

# FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

*Richard Andrews reports on a Russian pilgrimage to PNG to honour the work of 1800s anthropologist Nikolay Miklouho-Maclay.*

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**P**apuans always remember a friend – even after 150 years. That's what Nikolay Miklouho-Maclay found in Madang last year, when he retraced the steps of his namesake and great great grand-uncle.

Miklouho-Maclay, the elder, was reputedly the first anthropologist to research the former New Guinea, where he lived for more than two years in Bongu village.

However, his stay became more than the field trip of a detached researcher and he became closely involved with the locals.

"Speaking their language sufficiently, I thought it my duty as their friend (and also as

superiority. A belief Europeans used to justify the slave trade.

According to Tolstoy: "You were the first to demonstrate beyond question by your experience that man is man everywhere, that is, a kind, sociable being with whom communication can and should be established through kindness and truth, not guns and spirits."

Inspired by the humanist efforts of his Russian ancestor, his great great grand-nephew established the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation for the Preservation of Ethnocultural Heritage.

The foundation runs a museum in St Petersburg and finances projects around the



Flashback ... anthropologist Nikolay Miklouho-Maclay in PNG in the 1800s (left); his great grand-nephew, of the same name, last year visited the village where his uncle stayed and was warmly welcomed.

a friend of justice and humanity) to warn the natives ... about the arrival, sooner or later, of the white men, who, very possibly, would not respect their rights to their soil, their homes, and their family bonds," he later wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper.

Miklouho-Maclay lobbied passionately for New Guinea's independence while campaigning against blackbirding, colonial expansion and the South Pacific traffic in arms and intoxicants.

Supported by the Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, Miklouho-Maclay set out to scientifically disprove the common 19th-century belief that the human race could be divided into different species and ranked in terms of so-called

world to protect traditional cultures.

As an ethnologist in his own right, Miklouho-Maclay led his own expedition last year to meet descendants of the villagers first contacted by his uncle and to study Russia's early influence on local culture.

"A journey to the Maclay (Rai) Coast, named after my uncle, has been a dream since childhood," he says. "We had to overcome many challenges, but I was determined to make it happen when I turned 42, the same age as Nikolay Nikolayevich when he died."

Following the route set in 1871, the research team sailed from Port Moresby to northeast Madang. Unlike the original wary encounter with armed locals, the return visitors were ➤





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given a celebrity welcome by about 3000 residents from Bongu, Gumbu and Gorendu, decked out in their finest ceremonial dress.

"I could not even imagine this reception," says Miklouho-Maclay. "Not only that, but our arrival was accompanied by long-awaited rains. 'Maclay has come back and has called the rain', we were told."

He credits Madang identity and businessman, Sir Peter Barter, for the success of the visit.

"Sir Peter helped us organise the expedition and spread the word that the 'young Maclay' was returning to meet the descendants of those who knew his ancestor."

He also helped the team set up a satellite TV link-up between St Petersburg and Garagasi Point, where the Russian anthropologist's hut stood a century and a half ago.

With the cooperation of Telikom PNG and the TASS News Agency, people in Russia were able to speak online with participants in the celebration.

"It was very exciting for both sides," says Miklouho-Maclay. "My uncle was a Soviet-era cultural hero and many Russians remember him from history books and his diaries."

"In Madang, we found that stories about him are passed down through the generations. A school and even children are named Maclay, in honour of his memory." (The Scottish name comes from a 17th-century baron who fought in what's now

**In memoriam ...** local children at a memorial at Garagasi Point, where Miklouho-Maclay's hut stood 150 years ago (right); a ceremonial welcome for the great grand-nephew (far right).



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Ukraine and later married a Cossack woman.)

The Russian team stayed in Bongu during the visit and met descendants of Tui, a local chief who first befriended the 19th-century anthropologist.

"We found they also remembered such Russian words as *topor* (axe) *kukuruza* (corn) and *arbuz* (watermelon). Some believe Rai Coast also has Russian origins," says Miklouho-Maclay.

"At the same time, I was very happy to see that the people make every effort to preserve their ancient traditions and rituals."

After PNG, the team retraced the Russian anthropologist's journey to Australia and ➤



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visited his memorials in Sydney.

Miklouho-Maclay moved to the city in 1878, where he built the first biological research station in the Southern Hemisphere. He became a prominent local figure (a park is named after him in Birchgrove) and married the daughter of NSW premier, Sir John Robertson.

The anthropologist died of a brain tumour in 1888 during a visit to Russia and is now largely a forgotten hero. However, his descendant is committed to continuing his uncle's work through cultural exchanges, a documentary and a proposed listing of the Maclay Coast as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"I'd like the whole world to know about this sensitive region and take care of its diverse culture," says Miklouho-Maclay.

"As far as I am concerned, New Guinea has been always in my heart, and probably my life will be connected with the island forever."

See [mikluho-maclay.ru](http://mikluho-maclay.ru).



A family snapshot ... descendants of Chief Tui at Gorendu village.

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