

Papua New Guinea

AREA 462,840 km²
POPULATION 7,804,821
OFFICIAL LANGUAGES Tok Pisin, English, Hiri Motu, and Sign Language
CAPITAL Port Moresby

Main destinations of PNG coffee exports:
 Australia, New Zealand, Germany, USA,
 Japan, Belgium



Main provinces producing coffee:

Western Highlands, Eastern Highlands, Simbu, Morobe, East Sepik, Southern Highlands, Enga, Madang, Oro, West Sepik, Milne Bay, Central, Gulf, Jiwaka, Hela, West New Britain, East New Britain with the italicised provinces also producing robusta.



22
16th
712,000
 (60kg bags)
< 1%

Provinces - including the National Capital District and the autonomous region of Bougainville
 Global production ranking in 2015/16 ICO year
 Coffee produced in 2016 (arabica around 99 per cent versus robusta one per cent)
 Amount of world's coffee produced in PNG

SHIRIN MOAYYAD ULLA LOHMANN

Forget the rhetoric of misty valleys and romantic haciendas. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a country as stark in topography as it is in culture. Impassable, razor-edged mountains, impenetrable forests, and endless narrow valleys created over 800 distinct tribes, cultures, and languages in pristine isolation, one from the other. The highest mountain stands at 4509 metres above sea level and is touched by snow, despite the country's proximity to the equator (from zero to 12 degrees south).

The terrain is a nightmare to anyone with a fear of flying and nothing short of nirvana to lovers of nature. From scraggy limestone peaks to the clearest blue Pacific waters replete with explosively colourful marine life, PNG is unimaginably gorgeous—paradisical for its raw, remote beauty.

Culturally speaking, the geological extremity has meant a historically warring society in the coffee-growing highlands. Tribes here were fierce, as suspicious of outsiders as of nearby clans, and profoundly isolated from the world beyond.

By the late 1800s, the country had been carved up with colonial ease, making the southern and islands regions a protectorate of England called Papua, while Germany 'took' the north, calling it New Guinea. After the First World War, Australia was 'given' German New Guinea to administer by the League of Nations, the English portion having already been put under its rule in 1905 as an Australian Commonwealth territory. During the Second World War, the region was a major setting for the struggle between Japanese and Allied forces. After, Australia assumed control of the combined protectorate, the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, until Independence in 1975.

EARLY COASTAL PLANTING

On the coastal Papuan side, there is a record of plantings from the late 1800s, but this was never bound to be of the volume or quality that the highlands would eventually produce. Likewise, in the German-occupied regions of the north and east, coastal plantings of

robusta and liberica were established in many spots, often for the use of missionaries and the colonists themselves.

EARLY HIGHLANDS PLANTING

The highlands' foray into arabica began in the township of Wau, in Morobe Province. Here, the Department of Agriculture began planting arabica, driven by the frenzy of the 1920s gold rush. Once a hint of gold was sniffed, the race was on, attracting fortune seekers from around the world. At 1100 metres above sea level, Wau was much more favourable to arabica than the coastal robusta regions, and the mining concerns required both food gardens and coffee.

Lutheran missionaries had already planted subsistence gardens themselves, inclusive of coffee, the seeds from which spread to indigenous farmers and colonists alike. But in 1929, the Agricultural Station planted in some coveted Jamaican Blue Mountain typica and coffee here really took off. By the late 1930s, it was growing well in both Wau and Aiyura (Eastern Highlands). As intrepid German missionaries multiplied their outposts, they planted food gardens for their own use, and coffee as well. Moreover, unlike vegetables, coffee kept a long time and so could serve as a cash crop to sustain the missions.

For much of this time, the mountainous interior had remained isolated by virtue of its extreme topography. And in fact, outsiders assumed it was uninhabited until 1930, when Australian gold prospectors—including three brothers by name of Leahy—made a series of expeditions to the interior valleys in search of shining fortune. Although in their lifetimes they did not find the mother lode, one brother, Dan, remained behind in today's Western Highlands Province, enchanted by the country and its people. When World War Two ended, he established a farm, planting coffee with seed from the Wau agricultural station, marking the start of the plantation sector in the Western Highlands. Following local tradition, Dan married two local women, his son to one of whom, Bryan, today runs the

The photographs included in this article were chosen to represent the diversity of culture in PNG.

old family farm as well as a thriving specialty coffee operation.

In parallel, the Eastern Highlands plantation sector was established by Dan's brother Jim, and a former District Officer, Jim Taylor. There is much fascinating coverage of the lives of these early adventurers that is worth viewing or reading, including original film footage of the fabled 'first contact', when locals laid eyes on whites for the first time¹. This would not necessarily be worth mentioning, except that their lives and their families played such an active role in the establishment of coffee in the PNG highlands.

SMALLHOLDER COFFEE DEVELOPMENT

After the war, the Australian administration encouraged the expansion of coffee planting in the highlands by way of extension work, seed propagation, and village demonstration blocks. This marked the nascence of the smallholder sector, whereby local subsistence farms began planting coffee as a cash crop. Today, 90 per cent of the coffee produced is from smallholders, averaging perhaps an acre of land per household. These farmers tend to grow under shade and with little inputs, treating coffee like an incidental cash crop, intercropped with their more vital food plantings. They harvest when there is a need, since the logistical difficulties do not always make it worthwhile to work their coffee. Because of the remoteness of smallholders, coffee is often bought for cash by roadside buyers in cherry form and brought back to regional towns to process. Coyotes perhaps, but an indispensable service to the isolated smallholder.

The term 'blockholder' in New Guinea refers to 20 to 30-hectare lots that can be communally owned and which the government encouraged in the 1970s, after independence. Today, very few original plantations remain that exceed this size. With the crash in prices after the ICO's price support agreement in 1989 was dissolved, some of the larger estates went under and/or were broken out into blocks.



In recent years, mining concerns (PNG has proven rich in oil, gas, gold, and other treasures) and booms around pipeline construction have lured workers with high wages and easy cash; if driving a truck to service a mine earns steep wages, agriculture looks less attractive. As a result, coffee cultivation began to be neglected and production dropped from earlier highs of as much as 1.2 million bags to last year's 712,000. The good news is that 2016 is promising to be a boom year in both quantity and quality.

TODAY'S WORLD

The remoteness that defined the early highlands adventures has only been partly mitigated by modern air travel. The capital city, Port Moresby, has no real roads connecting it to the rest of the country, and there is effectively only one main road in the land: that which leads from the furthest reaches of the highlands down to the country's main shipping port of Lae. This road

then—the Highlands Highway—is the effective lifeline of PNG. And with every year's rainy season, parts of it are flooded, landslides bury other sections, and bad elements periodically profit from events to highjack transport or demand ransom for passage. Major urban hubs such as Goroka and Mount Hagen can be cut off for weeks and in certain sections, the highway is at best a narrow 4x4 track. The combination of these factors leads to it being both dangerous and highly exposed.

From the very start, the highway has been the economic artery of PNG—trucks ship trade goods up to the inland populations and backload coffee for export. It is the road that allows for the mechanism of trade. I have a distinct memory of the Markham River flooding one year and washing away a bridge in the height of the coffee season. Left with the prospect of the country's economy grinding to a complete halt for the two weeks it would take to pitch an emergency bridge, we opted to hire helicopters to lift 20-foot containers across the river. Back and forth they went for the seconds-long hop across the river ... those trucks stuck on one side off-loaded their coffee; those on the other their containers of trade goods and food stuffs. Loads were swapped, and each set of stranded trucks continued on its side of the river.

There is another dimension to this, namely the difficulty of getting the coffee out from the bushland where it grows ... in some places it has to be flown out. As per Joeri Kalwij, Deputy Country Manager of Monpi Coffee Exports, some of their supplying farmers live so remotely that to carry harvested cherry out on their backs over steep mountain trails would be impossible. There is a narrow window between harvesting cherry and pulping it before quality deterioration sets in, and given the terrain, these farmers cannot reach washing stations quickly enough. So they hand-pulp and dry in their backyards to ease the burden of carrying the cash crop.

Logistics are indeed hideous, but the prize for the effort? The most underrated specialty cup in the world, the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. If the logistical obstacle course can be overcome, the cup of PNG coffee that awaits is well worth the effort.

SPECIALTY PNG

As often in coffee origins, factors outside of the industry itself keep its development stagnant, such as wars or revolutions that cut off growing regions. PNG's own particular set of circumstances has meant there has been little change to the varieties grown, leaving

1. *First Contact*. (1983). [documentary] Directed by Robin Anderson and Bob Connolly. Australia.



typica, bourbon, arusha, mundo novo, caturra, and catimor as the main plantings—the latter initially seen as the rust-resistant saviour but losing in popularity when its cup qualities became known.

These are happy circumstances for the consumer because at its finest, New Guinean coffee has an unmistakably dulcet, tropical fruit note—something between jackfruit and ripe mango. Having received my coffee education on this profile, I have always found it mouth-wateringly delicious, though friends often tease me for a predilection that can sometimes run close to the cooked onion flavour they call defective. One person's geisha is another's cooked onion. Wherever your personal preferences lie, it has to be acknowledged that a top-quality New Guinea is highly distinctive, possessing a flavour rarely found elsewhere. A mentor of mine—and leading luminary of the US specialty industry—once said only half tongue in cheek, 'Every blend should contain New Guinea coffee.' I will admit to bias in claiming this to be categorically true.

On the commercial side, New Guinea has long been famous for its Y-grades and their winey acidity. These became highly valued by German buyers, who early on became staple customers of PNG's crop. But the future value of coffee in PNG has to lie in the promise of the specialty industry, and for this we need that nebulous thing called 'sustainability'.

SUSTAINABILITY

Well-intentioned initiatives have sprouted up regularly over the years, but the answer lies in on-the-ground initiatives, per Joeri Kalwij. 'Sustainability is the way to go, but it starts with financial sustainability. It's about getting farmers to look after their crop, to take back an interest in coffee and to treat it well, as more than an incidental occurrence intercropped with food, something that just happens to be growing in their garden. With the resulting premiums, you get an immediate translation into better lives for farmers. And environmental and social improvements are long-term results, since nothing here can happen overnight, nor without investment. Sustainability and certification can be the starting point for this change to happen, but exporters have to invest and do the hard work with farmers.'

Joeri points to a supply chain in Okapa of which he is particularly proud. It's only an 86km drive from Okapa to the Eastern Highlands capital of Goroka (where most export dry mills are located), but it can

take six hours in a small 4x4 truck ... if you can get there at all. As often as not, the roads are utterly impassable, a mud quagmire. Here Joeri found a parchment supplier committed to quality, intent on improving in a sustainable way, to benefitting the farmers of his community. Monpi worked with the farmers, training on much improved harvest and post-harvest practices, building raised drying beds, teaching proper parchment storage and many other measures. Quality increased.

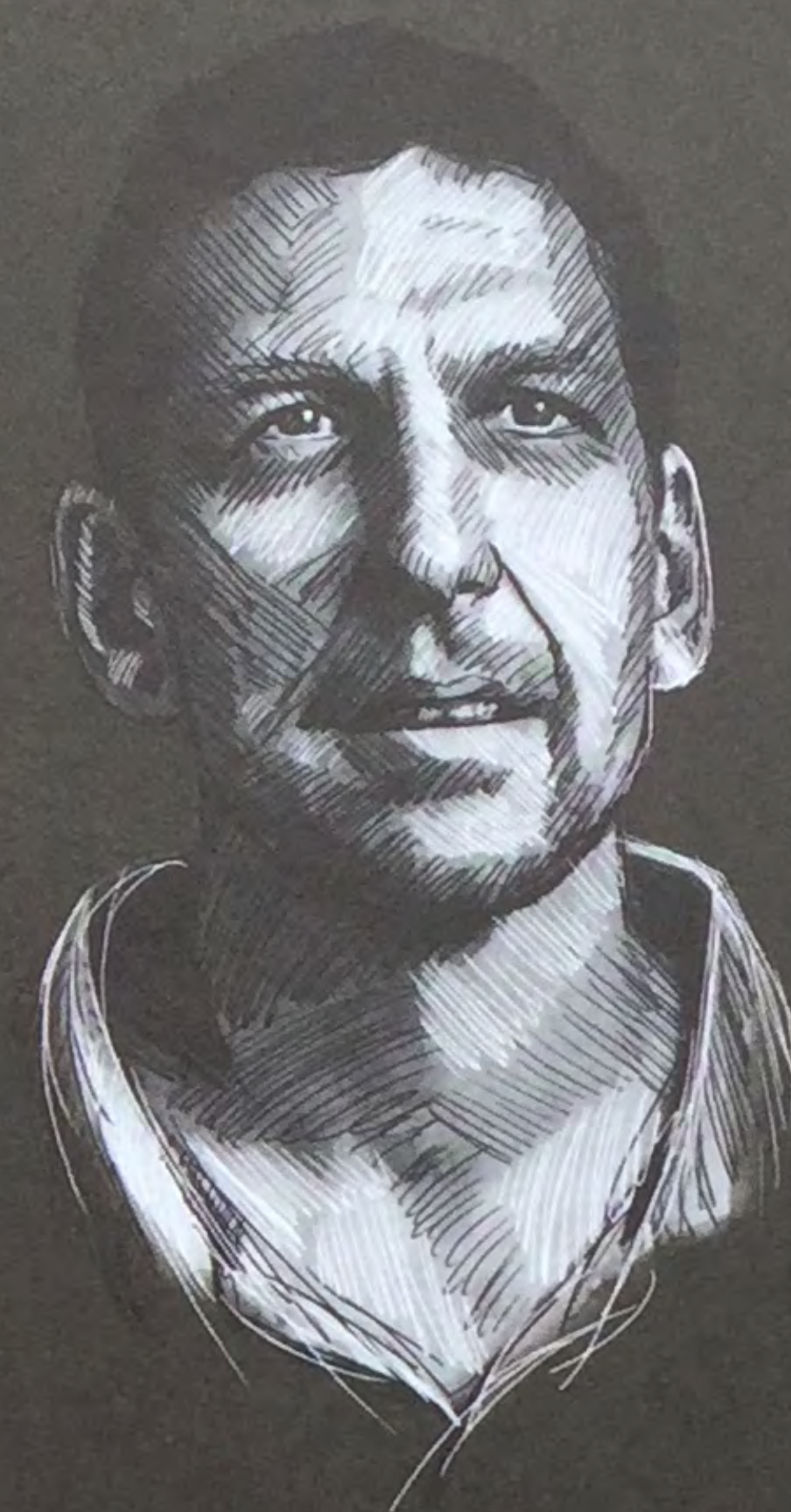
In addition to the best practices taught, Monpi partnered with Care International to incorporate gender equity trainings into the work they do with farmers, using an inclusive approach whereby families are treated as a business unit and encouraged to attend trainings with all working family members, not just household heads.

The resulting quality from this community has been flagged by specialty buyers, with a few micro lots receiving impressive SCAA scores and already sold to specialty roasters.

Four years down the track, and this month Monpi Coffee Exporters has commissioned a dry mill to be built in Okapa, the first of its kind in this remote outpost, and the biggest development there in decades. The positive collaboration between local farmers, Monpi and SMS², meant the logical next step was to establish a local dry mill. This will further improve services to the farming community and of course quality. Through Monpi's financing this has become a reality, with the farming community taking great pride in owning their own state of art dry mill. Monpi benefits by strengthening their long-term relationship with farmers: a textbook example of sustainability.

As a woman whose entry into the coffee industry dates to the 11 years I spent living in the country, I am forever and hopelessly biased towards PNG. But I am also convinced that my bias is not what shapes my judgement that this is a unique origin, with a quality found nowhere else in the coffee-growing world. The gentle sweetness, the aromatic allure, the balanced body and acidity of the best PNGs corroborate my former mentor's claim that indeed, every blend should contain New Guinea! ●

2. Sustainable Management Services, Monpi's entity to help their farmer supply chains with sustainability, certification, and best practises.



'Coffee farmers are not poor because of coffee. These are poor people farming coffee. Coffee is the opportunity, not the problem.'

Konrad Brits
CEO of Falcon Coffees



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