

Focus on PNG, our closest neighbour

With so much attention placed on Kokoda, that iconic rite-of-passage for around 6,000 Aussie trekkers a year, you could be forgiven for thinking that Papua New Guinea is a mono-dimensional travel destination. Far from it. The reality is our closest neighbour is multi-dimensional, providing an unexpected range of attractions appealing to ever growing numbers of visitors.

PNG has quietly experienced six years of consecutive inbound tourism growth and while many other destinations around the globe are experiencing negative results 2009 looks set to be another positive year.

Australia contributes more than half the total number of short-term international visitor arrivals to Papua New Guinea - 120,139 in 2008. Of total arrivals, 34% visited on holiday while 45% were business travellers. Despite the significant drop in outbound travel from Australia this year, and the closure of the Kokoda Track for part of this year, Papua New Guinea has held its attraction with holiday segment arrivals showing slight growth over 2008 figures.

Papua New Guinea Tourism Promotion Authority international marketing manager Leith Isaac says 2009 has seen a core shift in the market with the increase in FIT travelers arriving in the country.

"Australians have discovered that Papua New Guinea, one of the world's most fascinating destinations is right on their doorstep," Leith said.

"Traditionally the market to PNG was exclusively package tours and operator bookings for the adventure market but we are seeing more and more travelers are booking a flight to Port Moresby and deciding what to do when they hit the ground.

"Trekking has long been a draw-card for Australians in PNG but growing numbers are attracted by the world-class diving, surfing and birdwatching as well as the chance to experience a truly fascinating culture."

Tourism is not yet mainstream in Papua New Guinea; rather it appeals to a range of mostly niche adventure special-interest groups who enjoy scuba diving, trekking and cultural visits along with fishing, surfing and expedition cruising.

The launch of Virgin's Pacific Blue Brisbane to Port Moresby services earlier this year improves access and frequency, provides competition to the Air Niugini/Qantas code-share services from Sydney, Brisbane and Cairns and reflects sustained market growth.

New resorts are opening, additional hotels are being erected and existing properties expanding to cater for this growth.

PNG is linguistically the most complex nation in the world. Over 800 languages are spoken, estimated as an average of one language for every 900 square kilometres. We are talking distinct languages here, not dialects. The rugged terrain of the Owen Stanley Ranges on the mainland and over 600 islands offshore means there is no interlinking road system so transport is by boat, walking or plane (there are around 500 grass runways); it follows that geographic isolation will help ensure original cultures are preserved.

Tribes passionately maintain their individual heritage through their art, sing songs, dancing and initiations - expressions of their culture that continue regardless of tourism which to date has barely touched most of PNG. Examples include the Baining fire dancers near Rabaul and the Asaro Mud Men and Huli Wig men in the Highland regions.

Visits to remote villages scattered across the islands and forested landscape, second only in size to the Amazon basin, provides plenty of opportunities to see and in some instances purchase primitive art, timber carvings, masks (decorated with hair, shells, pig tusks), string bags (bilums), crafts, hand dyed Tapa cloth, woven baskets, penis girds and clay pots - and endless opportunities for photography.

Also on offer is a cultural explosion of colour and sound at PNG's regular festivals: the Goroka and Mt Hagen Shows are world famous but also consider the Canoe Festival in Alotau, the yam festival in the Trobriand Islands or the week-long Malagan Festival in Kavieng - any one of which provide unforgettable opportunities to experience large numbers of colourful, often raucous, tribes performing en-mass (in some instances this means thousands of participants).

PNG is widely recognised as having some of the best scuba diving in the world. The coral reefs are largely untouched, with outstanding marine life including reef sharks, pelagic fish, hammerheads, barracuda, manta rays as well as WWII wrecks (tanks, downed US bombers and Japanese Zeros) all in 28 degree waters. Apart from dedicated live-aboard dive boats popular dive spots include Loloata Resort, close to Port Moresby, Tufi Dive Resort, Jais Aben Resort in Madang or Walindi Dive Resort near Kimbe, all offering comfortable accommodation and plenty of options for those who may not be there just for the diving.

Pick just about any coastal destination and there is great fishing (including the famed Black Bass and Barramundi) to be had. A great lad's weekend away and a favourite for serious fishermen from around the world.

The view across to the coast from the summit of Mt Wilhelm is well worth the climb. At 4509 metres (Mt Kosciuszko is 2230 metres) you can encounter snow, just a few degrees from the equator. Apart from Kokoda, there are plenty of other easier and harder treks to choose from including Black Cat near Rabaul, said to require half-marathon fitness level before considering the challenge!

The reputation of PNG's surf spots is growing, luring surfers who seek consistent waves with barely another person to jostle with. Kavieng and Vanimo are the stand outs. The Surf Association has a code of practice to restrict visitor numbers and ensure traditional landowners benefit from visitation.

For the fit and healthy kayaking is one way to explore the extraordinary coastline of PNG, surrounding islands and remote coastal villages. What better way to meet locals in their dugout canoes than from your own kayak? Intrepid adventurer meets savvy local. Papua New Guinea waters and rivers offer enormous diversity for kayaking, providing a great opportunity to combine coastal exploration with outstanding fishing and cultural experiences through village stays.

There are myriad choices to offer adventure travellers of all ages. Sited on the 'Ring of Fire' PNG has a number of active volcanoes including the towering Mt Tavurvur in Rabaul, where you can walk through valleys of black ash, around fissures of escaping steam and sulphurous gas, while observing massive black clouds of volcanic waste looming above. Hands-on education for young and old volcanologists alike.

On thermal Fergusson Island locals wash and bathe in the cooler streams and cook vegetables in boiling hot springs and pools.

It's no wonder that keen photographers and birdwatchers flock to PNG to capture the wildlife and flora. PNG boasts the world's largest buterfly, the Queen Alexandra Birdwing which grows to 30cm across, the largest pigeon in the world, the Queen Victoria Crowned Pigeon (the size of a chicken), multiple species of Bird of Paradise, Cassowary and thousands of other species.

PNG Cultural Calendar

Tufi Cultural Show *Local performances, four local villages. (May)*
Rabaul National Mask Festival *Gathering of local tribes for three days of performances. (July)*
New Ireland Kontu Shark-Calling Festival *(July) and Malangan Festival (July)*
Mt Hagen Festival *Traditional costumes, head dresses decorated with Bird of Paradise feathers and cuscus fur. (August)*
Goroka Festival *Huge sing sings with hundreds (thousands) of painted tribes people gathering for dancing and singing. (September)*
Port Moresby Hiri Moale Festival *depicts the voyages made in canoes celebration of traditional trading, replica giant canoes (Iakatois) come to Ela Beach. (September)*
Milne Bay Canoe Festival *and Kenu and Kundu Festivals. (November)*

a
r
r
i
v
a
L

;
~

~

Reasons for travel to PNG (stats from Papua New Guinea Tourism visitor survey) :

- * *pristine beaches on small uncrowded islands (72%)*
- * *native tribal cultures (53%)*
- * *coral reef diving (52%)*
- * *eco tourism (49%)*
- * *trekking (42%)*
- * *fishing (37%)*
- * *surfing (20%)*
- * *bird watching (19%)*

Visa

100 Kina (approx A\$40) Tourist visa available for Australian citizens on