



Villagers from Bauwame, near Tufi in Oro Province, in traditional dress

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Expect the Unexpected **Papua New Guinea**

Papua New Guinea is truly one of the last frontiers—the country is a wild and adventurous place and offers some tremendous scuba diving, combined with many unique and fascinating things to see above the water. One of the world's most heterogeneous countries, Papua New Guinea (PNG) has a population of around 6.5 million people, but over 850 languages and nearly 1,000 traditional societies and ethnic indigenous groups. This tremendous diversity is the result of the country's mountainous terrain and dense vegetation whereby tribes and clans formed as a self-defense mechanism—leading to thousands of separate communities.

Low-level conflict between neighboring tribes was usually (and in many places still is) the norm, which meant that each tribe tended to limit itself to its defined area and resulted in the large number of traditional societies and languages. Even today less than 20 percent of PNG's population live in urban areas, with the remainder usually following a traditional

village and subsistence farming based lifestyle—many without power or running water, and where 'luxuries' such as soap, cooking oil and clothes are few and far between.

Located north of Australia, PNG occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, (the second largest island in the world), the Bismark and

Louisade archipelagos, the Admiralty Islands, Bougainville Island and numerous other smaller islands in the Bismark and Solomon Seas.

First contact

Possibly one of the most intriguing aspects of PNG is that it is only about 70 years since 'first contact' was made with

the highland people of New Guinea. Incredibly, that contact was made by an Australian prospector called Michael Leahy from rural Queensland, who not only extensively documented his experiences in a daily journal, he also took an extensive series of photographs using his Leica camera—thus providing a unique insight into an amazing series of events.

The discovery of significant gold deposits in 1926 at Edie Creek, near Wau on the north coast of New Guinea created a gold rush and spurred the Australian colonial government to venture inland and explore the very rugged interior. It had been assumed that the chain of mountains, that run east to west across the country, was so rugged that nobody



could possibly live there. Unknown was the fact that there are actually (in very simple terms) two parallel mountain chains and in between them are a series of fertile valleys, which were populated with a large number of highland people.

Equally ironically, the highlanders lived very parochially in thousands of separate small communities, each with its own network of allies and enemies. The fertile soils of the valley provided the communities with what they needed, and it was just too dangerous to travel outside the safety of their tribal territory, so there was a kind of 'Lost World' of people completely isolated from the rest of the world and living what was basically a Stone Age existence.

Michael Leahy, his brother Dan and Patrol Officer James Taylor were the people who made that first contact during the five years they spent exploring the highland region, from 1930 to 1935, looking for gold prospects.

World War II

Papua New Guinea was a major theater in the battle for the Pacific during WWII, with the Japanese forces landing first in Kavieng, New Ireland on 21 January 1942 and soon after at Rabaul in New Britain, which they proceeded to turn into a major base.

The Japanese launched their attack on Port Moresby in May 1942 from Rabaul, as the precursor to the invasion of Australia. But in the Battle of the Coral Sea, U.S. carrier-based aircraft and the Australian Navy

succeeding in forcing the Japanese armada back to Rabaul.

In June 1942, after suffering devastating defeat at the Battle of Midway, the Japanese abandoned trying to take Port Moresby by naval attack and launched a surprise landing near Buna

that separates the northeast from the southwest of the country. The defeat of this attack by the Australian Army on the Kokoda Track is one of the finest moments in the military history of Australia.

The remnants of the war are to be found all over the country, both above and below the water, and make Papua New Guinea one of the best places in the world to dive on WWII wrecks—particularly aircraft.

Australian Colonial Rule and Independence

When the Japanese invaded Rabaul in 1942, the British colonial territory of Papua and German New Guinea were merged together in to a single entity and administered as a one colony by Australia. After the war Australia remained in control of the country until full independence was granted in September 1975.

When visiting Papua New Guinea, it's very easy to get the impression that it was 'happy days' all round during colonial rule, and Australia ruled with great wisdom and generosity. Many older local people who experienced those times will tell you that it was much better back then—'gut taim bipo' (good times before). But the truth is that PNG was just not ready for independence in 1975, and many of the problems that plague the country to this day can be traced back to the rushed nature of that transition point.

The Wantok System

An appreciation of the 'Wantok system' is important in gaining a better understanding of today's Papua New Guinea, as the system is both the social glue that binds the nation together, while probably being the largest single impediment to the country's develop-



Michael Leahy, Australian prospector



on the northeast coast of PNG, using it as a base from which to launch an overland advance across the Owen Stanley mountain range. These mountains reach a height of 13,000 ft and are like a spine that runs down the Papuan peninsula creating a formidable, saw-toothed, jungle barrier





Distinctive facial tattoos of female villagers in Oro Province

On their time off, locals relax on the sidewalk and enjoy watching the street life

The negative side is that the political system in PNG is such that anybody elected to the parliament has to basically promise the earth to all and sundry, but this is particularly so to any of their Wantoks, creating a situation where a great deal of public money is consumed but there is very little to show for it.

Is it safe to go there?

This is a very common question and one I have been asked a lot but generally only by those people who have not yet been to PNG. And well, the honest answer is no, it's not 100 percent safe, but in my experience, the risks are manageable and are far outweighed by the overall experience.

I have lived in Sydney for the last 14 years and can honestly say that I have never had a single situation where I felt threatened or in any real danger. Is that because Sydney is 100 percent safe? No, it's not. What it really means is that I use my common sense and avoid areas or venues where there could be trouble. Coincidentally, I have also been visiting Papua New Guinea on a regular basis for about 14 years and also not had a single situation there where I felt threatened or in any real danger—again, because I used my common sense.



PNG



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expensive place, and personally I don't find it very appealing. The danger

is principally from the Raskols, local gangs that have become a permanent and very negative feature of Port Moresby, and some other major cities in PNG such as Mount Hagen and Lae. Virtually every expat I have spoken to in Port Moresby seems to have a "near miss" story and some have stories that are really scary. But I really don't think the place is the "near death" experience these stories and the media tend to make it, and in reality, I believe it is actually the local people that suffer the most from the Raskols.

A violent crime against an expat will usually bring severe retribution from the police, whereas similar crimes against the locals appear to be much more common and not a lot seems to be done



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THIS PAGE: Faces of the people of PNG

ment.

PNG is basically a patchwork quilt of nearly 1,000 traditional societies and ethnic indigenous groups. There are over 850 different languages (one third of the world's total languages still used), and one common tongue—Tok Pisin, the lingua franca spoken by the majority of the population. Wantok is Tok Pisin for "one language" and refers to the language of the tribe a person belongs to. But Wantok

is much more than a language as it encompasses the basic philosophy of life for the people of PNG, and if one of your Wantoks is in trouble, needs money or is hungry, you are compelled to help them as much as you possibly can. The positive side is that because there are such limited basic services for the people in general, and no safety net for the poor, the Wantok system effectively performs that role.

Port Moresby

Unless your final destination is Loloata Resort in nearby Bootless Bay, all scuba diving trips to PNG involve either transiting through, or overnighing in, Port Moresby as the capital is the only international gateway into the country. In my experience, this is probably the most intimidating part of any journey to PNG, because there is definitely an element of danger in Port Moresby, plus it's also an





Underwater scenes from Milne Bay, PNG: Diver and giant elephant ear sponges; Coral grouper on reef; Rhinopias or lacy scorpionfish (below)



about them. Apparently very few, crimes against expats are planned—instead they tend to be random and opportunistic occurrences where a Raskol seizes the chance that has suddenly presented itself.

For visitors to Port Moresby, being involved in such a random event is probably the biggest danger you will actually face, and that is only likely to happen if you are particularly careless, such as walking around unaccompanied with an expensive looking camera or wrist watch, or maybe a visibly bulging wallet.

Local people in PNG tend to sit on the ground and watch the world go by when they have nothing to do, which can be very intimidating to the uninitiated visitor who will already be semi-paranoid about raskols just waiting to

pounce. While it is unlikely that they will be wearing a T Shirt with "Raskol" on the front to identify themselves, the fact is that you will probably know one should you cross paths with one—or more.

So, the trick is to use your common sense and get out and see the things Port Moresby has to offer but use the guided tours offered by all the hotels to do that. The guides will know the potential trouble spots, who the possible trouble makers are and steer you well clear.

Away from Port Moresby, in the bigger towns such as Alotau in Milne Bay and Rabaul and Kimbe in New Britain of Kavieng in New Ireland I have wandered around alone, and while I did not feel completely safe, I did not experience any problems.

Some excellent general safety tips I

picked up from the Lonely Planet are as follows:

- Use a Bilum: Bilums are the locally made colorful string bags that everybody seems to use in PNG and using one does a lot to neutralize the flashing "I'm a tourist" sign above your head that draws attention to you.
- Raskol money: Have some money ready in your pocket in case you do have a "raskol moment" and keep the rest of it well hidden.
- Pay Friday: The locals get paid fortnightly on a Friday, and the younger men get on the grog in a big way—stay well clear. ■

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