

The Selling of the Last Savage

On a planet crowded with six billion people, isolated primitive cultures are getting pushed to the brink of extinction. Against this backdrop, a new form of adventure travel has raised an unsettling question: Would you pay to see tribes who have never laid eyes on an outsider?

By [Michael Behar](#)



SHOCKING SURPRISE: a native of West Papua, Indonesia, September 2004 (Stephen Dupont)

I'M SOMEWHERE in a godforsaken rainforest on the north coast of West Papua, Indonesia, and I'm ready to get the hell out of here. I'm five days into a three-week jungle trek with 43-year-old Bali-based outfitter Kelly Woolford, and things have gotten both weird and dangerous. Now I'm scared and confused, and I've lost all faith in my guide.

"We'll meet 'em, share a little tobacco, chill for a bit, and then move on—like passing nomads," Woolford had said. But five minutes ago we encountered bow-and-arrow-wielding bushmen who were so angry that they charged our camp, lobbing three arrows high above our heads. To avoid puncture wounds, I ran straight for a nearby river and almost swam across it, until I remembered that it contained crocodiles that might have torn me to shreds.

Despite all the chaos, Woolford seems detached, remaining calm and puffing a cigarette as our porters grapple for their machetes and bows. I ask for reassurance that I'm not about to get skewered, but his answer isn't very soothing: "If they want to fill our asses full of arrows, there isn't much we can do about it." True enough. Plus, Woolford already told me that if these men wanted to kill us, they would have done so by now.

Stephen Dupont Photos

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When I originally heard about First Contact, a trip offered by Woolford's trekking company, Papua Adventures, I couldn't believe he was really doing what he claimed to be doing. An easygoing American expat from Springfield, Missouri, who jokingly describes himself as a "hillbilly," Woolford marches into the jungle in search of uncontacted native tribes who have never seen outsiders—and who aren't supposed to mind tourists barging into their lives. I had trouble buying the idea that, in the 21st century, there were still nomadic hunter-gatherers out there using stone tools and rubbing sticks together to start a fire. But there are, Woolford assured me. From his home in Ubud, Bali, he explained the strategy behind his First Contact trips.

"There are a handful of places in West Papua that are untouched—still Stone Age tribes, still cannibals," he said. "It's just that a lot of people are too scared to go look for them."

Despite my initial reservations, when Woolford asked me to join his next trip to this easternmost province of Indonesia, which shares the island of New Guinea with the nation of Papua New Guinea, I decided that 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau might have had a point: Seeing a "noble savage" would rouse my spirit and reveal the primordial essence of my being. Of course, this outdated and arguably racist view ignores the fact that first contact has historically resulted in a deadly tsunami of disease, war, famine, slavery, and proselytization like those that engulfed nearly all of the world's tribal societies following the arrival of European explorers. But I signed on for the three-week trip anyway. Someone needed to check out Woolford's First Contact experience, which he was selling on the Web for \$8,000.

Making contact with tribal people is a risky business—a simple flu could wipe them out. But Kelly Woolford insists that he's mindful of such risks. "We don't try to corrupt them," he says. "Five minutes is all we do."

Right now, though, I'm regretting my eyes-wide-open approach, wondering if I'll end up like Alejandro Labaca, the Spanish Catholic missionary who made first contact with a remote Peruvian tribe in the 1970s. Labaca was later discovered, as Joe Kane wrote in his 1995 book *Savages*, "pinned to the ground, spread-eagled, by seventeen palm-wood spears, which jutted like porcupine quills from his throat, chest, arms, and thighs. His corpse was punctured in eighty-nine places."

Whether these natives are really "savages" or this whole encounter is some sort of bizarre put-on, I don't know. But I do know this: I'm freaking out.



OLD AQUAINTANCES: Woolford, far right, has connections all over West Papua. With him are two Baliem Valley tribesmen he's known since 1993. (Stephen Dupont)

NEARLY A YEAR AGO, I happened across Woolford's Web site, Papua-Adventures.com, while searching for outfitters in Indonesia. The site featured half a dozen tantalizing trips, but one in particular caught my eye: the First Contact expedition, billed as a "full-on exploratory" trek to find indigenous tribes, which Woolford defines as people who have not only never met or seen outsiders but are not even aware of their existence.

"According to anthropologists the best place... to make a 'First Contact' is indeed Papua," Woolford writes on the site. (Like many people, Woolford uses the province's official name, Papua, interchangeably with "West Papua," a more specific name favored by academics.) "In fact there are unexplored areas which harbor truly 'stone age' tribes."

This sounded incredible, so I started asking around and got different opinions on the likelihood of Woolford's claims.

"I don't believe there are any 'uncontacted' people, nor that anyone has to worry about making a 'first contact,'" Marshall Sahlins, professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Chicago, told me. But Miriam Ross, a researcher at Survival International (SI), a London-based nonprofit that works on behalf of indigenous people, estimated that at least 70 tribes—mostly scattered throughout the Amazon—remain uncontacted, entirely cut off from the outside world. After checking with other anthropologists, I learned that, based on word-of-mouth reports and the occasional sighting by a local villager out hunting, it's believed there may be a few uncontacted tribes still roaming the foothills, inland swamps, and low-lying jungle along West Papua's north coast.

"But how do you know where they are?" I asked Woolford.

"I study missionary literature," he said. "I study maps. I have good contacts in all the regions."

Woolford, who made his first trip to West Papua in 1989, led his inaugural First Contact trek in November 2003 with two paying clients: a retired 66-year-old Dutch orthopedic surgeon named Herbert Schrouff, and Robert Ferdiny, a 49-year-old veterinarian from Austria. The men were a week into the jungle when eight tribesmen emerged and pointed arrows at their heads, before calming down and allowing them to take a few photos. Ten minutes later, the encounter ended when Woolford's camera startled the natives. "They saw the flash and started to shoot their arrows," says Woolford. He and his group quickly beat it.



First contact trekkers cross a hastily built bridge. (Stephen Dupont)

Woolford's next trip was scheduled for September 2004, and I signed up. Ferdiny had already reserved a spot—his second trip—so he obviously had faith that Woolford wouldn't get us killed. As he described it, the lure of these trips was perfectly suited to his interests. "I like to see things that other people haven't—I guess that's a problem I have," Ferdiny told me later. "My wife tells me to leave the natives alone. Sometimes I wonder why I go."

I asked Woolford to arrange my *surat jalan*, a \$12 special permit, with the West Papuan police—mandatory for all foreigners traveling outside West Papua's larger towns. He'd also assemble a team of nine Papuan porters and arrange a boat to pick us up near Nabire, a scruffy port town of 26,000 on West Papua's Cendrawasih Bay, where we would begin our journey. To "protect the natives" and "keep out the idiots," Woolford forbids clients from carrying GPS devices and insists they keep the exact location and geographical markers of their treks secret. "We don't try to corrupt [the natives]," he said.

So how does he justify going at all?

"People are always looking for the latest thing. I wanted to see these tribes, but I couldn't afford it on my own. So I figured, why not get the experience, take some other people, and make money, too?"

"Besides," he joked, "I'm not giving 'em a Mini Maglite, and they're not gonna go out and get a plasma TV after we talk to 'em. Five minutes is all we do. My clients understand that."

Anthropologists I spoke with questioned these tactics. Intruding on uncontacted natives, they warned, is a recipe for disaster. And even though Woolford has experience in the field—he's made 26 trips into West Papua—he has no official scientific credentials, just a 1985 bachelor's degree in criminology, with a minor in sociology, from Springfield's Drury University.

"First-contact tribes in West Papua have typically been forced into marginal areas by more aggressive neighbors," warned William A. Foley, head of linguistics at Australia's University of Sydney, who has done field research in both West Papua and Papua New Guinea. "They don't have a positive view of people coming to see them, because in the past it has not led to positive results—i.e., people have been murdered, heads taken, eaten. So they shoot first and ask questions later. You can't just march in, because you could easily be shot at and somebody killed, and it can't be done for some bored Westerner who wants a thrill."

"First-contact tribes in West Papua don't have a positive view of people coming to see them," warned William Foley, an experienced field researcher at the University of Sydney. "You can't just march in because somebody could be killed."

First contact, especially with the wider outside world, has rarely been a pleasant business. When the earliest European explorers headed for new lands, they often traveled with a throng of soldiers in tow, just in case. For more than 300 years, from the late 1400s through the early 1800s, first-contact encounters were usually synonymous with swords, guns, and violent conquest. From Columbus to Captain Cook, the clash of modern and primitive has almost always led to disaster for native people, in the form of warfare, colonization, disease, and economic exploitation.

More recently, even distinguished anthropologists have been criticized for wreaking havoc on primitive tribes. In his 2000 book *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon*, author Patrick Tierney alleged that anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, then a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and University of Michigan geneticist James Neel conducted unethical research in the sixties and seventies on the Yanomamö, an indigenous group residing along the Brazil-Venezuela border in the Amazon. Tierney argued that Chagnon intentionally incited battles between the Yanomamö and neighboring tribes to study the relationship between aggression and reproductive success. Many anthropologists and scientific organizations feel that Tierney's criticisms of Chagnon were inaccurate or overstated, but whether the charges are true or not, they address an important dilemma: Does making contact with native tribes inevitably do more harm than good?

"If people are really a first contact, they don't even have resistance to colds," says Foley. "It is a big risk to their population—you're talking about small groups, no more than 100 people. You get a case of flu going through and you could wipe them out."

According to Fiona Watson, who coordinates field campaigns for Survival International staffers, in the years following first contacts, tribal populations can plummet by as much as half "purely because of disease." SI estimates that, stemming from this and other causes, several hundred tribes have gone extinct in South America alone since the era of colonization began in the 1500s.

This is one reason anthropologists increasingly shun the notion of first contact in favor of a more subdued approach. These days, a lone anthropologist will typically live with a known group for several months, chronicling cultural and social customs. In West Papua in particular, solitary surveys are also necessitated by government regulations: Indonesian officials—wary of foreign journalists and scientists who might publicize the mounting separatist movement being pushed by the Organisasi Papua Merdeka, or Free Papua Movement—have drastically limited permits for formal research in the province.

So how is Woolford able to operate? As an independent tour guide, he can move around the country more freely with clients who are on less-regulated tourist visas. Also, over the years he has befriended many of the officials in the regions he travels. But as much as anything, it's because West Papua is still a wild place.

I FIRST MET WOOLFORD at Bali's Ngurah Rai Airport on September 5, 2004. He's wearing an orange Patagonia T-shirt, cargo shorts, and Fila sneakers. He bears a startling resemblance to the actor Willem Dafoe; his reddish-blond hair is shoulder length, his face rugged and angular, with a thick brow and deep-set hazel eyes.

Woolford has lived in Bali since 1997. He rents a cramped cottage for \$70 a month in Ubud, a quaint Balinese village set amid rice fields and crumbling Hindu temples. To raise extra cash between treks, Woolford gives tennis lessons at the five-star Maya Ubud Resort. He doesn't drink and is a strict vegetarian, but he can't seem to get enough *kreteks* (clove-laced cigarettes), which he smokes throughout most of our hourlong drive to Ubud.



A somber escape toward Nabire and safety after a frightening encounter. (Stephen Dupont)

As the minivan weaves through traffic, Woolford lays out our game plan. In the last two weeks his porters have made two trips to the outskirts of the region we intend to visit. They've taken rice, gasoline, and money to pay off a tribal native named Hiri Didat—the *kepala desa*, or regional chief—whose permission we need to travel inland and who will accompany us on our trek.

While Woolford talks, he frequently interrupts himself with accounts of calamity in the jungle. One time in Papua New Guinea, he tells me, "I saw several tribal fights and even walked through the middle of one. They saw me coming, and both sides stopped shooting arrows so I could pass. When I passed the very last man, they resumed shooting." More recently, Woolford claims, he's visited tribes that practice cannibalism, a ritual that many experts say ended decades ago.

Later, over dinner in Ubud,

Rumors of cannibals have resounded for decades in West Papua. In 1961, Michael Rockefeller disappeared in the province during a Harvard-sponsored expedition; years later, rumors surfaced that he was captured, killed, and perhaps eaten.

I press Woolford for assurances about our upcoming trek. What exactly are his plans if we find a tribe that turns out to be hostile?

"The strategy is to approach the same men we saw last year," he explains.

"But weren't these the guys who chased you out of the jungle?"

"Yes, but the hope is we can soften them up with tobacco, then convince them to take us farther upriver to the next tribe."

Three days later, we fly to Nabire, then drive 45 minutes to meet our boat at a small, seldom used harbor north of town. William Rumbarar, 35, Woolford's local Papuan go-to guy, and six porters are already on board the 30-foot canoe, called a *prahu*; three more will meet us at base camp. Woolford, Ferdiny, 37-year-old Australian photographer Stephen Dupont, and I climb atop a heap of supplies shoved into the hull. I notice that the only potential weapons Woolford has packed are a few machetes, which we'll use to cut a path through the rainforest. He tells me the porters upriver have bows and arrows and a BB gun but that these are strictly for hunting crocodiles and birds.

We follow the coast north, cruising at about 15 knots. An unvarying coat of green stretches 20 miles inland, then vanishes under a low curtain of mist. Through the fog we see the distant peaks of the Kobowre Mountains, part of New Guinea's east-west backbone, which thrusts 16,000 feet skyward.



TOUGH GOING: The author and four First Contact porters in the jungle of West Papua. (Stephen Dupont)

As one descends either north toward the South Pacific or south to the Arafura and Coral seas, the mountains yield to alpine grasslands, montane forests, and, finally, lowland jungle and mangrove swamps. The island's topographic diversity harbors more than 20,000 plant species and a panoply of birds, insects, reptiles, mammals, and marsupials: tree kangaroos and giant butterflies, flying foxes and spiny anteaters. One particularly nasty beast, a bird called the cassowary—the largest land animal in New Guinea—has been known to fillet trespassers with the flick of a giant claw.

And then there are the rumors of cannibals, which have resounded for decades. On November 18, 1961, 23-year-old Michael Rockefeller, son of New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, was in the province on an expedition sponsored by Harvard University. The team discovered a previously undocumented tribe, part of the Kurelu people, in West Papua's Baliem Valley. Rockefeller remained in Papua to collect native art, but his boat overturned one day while he was traveling along the coast, and he was last seen, swimming for shore, by his colleague René Wassing, an anthropologist. Years later, rumors surfaced that Rockefeller had been captured, killed, and perhaps eaten by cannibals.

Papua has always been mysterious. Tales of black-sand beaches strewn with gold nuggets lured some of the earliest explorers. Portuguese mariners, eager to expand their empire east to dominate the legendary Spice Islands, reportedly first spotted New Guinea's coast in 1511. In 1526, Jorge de Meneses, the Portuguese governor of the Spice Islands, made landfall on the northwestern tip of what is now West Papua and christened it Ilhas dos Papuas, or "Island of the Fuzzy-Haired People." (Until 2002, the province was called Irian Jaya. *Irian* is a Papuan word meaning "hot land rising from the sea," and *Jaya* is Indonesian for "glorious." The name was changed to Papua by former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, mainly to appease West Papuan separatists.)

For two centuries, Portugal and Spain vied for authority of New Guinea. Neither succeeded. Under the Treaty of Utrecht, in 1714, Holland and Britain gained control of the island. In 1895, New Guinea was split at the 141st parallel: The Dutch staked claim to the western half, calling it Dutch New Guinea, and the Brits and Germans acquired the eastern territory. It wasn't until the early 20th century that, as one historian I spoke with put it, "the Dutch finally decided to see what they got out of the deal." In the first half of the last century, more than 140 expeditions were mobilized to survey the territory.

It's hard to believe that after such intense scrutiny, there would be any tribes left in West Papua that qualify for Woolford's definition of first contact. During World War II, Allied bombers pounded the Japanese holed up on neighboring Biak Island between May and August of 1944. Natives living anywhere along West Papua's north coast would have seen and heard the bombers and realized there was a world beyond the jungle.

"[West Papuan] tribes are not uncontacted in any absolute sense," argues Paul Michael Taylor, an anthropologist and curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, in Washington, D.C. "They've been trading crocodiles and bird of paradise feathers and have had access to metals and tobacco for a long time. So they've always been in contact; it's just a question of degree."

Before leaving Nabire, Woolford agrees that his definition of first contact may need to be modified. Should we actually encounter a tribe in the jungle, he says, it might be impossible to determine whether they have ever set eyes on an outsider. But there are certain clues to watch for.

"One is to see what kind of body decoration they're wearing. Check for plastic, metal, and synthetic materials," he says. "Another thing is to look at their tools. Do they have metal knives or a machete?"

Lastly, Woolford adds, we should watch their facial expressions to see if they appear unusually frightened or nervous. "Papuanians are scared of the unknown."

BY LATE AFTERNOON on September 12, we've covered roughly 70 miles of virtually uninhabited coastline. That's not surprising, considering that West Papua has about 2.2 million people in an area slightly larger than California. When we finally reach our base camp, a large clearing in the jungle next to the river, the remaining porters are waiting for us. They've been fishing and croc hunting for the past couple of days from a tiny *prahu* anchored in the reeds. In the clearing there's a rain shelter, called a *pondok*, about 40 feet long and 15 feet wide, with bouncy bamboo floors, roofed with palm fronds, and open on all sides. Next to it is a small cooking hut where one of the porters is roasting an emerald dove he shot with the BB gun.



REGROUPING: from left: Ferdiny, Woolford, and the author weighing options in base camp after the initial encounter. (Stephen Dupont)

Rain pummels us all night. It's unbearably humid, and the air in my tent is thick and stifling. I wake up soggy and cursing, having to mop up water pooling under my sleeping bag. The next morning my mood is worsened by Woolford's ability to survive off little more than cigarettes and coffee. We eat just two meals a day. Breakfast is always the same: instant oatmeal, coffee, and stale biscuits. Dinner typically consists of freeze-dried noodles or fried rice smothered in ketchup and chili sauce, sometimes with cabbage thrown in.

Gnawing on hard biscuits and gulping down watery coffee, I listen to Woolford.

"If we make friends with these first guys from last year," he says, "they will be able to take us to the location

Something doesn't feel right. The jungle is claustrophobic and, at times, maddening—and I have an eerie sensation we're being watched.

of the other guys. The way in Papua is that you gotta go slowly, slowly. You can't just barge right in and bust into their camp. They'll be angry and we'll lose everything."

We enter the jungle shortly before noon, walking south, away from the river. The forest's canopy is nearly solid; only the faintest spears of sunlight penetrate the crown. Some of the tallest trees, called matoas, soar over a hundred feet. As our group spreads out single-file, I lose sight of everyone except the porter directly in front of me. There is no discernible trail, and when he gets too far ahead, swallowed by the jungle, I become totally disoriented and have to call out for directions.

"How do they know where they're going?" I ask Woolford when we stop to wait for the porters to stuff betelnut—a mild stimulant extracted from the betel palm—into their cheeks.

"They're Papuans, man. This is their turf. They just have a sense about which way to go."

At one point I stumble and come within inches of stepping on a death adder—"one of the deadliest snakes in Papua," Woolford tells me later. A porter sees me staring at it, grabs a stick, and clubs it to death.

Aside from the stinging clouds of mosquitoes, the jungle is nearly motionless. Unseen parrots, cockatoos, and hornbills cry out from above. Invisible cicadas screech. After four hours of walking, we decide to set up camp next to a shallow creek. Our porters grab machetes and hack down brush and spindly trees. Within minutes they've cut a swath for our tents. Using the fresh-cut timber and vines, they assemble a large eating table, a long bench, a cooking hut, and a shelter roomy enough for all 14 of us to huddle under when the afternoon rains commence.

Dusk descends on the jungle, and depth, color, and texture slowly fade away. Then something strange happens: Seemingly out of nowhere, an unknown man starts calling from the darkness. His voice is shrill and quivering. It's not anybody from our group. According to my map, we're nearly a hundred miles from any significant settlement or village. One of our porters, a 25-year-old Papuan named Yakobus, grabs a pouch of rolling tobacco and wades through the creek toward a rustle in the trees.

"*Tsabat! Tsabat! Tsabat!*" he hollers, holding the tobacco in his outstretched hand. "*Tsabat! Tsabat! Tsabat!*"

"What's Yakobus saying?" I ask Woolford.

"I think it means *tobacco*," he says.

"In what language?"

"Burate, the language of the region. About 100 people speak it."

The figure passes between two trees, and I catch a glimpse of his grass skirt and an enormous longbow, which looks to be six feet tall. As Yakobus gets closer, the man's shouts get louder—now coming in short, angry snorts. Whoever this guy is, he's not too thrilled we're here. After Yakobus makes a few more attempts to give him tobacco, the stranger slips into the jungle, his shouts fading as he recedes.

Yakobus returns, wide-eyed and frightened. He thinks the man might be a chief of some sort. He tells Woolford that earlier, while the porters prepared our dinner, he went to scout our route for the next morning and stumbled across seven tribesmen crowded in a tiny bivouac about a mile from our camp. Initially Yakobus thought he recognized the men as members of the Keu tribe,

who are known to hunt in the area, but he couldn't be sure. He'd tried giving them several packets of loose tobacco as an offering. "But they started reaching for their bows," Yakobus says to Woolford, who translates the news to us. "I tried to give them the tobacco again, but they hit it out of my hand and ran into the jungle."

At first Woolford seems bewildered, which makes me nervous. But then he says this kind of aggressive behavior is normal and that it sometimes takes several days of approaching and retreating before a new tribe will allow outsiders to sit with them. I try to relax.

"At least they know we're here," Woolford says, lighting up a *kretek*. "Tomorrow we'll try again."



CULTURE CLASH: A group of tribesmen surround Woolford's expedition. (Stephen Dupont)

EARLY THE NEXT DAY, on September 14, Woolford, Dupont, Ferdiny, Yakobus, and I set out from camp with three other porters. Everyone else stays behind. I'm wishing I could do the same. Something just doesn't feel right. The jungle is claustrophobic and, at times, maddening—the incessant rain, heat, and mud, the screeching of cicadas, the eerie sensation we're being watched.

We've walked for hardly 15 minutes when I smell smoke. It's the campfire of the native party. Yakobus calls out, "Whooo-ahhh, whooo-ahhh," warning of our approach. Another porter beats the trunk of a matoa with a walking stick, sounding a booming thud so intense I can feel the thump on my chest. We're all bunched together about 20 yards from what appears to be the entrance to a three-sided bush shelter or bivouac. Nobody speaks.

Then all hell breaks loose. There's hysterical screaming and shouting. It's the natives, who leap through the

back of their bivouac. Twigs are snapping in every direction. I hear bare feet slapping the mud, more yelling, and bursts of frantic, hyperventilated babble. Within seconds the natives have surrounded us, almost entirely camouflaged by the jungle. They're about 40 feet away. To my right I see one lean out from behind a tree, then pull his bowstring taut and release it. I wince, then exhale. The bow is empty: no arrow. Another man does the same to my left. Then two others move to within 20 feet and twice more pull and release their bowstrings. It's a show of force—they could have shot us dead already if that was their goal.

Nobody speaks. Then all hell breaks loose. There's hysterical screaming and shouting. It's the natives. Within seconds, they have surrounded us, camouflaged by the jungle.

Yakobus tries to lure the natives back to their bivouac, repeating, "*Tsabat! Tsabat!*" and holding his hands above his head to show that he's unarmed. Twice he coaxes the men closer, but they panic when they see us and disappear into the jungle, whooping and yelping. After several minutes, Yakobus succeeds in calling all the natives to their bivouac. I grab the video camera we've brought and start shooting. There are eight of them: seven younger ones, possibly in their teens or early twenties, and one older man, likely the person who came near our camp the night before.

The men are wearing black headdresses that resemble chin-length dreadlocks. Made from cassowary feathers, the headdresses cover most of their faces. Some have tied the feathers into a kind of ponytail, and one has painted a pair of parallel white stripes down the center of his forehead. Strips of bright-yellow leaves are wrapped around their biceps. Each is wearing a skirt constructed of the same leaves, with a long strip of brown bark holding it in place. They stand motionless and silent in the bivouac just long enough for Dupont to click off a few photos.

That's when I notice that their hands are trembling. They look absolutely terrified. A wave of guilt washes over me. One of the men barks a command, and once again they dash into the jungle.

"This is very wrong," I snap at Woolford. "We need to leave right now. We shouldn't be doing this. They're really freaked out."

Yakobus makes a few halfhearted attempts to bring the men back but then suggests we return to camp and try again in the morning.

"Try again?" I mutter, still amped and jittery. As we retreat, I hear one of the tribesmen chant, "Wu-hu-hu, wu-hu-hu," in the distance. The others join in, repeating the phrase in haunting tones and in syncopated rhythm. It's hypnotic and beautiful—a show of solidarity, perhaps, to celebrate their having chased us off.

In the morning we set off toward the natives' bivouac once again. But this time their shelter is empty, their fire cold. On the walk back to our bush camp, the porters smoke kreteks and mumble quietly to one another. When we rejoin the others at camp, the *kepala desa*, Hiri Didat, hears our story and starts pacing back and forth. "I'm afraid that they might still be around here, circling the place," he warns Woolford.

Woolford mentions that the older man might have been the chief he encountered last year. But he's not certain about the others and has no idea what they'll do next.

"There are three possibilities," Woolford surmises. "They've gone farther away, they're circling around, or they've gone for reinforcements and might come back to attack us."

"Attack us?" I whimper.

"That means we are not safe," says Ferdiny.

"No shit," I say, noticing that the porters have already started to pack our gear, scurrying around camp at twice the speed I've seen them move before.

"The natives can follow our footprints and come attack us at base camp later," says Rumbarar, the local guide, who has barely uttered a word the entire trip. "But if they come back, it'll be more than eight people." Rumbarar then tells Woolford that the tribesmen were responsible for triggering the rainstorm last night, so they could abscond in the dark without being followed.

"The rain covers their footprints in the mud," says Rumbarar.

"Yeah, they made the rain," says Woolford. "They can do that. I've seen it happen in other parts of Papua."

"They can't make it rain," I interject. "So stop saying that."

"You don't believe me?" says Woolford. "It's true—I've seen it with my own eyes."

"I think this is a good note to leave on," says Ferdiny.

During the hike back to base camp, Dupont, Ferdiny, and I stick close together. Woolford is ahead of us and out of earshot. For the first time, we discuss the possibility that he might have sent word ahead that he was bringing Westerners into the jungle expecting to see wild, uncontacted tribes, and made arrangements for a staged encounter with our group.

"I think it might be a trick," Ferdiny whispers to me.

"I'm having a hard time believing that only a four-hour walk from the river, these tribesmen are so close by," I say.

"I'm really suspicious, too," says Dupont. "But I'm just not sure if it's a hoax, either."

We walk quietly but quickly. Every pop, screech, chirp, and whir—the sounds of the jungle—causes me to corkscrew my head in all directions, certain we're being followed.

BACK AT CAMP THAT NIGHT, it's nearing sunset and the sky is alive—drenched in shifting hues of fiery orange, crimson, and violet. We've been in the jungle for four days now, and I'm wiped out. I decide to take a nap in my tent before dinner. Minutes after dozing off, I hear shouts and someone yelling, "They're coming, they're coming! They've stalked us to the river!" I shove on my hiking boots and scoot backwards out of my tent. Then I see eight burly natives charging straight at me—bows and arrows at the ready.

Adrenaline kicks in and, without thinking, I break into a full sprint, then lunge headlong over a near-vertical embankment that drops nearly 20 feet into a gurgling river. I land on a narrow, vine-snarled ledge a few inches above the water. Only later will I find out that arrows were flying over my head.

For the moment I'm safe. I claw halfway up the slope, and thorns slice my arms. Squatting in a thicket of ferns, I glance up ward and catch sight of two natives peering over the edge a few feet above. They're probably wondering who would be foolish enough to jump into this river. I hold my breath and keep silent.

The tribesmen lose interest. I inch a bit farther upslope and watch the men hustle through camp and toward our porters,



*NO SALE: the kepala desa trying to give tobacco to tribesmen.
(Stephen Dupont)*

The men stand should to shoulder, glaring at us from

who are barking orders and scrambling for their machetes and bows. Crouching in the bushes, bruised and scared, I envision death by wooden arrow. Then I see a porter looking for me. So I hop over the riverbank and reveal myself to the natives, who, to my astonishment, are standing in front of Dupont for an impromptu photo shoot. At that moment, in a way I can't really explain, it all starts to seem absurd.

beneath their cassowary headdresses. A porter's dog yaps, startling them. As they dart into the jungle, Yakobus chases after them, hollering, "Tsabat! Tsabat!"

"Oh, please," I hear myself saying. "Give it a rest... lose the bows and arrows and phony outfits. This is a hoax, right?"

No reaction. Maybe it isn't a hoax.

About ten feet to my right, the *kepala desa* grabs his bow. Two of the other porters are clutching machetes, and the rest of the men are cowering near the back of their *pondok*.

The natives stand shoulder to shoulder, glaring at us from beneath their cassowary headdresses, then abruptly look away, as if embarrassed. One of the porters has brought along his dog, which begins to yap loudly, startling the tribesmen, who dart into the jungle. The *kepala desa* and Yakobus chase after them, hollering "Tsabat! Tsabat!"

Five minutes later, the natives return, looking calmer, and march in line into our campsite. Dupont gets within a few feet of the chief and continues snapping photos. Another five minutes pass. Then one of the natives shouts an order that prompts them to scurry into the jungle. One last time, Yakobus cajoles them back. By now it's dark. The tribesmen watch us from the edge of the forest, but when one of the porters ignites our kerosene lantern, the flash of white light scares them off for good.

Rumbarar suggests we pack all our gear in case we need to make a quick getaway in the night. We agree that it's too late to navigate the boats downriver in the dark. But everyone is afraid—Rumbarar, the porters, even the *kepala desa*, who Woolford claims has killed foes in tribal skirmishes. We speculate about how best to protect ourselves, and our words sound like dialogue from a cornball zombie flick:

Ferdiny: "Should we sleep here in the *pondok* or in the tents?"

Dupont: "Maybe they only kill at night?"

Ferdiny: "Maybe they only kill people wearing headlamps?"

Dupont: "I'm quite serious, Robert. They shot three arrows."

Ferdiny: "If they come in the night, we can use our camera flashes in their eyes."

Woolford: "Yeah, we'll flash 'em and back onto the boat."

It's beginning to rain. Ferdiny drags his tent from the edge of the jungle closer to the river. Dupont and I decide to sleep under the *pondok* with the porters. I spend the night fully dressed, boots on, heart racing, transfixed by the jungle. The rain is torrential and unrelenting. Lightning explodes above us. For a split second, the flashes illuminate everything in a blaze of white. The next bolt, I'm convinced, will reveal our attackers bounding toward us in the downpour.

At dawn, everyone is awake and scrambling to pack up and get out. By 7:30 our *prahu* is roaring downriver toward the open sea, toward Nabire and safety.

SIX DAYS AFTER OUR RIVER ESCAPE, I part ways with the group in the Papuan highland town of Wamena, where we've come to hike and decompress in the tranquil Baliem Valley. I'm due back in the States, but Dupont and I, still suspicious and troubled by our surreal sighting, decide that Dupont should interview Woolford on videotape when the two return to Bali, away from the distractions of West Papua.

During that session, Dupont mentions that some of us had doubts about the authenticity of our encounter. Woolford, not surprisingly, insists it was genuine.

"So nothing was arranged in advance?" asks Dupont.

"Oh, no, not at all. I couldn't do that. That's beyond me," Woolford says. "Papua is so weird, you don't need to stage anything. It's the land of the unexpected."

Two weeks later, back home in Virginia, I send three hours of our video footage to several anthropologists familiar with West Papuan tribes. None of them is convinced by it.

"I'm 95 percent sure it is a hoax," the University of Sydney's William Foley declares after watching it. He's struck by the fact that the natives didn't appear to have any skin diseases, which are endemic among bushmen. "This is unheard of for people living in the forest," he says. "The guys are too clean. Secondly, their dress is far too elaborate. That's the kind of dress they wear when doing a ceremony. That's not what they wear when they go out hunting and collecting food. All those headdresses—no way."

Other anthropologists have similar reactions. Paul Taylor, at the Smithsonian, adds that it wouldn't be too difficult to hire local villagers to stash their Western garb and don traditional dress, then pretend to be "discovered" as Woolford's clients plod through the jungle. "The big question in my mind," says Taylor, "is whether this is something he's paid these people to do over and over again." Whatever is going on, Taylor doesn't like it. "If it's not a first-contact situation, then it's fraudulent. And if it is a first-contact situation, then it's an insensitive way to go about it."

Everyone is afraid—Bumbarar, the porters, even the kepala desa who Woolford claims has killed foes in tribal skirmishes.

When I play the video for Eben Kirksey, a doctoral candidate at the University of California at Santa Cruz and one of the few scientists who has been granted permission to conduct research in West Papua, he notices many of the same suspicious details as Foley did—elaborate clothing, lack of skin diseases—but he also sees details that make him think some of what we experienced was authentic.

"The *kepala desa* looked really scared," he says.

The video footage supports this. I decide to have more of the *kepala desa*'s and the other porters' dialogue translated. Some of their talk is captured on camera when they don't know they're being filmed. In one scene, after the tribesmen storm our campsite at the river, the *kepala desa* says to Woolford, "I was so scared, I wanted to attack them when they shot the arrows."

I also interview several of Woolford's friends, curious about whether they think he'd deliberately dupe his clients. They unanimously insist that he wouldn't. They cite his "obvious love for the Papuan people" and call him "a stickler for being a man of his word." Laurence Livingston, a 43-year-old commercial beer brewer who lives in Homer, Alaska, roomed with Woolford in college, and the two have remained close ever since. "He is not into bullshit and scams," Livingston says. "The guy's for real."

Livingston suggests one possibility that I'd also been contemplating: If the trip was a hoax, then one of the locals might have set it up, unbeknownst to Woolford and the other porters. It's at least a plausible theory—if a First Contact trek turned up nothing, Woolford would not return to that area of West Papua, and the porters would be out of a job.

Woolford, for his part, fires right back when I run the anthropologists' remarks by him, starting with a comment that anyone who doubts his word should come along on a trip. "Some of these people are just lecturers at nice universities who have tenure and cushy jobs," he says. "If they think I've staged this, then come with me. I give them an open invitation to see for themselves. They can feel the energy of these guys, see them run around, see them barreling down and pointing arrows at them."

As for the appearance of the tribesmen, Woolford says the abundance of freshwater streams in the area means that the men we saw can bathe regularly. He chalks the elaborate ceremonial dress up to adolescent preening.

"Anywhere you go in the world, New York City or wherever, teenagers are always dressed to the hilt," he says. "In Papua's Lani country, the young guys wear *kotekas* [penis gourds] so big that it's obscene. I think that's the case with the guys we saw."

FIRST CONTACT OR HOAX? I may never know. The last time I speak with Woolford, in December 2004, he's almost positive that the older man we came across was the same tribal chief he saw last year, but he's still uncertain about the rest of the men. He's already scheduled his next First Contact trek for August 2005, based on information he's gathered about an unknown tribe sighted in an area roughly 100 miles north of where we trekked. Woolford says this could be one of his last First Contact expeditions.

"People pay a lot of money for this trip, and I want to try to find them something," he says. "But locating new tribes is getting harder and harder—and who knows what you are going to come across, if anything."

As I listen to Woolford, he seems heartfelt and sincere, like a man who really wants to give his clients their money's worth. His love of the province is obvious, and he treats his porters exceptionally well, paying them generously and often buying them rubber boots and clothing.

Nevertheless, I can't stop feeling like I've done something wrong by participating in the First Contact experience, even if Woolford is correct in his belief that his treks are helping redefine exploration in a positive manner. The way Woolford sees it, the scholarly elite, once the gatekeepers of discovery, are having to make room for any adventure seeker who can pay for the experience. To him, the First Contact expedition is a means to further democratize the process.

"If a postal clerk is interested in primitive times," he argues, "who am I to say, 'Oh, you only graduated from high school—you don't have a degree in anthropology; therefore, you're not qualified to see these people'? If you are fit, and you want to pay, then you should have the right to go."

Perhaps Woolford has a point. I confess that, a week after returning home, my reaction against what I see as his risky, exploitative style starts to fade. My intuition tells me that what I saw on our trek can't possibly exist. But what if it does? What if West Papua is the last place on earth where ghosts of the past still thrive in the present—where the surreal becomes real?

Now all I want to do is go back. But I don't know if I should.