

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## PAPUA NEW GUINEA

A POETIC PLACE WITH SUBTITLES

INSIDER'S  
FLORENCE

A NEW TWIST  
ON TOKYO

IS THIS THE END  
FOR SAIGON'S  
STREET FOOD?

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CAMBODIA AND THAILAND:  
A TOUR BY PRIVATE PLANE





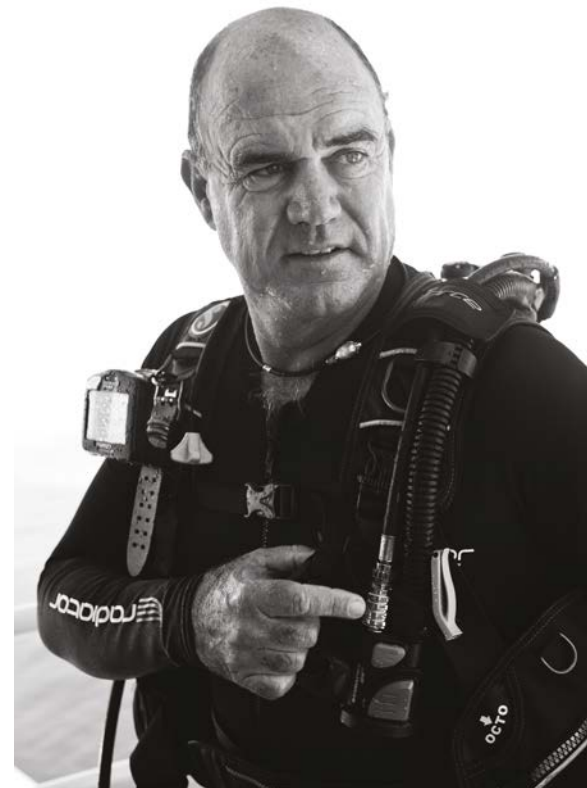
# MELANESIA RISING

Two *dimdims* fly off a yacht... It's the start not of a joke but of the trip of a lifetime for **Sophy Roberts**, who scuba dives below Papua New Guinea and chugs above it in a *mixmaster* *bilong Jesus Christ*. Photographed by **Ken Kochey**



A big catch near the  
Trobriand Islands.  
**OPPOSITE:**  
Two ways to  
navigate the Papua  
New Guinean  
waters.





here is a black-and-white picture of Errol Flynn standing in a copra plantation in Papua New Guinea, taken in 1926 in Kavieng on New Ireland, an island at the northern end of the Bismarck Archipelago off Papua New Guinea's northeastern seaboard. The 17-year-old Flynn poses in a white cotton shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, matching pants and with a cigarette hanging from his lip.

The photograph was taken six years after the League of Nations expropriated this former German possession when the islands north and east of Papua New Guinea, from New Ireland to Bougainville, were turned over to Australia as winnings for the crucial role their soldiers played in the Great War. This was when the area became known as the Mandated Territory of New Guinea (in 1942 invaded by the Japanese, then integrated into the independent political entity of PNG with independence in 1975). As for foreigners, they became known as *dimdins* in the local Melanesian Tok Pisin (or New Guinea Pidgin) language.

There is nothing more compelling than New Guinea's lingua franca—aside, perhaps, from the fact that in a country of just 7 million, Tok Pisin is one of 800 different tongues spoken, a sum representing an entirely disproportionate eighth of the languages in the entire world. It is a unique range mirrored by PNG's fantastical topography—especially its eastern shores and

islands, which I'm exploring on a 10-night cruise aboard the Australian-flagged expeditionary yacht, *True North*. Sailing one of the very few vessels plying these waters with an on-board helicopter, I can tell you from on-high that the landscape runs from menacing volcanic cones on New Britain, to strings of coral pearls in the Louisiade Archipelago, to a thousand jade-green fjords, which reach like spindly fingers into the cobalt Solomon Sea. What's more, the diving here provides an extraordinary perspective, with multi-colored coral gardens more vibrant and full of vitality than any I've seen elsewhere in the world. Still, this is my second visit to PNG in the space of six



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Flying the PNG flag; a welcome *sing-sing* in Tufi; Craig Howson, owner of the *True North*; the Louisiade Archipelago as seen from the helicopter; post-snorkel in Deboyne Lagoon; on-board amuse-bouches.

months, and the main reason I've returned is because I can't get enough of the people.

The trip starts in Kavieng, where Flynn was photographed, and finishes in Alotau, which is the capital of Milne Bay Province at the mainland's easternmost extremity, the 1,000-nautical-mile route encompassing numerous archipelagos, including islands as deliciously named as Panapompom. But then every word in this country, from maps to machines, is packed with poetry.

Children are *pikininis*. Branches are *fingas bilong tri*. Waterfalls are *wars kalap*, or water collapsing. Even the baddies sound attractive:



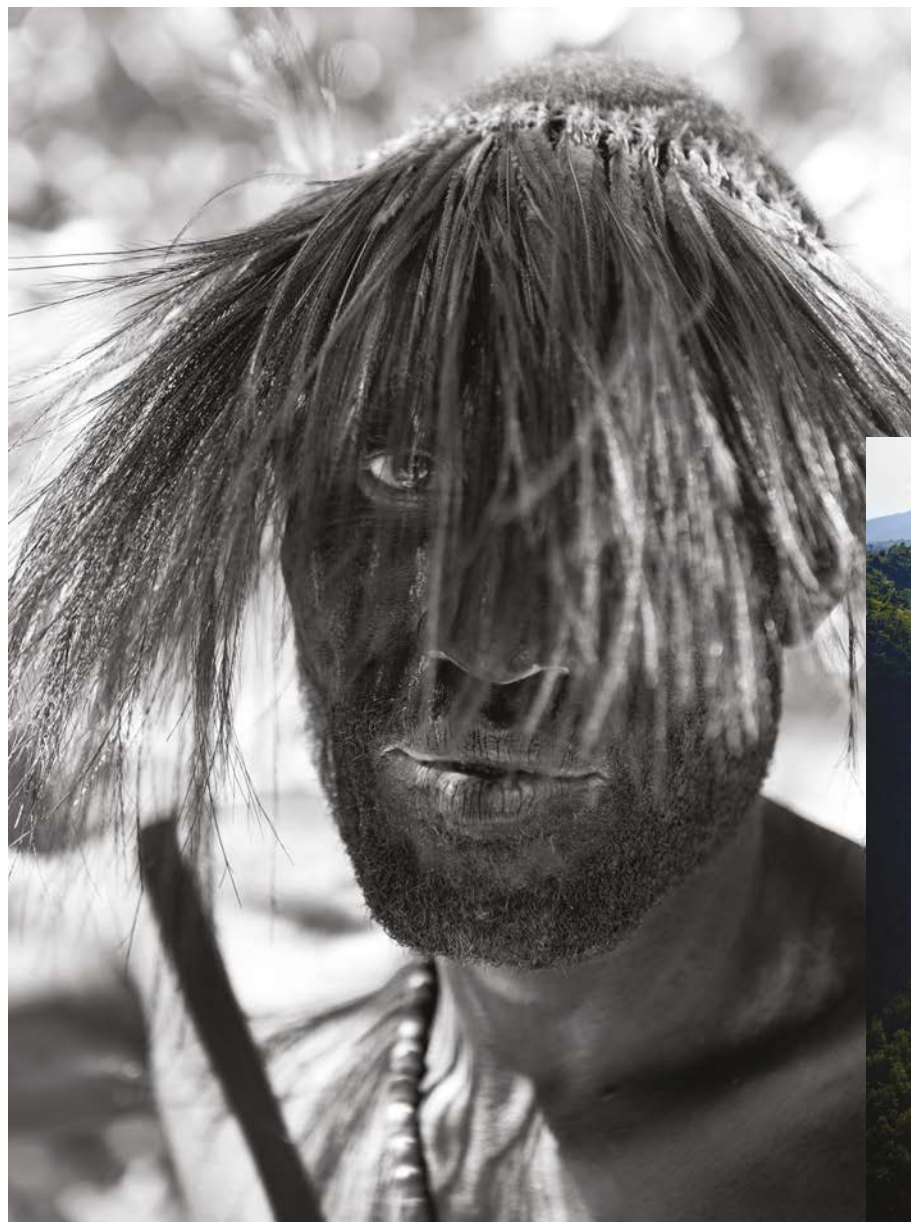


The promise of a chopper ride for the top students has raised grades on Rambutyo Island.

**BENEATH US, THE BOAT SLIPS AWAY. WE CLIMB HIGHER AND HIGHER BEFORE WE DROP DOWN, HEARTS IN MOUTHS, INTO A HIDDEN VALLEY. I DOUBT ANY MAN HAS WALKED HERE**







**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Sunset water sports; a Japanese fighter ditched in the May 1942 Battle of the Coral Sea, near Goodenough Island; verdant views; a solemn stare near Tufi.

criminals are *raskols*. Helicopters, more familiar to PNG's remote communities than cars, are *mixmaster bilong Jesus Christs*, indicating the presence of Christian missionaries, with the de-compressed metaphor—such and such is this, but not quite—loading up concrete nouns and simple verbs to create brilliantly witty turns of phrase.

*Wan bagful blak bokis hemi gat waet tut mo hemi gat blak tut, sipos yu kilim smol, hemi singaot gud* translates literally as “one big fella black box, him he got white tooth and him he got black tooth, suppose you kill him small (meaning strike or hit lightly) him he sing out good.” I attempt to work out the meaning further, by writing down the entire translation. Ruthie Sirambat, with whom I get talking on New Ireland, smiles and throws me a lifeline: “A piano,” she explains.

**I END UP SPENDING MY FIRST** morning in PNG with Ruthie, when a tropical storm blows in, smudging out the blue lagoon and blazing white sands. We sit out the rain for an hour on her pandanus-roofed veranda, which overlooks the water. I watch the children get their orange halos of flowers ready for the *sing-sing* they're putting on for *True North's* passengers. I listen to Ruthie and her friends *tok story* with an infectious enthusiasm. Ruthie, the daughter-in-law of a Methodist pastor, explains how New Ireland's Malagan culture is matrilineal. I doubt anyone is going to challenge her, nor any of these women: these are big, strong Melanesian *mamas*. When the conversation broaches the country's reputation for violence, Ruthie dismisses it with a swipe of her hand and a huge, eye-creasing smile.

Outside Port Moresby, which, granted, is cited among the world's most dangerous capitals, and the Highlands, where problems

fester among tribal groups that haven't yet worked out how to find gainful employment in a country undergoing rapid change, New Guineans laugh from the belly. They are deeply hospitable. When we turn up in a remote village on East New Britain, the local schoolteacher, Chris Topher, gathers together the villagers for a colorful *sing-sing* performance.

“I'd like to apologize for anything you don't expect,” he announces to our group of 32 *dimdims* sitting on plastic chairs arranged beneath the cherry trees. “I'd also like to say sorry for what we cannot provide.”

It is here that I hear the best pidgin word of all—a phrase politically incorrect to outsiders, but according to Topher, just another pidgin description: children born of relationships with foreign loggers are *half cuts*. Topher says the children are fully integrated into village society, even though the logging companies are not always so warmly appreciated.

**FLY OVER SOME OF THE** remote islands off Papua New Guinea, and it's easy to see what is happening: great holes in the jungle look like open wounds, the thickly forested folds cleared for regimented oil palm plantations. Land grabs are frequently the subject of corruption scandals, along with the purse-seine trawlers, which are emptying out the seas, and the mining companies, who are digging deep into this resource-rich nation for oil, gas and gold. Ecological concerns aside, the potential benefits of such efforts—development opportunities education, medicine—are not finding their way back to local people. They subsist on garden-grown vegetables, fruit and locally caught fish, but subsistence is all it is, with malaria still rife and natural disasters, from cyclones to volcanic eruptions, creating occasional and urgent calls for outside assistance.

Hence the relevance of *True North*, whose Australian owner, Craig Howson, ensures that it arrives at every village it visits with donations, including medicine and clothes and scores of footballs, which the kids chase into the sea. The helicopter occasionally flies the urgently sick to hospital—with the costs sponsored by individual passengers. *True North* also donates an annual scenic flight for the top performing children at a school on Rambutyo Island, which has made achievement rates shoot up, according to *True North's* helicopter pilot, Rob Colbert.

For *True North's* passengers, too, it is the helicopter that elevates the boat's PNG forays into the trip of a lifetime. With a 2.2-meter draft allowing it to slip in and out of narrow river systems and awkward coral atolls with ease, the





**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:** Chilling in Deboyne Lagoon; oxygen cha-cha-cha; taking a peek in the Louisiades; an outrigger sea boat unique to the Dobu people, who are spread from the Trobriands to the Louisiades.

## T+L Guide

**True North** ([northstarcruises.com.au](http://northstarcruises.com.au)). The author traveled as a guest on the 10-night Adventures in Paradise trip, which starts at A\$17,295 per person, including private, round-trip air charters between Cairns, Australia, and Papua New Guinea.

**Silver Discoverer** ([silversea.com](http://silversea.com)). Sleeping 120, this larger vessel has 12 Zodiacs and a glass-bottomed boat, as well as onboard diving expertise. A 14-day trip from Koror, Palau, to Cairns, Australia, via Tufi, Papua New Guinea, from US\$11,250.

**M/V Kalibobo Spirit** ([mykalibobospirit.com](http://mykalibobospirit.com)). Mick Jagger chartered this 10-cabin, 30-meter motor yacht on his December trip to the Trobriand Islands. Prices upon request.

**Eyos Expeditions** ([eyos-expeditions.com](http://eyos-expeditions.com)). Charter a super yacht from Australia, accompanied by the cultural expertise of skipper Rob McCallum, who spent 10 years living in Papua New Guinea. Ten-day cruises from €205,000 for 12 people.

vessel hits the perfect seam: affluent, exploratory travelers who want to tip off the edge of the map without giving up their air-conditioned cabin, scuba gear, fine wines or daily lift-off in the *mixmaster*. I come to fully appreciate the adrenaline rush when we hit Tufi. No roads link this coastal jewel with Port Moresby. Arrival is either by plane (a 50-minute journey from the capital) into Tufi's newly fixed strip on a flattened fjord's head, or by boat, which is what we're doing, sleeping in a perfect anchorage where high green walls of forested volcanic rock reach up on every side.

Here, I take my first helicopter flight of the expedition. Beneath us, the boat slips away, and the curls of foaming wake created by the tenders. The Tufians' outrigger canoes get smaller and smaller, until they look like insects on the water. We see waterfalls drop out of the sides of the fjord in which the ship is anchored, and then we follow a silver thread of river, which reaches up and up towards the peak of Mount Trafalgar. We pass over impenetrable blue pools where the river water pauses on its journey to the Pacific. We hover above 10, even 20, hornbills, which skim across the canopy. We climb higher and higher until we crest the ridge, its needle-like pinnacles as sharp as the teeth of a barracuda, before we drop down, our hearts in our mouths, into a hidden valley. I am doubtful any man has walked here.

It hits me then that's what I love about PNG—that real but ever harder to find sense of discovery. Flying home to London, I get talking to my neighbor on the plane. He is a British-born scientist working in birdlife conservation out of James Cook University in Australia. I tell him where I've just come from, and he tells me about *Pseudobulweria becki*, or Beck's petrel, on which he recently published a paper. It is a seabird endemic to New Ireland—the very place I started my trip, armed with that photo of Errol Flynn in the only decent book I could find on the region. He explains the conundrum of the petrel, and how nobody in the scientific research community can find the nesting grounds of this critically endangered seabird. They know it is there—the bird has been recorded 45 times since 2007, mostly north of New Britain and around New Ireland—but the sightings have all been at sea.

While I find the elusiveness appealing, he corrects me: If their colony is a single swathe of forest taken out by the loggers, we have lost the bird forever. I am reminded that if Papua New Guinea sometimes feels like a Neverland, that's because it's just as fragile as the world of a child's imagining. +

