

Blue heaven ... a helicopter takes off from the luxury expedition ship, *True North*, at anchor in PNG.

PNG BY SEA

Once the domain of fearless *National Geographic* photojournalists and intrepid explorers, PNG is re-emerging as the ideal adventure destination – this time by ship in five-star luxury. *Roderick Eime reports.*

Like fleeting shadows in the undergrowth, they move silently and stealthily, occasionally stopping, half-hidden, to check the progress of our canoes along the narrow, mangrove-lined creek.

Our stalkers are smeared head-to-toe with the thick volcanic mud and just a tiara of mangrove leaves as camouflage. Are they looking for an opportunity to ambush us, or just satisfying their curiosity? My question will soon be answered.

Papua New Guinea has a wild reputation, but here we are on *True North*, one of the world's acclaimed luxury expedition cruise ships.

We're on a "New Adventures in Paradise" cruise, beginning in the capital of New Ireland, Kavieng. The 11-day expedition, among the islands and along the coastal fringe of the Solomon Sea, visits volcano-ravaged Rabaul, the uninhabited Lusancay Islands, stunning Tufi, the D'Entrecasteaux Group, the Louisiades and finally, Milne Bay and its port of Alotau.

All the time, we are feted by a handsome, fascinating people of warm, heart-felt generosity with a deep respect for custom and tradition.

Shore visits from *True North* are conducted using its six aluminium runabouts. These hi-tech "tinnies" are more durable, faster more durable and versatile in tropical waters than the Zodiacs common on most of the world's adventure cruises.

Landings are almost invariably wet on the many atolls and isolated beaches such as Nimoa and Kimuta; so don't pack your best Florsheims.

One of *True North's* trump cards is the six-seat Eurocopter, piloted by full-time aviator Rainor Marshall. Used for the trickier landings and extra-special excursions, this asset really makes any expedition outstanding and sets North Star Cruises' offering apart from rivals in this arena. You might think all this opulence is foreign out here in the wild, but a hot shower and crisp lager is just the ticket after a day on the baking sand or trekking in the steamy jungle.

Hardcore adventure purists and Kokoda trekkers may want to bunk down with all the jungle has to offer, but we have the opportunity to experience the impossible and unheard of while retreating to supreme comfort at day's end.

Meals aboard *True North* are at least equal to the highest standards aboard boutique adventure yachts anywhere. With the enforced "barefoot" cruising aboard *True North*, where all staff and guests are shoeless inside, it's hard to call this fine dining, but head chef, Nik Flack, knows all about "hats" due to his previous role. He turns out what he likes to call "sustainable, organic and very Australian cuisine", using lots of locally sourced items, including seafood, greens and root crops.

As our barefoot staff serve delicate seafood, steak and poultry, there's great Western Australian wine, too.

Scuba diving is a big part of any *True North* expedition into these glorious tropical waters, and every opportunity is there for certified divers to explore the pristine reefs and corals that make PNG one of the world's top diving spots.

Dr Andy Lewis, one of Australia's foremost marine biologists, is there every step of the way, helping us unravel the mysteries of these remote waters, while dive master Oli Oldroyd keeps an eye on us underwater.

Rabaul, at the tip of New Britain, is intermittently the jewel of the district: perfect Simpson Harbour and glorious Blanche Bay framed by a magnificent but volatile mountainscape are indicators of its tumultuous past.

Once a perfectly manicured German colonial town, Australia's first job in World War 1 was to evict the Germans from Papua – and Rabaul was one of their objectives. The task was completed by September 1914, but not without loss.

Somewhere in Rabaul Harbour, or nearby, lies the wreck of submarine AE-1 and her 35 crew. Rabaul's violent history continued into World War 2, where the entire town was turned into a fortified base for the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy. Relics and artefacts can still be seen all over the town, ►



PNG, by the sea

including two aircraft wrecks at the old airport, slowly disappearing under a carpet of ash.

This haughty exclusivity aboard *True North*, I'm pleased to report, does not equate to callous disregard for our generous and welcoming hosts. While locals enjoy an abundant diet of fresh vegetables and seafood, there are the privations of island life to contend with.

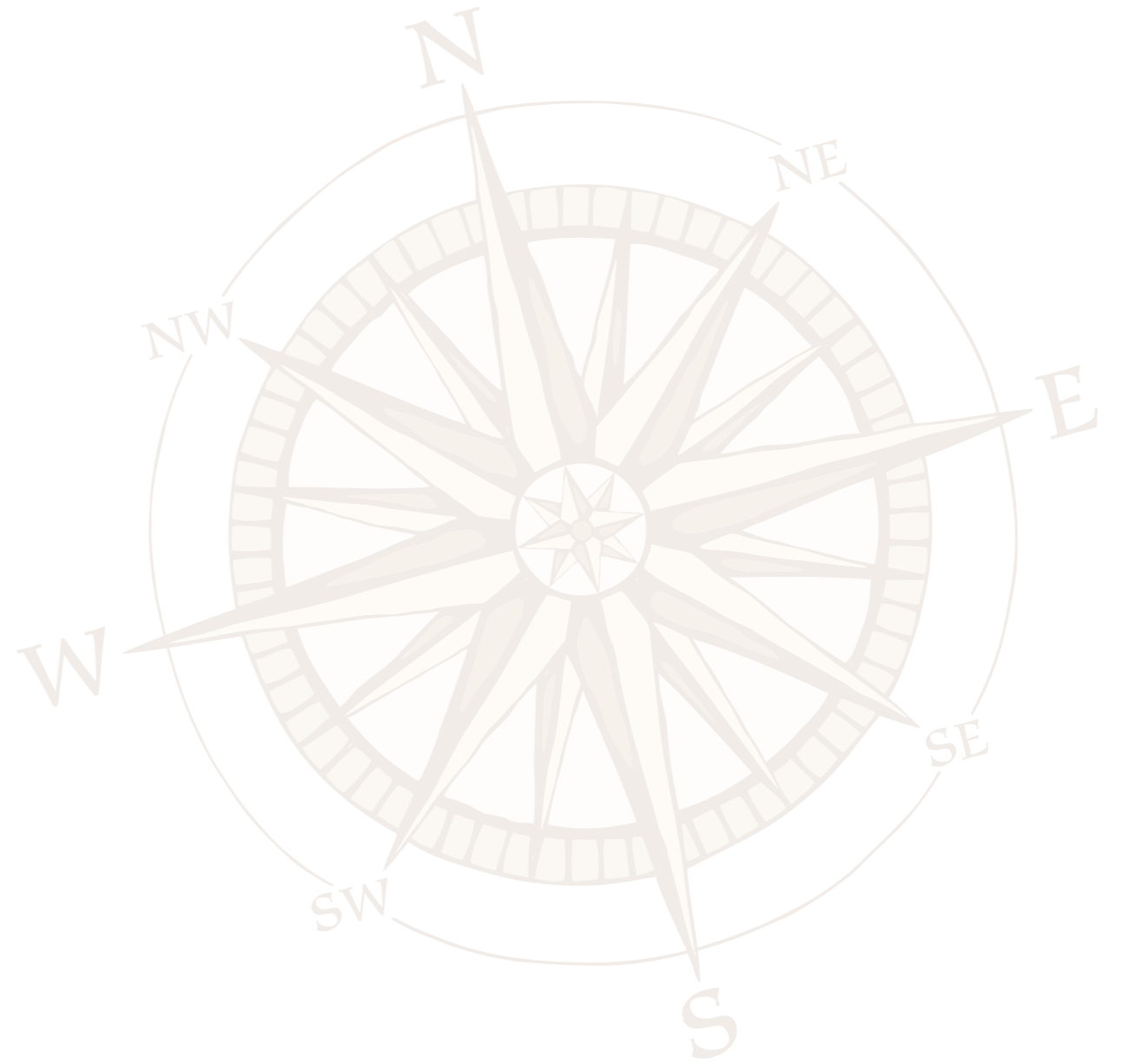
Medical and school supplies, for example, must make a long journey to get here, often passing through many hands. This is where expedition cruising can assist by bringing educational materials, books, clothing, simple medicines and first-aid supplies. Bypassing the convoluted distribution chain ensures these very end users get valuable resources.

Every passenger can help by filling their spare luggage space with inexpensive donations – and refilling it again with exquisite art, carvings and souvenirs. "Giving back" is fast becoming the hallmark of expedition cruising.

Back in the silent swamp, our *masalai* (spirit) followers continue to monitor our journey. Our heavily laden canoes continue to glide effortlessly along the still waters, just metres from the densely wooded embankments.

Now our pursuers reveal themselves in spectacular fashion. Leaping out ▶

A warm welcome ... cruise passengers are assured of authentic encounters of local life as they cruise PNG's coastline.



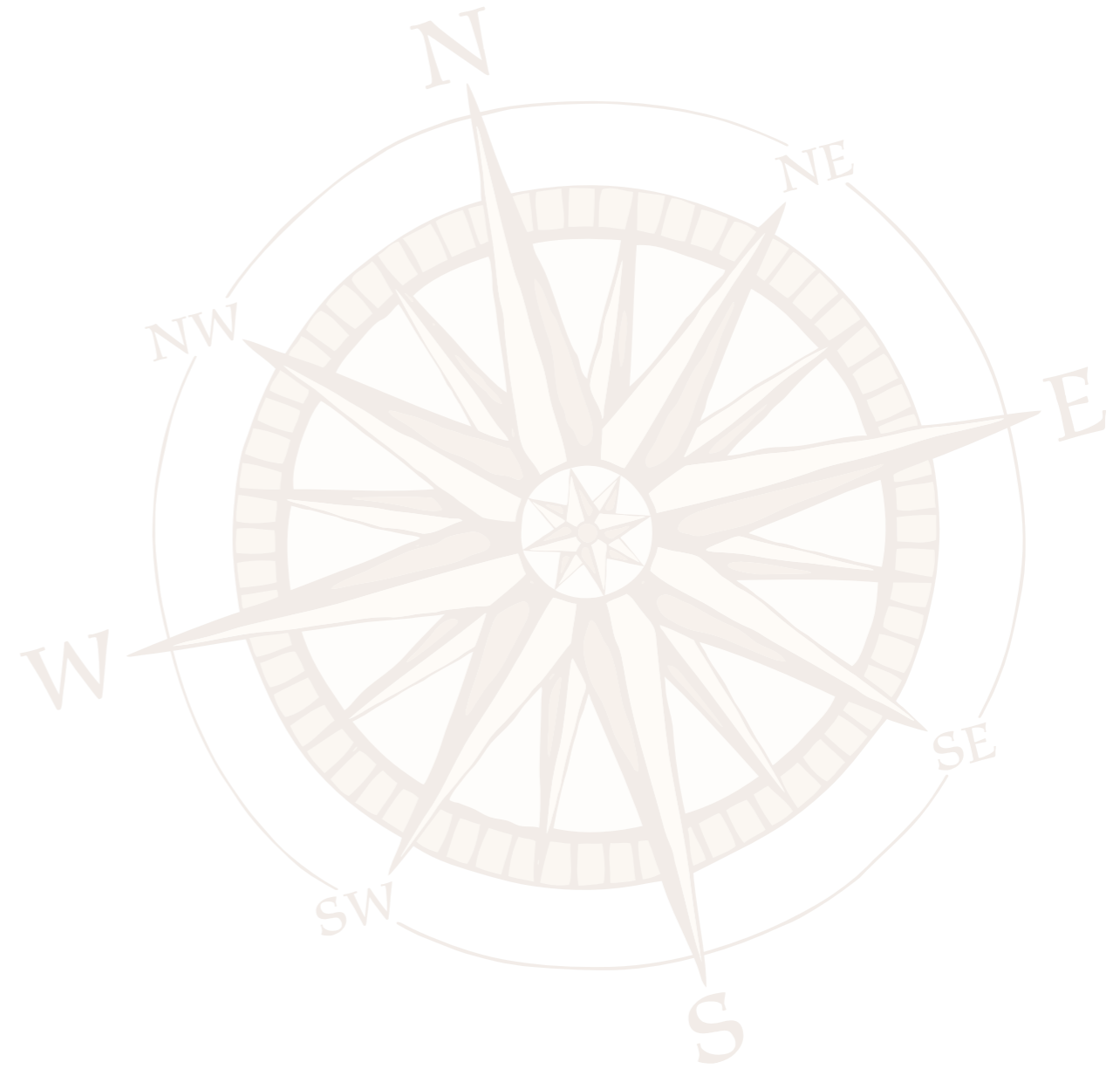
PNG, by the sea

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Thumbs up ... local boys give the sign that the water is warm and inviting. That's *True North* anchored off shore.



PNG, by the sea



Coastal life ... a village by the sea (right); *True North* tucked into a cove for the night (below right); interiors of the ship (opposite top); at sea with the landing craft trailing behind (opposite bottom).

from behind huge trees, they bring our party to a halt with incomprehensible, blood-curdling cries. From hidden vantage points within the undergrowth, saplings are hurled at us, some bouncing menacingly off the side of the canoes.

Gasps of surprise are clearly heard from several passengers and muffled chatter comes from others as we try to interpret their apparently hostile intentions.

The traditional challenge, thankfully, is all part of the show put on for us today by the Tufi villagers. Once, strangers would be challenged and encouraged to state their purpose – whether friendly or hostile. Our passivity assumed, we are welcomed by Anthony, the local chief, dressed in the stunning costume that makes Tufi one of the most spectacular cultural experiences in the country.



PNG, by the sea

TRUE NORTH BY THE NUMBERS

20
CREW

36
PASSENGERS

18
ENSUITE
STATEROOMS
AND CABINS

50
METRES IN
LENGTH

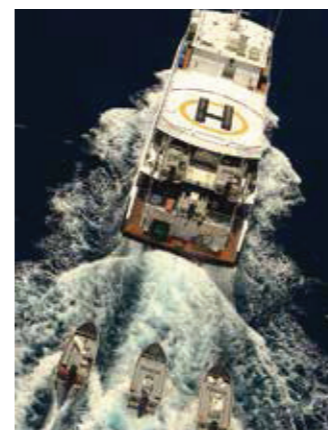
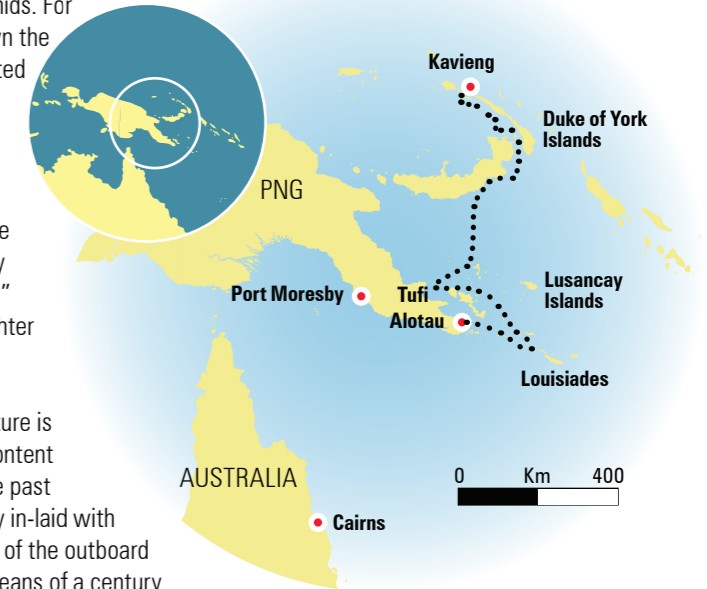
2.2
METRES
DRAUGHT



Set amid stunning tropical fjords, Tufi is only accessible by air or sea, and is renowned for its diving, trekking and rare orchids. For the next hour we are feted like visiting royalty, shown the process of sago extraction, ritual tattooing and treated to local ballads performed by a tiny choir of children with the voices of angels.

"Thank you for visiting our village," says Anthony with an earnest, almost sorrowful, look as the experience comes to a close. "We all hope you come back again soon. Once upon a time, we are so happy to see you, we make sure you stay – we eat you up!" And with that delivery he reels back in raucous laughter slapping his tummy bright-orange, betel nut-stained teeth exaggerating his mirth.

Preserving and encouraging local tradition and culture is important for expedition cruising, but for once I'm content that this ancient and sacred ritual is discussed in the past tense. Clutching a gorgeous ebony carving delicately in-laid with mother-of-pearl, I doze off momentarily to the drone of the outboard motor, dreaming I am one of these wide-eyed Europeans of a century ago. Then back aboard, I'm ready for that beer. ■



NEED TO KNOW

CRUISING New Adventures in Paradise is an 11-day trip on *True North*, departing Cairns on December 3, 2015, and November 30, 2016.

HOW MUCH From PGK36,000, including meals and excursions. Helicopter flights are extra.

MORE INFORMATION northstarcruises.com.au

