

True adventure

To the Sepik River and the Bismarck Sea

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It's a slow reveal in first light after an all-night passage along Papua New Guinea's north coast. Yesterday from our anchorage at Bagabag Island, we flew up the slopes of the dormant volcano on Kar Kar Island, blanketed in plantation sorghum and coconut, and did a lap around its forested caldera. Could it get more exciting? Yes, it can.

Now it's day three of our cruise and we are entering the Sepik River. The name gives me a little shiver of excitement. The 18-cabin True North, our luxury home afloat for an 11-night Sepik Soiree adventure cruise off northern PNG, is purpose built and can access shallow coastal environs and river systems.

We are surrounded by dense tropical jungle as we enter the river's mouth. Like the other passengers, I am up early, anticipating adventure, but everything looks supremely peaceful. The only signs of life are stray clumps of water weed floating past.

A month earlier, I had seen a spectacular exhibition of Sepik art in Canberra at the National Gallery. Monstrous crocodiles and other spirit beings still loom large in my imagination, and artefacts connected with social customs such as cannibalism and headhunting, which ceased but a century ago.

Then canoes begin appearing. Sometimes the dugouts carry whole families who are calling "Ball! Ball!" as we crowd on deck. We are prepared. Soccer balls begin to fly from the bridge above us. It is totally infectious fun and the 16-member crew are always well prepared. We are carrying about 200 footballs, round and oval, stowed on board along with other sports equipment, mosquito nets, school exercise books, pencils, T-shirts and caps. All items will be contributed to communities we visit around the Bismarck Sea.

PNG is one of the world's least-explored countries, sparsely populated and thought to be home to undiscovered species of plants and animals.

My first encounter with the country was on screen in *Cannibal Tours* (Dennis O'Rourke, 1988) about American tourists purchasing the highly prized, distinctive Sepik art. Artefacts were eagerly snapped up by dealers in the 1960s for galleries in New York, but trade tailed off after the nation's independence.

German colonists first explored the Sepik in the 1880s but, remarkably, it seems little has changed along the 1126km river, which loops through a landscape that can truly be termed timeless. Our first stop is the market at Angoram, the oldest and largest riverside settlement. Carved masks, spears and images of birds and animals are spread out to buy. I purchase a painted hornbill carved from hardwood but can't find a bilum (woven string bag) to my exact liking, though I now regret my indecision.

At villages such as this, the "sing sing" and community welcome require a lot of stamina, even for observers. The energy of the Kambaramba villagers — in full ceremonial dress and performing an undulating crocodile dance to pulsating drumming — far outlasts ours as we stand in the shade to watch.

From our mooring at Kambaramba we set out in True North's tender boats to visit the stilt village, where every structure stands above water. Even the domestic animals pick their way like high-wire artists along narrow poles. During our approach through narrow canals lined with long reeds, it's of some comfort to be told crocodiles have little chance of growing large because they are caught and eaten.

On day four, genial helicopter pilot Will swoops us further upriver where we are privileged a visit to the manhood initiation house at Palembang village and the spirit house nearby in Yenchen. During the 40-minute flight, we see the river looping like coiled rope through its vast, flat floodplain, dotted with backwater swamps and rainforest, and the Chambri Lakes area, where American anthropologist Margaret Mead lived in the 1930s and conducted her revolutionary social research.

At the men's house in Palembang we are greeted by the pounding rhythms of the garamut, a split hardwood drum. A group of young initiates, with cuts over their shoulders and down their backs to resemble the markings on a crocodile, sit quietly as PNG-raised Australian guide Simon informs us the practice has returned to the region in a re-emergence of cultural traditions.



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Next we take a thrilling short trip by immensely long narrow dugout to the Yenchen spirit house. Ceremonial cassowary figures guide us across clipped lawns towards the tall, imposing structure. Sacred objects are kept on the floor above, a space forbidden to all but initiated village men.

I purchase one of the ornamental paddles for sale on the floor and ask why male and female foreign tourists are allowed into such a hallowed space. I am told, quite reasonably, it's because we will not understand what we see, and therefore cannot steal the secrets.

After two days of immersion in Sepik culture, we head into the Bismarck Sea towards Sama and Ninigo islands.

From day five, we snorkel, scuba dive, fish for pelagics such as dogtooth tuna, sailfish and Spanish mackerel, or explore from the sky aboard the ship's six-passenger helicopter, which locals apparently have dubbed "The Mix-master from Jesus Christ".

We get a huge welcome "sing sing" at Ponam Island on day eight. The schoolchildren have had to put on their uniforms, even though it is a Sunday. And we appreciate

Clockwise from main: the stilt village on Lake Kambaramba, top; carvings for sale; True North gets a Sepik River welcome; villager in traditional dress

the effort and hospitality as we look around gardens, churches, schools and other communal buildings. All of our visits to the Bismarck's villages leave me with enduring memories of the simplicity, beauty and fragility of their way of life.

While PNG is one of the world's top dive destinations, the current drift along coral walls is total bliss for this snorkeller. Underwater meadows of abundant mature corals open out beneath us as marine biologist guide Andy Lewis leads the way. Turtles paddle away but the swarming shoals of glorious tropical fish hardly seem to notice us. And it isn't just about the coral, spectacular as it is. Submerged plane and boat wrecks are plentiful on days 10 and 11 as we ply the waters of New Hanover and New Ireland, key battle sites of World War II.

By journey's end, I think it's as well excursions are relatively active, considering the quality of meals. The 60kg Spanish mackerel Hugh has caught turns up in sushi bar snacks one day. The rest of that day's catch is ferried by crew over to the island villages nearby.

Like all else on this fascinating and fun trip, managed with utmost cultural sensitivity and professionalism, the crew has once again thought of everything.

Jane Freebury was a guest of True North and the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority.

Checklist

True North operates two Sepik Soiree cruises in November each year, from Kavieng and Madang, as well as exploration cruises of the region in November and December. Return chartered flights ex-Cairns are included in the fare; from \$17,995 a person twin-share. Award-winning Broome-based North Star Cruises Australia also conducts luxury adventure cruises around the Kimberley and West Papua.

- northstarcruises.com.au
- papuanewguinea.travel