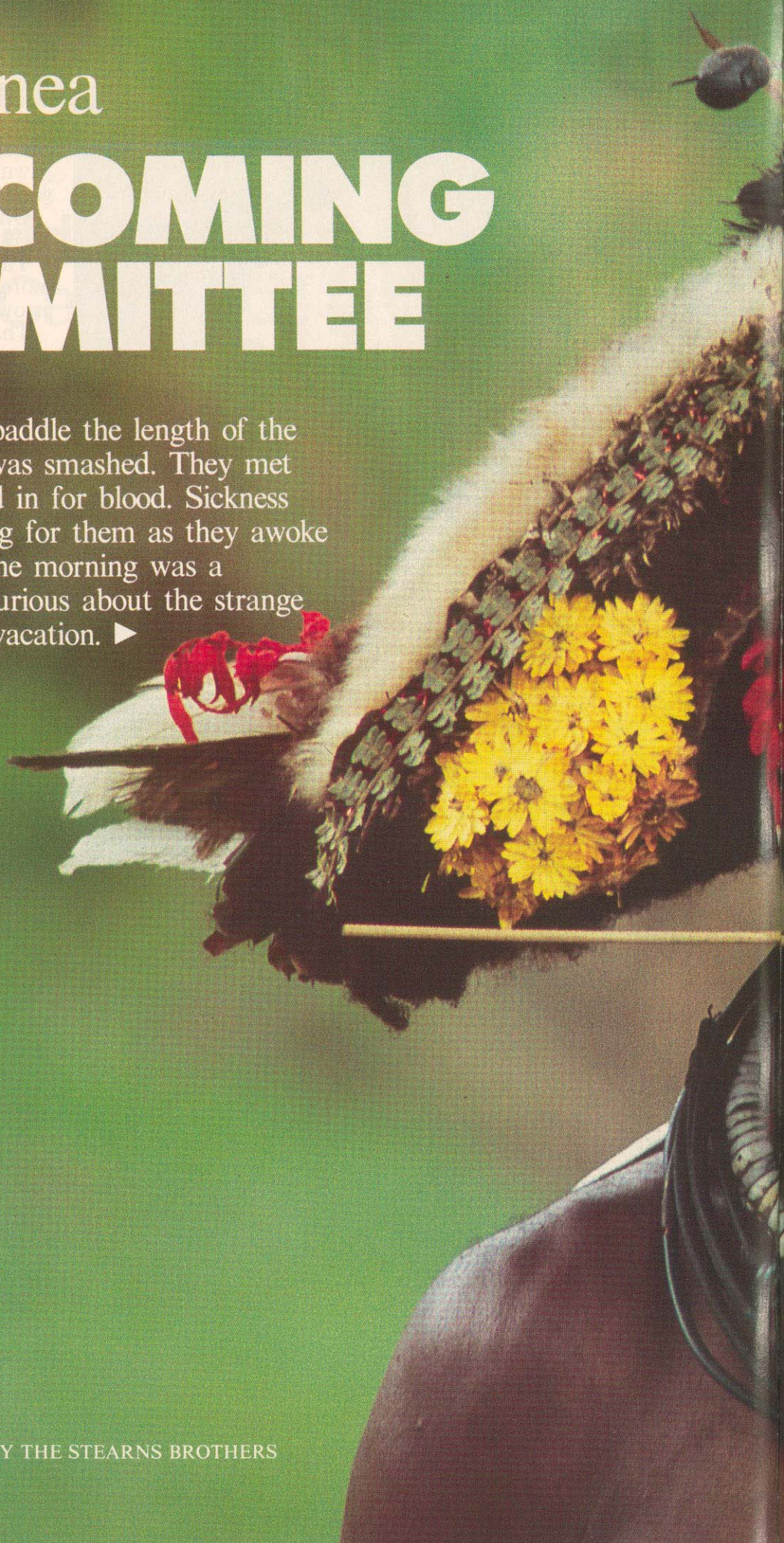


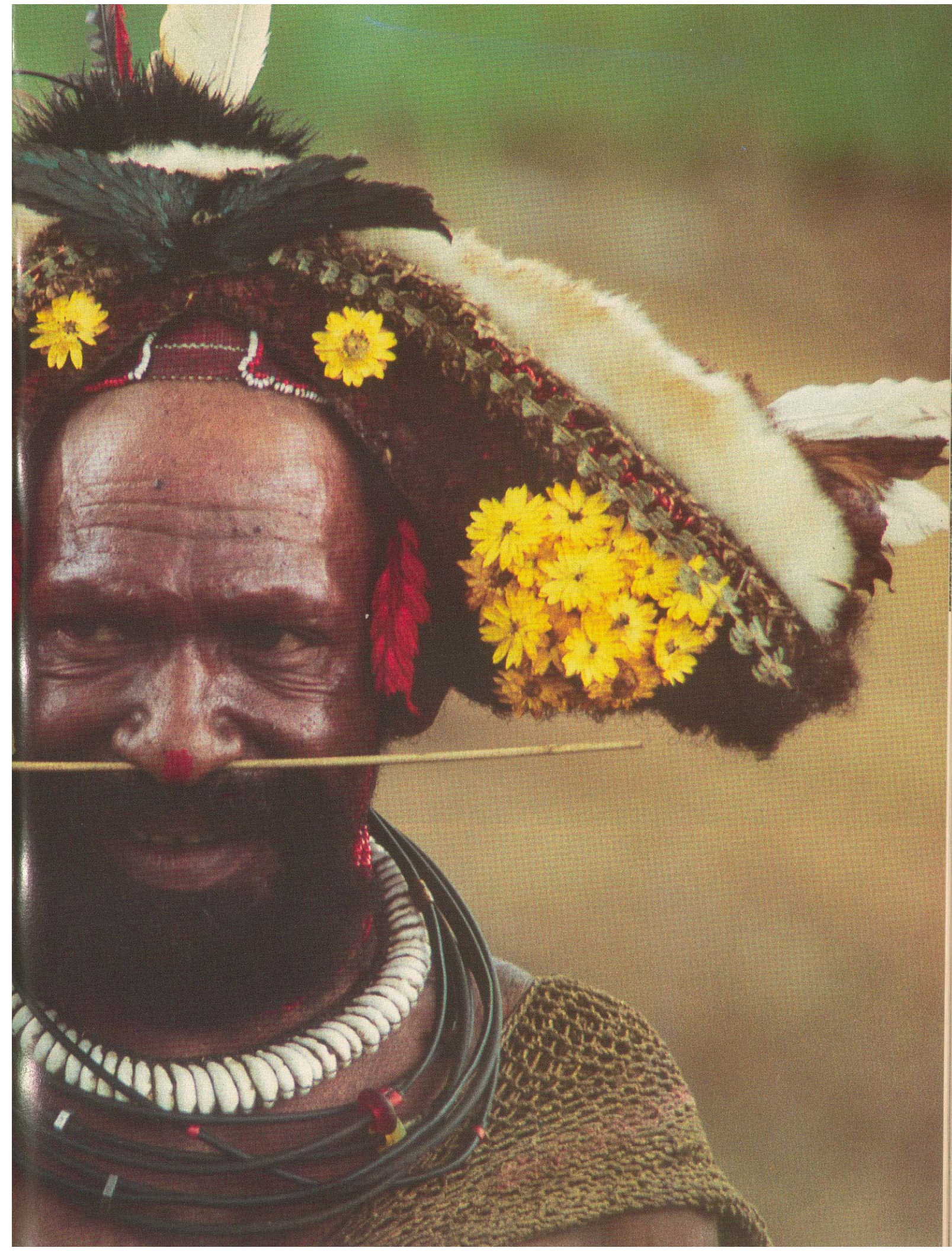
New Guinea

# WELCOMING COMMITTEE

They were the first to paddle the length of the Sepik River. A kayak was smashed. They met crocodiles. Bugs zoomed in for blood. Sickness weakened them. Waiting for them as they awoke in their sleeping bags one morning was a welcoming committee curious about the strange ways of white men on vacation. ►

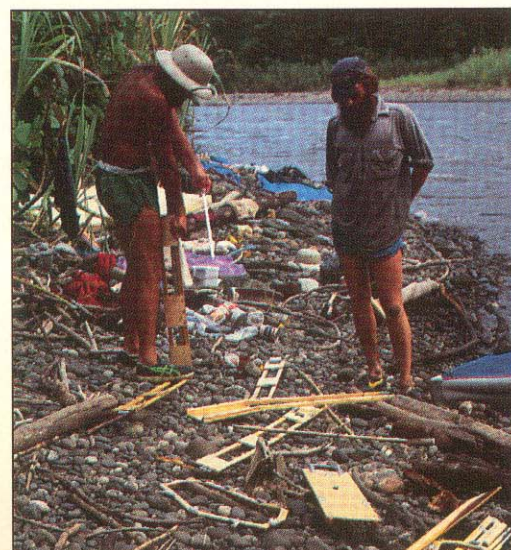


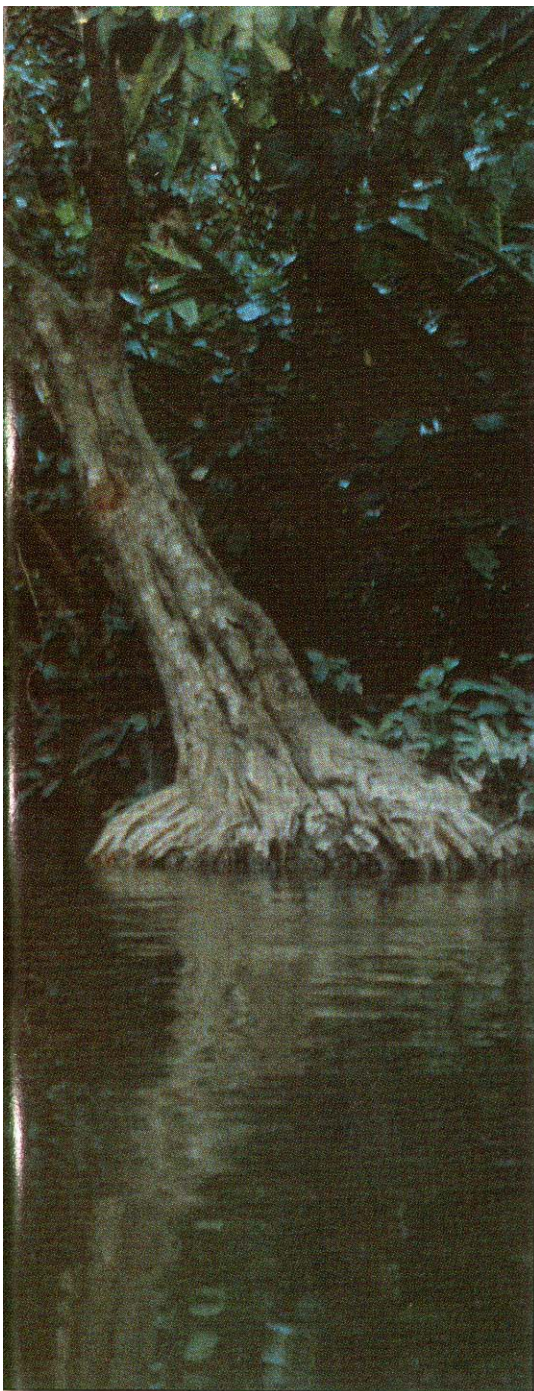
BY ERIC HOFFMAN PHOTOS BY THE STEARNS BROTHERS





The Sepik River can flow fast and smash a kayak (below). Beside the river, paddlers join their hosts in gnawing on sugar cane.





▶ The helicopter pilot grimaced, shook his head disapprovingly and said to the three Stearns brothers, "Good luck, you'll need it." The helicopter lifted off the sandbar and disappeared above the jungle canopy of New Guinea's Sepik River Gorge. Its resonating thumpty-thump faded and gave way to a distant siren sound produced by millions of tiny wingbeats as dark clouds of voracious mosquitoes descended and blanketed any blood-filled creature that dared come out of hiding.

Tony Stearns wondered if he could suffocate from inhaling mosquitoes as he and his brothers, Mark and Paul, dug through their supplies for mosquito netting, gloves, and long pants. They raced to assemble their four-meter-long canvas-covered kayaks and start their river journey.

### The First Time

The Sepik River had been negotiated in sections by anthropological expeditions, natives in dugouts and tour boats on the tamer parts near the coast. Nobody had ridden the 1,100-kilometer river from its headwaters to the Pacific Ocean. Roughly half the size of Sweden, New Guinea is the largest of the Solomon Islands and lies about 80 kilometers off the northern tip of Australia. The island is controlled by two nations, the eastern half by Papua New Guinea, which received its independence from Australia in 1975; the western portion, Irian Jaya, governed nominally by Indonesia.

In reality the concept of nation-

alism has been slow to take hold in the jungles of New Guinea and along the Sepik, where best-dressed men wear penis gourds, have fiercely painted faces and bones stuck through their noses, and rarely leave home without their axes, lances, and bows and arrows.

The Stearnses are not professional adventurers. At 32, Paul, a logger with a college degree in biology, is the oldest. Tony, the middle brother, is a doctor in Los Angeles, and Mark, 28, is a wildlife biologist in Alaska. At least once a year they have a reunion and it's usually on a river. "Besides being brothers we're best friends and have enjoyed river running for years," says Tony Stearns. "We've found river running provides excitement and, because it is intense and emotional, strengthens ties among those who share the experience."

Among the rivers the Stearnses have run are the Colorado, Trinity, and Rouge in the western United States and the Rio Grande de Santiago in Mexico. They decided on New Guinea because, according to Tony Stearns, "We had developed the skills to run rivers anywhere in the world and had always wanted to see the people of New Guinea before their cultures were erased forever. Plus, being the first to do something always adds incentive."

### Plan Ahead

The trip wasn't undertaken lightly. Tony Stearns, the doctor, took a summer job in an emergency clinic in a New Guinea highlands hospital to learn more about the country. He treated leprosy and snake bites, as well as arrow and lance wounds resulting from "payback," intertribal skirmishes aimed at settling disputes whose origins have been lost in time.

In order to converse with the islanders, Tony learned pidgin English, a language that evolved from blending the English of early European traders with local dialects. He researched the Sepik River by talking with a helicopter pilot who had seen most of it from the air and by studying a crude topographic map.

Tony found that enthusiasm about the river run was uniformly non-existent. "Everyone saw doom. Government people worried about Indonesian rebels where the upper Sepik crossed into Irian Jaya. Missionaries said the water was too dangerous, and there was a strong





Well, have you seen what they're wearing on the streets of Copenhagen these days?

## ► A mishap might have been forever

likelihood we'd succumb to any number of tropical diseases. The natives thought either the crocodiles or *bis* (sorcerers) would eat us. I was concerned about the total remoteness. We couldn't afford a mishap because getting help would be impossible."

The brothers met in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea's capital city, then rode by truck to the end of the Papua New Guinea Highland Highway at Lake Kapiago. They had their kayaks, most of their gear and food airlifted to Telofomin, a village with a missionary school 25 kilometers from the headwaters of the Sepik, to which they walked, through the jungle.

"It was always hot and humid, even the rain was warm," Paul says. "The trails either went straight up or straight down with no trails designed to angle back and forth up a steep incline for the

well-being of the hiker. It was always the straightest line between two points. The natives, with their exceptionally thick, muscular thighs, were built for it."

Paul recalls a conversation with a *wigman* (big man) near the village of Aruni: "I'd been walking all day, nursing blisters on both feet, when I took my shoes off to soak my feet in a stream. An elaborately decorated *wigman*, who had appointed himself my personal guide, laughed loudly and through clever pantomime and gestures indicated I had the feet of a baby. In between puffs on his ten-inch cigar, made of tobacco rolled in newspaper, he pointed at his bare soles with half-inch calluses as examples of proper feet. Under the circumstances, I was envious."

Many of the villagers wear traditional garb, for the men, ornamental headpieces and their favorite weapons. The women are dressed in grass skirts and jewelry and often carried a *bilum* (a large net pouch slung over one shoulder) full of vegetables or a newborn baby. Other villagers were decked out in Western underwear, baseball caps and T-shirts. "I saw plastic cruci-

fixes hung alongside *bilums* full of sacred bones of relatives and carvings of animal gods in *tamberans* (men's sacred spirit houses) I visited," Paul says.

### Sweet Potatoes

Generally the villagers were friendly. The Stearnses exchanged cloth and jewelry for sweet potatoes, tomatoes and yams and gave gifts to each village's headman.

"We were viewed with such interest that often twenty or more people watched everything we did, including sleeping and toileting," Mark says. "It was something I never got used to, especially because most of the crowd that gathered often showed no outward emotion, neither hostility or warmth, just intense staring. It wasn't uncommon for a villager who decided to study us to stay perched nearby for ten hours without leaving to eat."

In one village the reception was ominously chilly. "We greeted the headman with gifts which had opened the door to hospitality in other villages," Tony says. "He dropped the gifts at our feet without looking at them and suddenly

## ► Surrounded by armed men, they left

we were surrounded by armed men. We saw no women, which indicated they saw us as a threat. As gracefully as possible, with an unwanted escort of armed men, we moved through the village and back onto the trail. We were relieved when our escorts turned back at a stream that must have been the boundary to their territory.

"We found out later our mistake had been to enter the village from the direction of their enemies. Apparently they saw us as spies."

After reaching Telofomin, the Stearnses rested for a week, helicoptered into the Sepik River Gorge and began their river journey.

### Out For Blood

In the first 160 kilometers, according to the map, the river dropped steeply. The choking mosquitoes drove the Stearnses into the river as fast as they could assemble and load their boats. Paul says, "We barely had time to talk or reflect on what we were going to do because the mosquitoes were so horrible." Paul was the least experienced in handling a kayak and was fear-stuck when the three paddled around the first bend. "A large crocodile dropped into an eddy, which added an extra incentive to staying upright. The river was very dark and very fast."

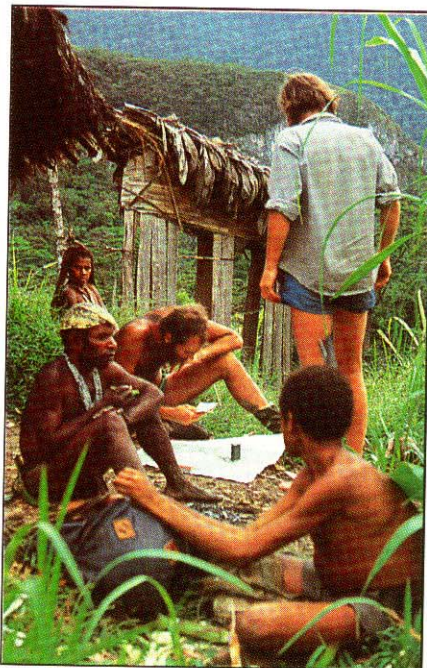
"There was no daydreaming or sightseeing. Before we could figure out where we'd been, we'd be off for another run through class three or class four rapids," Tony says. (Class six is the most difficult.) Tony found himself simultaneously elated and worried. "It was so exciting, shooting down a remote jungle river with no idea of what to expect next. But, when I barely stayed upright through a rough section of water, my elation switched to concern for the safety of my brothers."

That night they slept on a sandbar while wild pigs and other creatures, whose eyes glowed under the beam of their flashlight, crashed about in the jungle.

The next day was spent much like the first, catapulting along, at



The odd ways of white visitors include packing a knapsack.



Checking a map of the Sepik River, with those who need no maps.

times on the brink of capsizing, rarely having time to look at their exotic surroundings. All went well until dusk.

Looking for a suitable campsite, Mark Stearns drifted sideways in the swift current. His kayak wrapped around a submerged snag, which shattered the boat's wooden frame, collapsed the craft and spilled Mark and his supplies into the river. Mark swam to the bank. Paul and Tony retrieved the kayak and most of the supplies.

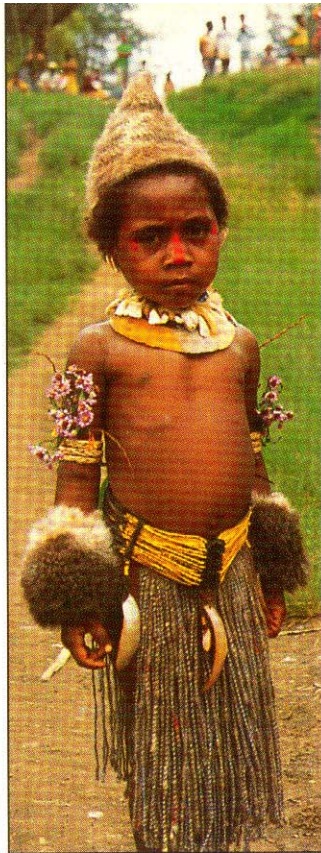
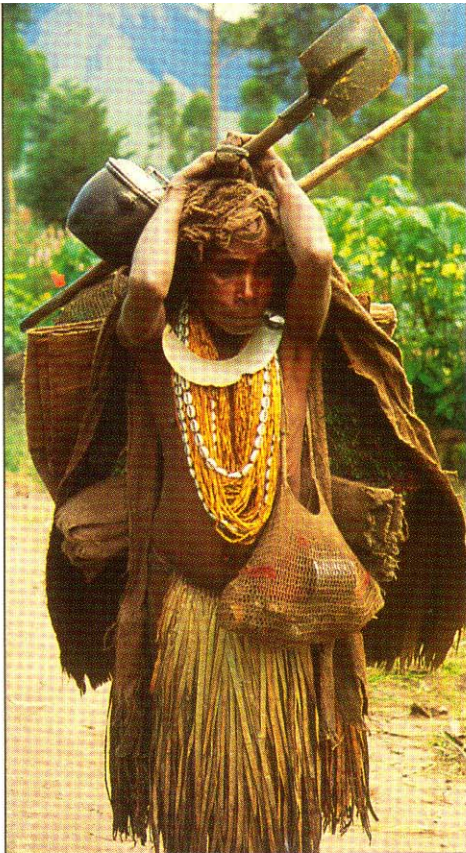
"There we were six hundred miles from help and with one less kayak than we needed," Paul says. Paul took apart an aluminum pack frame and with a makeshift drill

used the tubing to splice the kayak's frame. Some parts were shattered, so he and Mark carved new pieces from wood found along the river. Though the refitted kayak was a little lopsided and never tracked straight again, it floated.

After a day and a half in dry-dock the Stearnses took to the river again. By nightfall the river had begun to flatten out. They camped on shore.

Suddenly angry tribesmen surrounded them. "Apparently they thought we were spies or rebels. Someone had told them not to trust anyone who came down the river," Tony says. After a two-hour debate, Tony was unable to convince their leader of the brothers' innocence. "We didn't know if we were in actual danger so we played it safe and loaded our boats and shoved off for a more remote campsite," Mark says. When the Stearnses finally bedded down, they could hear *garamuts* (large drums used to communicate with other villages) in the jungle.

At dawn the Stearnses awoke and found their "secluded" campsite was practically on top of another village. The villagers had politely sat around the Stearnses waiting for them to awaken. Boys from the village showed the brothers how to capture a crocodile. A half dozen boys began shuffling in the shallow water of a pool. A boy yelled gleefully when his feet felt the croc. Prodding with sticks and feet they located the animal's head. One boy ducked beneath the surface of the muddy wa-



A woman on her way to a garden plot. A girl dressed for a "sing-sing". A "wigman" (big man) at Aruni village.

## ► Learning how to catch a crocodile

ter, grabbed the croc's head and jabbed a finger into each of the animal's eyes. The other boys grabbed the legs of the boy who had hold of the crocodile and towed both captor and captured to the river bank where the croc was bludgeoned by the adults and readied for the pot.

"The casualness of the undertaking was what amazed me. Nobody acted as if it was the slightest bit dangerous. The whole event had about as much tension as plucking a chicken from a hen house," says Paul.

For the next 800 kilometers the river drifted along at an even four knots. Travel became centered on diplomacy with natives, surviving bouts of influenza, leeches, mosquitoes and boredom.

A routine developed. About every 30 kilometers, natives in dugouts appeared who always seemed to have expected the Stearnses, presumably from drum-talk. Sometimes the villagers merely wanted to look at them. In one village an enterprising headman asked if the Stearnses could help him make a money factory so

he could be rich.

In the village of Bambunti, the Stearnses were fed tasty roast bat, yams, sweet potatoes and a beer-like liquid. A group of tribesmen were interested in the double-bladed paddle used to propel the kayaks. Tony invited three tribesmen to take the kayaks for a whirl. The Stearnses tried their skills in the dugouts. "Our hips were too big to fit into their boats so we straddled the gunwales with our legs dangling in the water. The dugouts were hard to keep upright. We usually capsized after three or four strokes. The villagers loved it and laughed at our buffoonery," Tony says.

### Meeting And Greeting

The constant social calls at villages slowed the journey to a crawl. With Mark and Paul battling flu, medical supplies running low, torturous insects, paddling all day in the baking sun, they decided to speed things up by staying on the river day and night. They lashed their kayaks together and took turns sleeping in their boats and steering around snags and floating islands of water lilies and aquatic plants.

"I was trying not to fall asleep, when I sensed something watching me," Tony says. "I turned. A ten-foot crocodile was drifting in the current about three feet behind our

boats. For a moment our eyes met, then swish—it was gone."

After six days of night-and-day river travel the threesome rounded a bend in the river and saw what appeared to be a fully lighted village. They'd come upon a sparkling white tourist ship anchored in the river.

At 2 a.m. the bedraggled, bug-bitten Stearnses climbed aboard and asked for some cold beer. In minutes many of the ship's passengers, who thought they'd paid to go as far up the Sepik as possible, were on deck toasting the Stearnses. After a couple of hours of talk and drink they climbed back into their canvas boats and floated into the night.

Eight days later they paddled out into the Pacific Ocean and met one last test. Sharks, which congregated to feed on whatever the Sepik had to offer, began bumping their kayaks. One bit into Paul's paddle and nearly tore it from his grasp.

The Stearnses paddled down the coast and 30 kilometers later rode heavy surf onto a beach near a road that meant transportation back to Port Moresby and home. ■

*Eric Hoffman writes about adventure and wildlife. He lives on a lama ranch he built in the Santa Cruz Mountains near San Francisco, California.*