence about coming ceremonies, trying to coordinate her guests to take advantage of special invitations.

The Bist pole ceremony takes place in an Asmat village every 15 or 20 years, marking the deaths of members of families. The figures carved into each totem-like pole are images of deceased family members, whose spirits remain in the village. Generation to generation, the ceremony is held to release the spirits to the netherworld. The chances of catching such a rare event are remote at best. Yet under the wing of Mother Patti our group arrived an hour ahead of the critical ceremonial moment, and were seated as honoured guests. Following an introduc-

tion by Patti, we foreigners were in turn asked to address a gathering of tribal men, to talk about our countries, homes and families and why we had come to visit Asmat. After I explained why I hoped to photograph their ceremony, I was invited to join the very heart of the spirit release, climbing up with the Bist poles as souls flew into the sunlight.

But not all communications between jungle drum and radio frequency connects so smoothly.

Patti led her privileged group far upriver, winding through a labyrinthine network of swampy channels lined with mangrove and lianas. We were invited to join a "men's house" in the jungle, a semi-sacred site where ceremonies are concluded, and the people maintain contact with spirits and tradition. An hour later, our powered longboats nudged in to moor amid a fan of dugout canoes. The New Yorkers stepped out onto slippery palm logs, greeted by many hands extended to offer support. Through hundreds of metres of dense, tangled rainforest, an elevated highway of recently



Back in 1991, many people in the swamp villages feared their chiefs had been abducted and killed by outsiders. When they reappeared, replete with stories of terrifying mechanized monsters, Mother Patti was often described as an agent of their leaders' salvation.



Patti leads her guests down a specially prepared VIP highway of logs through the forest (above), recently cut to give access to a remote men's house where ceremonies were conducted deep in the forest.

felled logs laid with head-to-toe precision led the guests ever deeper. The side rails were an affectation to help the clumsy outsiders avoid slipping off the fresh trunks and avoid a dunking in the squishy swamp below. Scores of excited, half-dressed children shrieked and leaped log to branch through the forest with us. Deep in a sector of forest that had probably never before experienced alien visitors, we reached a small clearing with a single long building of logs, bamboo and palm-leaf thatch.

We foreigners were offered mats as special guests, while Patti was brought into the heart of the occasion as an honoured elder of the tribe. While all Asmat women were traditionally excluded from entry, exceptions were made for the foreign women. And what rationale the Asmat men gave for Patti's exalted "male" position I never did come to understand. After an hour of ceremonial incantations and communal dance, the guests were invited outside for the felling of a sago palm and extraction of its life-giving starch.

The following day, tenders and longboats again glided through the silent brown waterways, headed for a village where another solemn ceremony, one with grave implications for the spiritual health of the community, was to take place. Grand masks representing powerful souls were to be unveiled for a rare showing and release of souls. Until those souls flew, there was a perceived danger to all in the village. Previously, the masks had been seen only by a few local elders.

How Patti had read the drumbeats across such forests, managing to get us all invited to such an event, amazed her guests. Our boats again pulled up on a muddy river bank. We crossed a rough log bridge through abundant jungle that seemed to be fighting to get into the river. Smoky columns rising through thatched roofs marked the village where our arrival was greeted by a rush of painted warriors screaming blood-curdling war cries and firing arrows that flew close overhead. Had Patti not anchored this haphazard gaggle of alarmed foreigners, I could have imagined them immediately diving back into the



The 'Bist' pole ceremony to release the souls of the departed to the next world is held every 15 or 20 years in Asmat villages. Each carved figure in the poles represents a particular relative who has died, and only through this ceremony can their souls leave the village for the journey to the next world.

AusThai Marine Co., Ltd

When Quality Counts

FERRY
DIVE BOATS
FISHING
CABIN
CENTRE CONSOLE
FUNBOAT
RESORT
RESCUE
PATROL

SERIES PRODUCTION POWER CATAMARANS & MONOHULLS
6 METRES TO 12 METRES
CUSTOM BUILDING TO YOUR PLANS OR OURS
PROTOTYPING AND MOULD MAKING

AusThai Marine Co., Ltd
533/16 Moo 10 Hua Yai Banglamung, Chonburi
20260 Thailand
Telephone +66 (0)38999999 Facsimile +66 (0)38999999
Mobile (English) +66 (0)819401203 Mobile (Thai) +66 (0)818557053
Email : info@austhaimarine.com Website: www.austhaimarine.com



Group after group of locals in a motley array of dress from tribal regalia to dirty Western scraps paddled up to Silolona, scrambling aboard as if it were home, knowing that on this boat they were welcome.



Silolona has already achieved a level of 5-star service that few other boats can match. The cold drink on arrival was also extended to Patti's old friends in lower Asmat, those who helped her run her cultural tours through the remote regions of Papua long before she decided to build her own boat. And no, this was not a set-up for the camera.

muddy current, preferring to take their chances with the crocodiles that lurked silently in wait.

But the ceremony, where spirits would enjoy release via the greatly feared masked spirit figures, never did transpire. We were a day early. Moreover, given Patti's tight schedule of ceremonial visits, we couldn't return the next day. So Patti's aura faded just a little - our growing sense that here was no common mortal, but rather the Mother Goddess of Papua, was diminished enough to let us clumsier individuals feel less inadequate.

A cultural tour through Patti's "home" territories isn't merely a tour. It's an immersion. And her territory is not limited to the swamps of the Asmat. Before flying over the backbone of West Irian down to coastal flatlands, our group spent a week with her in the Baliem Valley. This central highland visit, another story altogether, was no less remarkable. We saw this woman awarded a

rare honorary title as a protector of the Dani people, and a community that viewed her arrival as the return of one of their own.

Yet perhaps the most interesting paradox, one intrinsic to this remarkable American woman, is her status right there on *Silolona*, her own beautiful boat. A woman as boat owner and sailor? In Indonesia, women are simply barred from all positions on boats at sea. Who can imagine what catastrophe might befall the ship that braves the waves with a female sailor aboard? Every Indonesian sailor could imagine any number of disasters that could strike a vessel by provoking powerful unseen presences through feminine folly. Tradition holds tight here, and finding a female working on an Indonesian boat is almost a contradiction in itself. So how does Patti manage to maintain her much-respected status?

"Well," she says, "my crew tell me I have the spirit of a man. So they have made me an honorary man."

Finally, in an airport in Papua, when no-one was looking, the camera caught the answer to a question that follows Patti wherever she travels; how could a woman build an amazing boat like **Silolona**? The answer is the secret to Patti's success: it doesn't matter which door you go through, just as long as you get the job done. And if it's an important occasion like this - she wanted to overhear conversations in the airport control tower to be sure her chartered aircraft did not get taken, a second time, by a higher bidder - it doesn't even need to be a door, a luggage shoot will do just fine. As long as the job gets done.

