

CrownGroup 

# LOUNGE

*Winter 2015*

Leadership & Investment

Travel & Indulgence

Arts & Fashion

Architecture & Design

The Crown Collection



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Clockwise from left, 2015 Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Australia hits Sydney, Waterloo's Viking by Crown is now complete, the stunning Rachael Cassar recycled gown featured in Crown Ashfield's video and the Crown Group team celebrates the launch of Crown Group Lounge with Bonnie Boezeman.



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# ARCHIPELAGO A GOGO

AN ALMOST FORGOTTEN CHAIN OF ISLANDS OFF THE COAST OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA HOLDS A WEALTH OF WONDERS FOR THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO TRAVEL THERE ABOARD LUXURY SMALL SHIP *TRUE NORTH*, WRITES **RODERICK EIME**.

We are flying so close to the earth, I'm sure the branches of the thick jungle will slap the undercarriage at any moment. But our pilot, Rainor, keeps a steady hand on the stick, his steely gaze fixed on the ridge above us.

The helicopter rises steadily to the top of the rocky outcrop that juts out from dense undergrowth, the engine straining slightly as we pull up to clear the peak. A small village is directly below and the residents are running about excitedly as we swoop overhead.

I try to snatch a photo as the villagers wave furiously, but no sooner have I hit the shutter than we're in a steep dive towards the jungle floor on the other side. By this time the traces of a cheeky smile are evident on Rainor's face.

"How was that?" his voice crackles over the intercom. No-one answers as we gather our wits, but we'd do it again in an instant.

Here in the air-conditioned cabin of the Eurocopter EC130 B4, seven of us sit in leather-clad comfort as we tour the lush islands of the Louisiade Archipelago on a half-hour joy flight from the helipad of *True North*. Carrying just 36 passengers, the 50-metre purpose-built expedition yacht has come all the way from its homeport of Broome for an annual Papua New Guinea exploration.

This string of islands to the east of Papua New Guinea's mainland, first sighted by Portuguese navigator Luís Vaz de Torres in 1606, is still seldom visited by any vessel, let alone cruise ships. During November and December, however, a handful of small ships may drop in for a flying visit—in our case, literally. *True North*, North Star Cruises' only vessel, has been visiting the magnificent reefs and glorious tropical islands of this remote chain since 2005.

Unlike the unsympathetic Portuguese, who often shot first and asked questions later, here we are greeted like royalty and welcomed ashore at unheard-of islands such as Rossel, Misima, Panapompom and the evocatively named Panasia. Fresh green coconuts are offered for our refreshment, in exchange for soccer balls and schoolbooks.

The destruction of World War II didn't affect the Louisiades too much, despite the Battle of the Coral Sea being nearby. A US submarine strayed onto a reef off Rossel Island in 1942 and the remains of a Japanese freighter, the *Inaho Maru*, grounded in almost the same spot in 1922. Its rusting skeleton, pounded by relentless breakers, is clearly visible from Rainor's chopper.



But back in Deboyne Lagoon, near Panapompom, where the Japanese had briefly set up a seaplane base, there's a solid reminder of the conflict. An almost intact Zero fighter lies on the sandy bottom after ditching when its aircraft carrier was sunk during the 1942 Battle of the Coral Sea. Pilot Okura Shigeru carefully landed just off the beach and swam the few metres to shore, leaving snorkellers a tangible relic to 'discover'.

Apart from our heart-stopping airborne excursions, we are travelling on what may well be the most luxurious live-aboard dive vessel anywhere. Ticketed divers can bring their own gear or hire it for a nominal fee and then dive to their heart's content in water as clear as Bombay Sapphire.

Our divemaster, Oliver, leads the scuba team onto the remote reefs that teem with both reef fish and the occasional pelagic (open ocean) brute, such as the nasty-looking dogtooth tuna that darts ominously through our group. And we don't just gaze in bewilderment at the quantity and variety of fish we encounter at such unambiguously dubbed sites as 'the fishbowl' at the deliciously named Saru Nom Nom Island.

Aboard almost every *True North* departure is Dr Andy Lewis, an eminent marine biologist and ecologist. Andy more than satisfies the many enquiries guests pose about both the land and marine ecosystems we encounter daily.

"There are fantastic reefs scarcely seen by other travellers, with beautiful reef slopes dropping into indigo-blue water, all teeming with fish and other marine life," Andy tells us. "The waters of the Louisiades and Papua New Guinea offer some of the best diving and snorkelling in the world and present an excellent example of highly diverse tropical marine ecosystems with very little human impact. Coral cover and fish densities are both exceptional."







Our own squad of anglers heads out daily to catch the evening meal. This fun diversion is a hallmark of any *True North* cruise, if local permissions can be sought. Our keen anglers triumphantly return with ample snapper, cod and even a tuna to grace the chef's table.

Dining aboard *True North* is best described as casual gourmet. The quality of food delivered to our table by barefoot stewardesses is superb. Designed by head chef Nik Flack, it's a creative combination of fish freshly caught by our intrepid anglers and carefully selected provisions. It's sustainable, organic and very Australian cuisine. Braised lamb shoulder, seared king snapper, Western Australian crayfish with truffle risotto or slow-cooked wagyu beef fillet could easily appear on any day's menu.

Cabins are available in several grades and sizes, although the choice options are on the upper and main decks (Explorer Class and River Class, respectively), where space and comfort levels befit the \$1000-plus per person, per day, price tag. While Ocean Class (lower deck) cabins are still comfortable, they are 'cabins' without the expansive picture windows, floor space and double beds.

For decor and public spaces, think more along the lines of exclusive designer beach house rather than fancy boutique hotel with a relaxed, decidedly unpretentious atmosphere that quickly levels out any pretenders.

As Rainor prepares to settle the Eurocopter back on the upper deck of *True North*, I cast my eyes one last time across the lurid waters of the bay while the 'tinnies' bring the snorkellers, anglers and hikers back to the 'mother ship'. We'll shortly pull anchor and leave this mesmerising scene behind, leaving our hosts to return to their blissful isolation and this divine archipelago to its own mysterious devices.

## GETTING THERE

The 6-day Archipelago Adventure is part of North Star Cruises' Papua New Guinea and West Papua season that runs annually from October through December aboard the 36-berth expedition ship *True North*. Archipelago Adventure departs mid-December from Alotau (Milne Bay).

Charter flight connections are included in the fare, plus all meals, accommodation and excursions aboard *True North*.

Helicopter flights cost extra. A full 4-hour, 6-flight package is available for \$3160, but single flights can also be purchased depending on space. Diving is available for PADI-certified divers and occasionally for beginners.

Rates for 2015 and 2016 departures start at \$8995 per person in an Ocean Class cabin.

*The writer was a guest of North Star Cruises and the Papua New Guinea Tourism Promotion Authority.*

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# TRUE NORTH

*Luxury Adventure Cruises*



An adventure on the **TRUE NORTH** is one of Australia's most revered holidays! Bigger ships cannot go where we go! Extended periods at sea are specifically excluded and daily activities can include scenic walks, fishing, snorkelling, diving, scenic flights in the ship's helicopter and cultural events. We deploy comfortable expedition boats (not rubber boats) and discover wilderness in small groups. An AUSTRALIAN crew uniquely chaperones every experience. Beware of imitations and discover for yourself why our guests consistently remark *"that's the best holiday I have ever had!"*

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**Includes return charter flights ex Cairns. Limited availability - don't miss out!**

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