

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The last place on Earth

COLEEN AND KEN BONDY

January 1992, Baungnung, PNG:

Our ship is anchored off an isolated village. We take the tender ashore and are immediately surrounded by the songs and smiling faces of native children. The children, who speak some English, overwhelm us with questions and scream in delight to hear any answer. It's been five years since they've seen anyone from the West.

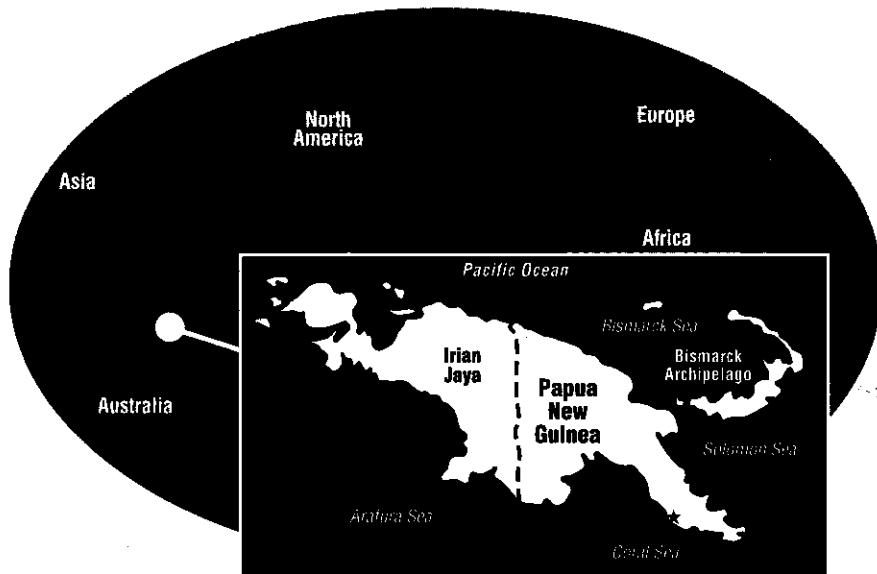
Diving's growing popularity has created a new breed of traveler seeking increasingly remote corners of the earth for underwater exploration. Divers have recently discovered Papua New Guinea's (PNG) submerged treasures, and this South Pacific island, long relegated to an obscure, Stone Age existence, suddenly finds itself thrust into the diver's spotlight.

By staying in five-star hotels and diving from world-class dive boats, dive travelers could visit PNG without ever making real contact with the country. But to make the trip the adventure it should be, visitors must stray from the comfort of controlled climates and experiences.

PNG has so much to offer — unforgettable diving, mesmerizing people, and breathtaking scenery. It's not the typical dive location. Getting there is arduous, and being there, for the unprepared diver, can be difficult. Taking a little time to understand the country and its people will allow divers to make the most of the experience.

LOCATION

Papua New Guinea is just north of Australia and just south of the Equator.



It covers the eastern half of the larger island of New Guinea, and its outlying islands make up the Bismarck Archipelago. The island's western side is a completely different country, Irian Jaya, which is controlled by Indonesia.

PNG is bordered by several seas and oceans. The Coral Sea is to the south, and to the southwest is the Arafura Sea, gateway to the Indian Ocean. The Solomon Sea borders the island's eastern portions, and the Bismarck Sea borders the northeastern coast of the mainland and surrounds the islands in the Bismarck Archipelago. The Pacific Ocean borders the country's northern shore.

PNG's topography ranges from the low-lying coastal shores to rugged mountains, which contain some of the world's most diverse rain forests. Its highest point, Mount Wilhelm, 15,400 feet above sea level, is found in the

main island's Owen Stanley Mountain Range. The country has several rivers, and the two major ones are the Sepik, which winds along the northern portions of New Guinea, and the Fly, which meanders through the country's southern sections.

THE PEOPLE

The people of PNG generally are warm, friendly, curious, and delightful. They are eager to help, eager to learn about the new influx of strange visitors, and eager to make friends. They smile readily. Their humor crosses all language barriers, important in a country with more than 700 recorded dialects.

The population's friendliness is found throughout the country, increasing with the distance from the larger cities. Highland villagers and those living in other less-developed areas show genuine in-



KEN BONDY PHOTOS

Accommodations in PNG combine primitive architecture with modern conveniences. One outstanding example is the Ambua Lodge near Tari.



A Huli warrior in ceremonial costume

terest in, and warmth towards, visitors, despite the fact that many of them have a documented history of cannibalism!

Native Papua New Guineans can trace their heritage to Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, and Asia. Most look Melanesian, with broad, flat faces and wide noses and mouths. Almost without

exception, they have short, fuzzy hair. However unlike other countries inhabited by dark-skinned people, many have light blond hair, which is a striking sight.

HISTORY

Although the island has been populated for thousands of years, Europeans first sighted New Guinea in 1512. A Portuguese explorer, Jorge de Meneses, gave the island its name. He called it "Ilhas dos Papuas," or "Island of the Fuzzy-Hairs." It was later renamed "New Guinea" by the Dutch. After its "discovery" by Europeans, many countries tried to grab a piece of it for themselves. The Dutch, Germans, British, Indonesians, and Australians all have ruled parts of the island.

After World War II, the United Nations gave Australia the eastern half of the island, called Papua New Guinea, to rule as a territory. In 1975, with some prodding from the United Nations, Australia helped Papua New Guinea become independent. Outsiders still hold the western half of the island. The Dutch occupied that area from the late

1800s until 1962, when Indonesia took over. There's great unrest among the indigenous population of Irian Jaya, or New Irian, where rebels have been fighting for decades to free the country from Indonesian rule. Due to these continuing skirmishes, visiting Irian Jaya is risky, and not recommended.

POLITICS

PNG's political climate is probably the biggest concern for travelers. The people have been forcibly ruled by many countries and, understandably, resent it. Independence from Australia took a long time, and in the process, Australia managed to acquire many of PNG's bountiful natural resources. Gold is the single largest export, but the country is also rich in copper, silver, nickel, oil, and gas.

Large cities struggle with high crime rates. Native males migrate to the cities seeking work, usually to no avail. Seeing wealthy westerners living there does not help the situation. Going outside at night in the larger cities, such as Port Moresby, Lae, Madang, and Rabaul, is

FACTS AND FIGURES

Location: 100 miles north of Australia and just south of the Equator.

Climate: On the coast, the air and water temperatures are about 85°F during the day and a little cooler at night. In the highlands, the temperatures can get as low as 57°F at night. PNG has a tropical climate and rain can be expected at any time.

Capital and largest city: Port Moresby.

Currency: PNG money is divided into Kina and Toea, pronounced "keener" and "toya." It's circulated in K20, K10, K5, and K2 bills, and a 1 Kina coin with a hole in the center. The Kina is divided into 100 Toea, with 1T, 2T, 5T, 10T, 20T coins. At the time of publication, 1K is worth about \$1 US.

Language: There are three official languages: English, Pidgin, and Motu.

Entry requirements: Passport and visa are required. Single-entry visas are available to tourists on arrival at Port Moresby, the only PNG port of entry, for stays of 30 days or less. A ticket to leave and sufficient funds to stay are required. There is a 10K exit fee.

Time: PNG is 21 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time.

Electricity: 240 volts, 50 Hz AC is used, but DC is used in some areas.

Water: The water is safe to drink in most areas.

Tipping: Not customary and not encouraged.

Getting there: Most travelers fly via Australia to Port Moresby.



PNG's fascinating crocodile fish

not advisable. Outside of the large cities, PNG offers visitors a much safer, friendlier welcome.

Despite widespread unemployment, PNG does not suffer poverty as we know it. Strong family networks keep the population fed and clothed, but unrest nevertheless results from unemployment.

In the modern world, PNG cannot continue as it has for thousands of years — a sad result of "progress." A short time ago the people lived in the Stone Age, and they now have been thrust into the era of computers and airplanes. In the aftermath of discovery, a proud, beautiful country finds itself looked upon as a poor, third-world nation.

PLACES TO SEE

There are two "must-see" areas for the traveling diver who wants to explore the country above water. One is the mountainous area known as the Southern Highlands, home of the Huli Wigmen. The other is the Sepik River basin on the northern coast. Both have excellent tourist accommo-

dations and are served regularly by competent PNG tour operators.

The mighty Sepik is PNG's largest river and is navigable for almost 700 miles. Hundreds of villages line its banks, each with its own distinctive "spirit house," where only men are permitted to enter. (Exceptions are made for female tourists.) Aside from its stunning scenery and abundant wildlife, the Sepik basin is a center for primitive art. Each village specializes in a different form — wood carvings, pottery, clothing, weapons — and they all can be found along the river.

Much of the artwork revolves around the crocodile, an indigenous animal that plays an important part in the river peo-



A lionfish parades under PNG's coastal waters.

ple's spiritual and economic life. Many of the Sepik men still endure an adolescent "skin-cutting" ritual where incisions are made throughout their upper bodies and arms so scars will resemble the pattern of a crocodile's skin.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of PNG, however, is the vast Tari Basin in the Southern Highlands. In a strikingly beautiful central mountain valley live some 38,000 Huli people, whose first contact with the outside world came less than 60 years ago. The Huli are gardeners (mostly sweet potatoes) and pig farmers. The pigs not only provide meat but also are the Huli monetary unit and the standard of wealth. In male-dominated Huli society, wives are purchased with pigs, and in 1990 the current "bride-price" was 24 pigs per wife.

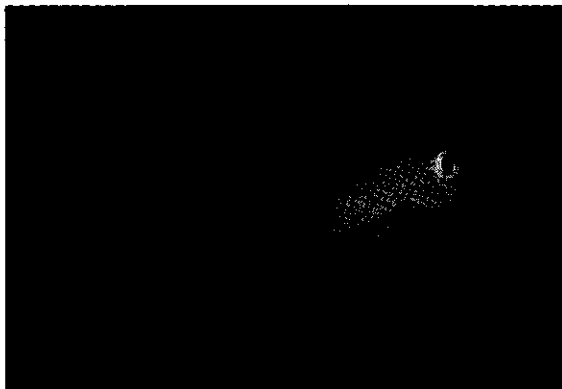
For the visitor, arguably the most interesting aspect of Huli life is their art. Lacking the raw materials available to the Sepik river people, the Hulis use their own bodies as canvasses. Every social situation calls for a different type of decoration, including body and face paint, decorated nose bones, feathers, animal skins, and giant human-hair wigs worn by the men. Seeing these people in their ceremonial dress reminds one of a human coral reef, and arriving in Tari on a market day is a real sensory overload.

With increasing Western influence, the Huli culture is sadly fading. The mix between the old and new cultures is apparent in the small Western-style towns that have arisen in the Tari basin, where it's not uncommon to see a Huli warrior, fully decked out in bright yellow and red body paint, hair wig, and nose bone, side-by-side with men dressed in Dockers and Rambo T-shirts. Fortunately, the garden villages themselves still offer a glimpse into the past rarely seen anywhere else in the world.

DIVING

Diving in PNG is fabulous. Ascending from the dive of a lifetime, one may see 20 or 30 outrigger canoes through crystal-clear water, with curious faces peering down. The eerie feeling that you've glimpsed the early beginnings of the Earth can't be shaken when a dive crammed with vibrant, teeming life ends with such an enchanting encounter.

When diving PNG, it's not uncommon to be the first person to dive a new reef, or to discover a new species. Papua New Guinea boggles the mind with its sheer numbers of fish, not to mention their outrageous shapes, colors, and forms. A lucky diver may encounter reef



A blue fire goby defends its nest.

sharks, lionfish, clown triggers, spotted eagle rays, manta rays, whalesharks, jeweled moray eels, and an array of nudibranchs, and other fish, on a single dive. Flowery soft corals and fans entangle hard coral reefs in a collage of color and shapes. Undersea PNG is truly the South Pacific at its best, and the South Pacific isn't bad anywhere.

PNG played a major role in World War II, and as a result, thousands of aircraft and shipwrecks are scattered in her waters. Among the popular wreck dives is an American B-17 resting at 120 feet in Milne Bay, and a beautifully preserved two-man Japanese submarine lying at 60 feet off New Hanover Island.

Although some consider warm-water diving "easy," many of Papua New Guinea's best dives are "advanced." To truly enjoy all PNG has to offer, you

might consider seeking advanced training, particularly in deep, night, and ocean diving, before making your visit.

Most diving operations in PNG are outstanding, but to ensure things goes smoothly, make your diving plans with your travel agent ahead of time.

TIPS FOR TRAVELERS

Women should not wear short shorts or skimpy bathing suits in villages or larger cities. Long shorts seem to be OK, as well as tank tops. In hotels and on live-aboard boats these unwritten rules are relaxed.

Travelers to PNG should take precautions against malaria. Start taking malaria pills several weeks before and after your trip. Consult your doctor for the most up-to-date medicine.

Every detail of the trip to PNG should be planned in advance. The country is still "developing," and lengthy delays could occur if flight plans and accommodations aren't worked out ahead of time. For the fewest headaches, consult a dive travel agency that knows PNG and let it make arrangements. If you intend to do any topside traveling, use an established PNG tour operator rather than trying to arrange it yourself.

Bring lots of money. Prices in PNG, as in most South Pacific destinations, are expensive. Hotels in the big cities range from reasonable to expensive, and making reservations in advance can save a lot of money and time.

Papua New Guinea offers a glimpse of a simpler, gentler life. It's one of the few remaining paradises on our planet. Some suggest that visitors rush to see the island before it's "ruined" by development, well-intended advice that, unfortunately, hastens the destruction of wilderness and primitive civilizations. Even if you never visit PNG, maybe you will come to understand more about her people, seas, mountains, and rivers. If outsiders can look upon this country as having intrinsic worth, instead of potential commercial value, it may survive.

