

Cinematic Style | NEW SPRING FASHIONS REVIVE OLD HOLLYWOOD

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2013's LEADING CONTENDERS SHIFT INTO HIGH GEAR



MARCH 2013



Grand Openings

MODERN RETREATS IN MALTA, BRAZIL & BHUTAN

True Blue

An authentic cultural adventure unfolds along Papua New Guinea's seldom-sailed Sepik River.



ALL EYES ARE on the eight young men seated around the fire. The skin on their backs and shoulders is deeply scarred, having been stippled with razor blades in a pattern modeled after the scaly hide of a crocodile. The wounds have been pasted with ash and river mud and pummeled with bamboo bats, and are now drying in the heat of the blaze.

Reserved for men over the age of 20, this ceremonial ritual is conducted generation after generation in Papua New Guinea's Iatmul culture, which holds that its people evolved from crocodiles. Witnessing this rite of passage is a rare privilege for outsiders—and one of several insider cultural experiences on a *True North* adventure through Papua New Guinea.

True North is a 164-foot adventure vessel operated by Australia's North Star Cruises, which pioneered Western Australia's far-flung Kimberley region (see "Call of the Kimberley," page 157) for cruising more than 25 years ago. With its inaugural Bismarck Bonanza journey last November, *True North* became one of the few commercial passenger ships to tour Papua New Guinea's serpentine Sepik River, the lifeline of the Iatmul.

Lying just 99 miles north of Australia's Cape York Peninsula, Papua New Guinea is arguably one of the world's last true wildernesses. *True North's* new routes through the country—the vessel will return this November with the 10-day Bismarck Bonanza and 12-day Sepik Soiree cruises (priced from about \$15,850)—explore the sparsely populated region by land, by sea, by helicopter, and underwater. The trips span 70 nautical miles of the Sepik and follow reverse paths up and down Papua New Guinea's north coast,

connecting *True North's* 36 passengers with communities along the river and on remote islands in the Bismarck Sea.

Onboard *True North*, guests of the 18 suites are served by a staff of 20 that includes two chefs formerly of Melbourne's acclaimed *Vue de Monde*. Passengers gather in the well-stocked lounge bar, the casual dining area on the rear deck, and the extensive transom, which becomes a hive of activity each morning and afternoon as guests embark on fishing, snorkeling, scuba-diving, and cultural excursions.

Six aluminum-hulled tenders facilitate the outings, as do *True North's* relationships with local guides such as Hank Liversidge. A university graduate and exploration site manager for several international mining companies, Liversidge accompanies passengers to islands where they might be greeted by an entire village of people performing a "sing-sing" wearing elaborate beads and feathers and carrying giant crocodile puppets. Cultural tours also visit lively markets and crafts vendors, whose works include intricately carved masks, grass skirts, and *bilongs*—simple string bags that villagers sling over their shoulders or across their heads, so called because everything inside "bilongs" to the wearer.

Thanks to guides like Liversidge—who looks forward to receiving his own crocodile-like hide next year—*True North* passengers gain unprecedented access and insight into these rarely visited communities and ceremonies of the Iatmul. "We are from the crocodile," Liversidge says. "It's our cultural belief—our trademark." —TRICIA WELSH

North Star Cruises, +61.8.9192.1829, www.northstarcruises.com.au

The helicopter-equipped ship will commence its second cruise along the coast of Papua New Guinea in November.