

A black and white photograph showing two pigs, one light-colored and one dark-colored, curled up together in a small wooden boat. The boat is on a dark body of water at night, with a bright light source reflecting off the water's surface in the upper right.

# FARTHER SHORES

A JOURNEY AROUND PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S REMOTE NORTHERN ISLANDS COMBINES LUXURY CRUISING WITH THE CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE - AND CONTRIBUTE TO - TRADITIONAL VILLAGE LIFE, WRITES **SALLY PATTEN**.





CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Fishing under forbidding skies; piglets get a ride at a stilted village off the Sepik River; True North lying off a coral shore; mixed welcome by toddlers on Ponam Island.

**T**he first person I meet as we embark on our 2100-kilometre journey around the northern islands of Papua New Guinea is a boat builder – of the super variety. Mark Stothard's current project is building an 84-metre trimaran super yacht, the largest of its kind in

the world, for a Singaporean billionaire. As it turns out, True North, the boat that will take us cruising around this remote group of PNG islands, is one of Stothard's former creations, built with business partner Craig Howson. It is technically not a super yacht, but the 50-metre monohull features a helipad, complete with seven-seater helicopter, six tenders and accommodation for 36 passengers and 20 crew.

The 11-night Sepik Soiree Cruise is one of extreme contrasts. A sumptuous lunch of crispy-skinned salmon and a beetroot, pistachio and rocket salad – in airconditioned comfort – is followed by a visit to a village with no power, where the contents of the evening meal depend almost exclusively on what has been caught, picked or grown. Snorkelling off a coral reef that falls away like the face of a cliff into a mass of deep royal blue is followed by snorkelling in a shallow fish bowl where

orange, black and white clownfish anxiously guard their offspring. For the divers among the group, tropical fish are replaced by schools of giant trevally and tuna. For all of us, bright sunshine turns into tropical downpours and, soon enough, back to brilliant sunshine. Late one afternoon, we watch a rainstorm move slowly across the horizon. The sky is not so much 50, but 100 shades of grey. The following morning, the rising sun turns the colour of the water to fairy floss.

The cruise takes in some of the least-visited islands in the world, from Kavieng in New Ireland Province (reached by a charter flight from Cairns) to Witu, Admiralty, Kaniet, Hermit and Ninigo islands, before hitting the PNG mainland and setting up the Sepik River. Here, the contrast is starker than ever; the light and airiness of island life is replaced by muddy, crocodile-infested waters and the ancient, brutal rites of passage that make men out of boys. For us though, there's the choice of fishing, snorkelling or diving most mornings and afternoons, plus an island visit.

North Star Cruises, the Broome-based company that runs True North (which is part-owned by Stothard), is one of only a handful of tour operators trying to prise open the PNG tourism market. Despite some progress, the villages we visit are not places for travellers who insist that all their attractions come in perfectly formed, polished packages. But



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK STOTHARD



FROM TOP: Remnants of the Pacific war make great diving sites; schoolchildren on Rambutyo enjoy True North's visit.

those who like warm smiles, harmonious voices and a doorway into another culture are handsomely rewarded.

In most places, as much as we observe, we are being observed. The day we visit Rambutyo in the Admiralty Islands, the whole school from one of the local villages comes to the jetty as a welcoming party. The children stare at us, flashing broad white smiles at the newly beached white whales, washed up by the tenders. The older villagers flash equally broad, orange smiles, their teeth stained permanently from chewing a combination of betel leaf, lime – extracted from crushed coral and shells – and mustard. We are led up a narrow path, with pig huts on either side, to a large clearing which separates the school from the dwellings. One pig seems to have escaped his cage and is thoroughly enjoying himself, darting from the hapless grasp of several older women.

The school has about 150 students and we're treated to a concert and traditional dances set to the mesmerising beat of garamut drums. The humidity must be close to 100 per cent and it's about 30 degrees. One of the village elders knocks the tops off several coconuts and offers them around. We accept gratefully. When we leave, the entire village sends us off. As a thank you, the crew driving the dinghies tilts the engines and revs up to create a rooster tail of water. Squeals of

laughter ensue. Back on shore, the children in the front rows are soaked.

North Star Cruises does its bit for the communities we visit. Every village we go to, we take gifts of clothing and school and sporting equipment. It is a way of ensuring aid reaches communities, rather than disappearing into the private bank accounts of government officials.

At Rambutyo, each year the top 10 students are given a ride on the boat's helicopter as a study incentive. It does the trick, says the school principal. As the stunned students disembark from the chopper, one mother takes her son's hand and dances around him in excitement. Even Will, the pilot, concedes it is hard to keep a dry eye at the thought of these children, most of whom have never seen an aeroplane, peering down at their island from the sky. "If tourism is done in the right way, it will protect their culture," Stothard says. It gives eco-tourism a whole new meaning.



From Rambutyo, we head for another island in the same group, Ponam Island – and another, perhaps more sinister contrast. The rainbow colours of the local dancers' traditional costumes and immaculate huts built of sago leaf are set against a helicopter ride over neighbouring Manus Island. A chill goes down the spine as we fly over the grey, box-like huts of the infamous detention centre. It seems the locals are as much in the dark about what goes on inside as we are. "It is very strict. There is no information about it," says Mathilda, one of the Ponam elders.

PNG's northern islands may be remote but they are not untouched by the Western world. Germany colonised much of the area in the 1880s and 1890s, staying there until the Great War. It's thanks to them that the islands are full of palm plantations. In the latter part of the 19th century, coconut flesh (or copra) was highly sought after for use in soap and cosmetics. However, the plummeting price of copra, blamed on the discovery of synthetic substitutes, combined with poor transport connections between the remote islands, means not much is harvested these days.

During World War II, the Americans turned much of Ponam into a runway. Today one end of it, now covered in grass, comprises the school sports field. Other remnants of the Pacific war, in the form of fallen planes and sunken ships, lie underwater as if ready-made for diving enthusiasts.

As True North continues its journey from the islands to the New Guinea mainland, I discover most passengers are well acquainted with the boat, the friendly, nothing-is-too-much-to-ask level of service and quality of the food that emerges from a modest kitchen. Crayfish risotto, braised beef cheek and candied walnuts and beetroot salad, and confit duck with a soba noodle salad are just a few of the standouts.

Most have been on one of True North's trips around the Kimberleys in Australia's north-west. One has built up some serious "frequent flyer" points, with this his 10th cruise. "It's the perfect adventure holiday for people who are busy," says Paul Bannan, a surgeon from Perth. "You get to go to places that are pristine and untamed, which can prove impossible as an independent traveller in a country like PNG."

The writer travelled as a guest of North Star Cruises. Suites from \$17,695 per person. For more information, see: [northstarcruises.com.au](http://northstarcruises.com.au).

To book, email [cruise@northstarcruises.com.au](mailto:cruise@northstarcruises.com.au) or tel: (08) 9192 1829.



## SKIN FULL

CROCODILES ARE never far from the surface of the Sepik, literally and metaphorically. Regularly six to eight metres long, during the day they lurk in the swamps on either side of Papua New Guinea's longest river, venturing into the open waters at night to feed.

But their power goes far beyond the ability to kill pretty much everything in their line of sight. In one village we visit, the locals perform a traditional crocodile dance. Lines of men hold up two huge crocodile puppets, a ritual usually performed in traditional ceremonies.

Other tribes hold not only that they descend from the crocodile but that to become men, boys must acquire crocodile skin. The initiation process involves cutting their skin about 1 centimetre deep with a razor and applying oil and mud to create welts in the shape of a crocodile. "You lose blood and replace it with new blood and become a man," says Hilary, a local guide.

In Yetchen village a spirit house is hidden behind a high screen of woven palm leaves. Inside young men and their mentors perform another crocodile dance, dressed in elaborate grass skirts and beads. It is two weeks since seven boys in their late teens have had the skin on their backs, chest and upper thighs sliced open. Some of their wounds are still weeping but serious infection is rare.

The brutality of the initiation process starts with the spirit houses themselves. Simon Tewson, our main guide and a font of PNG knowledge, informs us that according to ancient tradition, the main supporting structures of the spirit houses are planted in the ground above the body of someone who has been kidnapped from a rival tribe and buried alive.

On that note, we leave the river and head back to the turquoise waters of the Bismark Sea. SP

