

Bird of Paradise Memories

By Marilyn Litvak

Bird of Paradise feather hats may not be politically correct these days. But a century ago they were all the rage amongst women of a certain means.

My grandmother owned one such hat. And for as long as I can remember, this treasure was stored deep in her wooden hope chest and rarely taken out—and certainly never worn by her. Occasionally, upon my childish insistence, she'd humor me with a peek into the chest. And sometimes, usually when I had a friend in tow, my grandmother would even let me try on the Bird of Paradise hat. I'd admire myself wearing the hat—turning this way and that in the triple mirror of her makeup bureau. And then reluctantly give my grandmother back the glorious brown velvet, wide brimmed hat, festooned with a small pale yellow bird with a green throat, golden head, and long delicate, yellow feathers streaked with brown wrapping around the hat's crown.

Now I'm THE grandmother and hat has been passed on to me. I keep it regally displayed in an artistic box on a special shelf in my living room. Sometimes one of my visiting granddaughters will try it on. But neither seems to have the obsession with the hat that I did.



This past spring I was privileged to be asked to speak at the yearly World Culture Day put on by my granddaughters' school. Word had got out that I had travelled to over 75 countries in the course of owning a travel business. And that such extensive travel had provided me with a wealth of knowledge about the world's many cultures.

Hmm, which country should I choose to be the subject of my presentation? Why Papua New Guinea, of course, the island nation in the South Pacific where the Bird Of Paradise may be found in great numbers—some 39 species.

A former colleague in the travel business agreed to join me in the presentation. We had visited this wondrous island together a number of years ago. Of course, she didn't know before that trip about my determination to catch sight of a Bird of Paradise.

But it wasn't long after we landed at Mt. Hagen airport some 6,000 feet up in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, that she became aware of my mission.



The New Guinea Highlands are an East/West mountain range with peaks soaring some 15,000 feet above sea level that Papua New Guinea shares with the country of Indonesia to the West. The Highlands hosts a multitude of tropical valleys and rivers



Our accommodations while in the Highlands were within walking distance of a hilly rain forest. And of course, hiking through the rain forest, I was busily looking for a Bird of Paradise.



Unfortunately, it didn't happen, despite my most dogged efforts. But we had wonderful experiences in the Highlands meeting and visiting with the native people; learning about their way of life which

includes farming and hunting; taking a peek inside their homes; and watching them perform their ancient tribal dances.

An important Highland clan called the Huli host regular tribal gatherings called sing-sings at which clans dance and sing together. A few pictures follow including one of my elusive bird. Note the tribe people's wonderfully painted faces, elaborate wigs made of human hair, and, of course, bird feathers.



Now that I've been able to share my love of the Bird of Paradise with another generation, hopefully they'll look at the Cornell Ornithology Lab's web site at www.birds.Cornell.edu and spend a few moments viewing some great videos of this wondrous bird species. Thanks to their web site, I've learned my hat's bird is a Lesser Bird of Paradise with mating plumes.



Also, a special thanks to Maureen Mehler for the trip pictures included with this piece.

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