

# BUSINESS JET TRAVELER

## Papua New Guinea

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*No matter where you live, you're likely to feel a million miles from home here.*



A Group of bare-chested, dark-skinned men stand on the shore of Garove Island in Papua New Guinea, staring at us. They wear elaborate feathered headdresses and grass skirts and their faces are painted in streaks of yellow ochre. As our expedition vessel moves close to the shore, I notice their necklaces are made of pigs' tusks. As we step off the boat a few minutes later, not one smiles and I can feel the anxiousness bubble up in my stomach.

Finally after what appears to be a standoff, one of the tribesmen moves forward, holds out his hand and says, "Welcome to New Guinea. We used to eat you, but now we greet you." He grins,

displaying teeth and gums stained red from betel nut.

When I told my sister I'd signed up for a 12-day cruise to Papua New Guinea, she begged me not to go, because she was so concerned about my safety. As she noted, Michael Rockefeller (son of the late Vice President Nelson Rockefeller) disappeared there in 1961, after his dugout canoe overturned. No one knows whether he drowned, a crocodile got him or the cannibals ate him. I assured my sister that this incident happened half a century ago and that I'm going not by canoe but on a luxury cruise ship. Also, there are no longer any cannibals, and the only crocodile I'll see is behind a glass wall at the Wildlife Dome in Cairns, Australia.

Still, New Guinea—which lies just south of the equator and has the largest area of intact rainforest outside of the Amazon—is a million miles from the world where I live. The only urban city is Port Moresby, which is in stark contrast to the primitive coastal villages I plan to visit.

I have come here because I want to witness a culture in a country linked to ancient myths and rituals, where tribes in remote villages continue to inhabit thatched huts with no electricity and where women cook on communal stoves made of heated stones.

When the original migrants arrived here from Africa more than 50,000 years ago, each tribe spoke a different language. In the 16th century, a Spanish explorer named this place New Guinea because he thought the people looked like those he'd seen on the Guinea coast in Africa. Today, there are still more than 800 tribes and as many tongues, though some tribes speak pidgin, a simplified language with such words as wash-wash for swim and see-see for island.

Papua, itself a large see-see, has 300 other, smaller offshore islands with no roads, and the only way to see them is by boat. And while the islands are extremely remote, I have a spacious air-conditioned cabin, Internet access and a deck that circles the ship so I can run laps daily as the sun rises on the Coral Sea. Each morning we arrive in a new place and are immediately surrounded by a flotilla of dugout canoes, sometimes accompanied by drummers pounding out a greeting. Children in Papua learn to paddle almost before they can walk, and scores of kids in pint-sized canoes peer up at us, as curious about us as we are about them.

After a 24-hour journey on Qantas Airlines to Cairns and a charter flight to the township of Raboul, I board the Coral Princess cruise ship *Oceanic Discoverer*. The next morning I go on deck to see we have arrived in an oceanic lagoon, Garove Island. As soon as we walk onto the shore of this extinct-volcanic island, the villagers greet us in a receiving line, most chewing betel nut, a mild stimulant used since ancient times.

Our visit begins with a sing-sing, a welcome ceremony of singing, dancing and kundu drumming in which the participants wear colorful grass skirts or loincloths, feathered armbands and ankle bracelets made of leaves and feathers. The men are adorned with elaborate bird-of-paradise headdresses and the women wear flowers behind their ears and wreaths made from the pandanus leaf. All paint their faces in stripes, dots or zigzags, depending on the village, and in the colors of New Guinea: white, red, black and yellow. Often the female dancers are bare-breasted.

After the singsing, it's time to shop. Papua is full of skillful artists and, besides subsistence

farming, selling their artifacts is one of the only ways they can earn money. I admire woven shoulder bags called bilums, wooden masks, spirit boards, shell necklaces, hand-carved wooden animals and shiny trays shaped like fish. I pause in front of a cone-shaped object. "Basket?" I ask the vendor. "Penis gourd," he says in heavily accented English.

When you see something you like, you start by asking how much. The seller names an amount and you say, "What's your second price?" That price is final—you don't ask for a third. My favorite finds are a long wooden flute shaped like a tribal figure, a wooden pig with mother-of-pearl eyes and a bare-breasted female fertility figurine. When I lift the grass skirt, I notice she's anatomically correct.

The villagers call us dim-dims, a pidgin word that isn't derogatory but that I find a little strange. Much stranger is when I pose the same question to several villagers and receive different answers from each. I ask, "How many cruise ships come here?" One islander replies that three come per year; another says one every month; a third tells me we're the first ship this year. Our onboard anthropologist explains that often the villagers will say anything because even if they don't know an answer, to not give one would be rude.

One morning in the Tufi Fjords I meet Tony, still in his sing-sing costume. I have learned that brides cost between \$500 and \$1,000 but can also be bought with a few dozen pigs and a big harvest of vegetables, so I ask Tony how much he paid for his wife. Thirty pigs, he says. He tells me he already has five children but wants three more daughters, because each will be worth 30 pigs. At lunch, I learn that Tony told another passenger he'd paid 90 pigs for his wife and has nine children and told a third passenger he'd paid 50 pigs for his wife and has seven children. Who knows?

Most of the Papua population is Christian, but ancient myths pervade its culture. The natives believe in the spirits of the dead, and when hunting, they call out the names of their ancestors so the spirits will wake up to help them draw a pig or fish closer. One afternoon, we visit Fergusson Island, known for its bubbling hot springs and extinct volcanoes. Mary, a local, leads us toward Dei Dei Hot Springs, which, she says, were discovered by a dim-dim. "If you call to him, he rises and you talk to him," she adds.

Mary raises her arms and begins to chant, trying to summon the dim-dim. Nothing. She calls out again. "Maybe he went out," she says. "If he were here, he would rise." Suddenly the water bubbles up, erupting into a 10-foot-tall geyser. "There's dim-dim here!" she says. As we walk back down the trail, she announces, "The dim-dim came and the white flowers are out. It's time to harvest the yams."

Yams are the staple food and the element that structures society on the Trobriand Islands, also known as "the islands of love." The natives use them as currency and to trade for food, rope and other supplies. They publicly display the yams in yam houses, elaborate hand-carved wooden huts. Yams are so important that couples cannot eat them together unless they're married. In the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom must eat the best yams in the village. Adolescents on the Trobriand Islands aren't allowed to eat yams to attract the opposite sex, though sex plays a huge role on these islands. The Trobriand Islanders have a completely different approach to sexuality and, each year,

during the week of the yam-harvest festival, everyone—including young teens—is urged to have sexual relations. Women are as assertive as men, and multiple partners are encouraged during this week of free love.

In the Tufi Fjords, by the time a girl reaches puberty, she can choose to have her face and entire body tattooed. In one village we visit, a beautiful girl of 13 or 14 lies bare-breasted on palm fronds beneath a shady palapa. Her aunt, one of the few people in the village who knows the art of tattooing, bends over her and draws a design with a black marker on the girl's face. If the girl approves the design, the aunt will start the tattoo process, which will take three days. The girl is smiling because the tattoo is considered a feature of beauty. I cringe at the thought of the pain and how it will change her looks.

One morning I walk with an islander through the rainforest and he points out betel nut and paw-paw trees, then pulls a leaf off a pandanus tree. The leaves are used for floors, roofs and catching fish and he shows me their needle-like ridges, so sharp they can draw blood. "We tie the leaf to a stick," he says. "We throw the stick in the water, the fish grabs onto it and there's dinner." On another island, a guide points out the noni tree, whose fruit, leaves and bark cure everything from insect bites to infectious diseases. "We squish it up and make medicine," he says. I am in awe of these people who live so close to nature, in harmony with the rainforest and the sea, and whose community gardens overflow with yams, cocoa, casaba and taro.

By the time we return for lunch each day, I'm exhausted from all the morning activity. Afternoons are mellow and include swimming, snorkeling, taking a tour with the ship's biologist in the glass-bottomed boat or diving. Papua's coral reefs are pristine, and the sea is so warm we never need a wet suit. We move along the sandy sea floor, looking at coral and passing parades of lionfish, clownfish and other aquatic critters. On Pig Island, I follow the dive master beneath the sea to a former Japanese cargo carrier, now a sunken wreck. We swim around the former instrument of war, which has been transformed into a reef filled with colorful anemones.

I love my solitude on the ship, which offers plenty of secluded places to look out at the sparkling water, the surrounding hills blanketed in velvety shades of green and the cloudless sky where two red-footed boobies might swoop down to chase the flying fish. I think about the Papuans who have no TVs, computers or iPhones, yet seem so much more content than we are. On the last morning, I walk with a local schoolteacher and ask, "What's important to you?"

"The land," he says. "The land is my mother and my strength. The land is my life."

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## **TRAVELER REPORT CARD**

### **ACCOMMODATIONS: (A-):**

The *Oceanic Discoverer*, the author's home base for this journey, has 36 spacious staterooms with large ocean-facing windows, an excellent reference library, two cocktail bars, a small pool and lounge chairs on three decks.

## CUISINE (B+):

Aboard the *Oceanic Discoverer*, the chef creates an endless array of fresh dishes with a hot and cold breakfast and lunch buffet and a formal dinner with three entrée choices. Afternoon tea includes freshly baked cakes.

## ACTIVITIES (A):

The ship visits a new destination daily and the cruise includes island stops, snorkeling, swimming and diving (with a diving instructor). You can also choose a glass-bottomed boat for a guided beneath-the-sea tour. An anthropologist and a biologist give lectures and join guests on the islands.

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## TRAVELER FAST FACTS

### WHAT IT IS:

Papua New Guinea, one of the world's most culturally diverse, rural and least-explored countries, occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea and is north of Australia. It also includes many offshore islands.

### GETTING THERE:

Fly your jet to Australia's Cairns Airport ([cairnsairport.com.au](http://cairnsairport.com.au)), which has a 10,354-foot runway. From Cairns, fly to Tokua Airport in Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, which has a 5,643-foot runway. Phone +675 982 9033. You can also charter a jet from Cairns through Altitude Aviation ([altitudeaviation.com.au](http://altitudeaviation.com.au)). If you want to fly commercial, note that Qantas offers the most flights from North America to Australia. Delta, United and Air Zealand also fly to Cairns.

The author explored Papua New Guinea on the *Oceanic Discoverer*, a 12-day **Coral Princess Cruise**. The ship carries a unique expedition vessel, Xplorer, which has room for all 72 passengers, who board directly from the *Discoverer*'s deck. The Xplorer is lowered in and out of the sea via electric cables—no inflatable boats necessary. Other options include Zegrahm Expeditions' 14-night cruise on a 100-passenger ship with 10 inflatable boats and Northstar Cruises' *True North* with a nine-night cruise for 36 passengers with six inflatable boats and optional helicopter sightseeing tours. Keep in mind that you'll need a visa (best obtained prior to departure) for entry into Papua New Guinea.

### SIDETRIPS:

It's more than 24 hours from New York to Cairns, so it makes sense to take a few extra days to explore Australia before or after the cruise. The author's trip included extensions in Sydney and Cairns that were arranged by bespoke tour operator Ker & Downey.

**Margie Goldsmith** is a reporter, columnist and novelist who has visited 122 countries and written about them all.

# Additional Images

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INDONESIA

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

AUSTRALIA

Pacific Ocean

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Coral Sea

Madang

Rabaul

Tokua Airport

Port Moresby