



Ecotourism Melanesia

Explore Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific

EM207C 2024 SEPIK CROCODILE FESTIVAL TOUR 14 NIGHTS THU25JUL-THU08AUG 2024
Core tour 8 nights Port Moresby, Mt Hagen, Goroka, Madang 25JUL-02AUG USD 4950 p/p + flights
Festival extension 6 nights Wewak/Sepik River 02-08AUG USD 2950 p/p + flights

This is a fully escorted sign-up (open) small group tour for solo travellers and couples. The festival is offered as a separate add-on extension because the very basic accommodation, hot humid weather and “adventure travel” conditions on the Sepik River are not everyone’s cup of tea. Group size for the Festival extension is limited to 8 because of charter aircraft load limits. If there is enough demand, two parallel groups with separate guides and separate air charters will operate. Core tour maximum group size is 16 but usually 10-12.

The Sepik Crocodile Festival is a small rural festival with amazing local tribal dances that you won’t see at the Mt Hagen Show or other festivals, and very few tourists. The event was originally an initiative of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and aims to promote sustainable harvesting of the wild crocodile population. The Festival takes place at Ambunti a small township on the border of the Middle and Upper Sepik where WWF’s conservation activities are focused, and is scheduled 5th - 7th August each year which falls in the middle of the local “dry” season when there is less rain than other months, and (hopefully) less mosquitoes.

Reaching Ambunti overland from Wewak by road and river transport takes about 8 hours which is why a 45 minute flight by light aircraft is much preferred for at least one way. Travel challenges plus the limited, Spartan accommodation options at Ambunti are the main issues discouraging conventional tourists from attending this festival. Consequently less than 100 intrepid visitors make it to the festival each year.

Our escorted small group tour is designed for hardy cultural tourists and serious amateur photographers who can cope with basic accommodation, simple local food and the hot humid weather of the steamy Sepik Basin without the comforts of air-conditioning and iced drinks. The payoff is excellent close-up ethno-photography with opportunities for candid portrait, group and action pics not possible elsewhere as some of the cultural groups from very remote Sepik villages will perform only at this festival once a year.

Apart from the festival, the core tour itinerary focuses on tribal culture and the natural environment during visits to Mt Hagen, Goroka and Madang. Accommodation in the towns en route is in the best available hotels.

Note: The Sepik extension is a “wet foot” tour that involves climbing in and out of motor canoes, some squelching in mud, some scrambling up riverbanks and sleeping in basic accommodation without electricity several nights in a row, so some physical agility and mental resilience is required.



ECOTOURISM MELANESIA LTD

TOUR COST

GROUND PACKAGE

Core tour ground package 8 nights USD 4950 per person twin-share or willing-to-share (single supp \$790)
Sepik extension 6 nights USD 2950 per person twin-share or willing-to-share (single supp \$440)

INTERNAL AIR

Core tour only:

Port Moresby-Mt Hagen + Madang-Port Moresby = USD 600

Core tour + Sepik extension):

Port Moresby-Mt Hagen + Madang-Wewak + Ambunti-Wewak + Wewak- Port Moresby = USD 1200

Internal air is priced as a flat rate package and must be purchased from Ecotourism Melanesia in conjunction with your ground package to afford us full control over rebooking / reissuing of flights for the group in the event of itinerary changes or flight disruptions.

Deposit requirements: 25% of the ground package plus 100% of internal air is required at the time of booking to confirm your place on the tour and the balance is due 6 weeks before departure. Pricing is subject to change prior to final payment. Full terms and conditions are printed on page 2 of your quotation/invoice.

TOUR INCLUSIONS - CORE TOUR 8 NIGHTS

- Port Moresby - meet and greet, half day city tour
- Port Moresby - one night 3.5 star accommodation and breakfast (Holiday Inn Express or similar)
- Mt Hagen - two nights 3.5 star accommodation and breakfast (Highlander Hotel)
- Mt Hagen - full day sightseeing and village tour with lunch
- Mt Hagen - scenic road transfer to Goroka with village stops and lunch
- Goroka - two nights 3.5 star accommodation and breakfast (Bird of Paradise Hotel)
- Goroka - full day sightseeing and village tours as per itinerary or similar with lunch
- Goroka - scenic road transfer to Madang with lunch
- Madang - three nights 3.5 star accommodation and breakfast (Madang Resort Hotel)
- Madang - full day town and harbour tour (optional snorkelling) with lunch
- Madang - full day seaside village and rainforest trip with lunch
- all hotel / airport transfers
- all fees and gratuities for local guides, helpers, village demonstrators
- accompanying company tour leader to escort and manage daily arrangements
- 24-hour back-up assistance from our office in Port Moresby

TOUR INCLUSIONS - SEPIK RIVER EXTENSION 6 NIGHTS

- Wewak - two nights 3.5 star hotel with breakfast (In-Wewak Boutique Hotel or alternative)
- Wewak - road transfer to Sepik River
- Sepik River - two days motor canoe touring of Middle Sepik villages
- Sepik River - three nights village guest house accommodation (1 star twin-share or multi-share with clean bedding, outdoor bathroom, local-style meals, bottled/boiled water, possibly some electricity)
- Sepik River - two days excursions to the Sepik Crocodile Festival with entry pass, guides and bottled water
- Sepik River - charter flight Ambunti to Wewak
- all fees and gratuities for local guides, helpers, village demonstrators
- accompanying company tour leader to escort and manage daily arrangements
- 24-hour back-up assistance from our office in Port Moresby
- various hidden costs like local permissions, retainers for local area reps, gear and supplies air-freighted from Port Moresby and stored in Wewak, and a tour development levy to recoup our outlays for designing, reconnoitring, organising and monitoring this remote area program

EXCLUSIONS

- hotel dinners (pay as you go)
- bar drinks including bottled water at your hotel (pay as you go)
- tips (not expected, and only appropriate for exceptional service)
- souvenirs and items of a personal nature

TOUR ITINERARY

DAY 1: THU 25 JULY 2024



ARRIVE PORT MORESBY

Arrive in Port Moresby by air from Cairns, Brisbane, Sydney, Singapore, Hong Kong or Manila. Staff from Ecotourism Melanesia will meet you on arrival and assist you to transfer to your hotel.

(If arriving on an early flight your room may not be ready and you may have to pass some time in the coffee shop, snoozing in an armchair in the lobby or resting in a deck chair at the poolside until your room is ready).

12:00 Pick up at the hotel lobby and commence your half day tour of Port Moresby starting with a lunch stop and including

- a visit to the national museum and parliament house (if open)
- a tour of the botanical gardens (Nature Park)
- a walk-through tour of an urban over-water stilt village
- a stop at the Koki Fish Market

Overnight Holiday Inn Express (or similar), Port Moresby includes breakfast

DAY 2: FRI 26 JULY 2024



PORT MORESBY / MT HAGEN (half day tour)

After breakfast in the hotel, transfer with the group on our private shuttle to the domestic terminal for your flight to Mt Hagen.

Your flight today (we will ticket) will be one of the following depending on seat availability at the time you book your tour:

PX180 0830/0930 or PX182 1000/1100 or PX184 1140/1240

Your tour leader will meet you at Mt Hagen airport and transfer you to the hotel.

After lunch your tour leader will take the group on a familiarisation drive around Mt Hagen and surrounds.

Overnight Highlander Hotel, Mt Hagen includes breakfast

DAY 2: SAT 27 JULY 2024



MT HAGEN (full day excursion)

Commence today's touring with a drive out the Kuminga back road past peri-urban villages, roadside markets, market garden plots and coffee plantations to Mt Ambra which offers scenic views of Mt Hagen then around the back of the airport past the Show Grounds to the Highlands Highway and east to Kindeng farming community.

Here you'll have candid opportunities to mingle and chat with local people engaged in small scale agricultural activities such as marketing gardening, fish farming and raising livestock. Families from a number of different areas of the highlands have settled at Kindeng which makes it quite a diverse community.

From Kindeng you'll drive back into town and turn south on the Kum Road out to Rondon Ridge for a guided walk through the magnificent orchid gardens and adjacent forest reserve.

Lunch will be served at Rondon Ridge Lodge.

The Raggiana bird of paradise is common in this area and there is a good chance of seeing or at least hearing one in the wild (they have a very loud call).

In the afternoon visit Moika or Ogelbeng village and take a walking tour of the village and gardens, go inside a family hut, meet local people and children doing their everyday thing and photograph some villagers in full costume and body paint. You'll also see a display of tribal "treasures" which have been passed between families for generations for the settlement of marriages and conflicts, including "moka kina" mother of pearl, cowrie shells transported from the coast, animal bones and teeth, brilliant bird feathers (and even sun-dried whole birds!), stone and shell "money".

Return to the hotel before the afternoon rain begins.

Overnight Highlander Hotel, Mt Hagen includes breakfast

DAY 3: SUN 28 JULY 2024



MT HAGEN / GOROKA (road transfer with village stops)

08:00 Check out of the hotel and load your bags in our charter bus for 08:30 departure to Goroka. Normally the drive takes 4 hours but today's transfer will take the whole day with sightseeing and lunch stops en route.

The Highlands Highway runs east from Mt Hagen, passing first through the market gardens, coffee and tea plantations of the Waghi Valley. This valley is often called the "food bowl" of PNG because of the intensive agricultural activities and in fact at the village of Kuk near Mt Hagen archaeologists found evidence that the area has been planted with food crops for thousands of years.

From the Waghi Valley the highway passes through the small towns of Kudjip and Minj then climbs into the alpine Chimbu Province with its precipitous ravines and steep mountainsides amazingly covered in furrowed gardens with people working away in them... "one foot uphill, one foot downhill" as the locals sometimes joke. The first stop late morning will be at Mindima village in the Chimbu province to see the villagers of the Omo Masalai tribe perform their ghoulish but slightly comical "skeleton dance" and a demonstration of their local courtship ritual.

Back on the highway PNG's highest peak, Mt Wilhelm, comes in to view on the left as the bus winds its way to Kundiawa town, the "capital" of Chimbu, for a lunch stop at the Mt Wilhelm Hotel (included).

One hour further on brings you to the "snake village" where the local people have a strange affinity for snakes and like to keep them as pets, although the poisonous ones stay in cages ☺ . You'll see the locals showing off their pythons and tree snakes and have a turn at handling them if you wish. If you are not a "snake person" you can cower in the bus ☺

From the snake village, continue another hour to the peak of the Daulo Pass, a high altitude biodiversity hotspot where the road winds through swirling mists past giant tree ferns and trickling waterfalls. Local children sell flowers on the side of the road here. If it's not raining by this time you will be able to take a guided walk through the ancient moss forest which is populated by flowering and non-flowering trees and ferns which form a substrate for the growth of a wide variety of saprophytic native orchids, green mosses and colourful fungi, lichens, liverworts and leafy epiphytes. Birds of paradise also frequent the area.

From the Daulo Pass the road descends through the fertile Asaro Valley and finally into Goroka town.

16:30 (approx) On arrival in Goroka you will be checked in at your accommodation and have some time to rest and settle in before dinner.

18:30 Dinner at Bird of Paradise Hotel or Mandarin Chinese Restaurant (pay own)

Overnight Bird of Paradise Hotel, Goroka includes breakfast

DAY 4: MON 29 JULY 2024



GOROKA (town and villages tour)

07:00 Breakfast at the hotel

08:00 Meet up with your guide at reception and commence some sightseeing around Goroka town including:

- Mt Kiss lookout (see most of Goroka town and the adjacent Asaro Valley)
- JK McCarthy Museum of Highlands Culture (if open)
- fresh produce market (vegetables, pigs, chickens)
- handicrafts market (woven bilum bags are the best buy)

Later drive 30 minutes out of town to the Asaro Valley, home of the famed Asaro mud men. Here you will be treated to a private mud men performance - a little corny but a lot of fun and great photography. The Asaro people have long had a tradition of crafting fierce looking clay helmets worn during tribal fights in the old days to frighten the enemy. The helmets are also worn for traditional dancing and drama performances demonstrating how their ancestors confronted enemy tribes wearing their scary mud helmets, their bodies smeared with grey mud, looking like evil ghosts. After the dance (or “prance”) you’ll be shown how the clay helmets are made, and you’ll have an opportunity to try one on yourself. An added bonus will be a cane-swallowing ritual performed by men from the Bena tribe. Lunch (if you can stomach it) will be served at your guide’s home at Asaro - meat and vegetables roasted in bamboo

From Asaro, drive 30 minutes further to Kenadi village where the people live an even more traditional lifestyle in round huts made of bush materials. The village is a typical rural highlands community with smoky cooking fires and pigs wandering around. At the village you’ll be welcomed by locals in traditional dress and walk by a number of homes to see locals engaged in different daily chores and activities including cooking, house building, making and using bows and arrows, weaving “bilum” string bags, fashioning “kundu” hand drums from hollow logs and a special demonstration of funerary rites. On the land around the village you’ll see people engaged in vegetable gardening (the highlands climate is perfect) and tending their coffee crops. Organic coffee grown on smallholder blocks is the major local cash crop.

17:30 Return to hotel

Overnight Bird of Paradise Hotel, Goroka includes breakfast



DAY 5: TUE 30 JULY 2024



GOROKA / MADANG (scenic road transfer)

07:00 Breakfast in the hotel and check out

08:00 Check out and meet up at reception to make an early start on the bus ride to Madang. A packed lunch and plenty of bottled water is arranged by the guide. The trip takes 8 hours, initially a downhill gradient through scenic villages and countryside along the remainder of the mountainous Highland Highway, passing through the rural towns of Henganofi and Kainantu (toilet stops) and crossing the majestic Yonki hydroelectric dam before descending through the steep winding Kassam Pass into the wide flat Ramu River Valley. Twisting down the hairpin bends of the Kassam Pass - which is occasionally blocked by landslides so no yodelling please ☹ - you may notice the change in temperature and humidity as you pass through the thermal inversion layer from the dry, cool air of the highlands to the moist, warm air of the coastal tropics. Making a left turn onto the Ramu Highway, the drive transitions into a smoother and faster run for the remaining 3 hours down to Madang, passing by many kilometres of sugar cane farms and other agricultural ventures.

The final leg into Madang town becomes more crowded with many roadside hamlets, markets and smallholder blocks, with occasional glimpses of the Bismarck Sea visible to the right.

On arrival in Madang town, check in at your hotel and if there is any spare time you can explore the hotel gardens and take a walk around the foreshore area near the hotel which has a small fish market.

Overnight Madang Resort Hotel, Madang includes breakfast

DAY 6: WED 31 JULY 2024



MADANG (town and harbour tour)

07:00 Breakfast at the hotel

08:00 Commence today's exploring of Madang town and surrounds.

First up see a fine array of Madang handicrafts at the Madang Resort carver's hut and orchid gardens then stop at the town centre for a browse through the fresh produce market. A poke around in a typical Chinese store is also a must! Also in the town centre you will see Madang's resident flying fox colony, a love-them-or-hate-them crowd of noisy bickering creatures that inhabits a copse of trees in the town square.

Down on the foreshore, stop at the Coastwatcher's Lighthouse, Machine Gun beach, and the lovely tidal lily ponds of the Madang inlet and the Gold Club lily ponds. The Coastwatchers Memorial Lighthouse flashes the Madang harbour signal out to sea at night and is an iconic feature of Madang - somewhat resembling a life-size space rocket - located next to "Machine Gun Beach", a sheltered swimming beach featuring a number of wartime artillery relics. Further out of town, stop at the Madang culture museum (toilets available) and the pretty Balek Grotto (see left) which is a cold water sulfur spring where you can feed turtles and eels - the site was used for some scenes in the Pierce Brosnan film Robinson Crusoe. You can take a short walk through the surrounding tropical gardens and patch of rainforest where you may come across birds and other fauna.

12:30 Lunch at the hotel (included)

1:30 Board a motor boat for a sightseeing and snorkelling excursion in the Madang lagoon. The tour will take in the Madang inner harbour and port with its sheltered waterways and tidal lagoons and also the giant outer Madang Lagoon which has many small islands, some inhabited by village communities while others are home to birds and crabs only.

Stops can include Alexishafen (German mission station occupied by the Japanese in WW2 then destroyed and rebuilt by the Allies) and Pik Island, a lovely place to swim and snorkel over the colourful reef (gear supplied).

Overnight Madang Resort Hotel, Madang includes breakfast



DAY 7: THU 01 AUG 2024



MADANG (seaside village and rainforest bat cave excursion)

07:00 Breakfast

08:00am Commence today's tour with a drive out of town past the airport and turn off at the side road up Nobnob ridge to the Nobnob lookout which offers panoramic views of the Madang coastline - Madang town and lagoon to the south east and Karkar Island to the north.

Back on the main road, drive further out the North Coast road to Rempi Lagoon, a picturesque coastal lagoon protected by a line of tiny islands running parallel to the beach. More of the Robinson Crusoe movie was shot here at Rempi Lagoon and in the adjacent rainforest on shore.

On arrival at Wargidan village the locals will welcome you then paddle you out to the little islands in a native dugout canoe and you can do some exploring then paddle back to shore again. Don't hesitate to ask for your turn with the paddle, it's great fun even if you go around in circles ▢ The local dugout canoes have stabilising outrigger arms which prevent them from tipping over. And wherever you see a flash of brilliant colours in the water you can jump out with a mask and snorkel for a spot of reef snorkelling.

Back at Wargidan village a local style seafood lunch is prepared for you with some fish barbequed under hot stones or coals and some local vegetables cooked with coconut and seafood in traditional clay pots.

After lunch, say farewell to the lagoon and head inland 20 minutes drive to the Warwin Creek rainforest.

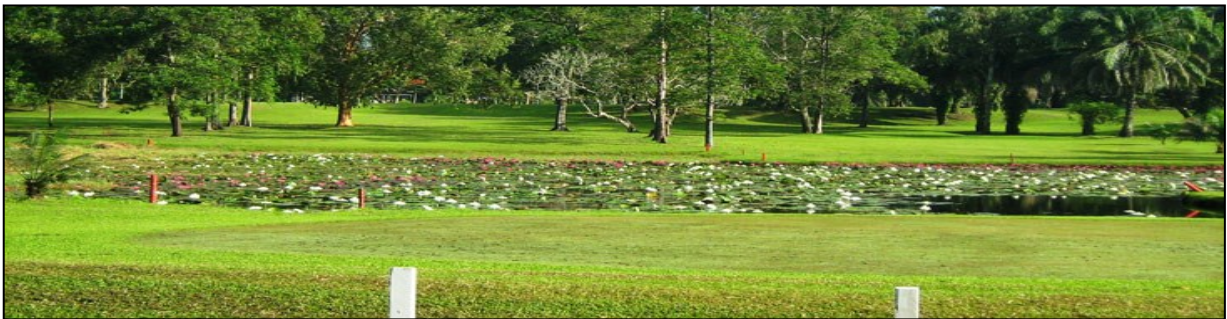
Here a 2 hour hike through the pristine rainforest awaits you if you enjoy reasonable physical fitness. There is a steep descent to the creek at the start and a steep climb out of the gully at end, with most of the hike following the verdant creek itself - the walking track crosses the creek many times so you will be up to your ankles or knees in water a lot of the time and your shoes will get thoroughly soaked but fortunately there are no leeches or other nasties in the creek as it is quite fast-flowing.

The hike includes a foray into a limestone cave with stalactites and a small stream running through it. The cave is inhabited by thousands of tiny bats which feed off insects. You may even spot a small python lying in wait for a hapless bat. Your guide will provide flashlights for exploring the cave. Further downstream from the cave is a lovely swimming hole with a series of pretty cascades where you can jump in for a fun swim before completing the hike by climbing back up to the road.

If you are not a good hiker, a shorter forest walk on flat ground is available, skipping the creek and the bat cave.

Late afternoon, drive back to the hotel in time to catch the tropical sunset before dinner.

Overnight Madang Resort Hotel, Madang includes breakfast



DAY 8: FRI 02 AUG 2024



MADANG / PORT MOREBY OR WEWAK (town tour)

07:00 Breakfast, check out and transfer to Madang airport for your flight to Port Moresby or Wewak.

If you are only taking the core tour and exiting today your flight will be:

PX111 departs Madang 0630 arrives Port Moresby 0730 (we will ticket)

Our Port Moresby staff will meet you on arrival and assist you with your onward arrangements.

If you are continuing to the Sepik Crocodile Festival your flight will be:

PX128 departs Madang 1125 arrives Wewak 1215 (we will ticket)

On arrival in Wewak you will be met by the hotel shuttle and our local guide for transfer to the hotel in time for lunch (included). Later our local guide will take you for a drive around Wewak town area then 14km west of Wewak town to Cape Wom (Wom Beach) which is the site of the Wom Memorial Park, the location of the official Japanese WW2 surrender in New Guinea. At Wom are also the overgrown remains of the Wom WW2 airstrip, some caved in Japanese tunnels, and some preserved field guns.

Overnight In-Wewak Boutique Hotel (or alternative), Wewak (includes breakfast)

DAY 9: SAT 03 AUG 2024



WEWAK / SEPIK RIVER (KANGANAMUN)

08:00 Depart Wewak by road via Timbunke or Kanduanam to the Sepik River. The roads from Wewak are unsealed most of the way and quite bumpy. A packed lunch is provided by the hotel. On arrival at the river you will settle into a waiting motor canoe and head up river to Kanganamun village, stopping at one or two other villages enroute eg Tambanum, Kaminabit where you will be able to see artisans at work carving weaving and sculpting the incredible Sepik fine art.

Two hours ride upstream from the road head is Kanganamun village in the heart of the latmul tribe territory where the men identify themselves with their tribal animal totem - the crocodile - by scarring their bodies to look like crocodile skin. Tour the village which boasts the largest Spirit House on the Sepik where you will see many tribal artifacts - some are made for sale while others are tribal heirlooms not available for sale.

At the Spirit house you'll hear locals talk about their life along the river and especially the crocodile animist religion.

Some men may show you the "crocodile skin bumps" on their backs and some young men who have recently been initiated may show you their fresh scars. At Kanganaman Spirit House you will also hear flute and drum players perform, typically in the evenings.

Overnight Kanganaman village guest house, Middle Sepik (includes dinner and breakfast, bottled or boiled water).

Sleeping gear supplied = tropical sleeping bag, rubber or inflatable mattress, plus mosquito net or dome tent for refuge from insects.



DAY 10: SUN 04 AUG 2024



SEPIK RIVER (KANGANAMUN / AVATIP)

This morning cross the river by canoe and hike 30 minutes inland to Palembangi village which is located on low-lying savannah.

Palembei has two spirit houses containing many old artifacts.

Normally only initiated men (with crocodile scars on their skin) may enter the spirit houses but an exception is made for tourists (male and female) since they are outsiders not under tribal law.

From Palembangi your motor canoe journey will continue 2 hours upstream to the small township of Pagwi (lunch stop and visit a crocodile farm) then another hour upstream up to Avatip village.

Avatip is one of the largest villages on the Sepik and has a traditional style village guest house where you will be accommodated.

Tour the village and settle in to your accommodation and enjoy some evening entertainment after dinner.

Overnight Avatip village guest house, Middle Sepik (includes all meals)

DAY 11: MON 05 AUG 2024



AMBUNTI (Sepik Crocodile Festival)

After breakfast board your motor canoe for transfer from Avatip 45 minutes upstream to the river township of Ambunti.

Our local guides will escort you to the festival venue and help you navigate the crowds, hold your stuff for you while you chase the best shots with your camera, and “gopher” your food and drink on request. The tour leader will have bottled water available at the venue but no organised lunch is provided today - you can buy and try local foods from the many food stalls at the venue which will include fresh fruit, cooked fish and vegetables, scones and puddings, local style donuts etc. Be prepared for rain to interrupt the program.

Late afternoon, return to Avatip.

Although the 5th August is officially the first day of the festival it is usually taken up with speeches, games of tug-of-war, races for school children and other community events. The sing-sing program (traditional dancing) usually commences in earnest on the second day.

After watching some of the activities and having some yummy local food from the market you

Overnight Avatip village guest house, Middle Sepik (includes all meals)

NOTE: Mosquitoes are not usually too bad along the Sepik in August because it is dry season which prevents breeding in the brackish water that they prefer, but the situation can vary from year to year and from place to place so no promises ☺ and you should bring plenty of “nuclear strength” repellent and take a course of presumptive treatment for malaria before you travel home (we can supply).

DAY 12: TUE 06 AUG 2024



AMBUNTI (Sepik Crocodile Festival)

Today is the second day of the festival which is usually the best day of cultural programs and there will be performances in both the morning and afternoon.

Overnight Avatip village guest house, Middle Sepik (includes all meals)

NOTE: Much of your canoe travel will be in blazing hot sun (and/or rain!) so wear long sleeves, plenty of sunscreen, a hat, sunglasses and even hold an umbrella to keep the sun off you while sitting in the canoe. Beware also of the sun’s reflection off the water.

DAY 13: WED 07 AUG 2024



AMBUNTI (crocodile festival) / WEWAK

This morning pack your bags and bring them with you to Ambunti where they will be locked in the airstrip shed while you'll enjoy the morning program of the last day at the crocodile festival. Lunch once again is pay-as-you-go from the food stalls at the venue. In the afternoon your charter flight will drop in to Ambunti airstrip to fly you out to Wewak - exact time will depend of the weather and depend on how many other chart flights the aircraft has booked for that day.

On arrival in Wewak, transfer to the hotel and cool off in the swimming pool or on the breezy verandah with a cold drink.

Overnight In-Wewak Boutique Hotel (or alternative), Wewak (includes breakfast)



DAY 14: THU 08 AUG 2024



WEWAK / PORT MORESBY / FLY OUT

05:00 Early breakfast and check out of your room.

06:00 Transfer on the hotel shuttle to Wewak airport for your flight to Port Moresby

07:40 flight PX141 departs Wewak for Port Moresby arriving 09:00

On arrival in Port Moresby you will be met by staff from Ecotourism Melanesia and assisted to connect with your onward flight or other arrangements.

TRIP NOTES - SEPIK RIVER

ABOUT WEWAK

Wewak town (population around 50,000) is the jumping-off point for the Sepik River and the Wewak Islands. A smaller town than Madang, Wewak is less tourist-oriented and the local economy is mainly based on commercial fishing and agriculture. There are three medium sized 3 star hotels and a number of smaller motels and guest houses. From Wewak there are two roads leading to the Sepik River - one to Pagwi on the Middle Sepik and one to Angoram on the Lower Sepik - and charter aircraft operate from Wewak airport to airstrips along the river at Ambunti (Upper Sepik), Timbunke (Middle Sepik) and Karawari (a tributary of the Sepik). From the Wewak waterfront open speed boats travel less than an hour to the offshore Wewak Islands, Muschu and Kairiru.

ABOUT IN-WEWAK BOUTIQUE HOTEL

Situated on a cliff top overlooking the Bismarck Sea the In-Wewak Boutique Hotel is a recently built plantation-style property featuring white-painted rooms with sterile clean bathrooms, white stucco facade, and wide verandahs with stiff sea breezes in the afternoons. By far the best hotel in Wewak, this hotel offers international-standard comfort and service in a small boutique package. The restaurant serves superb local seafood and the a la carte menu is a match for any of the larger hotels in Port Moresby. Breakfast and lunch are served in the café and represent good value. Dinner is served in the larger fine dining restaurant. Dial-up internet, though very slow, is available from user terminals near reception. There is a small but no beach access due to the clifftop location. All rooms are air-conditioned and fitted with a queen size or king size bed or twin beds. www.inwewak.com

ABOUT SEPIK CROCODILES

Known locally as “pook-pooks”, crocodiles play a major part in the lives of the Sepik people. Apart from their centrality to spiritual beliefs, crocodiles are important for the local diet and the village microeconomy. Everywhere in the Sepik River basin, the crocodile is an occasional source of protein for the village diet, and crocodile skins are sold for cash to outside buyers. The collecting of crocodile eggs in the wild and hatching them in crocodile “farms” is an ongoing threat to the wild population. WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) is educating locals about sustainable harvesting of wildlife resources and encouraging them to turn to alternative sources of income such as ecotourism. The two species of crocodile prevalent in the Sepik basin are the common saltwater crocodile (*Crocodilus porosus*) and the New Guinea freshwater crocodile (*Crocodilus novaeguineas*). These days the wild populations of both species are retreating to the more remote tributaries of the Sepik that are furthest from their major predator: humans. It is unusual to see crocodiles along the main human-occupied areas of the Sepik River proper these days, as the constant passage of motorised canoes and other small boats has driven the crocodile population up into the backwaters. Very large crocodiles are rare these days and no “monster man-eaters” have been caught in the past 10 years.

ABOUT THE MIDDLE SEPIK CROCODILE CULT

In the Middle Sepik and Blackwater Lakes, crocodiles are revered as spiritual totems symbolising strength and power. In the Middle Sepik Yatmul tribe villages from Korogo down to Kaminabit including Yentchen, Palembang and Kanganaman, the traits of the crocodile are so envied that the men even try to make themselves look like crocodiles. The initiation of young men into adulthood involves a painful scarification ritual during which dozens of small cuts are made all over the back and chest from shoulders to hips, and pockets of skin are lifted away from the flesh (without any anaesthetic). Upon healing, this leaves raised scars that resemble the bumpy dorsal hide of the crocodile. Such initiations take place once or twice per year in each village and are carried out in private for modesty reasons because the young men cannot wear clothes while their scars are healing uncovered. After the cutting they spend two weeks resting and recovering in a special hut, naked with only healing herbs rubbed on their bodies. Women and outsiders in particular are not normally allowed to witness the cutting ceremony or see the initiates naked although recently some villages have started allowing film crews and wealthy tourists to fishbowl the ritual on paying a sizeable fee. Apparently, and hopefully, the fee goes to the initiated boys and their families to help them pay for hosting several days of feasting at the end of the initiation process. Once initiated, the young men gains status in the tribe and may frequent the Haus Tambaran (men’s spirit house) to socialise with other initiated men and participate in pagan cult practises such as communing with the ancestors. Yatmul men who are not initiated (eg due to Christian religious beliefs, due to living in the city and not having the opportunity, or due to being frightened of the pain) are not permitted to enter the Haus Tambaran. However in most villages the initiated men do allow outside visitors, including foreign women, to enter the tribal spirit house because outsiders are not under tribal law.

ABOUT SEPIK MOTOR CANOES

The Sepik River and the neighbouring Ramu River are the only places in PNG where you will find motorised longboats or “motor canoes” still in common use. Although previously found in all large rivers around PNG, fibreglass dinghies are now more common along most other rivers. Up to 10 metres in length, Sepik motor canoes are carved from whole tree trunks and take about 3 months to make. On the Sepik River you will see such canoes carrying up to 30 people or large quantities of fuel drums or other cargo weighed right down to the waterline but for comfort and convenience we load only 4 tourists plus baggage and supplies into a medium sized canoe (6-7 metres with a 30hp outboard motor) or 6 tourists plus cargo into a large canoe (8-10 metres with a 40hp engine). We do not own our own canoes: we hire them from local village operators in support of our responsible tourism policy. Sepik motor canoes are very safe and in all our years of operating Sepik River trips we have never known a canoe carrying tourists to capsize or sink. This is because when the makers carve the canoe they leave the wood at the bottom of the canoe very thick and carve the sides and prow thin. This way the centre of gravity remains low and the canoe tends to remain upright and not tip over. For stability reasons we prefer not to place cane armchairs in canoes for tourists to sit on (as do some other tour operators) because when passengers sit high in the canoe this raises the centre of gravity of the canoe and makes it roll from side to side and increases the risk of a passenger toppling out of the canoe when standing up to stretch a cramp or take a photograph. The local people normally sit cross legged right down in the bottom of the canoe and for safety reasons we prefer our travellers to do the same. We’ll try to provide a cushion or rolled blanket for you to sit on for comfort. We do provide life jackets and encourage you to wear one even if you are a strong swimmer because the Sepik River has very strong currents that are hard to swim against. Although none of our travellers have fallen out of a canoe before, if it does happen to you the best strategy is just to float in the current until you are washed onto a sand bank at the next river bend or until the canoe comes around to pick you up. The biggest danger with Sepik canoe travel is sunburn. Apart from applying sunscreen we recommend you wear long sleeves and hold an umbrella or wear a large wide-brimmed hat while travelling in these open canoes. Normally we provide umbrellas. Despite the brown colour of the river it does reflect a lot of solar radiation upwards under your umbrella or the brim of your hat so it is important to apply sunscreen to the undersides of your face and arms as well.