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# FORBIDDEN WATERS

Located on Australia's doorstep, Papua New Guinea intrigues Tricia Welsh with its wild, exotic nature – birds of paradise, tree kangaroos, colourful tribal costumes – not to mention man-eating crocodiles.

With a colourful history of unstable politics, many people have considered Papua New Guinea unsafe to visit... that is, until now. Through the endeavours of people like Broome-based Craig Howson, founding director of North Star Cruises who was first introduced to this northern wilderness by Steve Irwin, travellers are now able to discover its charms – from the comparative safety of the water.

Having pioneered luxury cruising in the Kimberley some 28 years ago with a smaller edition of the now 36-berth

luxury adventure vessel, the *True North*, Howson has introduced two back-to-back 11-night Sepik Soirée itineraries in November and December each year that cruise along PNG's north-east coast, venturing more than 70 nautical miles up the crafts-rich Sepik River and then to the far-flung Admiralty Islands, stopping off to visit remote communities that few have had the privilege to visit.

## A true adventure vessel

After a two-hour private charter flight from Cairns – included in the rate – the cruises set off from either Madang or

01 Snorkel in Madang Harbour  
02 Jungle canoes  
03 Dressed up, island style  
04 Brilliant Pacific blues





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05 Exploring by chopper  
06 Local colour and costume  
07 Welcome coconut drink  
08 Luf village, Hermit Atoll

Kavieng where guests are welcomed on board by a young 20-strong all-Australian crew.

Accommodation is in 18 ensuite cabins over three levels and in three categories. The top-rung Explorer and River Class cabins feature king-size beds that can be converted to singles, while Ocean Class offers two comfortable singles. All are stylish in décor with in-room entertainment and satellite telephone.

Days start early with hearty breakfasts before guests who wish to join in activities meet on the well-equipped transom, which becomes Adrenaline Central each morning and afternoon as six steel-hulled expedition boats prepare for fishing, snorkelling, scuba diving, exploration or island excursions.

After the day's exploits, guests can relax over drinks in the upstairs lounge with sink-into sofas or on the outside rear deck, before dining at communal tables. There is also an observation lounge and guests are welcome to visit the bridge.

With a shallow draft of 2.2 metres, the 50-metre-long *True North* was custom built for exploring river systems and coastal waters. She is a true adventure vessel, being able to venture where few others dare.

Sing-sings and crayfish

Along the Sepik, guests are welcomed by locals in primitive dug-out canoes, some bearing flowers, others proudly carrying baby crocodiles – and youngsters as naked as the day they were born. Passengers are able to visit open-air village markets where homegrown produce, fresh and smoked fish and sago wrapped in green leafy plants are among items for sale. Some villages are known for their traditional arts and crafts where masks, grass skirts and intricately carved story boards make good souvenirs – provided they can safely pass through customs on return to Cairns.

Leaving the mainland, the itinerary includes nearby islands such as Rambutyo and Ponam where villagers stage lively sing-sings of welcome – whole communities dressing up in feathers and leaves with elaborate head and ankle beads. One village is known for its enthusiastic dance with giant crocodile puppets. Guests often get caught up in the spirit of the dance and join in.

*True North* is greeted everywhere en route – especially in the remote Ninigo Islands where fishermen paddle their dug-outs over to the sleek vessel in the hope of selling their abundant catch of beautifully coloured painted crayfish. Many crayfish later – at a modest price around seven dollars a kilo – everyone goes home happy.

In the galley, chefs prepare contemporary fare often with produce gleaned from these waters – fresh

“VILLAGERS STAGE LIVELY SING-SINGS OF WELCOME – WHOLE COMMUNITIES DRESSING UP IN FEATHERS AND LEAVES”

Sepik prawns, elusive black bass caught by locals, tuna, barracuda or Spanish mackerel caught by guests – and those succulent painted crays. They make yoghurt and ice-cream and bake fresh bread and sweet treats daily.

Into the depths of the Sepik

On board is marine scientist Andy Lewis who has logged more than 2000 hours in the past decade guiding snorkellers in coral reef environments. He brings the underwater alive giving running descriptions of on-the-spot discoveries and translating them during evening talks accompanied by his excellent underwater photography. Among unexpected encounters might be pods of pilot whales – some breaching high out of the water, and a sea of spinner dolphins that seem to show the way.

Unique in the region, *True North* boasts a six-seater Eurocopter dedicated to sightseeing over tropical islands, flying in close over mildly active volcanoes and for transporting guests deeper into PNG's Sepik wilderness. A cultural highlight of the PNG cruises is a chopper flight 250km upstream in the middle Sepik to visit a Yechtan spirit house where guests are privy to an initiation ceremony of young local men into the *puk-puk* or crocodile culture.

Howson sums up the journey's appeal: “This is an incredible mix of what the region has to offer: besides its rich culture, it shows nature at its best – above, on and below the water.” ♦

Travel file

Accommodation  
[www.northstarcruises.com.au](http://www.northstarcruises.com.au)

Information  
The 11-night Sepik Soirée sails from 11 to 22 November, and 22 November to 3 December in 2015. Priced from \$17,695 (\$19,995 for 2016 voyages) per person twin share.  
[www.papuanewguinea.travel](http://www.papuanewguinea.travel)