



Papau New Guinea


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Often thought of as the last frontier on earth and considered one of the world's more dangerous places, this island nation offers a (quite safe) peek into a world you thought no longer existed. Local tribes continue to live the way they have for centuries, many virtually undisturbed by the outside world, amongst some of the most beautiful, exotic wildlife and landscapes you'll ever see.

As you explore dense jungles, active volcanoes, and deserted islands, you'll encounter endemic species like birds of paradise and giant Queen Alexander Birdwing butterflies. Underwater, swim amongst healthy coral reefs, submerged mountains, and animals like pygmy seahorses, octopuses, and various sharks. Visit the unmoved remnants of World War II, whose Pacific theatre largely took place here, and see some of the world's most renowned tribal art.

If you're feeling particularly adventurous, venture into the Highlands of the main island, one of the least explored places on earth, where isolated communities still practice tribal warfare. Hike along the legendary Kokokda Trail, one of the most beautiful – and dangerous – treks in the world. Should you be around on an even-numbered year, in September, attend the Goroka Show, a tribal gathering and cultural event where over 100 tribes demonstrate their traditional music, dance, and rituals.





Destination Highlights

New Britain

Until rather recently, Rabaul on New Britain island was one of the most beautiful, pleasant ports in the South Pacific, a well-preserved remnant of its colonial heyday. And then, in 1994, two of the volcanoes ringing its harbour erupted, burying the city; one of the volcanoes, Tuvuvur, still belches steam, though you can try to climb it if you want, as some visitors do.

It's not Rabaul's only draw, of course, with Admiral Yamamoto's bunker and numerous Japanese tunnels now open in the sides of mountains, and the once-famous Rabaul market still vibrant and exciting, if not what it once was. July brings the Papua New Guinea National Mask Festival, celebrating and showing off the ornate traditional masks meant to represent spirits.

As in much of Papua New Guinea, though, the diverse marine world of the island's bays and the Bismarck Sea exerts a strong pull. Dive amongst World War II plane and shipwrecks, off vertical walls and coral reefs, and amongst one of the most diverse marine communities in the world. In Kimbe Bay, you'll find more than 800 marine species and over half the species of coral known to exist, as well as huge underwater mountains and extinct volcanoes.



New Ireland

One of the most relaxed, friendly, and beautifully remote regions of Papua New Guinea, New Ireland and its surrounding islands are off the beaten path, but well worth the effort. The main town of Kavieng is a sleepy, low-key collection of tree-lined streets, bakeries, golf courses, and guesthouses that almost feels out of place in this "edge-of-civilization" country. Visit the main market for a dose of fresh fruit and local handicrafts.

Like in much of Papua New Guinea, though, getting out of town is key. Fish in Kavieng harbour, witness ancient rituals and the practice of shark calling during June and July's Luka Barok Festival, canoe and kayak between secluded inlets and hidden caves, and go biking around the island. Sail around the Tigak Sea to the pristine beaches, clear blue waters, and welcoming communities of small neighboring islands, like Kulinos, Nusakelo, and Laminlagit; companies like No Road Expeditions can help smooth your way with the locals, if you want an even more cultural experience.

Get underwater, too, to such renowned dive sites as Albatross Passage and Planet Channel. Swim with eagle rays, dogtooth tunas, barracudas, grey reef sharks, and pygmy seahorses along coral walls and colourful reefs. Keep your eyes open for the numerous ship and plane wrecks left over from World War II, many of them not far from the surface.



Madang

As you sail into bright blue Madang Lagoon, surrounded by rugged mountains and verdant jungle on one side, reefs and volcanic islands on the other, go ahead and gasp in awe. The sun-soaked town, perched on a harbour considered one of the South Pacific's finest, is a picturesque maze of lush gardens, scenic views, and German colonial remnants. In the lively market, wander amongst merchants selling fresh tropical produce, shell jewelry, bilum woven bags, wood-carvings, and local Bilbil clay pots.

But, as beautiful as the surface-level surroundings are, the underwater world may actually surpass them. Swim or fish if you want, or dive down amongst some of the world's most famous dive sites, including the volcanic Planet Rock, World War II wrecks like that of the US minesweeper the Boston and the 34 ships in nearby Hansa Bay, and the masses of fish in Magic Passage. Your companions will be clown triggerfish, moray eels, silver tip sharks, and tiger sharks. For a less intense experience, seek out shallow lagoons and colourful coral reefs.



Sepik River

One of the world's key rivers and major waterways, this river through the heart of Papua New Guinea's jungles runs from the Indonesian border all the way out to the Bismarck sea. As you float along, you'll encounter cultures untouched by the modern world, rural communities living the way they have for centuries; until nearly two decades ago, the island's interior was the one of the last places one earth unexplored by modern civilization.

Wherever you stop, whether at known villages like Angoram and Ambunti, or at smaller communities, you'll be treated to traditions, rituals, songs, dances, and art unlike any you've ever seen. If you can, be sure to buy some of the decorative, ceremonial wood-carvings for which the regions tribes are know, their work considered among the most beautiful primitive art in the world. Up by Kanganmun, pay a visit to the oldest Haus Tambaran, or Spirit House, along the river; if you're lucky to arrive on an initiation day, you may get to witness a ceremony few outsiders have ever seen.

Along the river, watch the dense jungle and the sky above for such exotic birds as egrets, herons, kites, cormorants, and kingfishers. Keep your eyes on the surrounding swampland and you may even see the two species of crocodiles who reside in the river.



Alotau

Located in the far eastern reaches of mainland Papua New Guinea, the isolated port town capital of the Milne Bay Province isn't much to look at as a town, but it offers exciting diving opportunities and plenty of landmarks for World War II enthusiasts.

When you first touch down, wander through the busy harbour and lively markets selling fresh fish and produce like betel nuts, peanuts, and bananas before turning to the still very much present remnants of the war. War memorials for the Battle of Milne Bay and to the Australian squadron leader Turnbull just scratch the surface. In and around the town itself, landing barges, aircraft, and tanks from both sides lie forgotten, some abandoned to the beach, others grown over by banyan trees.

At dive spots like Lauadi and Milne Bay, swim along black volcanic sand with colourful sea life such as lion fish, seahorses, blue ribbon eels, nudibranchs, and octopuses. Keep your eyes open for gigantic sea fans, too. Head over to the sea wall at Wahoo Point, a favorite haunt of hammerheads, manta rays, minke whales, and whale sharks. Further afield, by the volcanic islands of Louisiade Archipelago, where the beaches are pristine and the water clear, swim along lonely coral reefs and look for World War II plane wrecks.





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