

Episode 81: Papua New Guinea

Summary

Our guest Joanna talks about her experiences living and working in Papua New Guinea. She discusses Papua New Guinea's languages, culture and love for her favourite sport, rugby league.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Joanna. And Joanna, you're English, you live in Australia, but you've spent a lot of time in Papua New Guinea, and so that's what we're talking about today. And for the uninitiated¹, what and where is Papua New Guinea?

Joanna: Papua New Guinea is in the Pacific but it's very close to Australia. A lot of Australians actually don't realise this, but at the closest point, Papua New Guinea is only ten kilometres from Australia, so it's by far the nearest neighbouring country to Australia.

Nick: Right, and didn't it used to be part of Australia? Aren't there kangaroos, uhh, that are in Papua New Guinea because it was once connected to the mainland of Australia?

Joanna: It was, yes. It was connected to, sort of, Far North Queensland, so there are certain species² like kangaroos and cassowaries, which are a colourful large bird that walks through the rainforest, that you only find in North Queensland and Papua New Guinea.

Nick: Well, there you go. And so when did your interest in Papua New Guinea begin, or how did it begin?

Joanna: Umm, my interest in Papua New Guinea began, umm, when I was quite young through the sport that I grew up watching, rugby league. Umm, so there's a few different types of the sport of rugby and rugby league is one that is particularly popular in parts of England, where I'm from, Australia and parts of New Zealand, but mainly Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea is actually the only country in the world that calls this sport of rugby league its national sport, umm, which is a bit surprising because it's not the best country at the sport. In fact, for many years,

¹ uninitiated: those who don't know

² species: types of animals

umm, the national team lost most of its matches. But it's, umm, what happened was Australians sort of introduced this sport into Papua New Guinea in the sixties and seventies, and it just took on a life of its own³ there. So I was always familiar with this country because I came across players playing in England from Papua New Guinea, and we all knew that this was the country where everyone was obsessed with this sport and it was a fascinating tribal country, so we were all just a little bit intrigued by it. And after I moved to Australia I had the opportunity to go there and cover⁴ the sport of rugby league.

Nick: Yeah, it's funny, because it's a country that's not really well known, probably, to a lot of people in different countries around the world, but, yeah, you can have just this little entryway into the society and the culture that you had with rugby league and, uh, and there you go.

Joanna: That's right. Most people who have something to do with Papua New Guinea had a specific reason for that and for me it was rugby league. And another thing it's famous for is having a lot of very rare species. Umm, quite often, umm, scientists go into PNG to a place in the jungle that not many people go to and they discover new species, even in the last few years, this is still happening. So I suppose a lot of people who are interested in the country are approaching it from a scientific perspective, but for me it was about the sport.

Nick: OK, so you go to Papua New Guinea several times a year, still related to this sport. So what is it exactly that you do when you're there?

Joanna: Umm, the first thing I did there was I worked on a community development program that uses the popularity of this sport to make a positive change in society, so encouraging kids to go to school every day, which is not always a common thing in a developing country like Papua New Guinea, and promoting respectful behaviour. So there's a lot of traditional beliefs and, sort of, cultural reasons why gender equality hasn't always been good in a place like PNG, and this program used the sport of rugby league, even with textbooks and resources built around the sport, to promote ideas about respecting women and that sort of thing. So I worked as a media advisor on that program and in media roles in the sport and I'm also making a documentary there about the women's rugby league team.

Nick: That's great. And having come from England, having worked and lived in England and then Australia, when you went to Papua New Guinea and had to work there, I imagine there were challenges there for you?

Joanna: Yes, it's a very different place to live and work. Umm, I suppose in the modern day one of the things you notice most when you're working there is that the Internet is so slow. Umm, you can't watch a video on YouTube or anything

³ took on a life of its own: evolved naturally

⁴ cover: report on, as a journalist

often, just to download an attachment⁵ can take ages. Umm, so that's one of the things that you notice daily in your working life. Umm, it's a country that has very few roads, because there's a lot of mountains. So you have to fly to get between almost any part of the country. And flights are cancelled very frequently. Umm, so you get used to booking a flight, going to the airport, it not happening, and then come back the next day. Umm, so there are certain things you get used to but, umm, the people are really friendly and they, sort of, embrace you and that's how I've started to feel like I'm part of the country.

Nick: So even as a kind of an outsider, you've come in and been accepted by them?

Joanna: Yes, although not immediately. I think that like when you move to any country, it takes a while, and for the first year, umm, when I actually lived there all the time, maybe not so much. But I've been going back and forth for three years now, a little bit over three years, and, umm, as I, sort of, learn the language more, umm, that also helped as well to become a bit more part of life there.

Nick: Right, so talking about the language, you were saying a couple of days ago that there are - what? - eight hundred languages spoken in Papua New Guinea?

Joanna: Yes, Papua New Guinea has about a third of all the languages in the world, more than eight hundred languages in one country. So many of them are only spoken by a small number of people. You might hear that and wonder whether a lot of them are quite similar, which I wondered too, but I'm told that they're mostly quite different. So there really are eight hundred distinct languages, but because there are so many, there are a couple of national languages, one of which is English. But many, many people don't speak English, and another one is, umm, pidgin⁶ English, or as it's called there, Tok Pisin, which is kind of a combination of English and some PNG words and has just been created over the last few decades to be a national language.

Nick: And is there a standardised version of that or is it a little bit different as you go around?

Joanna: I suppose it's standardised but it's also very rarely written down. It's not really a written language so, umm, there is a dictionary, so if you're trying to learn the language it is quite interesting, because you can't really buy a textbook or anything. Umm, you learn it by talking to people. You do see it written down sometimes on signs, umm, but it is mostly a spoken language, so there's, sort of, quite a lot of slang⁷, and words get made even shorter and shorter. And, umm, so yeah, it's standardised but it's sort of taken on a life of its own in some places.

⁵ attachment: file sent by email

⁶ pidgin: simplified form of a language

⁷ slang: informal or colloquial language

Nick: Right, and so how have you gone about⁸ learning some of this? Just, uhh, with talking to people, like you said?

Joanna: Yeah, I think so. Umm, there are, sort of, certain words I picked up⁹ and, especially over the past year, because I've worked with a lot of rugby players who speak this all the time between them. Umm, and I could, sort of, see that some of them would respond to me better if I spoke to them in Tok Pisin, so I just sort of started speaking it more, started hearing it more. I was also filming a lot of interviews in Tok Pisin which I then had to listen back to and try and translate. At the beginning it was just to try and make sense of, but now I can basically translate them, so I suppose that was a good way of doing it: just listening back to things and playing them again until I got my understanding perfect. And if there's just one or two words I don't know, I just send a Whatsapp message to one of my friends in PNG: 'What does this one word mean?' And they tell me and then it fits together.

Nick: Yeah it's always one of those things when you live in a place like that where you need that friend, that local friend, who can help you with all the stuff that you need to do - the same when we lived in China, we always had friends that we would always text to help us out in interesting situations. So the capital is Port Moresby. What kind of a city is that?

Joanna: Port Moresby doesn't have a very good reputation. Umm, anyone who's ever googled Port Moresby will discover that, uhh, there's a lot of talk about crime, which is true. There is a lot of crime in Port Moresby, umm, but it's a city that's changing really fast. It's hosted some major sporting events over the last few years and this year it's actually hosting APEC, umm, which is a huge international gathering of Asia-Pacific countries. Umm, the U.S. will be there as well as China, so they're fast building lots of infrastructure for that - new roads, big hotels. Umm, so it's a city that's changing fast and it doesn't really reflect the rest of the country which is still quite rustic in some ways.

Nick: And so do you have to travel often to these other parts of the country and see that contrast?

Joanna: I've been lucky enough to travel a bit, yes. Umm, there's some beautiful parts of the coast and islands and places where you can dive and snorkel and kayak around little islands, which is probably the nicest part of Papua New Guinea. But Papua New Guinea is also famous for its highlands, so the mountainous regions, umm, where there's still a lot of traditional tribal culture. It's a lot cooler up there. It's very hot in Port Moresby but it's nice and cool in the mountains. Umm, great local fruit and vegetables grown, which makes me happy 'cause I'm a vegetarian. Umm, so there's a lot of, a huge variety in the country, and it's really great to be able to get out of Port Moresby and see other places.

⁸ gone about (phrasal verb: to go about): approached, tackled

⁹ picked up: learned in an informal or casual way

Nick: And so overall, with all your experience that you've had in Papua New Guinea, what would you say are the lessons that you've learned from the whole thing?

Joanna: Wow! Umm, well, I'm still learning quite a lot. I think one thing I've learnt is that, umm, some of the people I work with there, some of the female rugby league players who are kind of my age but have grown up in such a different country, in such different circumstances, we really share the same views on so many things. I found out the other day that one of them growing up, her favourite Australian rugby league player was the same as mine, and I was growing up in London and she was growing up in Port Moresby. So I guess sport makes the world very small like that.

Nick: Alright, thank you very much for your insight¹⁰.

¹⁰ insight: specialised knowledge

Comprehension Questions

1. What does Joanna say is her biggest challenge when working in Papua New Guinea?
2. According to Joanna, why is it difficult to learn the national language, Tok Pisin?
3. Joanna says Port Moresby is changing fast. Why?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. She's a very prominent journalist. She has been asked to _____ many presidential elections, important international meetings, etc.
2. He lived in Italy for many years, so he _____ some Italian even though he didn't do any formal study in the language.
3. Australians can be difficult to understand, especially for non-native English speakers, because they tend to use a lot of _____ in their speech.
4. They started a small movement on social media and after a couple of days, it _____. Now it's much bigger than they ever dreamed of.
5. Papua New Guinea has many _____ of birds. Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*, is famous for bird-watching in Papua New Guinea.
6. After being the minister's secretary for many years, she has a lot of _____ into the way governments operate.
7. There is a huge problem at work and her boss is impressed with the way she has _____ trying to fix it. She's taken a very analytical approach.
8. 'Did you get the _____ I sent? All the details of our reservation are in it.
9. For the _____, there are three species of cassowary. It's a large, flightless bird that lives in tropical forests.
10. The _____ English that is spoken in the remote tribal areas is often incomprehensible to those who come from the cities.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to go to Papua New Guinea? Why or why not?
2. Joanna mentioned that Papua New Guinea has some beautiful islands and beaches, and also mountainous areas with traditional tribal culture. Which of these two places would you prefer to go to? Why?
3. Have you ever watched rugby league or other types of rugby? If so, what do you think about it?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. That the Internet is extremely slow there, which makes it difficult to work in the modern world.
2. Because it isn't written down often and there aren't any course books for people who want to learn the language.
3. A lot of new infrastructure is being built to accommodate major sporting and political events that are being hosted there.

Exercises

1. cover
2. picked up
3. slang
4. took on a life of its own
5. species
6. insight
7. gone about
8. attachment
9. uninitiated
10. pidgin