

# Cruising wild in style

**ONE OF THE WORLD'S** last unexplored wildernesses, Papua New Guinea promises a wealth of cultural and natural experiences. A 10-day tour on board adventure vessel *The True North* delivers up-close-and-personal encounters, plus a host of luxury extras, such as restaurant-quality meals and daily helicopter jaunts.









located a mere 150 km from the tip of Australia's Cape York Peninsula, Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of the last true wildernesses in the world. Few Australians have visited and even fewer have it on their wish list. Shaped like a prehistoric bird, the country often makes headlines for all the wrong reasons – violence, instability and ghosts of a checkered past.

While still comparatively raw, tourism is slowly developing and, through the endeavours of people like Broome-based Craig Howson, founding director of North Star Cruises, more and more travellers are able to enjoy this exotic part of the world – from the relative safety of the water.

Howson pioneered luxury cruising in the Kimberley 26 years ago with a smaller version of the now 36-passenger adventure vessel *The True*

#### UNCHARTED TERRITORY

A pioneer of luxury cruising, *The True North* journeys 70 nautical miles down the Sepik River, taking in remote island communities and tribal villages. Colourful markets and cultural performances await.

*North*, and was first introduced to PNG by the late adventurer Steve Irwin. Each year Howson spends up to 15 weeks on board, 'tweaking' itineraries and introducing new ones, such as the Bismarck Bonanza. "It's 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 sea," he says.

I've always been fascinated by the exotic nature of the country, with its birds of paradise, tree kangaroos, colourful tribal outfits, thick jungle-clad highlands, man-eating crocodiles, as well as good fishing, snorkeling and dive opportunities. So I didn't need much convincing to join 30 other passengers on the inaugural journey. Over 10 days, we sailed along PNG's north-east coast, 70 nautical miles down the art-rich Sepik River, calling in to small remote island communities that few people ever visit.





We visit villages along the riverbank, with produce markets and displays of intricately carved artifacts.







## All aboard

Following a two-hour private charter flight from Cairns, we arrive in Madang and board the boat. Sipping fresh coconut juice from flower-trimmed coconuts, we settle in for our first night afloat under the care of the 18-strong crew.

For some passengers, it's their second, fifth, 10th and even 13th adventure on the 50-metre triple-decked luxury expedition vessel; for others, like me, it's the first. With such comfort, care and high level of adventure, you can easily get hooked, assure the serial cruisers.

Accommodation is in 18 comfortable suites, complemented by a spacious dining room, welcoming lounge bar with comfy sofas, a rear deck for casual dining and drinks, and

a well-equipped transom that becomes a hive of activity each morning and afternoon as fishing, snorkeling and scuba diving get under way.

Air-conditioned, and with a draught of just 2.2 metres, *The True North* was purpose-built for exploring river systems and coastal waters and, thanks to her size, can venture where few others dare. A six-passenger Eurocopter on board takes guests on scenic flights to discover natural attractions more closely, and six aluminium-hulled expedition boats allow guests to pick and choose where they might want to go and when.

When we venture down the 1,126 km long Sepik River, local river pilot Peter Yaman helps navigate the serpentine waters, dodging hidden

sandbanks and floating logs, and slowing down so as not to rock the primitive canoes with curious villagers who've come to investigate.

We visit villages along the riverbank, with produce markets and displays of intricately carved artifacts, including masks, storyboards and coconut shells amid woven penis caps (that have replaced traditional penis gourds) and *bilongs*, simple string bags that locals carry over their shoulders or across the top of their heads, and are so called because everything inside 'bilongs' in them. Other villages stage lively *sing-sings* to welcome us, the whole population dressing up in elaborate beads, feathers and colourful dance outfits, including one village with giant crocodile puppets.





**CLEAN LINES**  
The modern interiors include 18 comfortable suites and spacious lounge and dining zones.

**WELCOME**  
Fresh coconut juice is served on arrival.

**FINE DINING**  
Top chefs, formerly of Melbourne's Vue de Monde, prepare the world-class cuisine. Locally sourced seafood shines in their contemporary menus.



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## Vue de Monde on board

**WITH EXPERIENCE** working alongside celebrated Melbourne chef Shannon Bennett in the hallowed kitchens of Vue de Monde, onboard chefs Nik Flack and Zac Johnson create exceptional city-style meals and make fresh bread, yoghurt and ice-creams daily. They use plenty of local seafood, such as elusive black bass, giant Sepik River prawns and succulent painted crayfish caught by locals, and scale fish caught by guests: Spanish mackerel might end up crumbed for fish and chips, barracuda in a classic Niçoise salad or yellowfin tuna as sashimi. With several volcanoes in the region, their Monam Volcano fondant receives applause: a decadent chocolate pudding overflowing with raspberry coulis 'lava'.



**VILLAGE LIFE**

*The True North* is granted access to remote communities where few travellers have ventured before.

**NEW HEIGHTS**

A six-seater Eurocopter provides the chance for guests to explore hard-to-reach locations each day.

**NATURAL WONDERS**

Papua New Guinea is blessed with quality snorkeling, diving and fishing.

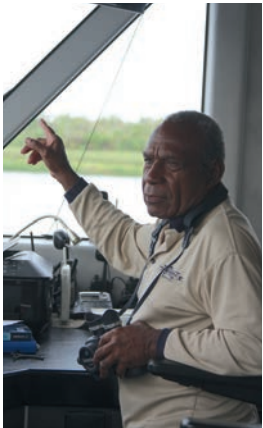


Daily flights

Helicopter pilot Rob Colbert takes passengers on daily flights over tropical islands, to remote villages in the Sepik River basin and up close to still-active volcanoes. He has worked with *The True North* for 14 years and delights in telling about their first visit to the primary school on Rambuyto Island, a remote community in the Admiralty Islands that rarely has interaction with outside visitors. After offering a helicopter ride to the five best students at the school, the headmaster excitedly reported that attendance and performance had “gone through the roof”. Says Rob: “This year I’m going to offer a helicopter flight to the five best boys and the five best girls at the school – in two separate flights.”

**LOCAL**

Sepik River pilot Peter Yaman guides *The True North* up the river.



We are constantly on the look-out for crocodiles and find them everywhere: on artifacts, carved on the front of canoes, and baby ones held out for us to inspect. Later, while on an excursion up the Pandi River in New Britain, we learn that a young man had been taken by a large croc just that morning, where locals continued to wash in the brackish water.

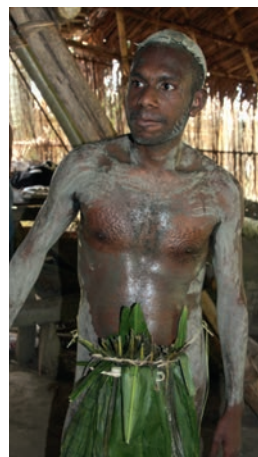
Leaving the Sepik, we cruise overnight to the far-flung Ninigo Islands, a large open atoll containing even smaller atolls and about 50 tiny islets. After lunching on plump Sepik *cherubin* (prawns), we set off to snorkel the Pelleluhu Passage. When we get back, the boat is surrounded by a flotilla of dugouts roped together as fishermen drop off their catch of spectacularly coloured painted crayfish. Howson and the chefs are quick with kitchen scales and buy about 100 crays, or 60kg, at \$7 a kilo. Many are relegated to the freezer for future cruises.

Whale-watching

One brilliant sunny day with clear blue skies and turquoise waters, we come across two pods of pilot whales that breach and splash playfully; another day we are surrounded by hundreds of spinner dolphins that swim under the tenders and seem to guide our way. And, while snorkeling and diving, we spy turtles, manta and eagle rays, white-tipped sharks, schools of black and red snapper, colourful parrotfish, angelfish, vibrant blue damsel fish and various striped anemone ‘Nemo’ clownfish, for which the area is noted.

Onboard marine scientist Andy Lewis is in his element in the water and explores new sites on every trip. For his doctorate thesis, he studied the population dynamics of reef fish and their responses to coral disturbance and, in the past decade, has logged more than 2,000 hours guiding snorkelers in coral reef environments. He imparts his encyclopaedic knowledge in layman’s terms, and shares the day’s discoveries with casual evening chats and graphic underwater images. Having skippered luxury maxi-yachts around the world over the past few years, Captain Greg Dunn is enjoying his second stint as master of *The True North* and declares the boat was built for adventure. “How many other boats can send their helicopter up to look for a new dive site?” he asks.





## Puk-puk initiation

**THE CULTURAL HIGHLIGHT** is a visit, by helicopter, to the Yechtan spirit house, some 250 km upstream in the middle of the Sepik, where we are privy to an initiation ceremony. Inside, eight young men sit around charcoal fires wearing a few modesty leaves around their waists and caked river mud on their heads. These young latmul men have just been initiated into the puk-puk or crocodile culture – a ritual where the skin on their backs and shoulders is cut with razorblades to form a decorative stippled pattern resembling that of a crocodile, from which they believe they evolved.

The fresh wounds are then pasted with ash and river mud and pummeled with bamboo bats while the heat from the fire almost ‘tans’ their wounds like leather. Several are students at Lae University. Hank Liversidge, our local PNG guide who is a university graduate and mine exploration site manager for several international companies, can’t wait to be initiated next year. “We are from the crocodile,” he explains simply. “It’s our cultural belief passed down from generation to generation – it’s our trademark.”