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# Visiting Papua New Guinea

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## Introduction

Nestled in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, east of Indonesia and north of Australia, Papua New Guinea (PNG) stands as a beacon of cultural and ecological diversity. Its sweeping landscapes, from rugged mountain ranges to lush rainforests, and its warm, inviting seas offer a vista of unspoiled natural beauty. PNG is not just a land of stunning visuals but also a tapestry woven with more than 800 distinct languages and varied cultural traditions, promising a unique, unforgettable experience for every visitor.

In planning your visit to Papua New Guinea, it's essential to approach the journey with an open mind and readiness to embrace the distinctive challenges and rewards this nation offers. PNG is unlike any other tourist destination, with its geographical isolation resulting in a preservation of traditional lifestyles and customs. Travelers will discover a profound cultural richness rooted in the land's unique history and its people, offering more than just a vacation, but a true cultural immersion.

Traveling through Papua New Guinea demands a spirit of adventure. The infrastructure is developing, and the terrain can be challenging to navigate, making air travel the most efficient means of covering longer distances. Delving into the heart of PNG, you can find that the lack of conventional tourist luxuries is more than compensated by the warmth of the people and the vibrant experiences.

Safety and preparation cannot be overstated. Understanding entry requirements, securing appropriate visas, and comprehending the healthcare landscape are crucial steps in preparing for your travel. Health considerations such as vaccinations and preventive measures against diseases prevalent in the region need to be a priority as you plan your itinerary.

PNG's allure lies in its natural and cultural offerings — majestic Highland valleys, engaging tribal festivals, and some of the world's most secluded and pristine diving spots tempt the intrepid. Engaging with the traditional cultures, witnessing the local 'Sing Sings', and exploring remote villages afford a glimpse into the lives of people who have, for centuries, maintained a harmonious relationship with their environment.

Whether you are drawn by the promise of discovering rare bird species, the challenge of trekking the historically significant Kokoda Track, or simply the quest for a truly unique destination, Papua New Guinea beckons with a promise of new horizons and adventures untold. Your journey will be an immersion into a world where the past unfolds and sets the stage for an extraordinary cultural adventure.

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea. The name itself conjures images of dense jungles, exotic birds, tribes adorned in vibrant feathers, and a sense of mystery lingering from an age of exploration. Often described as one of the world's last great frontiers, it occupies the eastern half of New Guinea, the second-largest island on Earth, along with an archipelago of some 600 smaller islands scattered across the Bismarck and Solomon Seas. Lying just south of the equator and immediately north of Australia, PNG forms a captivating bridge between Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It's a place where the ancient rhythm of tribal life persists alongside the rapid currents of the 21st century, offering visitors a journey not just across landscapes, but through time itself.

Understanding Papua New Guinea begins with appreciating its dramatic and often challenging geography. This is a land sculpted by immense geological forces, situated within the volatile Pacific Ring of Fire. Towering mountain ranges form a rugged spine down the main island, reaching heights that surprise many visitors unfamiliar with the region. Mount Wilhelm, the country's highest peak, scrapes the sky at over 4,500 metres (nearly 15,000 feet), often dusted with frost - a startling contrast to the tropical heat of the coasts. These highlands, deeply dissected by valleys and rivers, have historically isolated communities, fostering the incredible cultural diversity that defines the nation.

Below the formidable highlands, the landscape cascades through foothills cloaked in some of the planet's most extensive rainforests. These forests teem with life, concealing hidden waterfalls, unique wildlife, and villages accessible only by foot or small aircraft. Rivers carve dramatic paths towards the sea, the most famous being the mighty Sepik, a vast, slow-moving waterway that acts as a central artery for life and culture in the northern lowlands. Its muddy waters wind through swamps and plains, nurturing communities whose art and traditions are intrinsically linked to the river's pulse.

The coastal regions present yet another face of PNG. Here, mangrove forests fringe muddy estuaries, giving way to sandy beaches, idyllic islands, and some of the most spectacular coral reef systems found anywhere. The surrounding seas are dotted with volcanic islands, low-lying coral atolls, and larger landmasses like New Britain, New Ireland, and Bougainville, each possessing its own distinct character, culture, and history. This intricate coastline, combined with the mountainous interior, means that travel within PNG has always been inherently difficult, relying heavily on aviation and sea transport rather than extensive road networks.

The climate, broadly tropical, varies significantly with altitude and location. Coastal

areas experience consistently high temperatures and humidity throughout the year, typically hovering around 25°C to 32°C (77°F to 90°F). The highlands, however, offer a more temperate climate, with warm days often followed by surprisingly cool nights, sometimes dipping close to freezing point at the highest elevations. Rainfall is abundant across the country, with distinct wet and dry seasons, although regional variations are considerable, and visitors should always be prepared for sudden downpours, regardless of the time of year.

This diverse geography has blessed Papua New Guinea with considerable natural resources, including significant deposits of gold, copper, oil, and natural gas. Forestry and fisheries also contribute to the economy. However, harnessing these resources sustainably while managing their environmental and social impacts remains a major challenge. The rugged terrain makes infrastructure development costly and complex, hindering access to markets and basic services for many communities, particularly those in remote inland areas.

The incredible geographical isolation fostered by mountains, rivers, and islands is the primary reason for Papua New Guinea's unparalleled biodiversity. It is classified as one of the world's seventeen megadiverse countries, harbouring a disproportionately high percentage of Earth's species within its borders. Its rainforests are a living laboratory of evolution, home to creatures found nowhere else. The sheer variety of plants, insects, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals is staggering, with new species still being discovered regularly in its less explored regions.

Perhaps the most iconic symbols of PNG's wildlife are the birds-of-paradise. With their elaborate plumage and mesmerizing courtship displays, these 38 unique species have captivated naturalists and collectors for centuries. Spotting them requires patience and often guidance into remote forest habitats, but the reward is a glimpse of avian beauty unmatched anywhere else. Beyond these feathered jewels, the forests shelter elusive tree kangaroos, giant cassowaries capable of delivering powerful kicks, numerous species of cuscus (a type of possum), and a dazzling array of butterflies and insects.

The country's flora is equally impressive, ranging from ancient cycads and towering rainforest hardwoods to delicate orchids, with thousands of species documented. The dense vegetation provides sustenance and materials for traditional village life, underpinning cultural practices and knowledge systems passed down through generations. This profound connection between people and the natural environment is a defining characteristic of Papua New Guinea, something visitors quickly become aware of as they explore beyond the main towns.

Equally renowned is the marine biodiversity. Situated at the heart of the Coral Triangle, the epicenter of global marine life, PNG's waters boast an astonishing variety of coral reefs, fish, and other sea creatures. Divers and snorkellers are drawn to its

pristine underwater landscapes, exploring vibrant coral gardens, dramatic drop-offs, seagrass beds, and haunting World War II wrecks that have become artificial reefs teeming with life. The sheer number of fish and coral species is thought to be significantly higher than in many other famous dive locations worldwide, making it a premier destination for underwater enthusiasts.

However, this natural wealth is fragile. Threats from deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices, mining impacts, and the effects of climate change are pressing concerns. Conservation efforts are underway, often involving partnerships between government agencies, international organisations, and local communities who possess invaluable traditional ecological knowledge. Responsible tourism plays a crucial role, providing economic incentives for conservation and promoting awareness of the need to protect these unique ecosystems for future generations.

If PNG's geography and biodiversity are remarkable, its human tapestry is arguably even more extraordinary. It is often cited as the most culturally diverse nation on Earth. Imagine a country roughly the size of California or Spain, yet home to over 800 distinct indigenous languages – not dialects, but fundamentally different languages. This linguistic diversity reflects an equally vast array of cultural groups, each with its own unique traditions, social structures, belief systems, art forms, and styles of dress. While modernization is increasingly visible, particularly in urban centres, traditional ways of life remain profoundly important, especially in rural villages where the majority of the population resides.

The people are predominantly Melanesian, part of a cultural and linguistic grouping that stretches across the islands northeast of Australia. However, there are also communities with Polynesian and Micronesian origins, particularly on some outlying islands, adding further layers to the cultural mosaic. Within the broad Melanesian identity, local affiliations are paramount. Loyalty typically lies first with one's family, then the clan, and then the larger tribal or language group, often referred to locally as 'wan tok' (literally 'one talk' in Tok Pisin, signifying shared language and cultural identity). These affiliations shape social interactions, land ownership, and political dynamics.

Traditional social structures often revolve around concepts of kinship, reciprocity, and leadership. In many highland societies, the 'big man' system prevails, where influential individuals gain status through their ability to accumulate wealth (traditionally pigs and shell valuables) and distribute it through elaborate feasts and exchanges, thereby creating networks of obligation and support. Elsewhere, leadership might be hereditary or based on other criteria. Understanding these social dynamics, even superficially, can help visitors appreciate the context of interactions they observe or participate in.

Subsistence agriculture remains the bedrock of life for a large portion of the

population. Villagers cultivate gardens, growing staple crops like taro, yams, sweet potatoes (kaukau), bananas, and sago palm (particularly in lowland and swampy areas). Pigs are highly valued, often raised for ceremonial occasions and exchanges rather than daily consumption. Coastal communities rely heavily on fishing. This close connection to the land and sea fundamentally shapes worldview and daily routines. Land itself is usually held under customary tenure, owned collectively by clans rather than individuals, a concept often difficult for outsiders to grasp but crucial to understanding local perspectives.

Spiritual beliefs are deeply ingrained and diverse, often involving reverence for ancestors, spirits associated with natural features like mountains or rivers, and beliefs in magic or sorcery (sometimes referred to as 'puripuri' or 'sanguma'). While Christianity, introduced by missionaries, is widespread and often blended with traditional beliefs, underlying cosmology continues to influence daily life, ceremonies, and explanations for fortune and misfortune. Visitors should approach discussions of such beliefs with sensitivity and respect.

The visual expressions of PNG's cultures are stunning. Elaborate body decorations using feathers, shells, ochres, and intricate designs are common, especially during festivals known as 'Sing Sings'. Traditional architecture varies widely, from the stilt houses of coastal villages to the roundhouses of the Highlands and the imposing 'haus tambaran' (spirit houses) of the Sepik region, often adorned with intricate carvings. Artistry flourishes in masks, sculptures, woven baskets ('bilums'), pottery, and personal adornments, reflecting deep cultural narratives and spiritual significance.

Understanding Papua New Guinea also requires acknowledging its complex history. Archaeological evidence suggests human habitation stretching back at least 40,000 years, with successive waves of migration shaping the genetic and cultural landscape. Early interactions involved Austronesian-speaking peoples migrating through the islands, introducing new technologies like pottery and maritime skills. However, the rugged interior remained largely isolated, preserving ancient cultures relatively undisturbed until recent centuries.

European contact began sporadically in the 16th century with Portuguese and Spanish explorers, but sustained engagement only grew in the 19th century with traders seeking resources like sandalwood and bêche-de-mer (sea cucumbers), followed closely by Christian missionaries. Colonial annexation occurred late in the century: Germany claimed the northeastern mainland (German New Guinea) and nearby islands, while Britain claimed the southeastern mainland (British New Guinea, later Papua). In the early 20th century, administration of British New Guinea passed to the newly independent Commonwealth of Australia.

During World War I, Australia seized German New Guinea, and after the war, administered both territories (Papua and the Mandated Territory of New Guinea)

separately under League of Nations and later United Nations mandates. This period saw the expansion of colonial administration, infrastructure development (often driven by resource extraction, particularly gold), and the establishment of plantations. However, penetration into the remote highlands occurred relatively late, with significant exploration only taking place in the 1930s, revealing dense populations previously unknown to the outside world.

World War II brought devastating conflict to Papua New Guinea. The island became a major battleground between Allied (primarily Australian and American) and Japanese forces. Brutal fighting occurred along the Kokoda Track, in Milne Bay, Rabaul, and numerous other locations. Papua New Guineans served alongside Allied forces, notably as carriers and scouts ('fuzzy wuzzy angels'), playing a crucial role in the campaigns. The war left a lasting legacy, including physical scars like unexploded ordnance, but also profound social and political changes, accelerating exposure to the outside world and fostering a nascent sense of national identity.

Following the war, Australia combined the two territories into the Territory of Papua and New Guinea and gradually moved towards preparing the country for self-governance. Political parties emerged, and discussions about independence intensified. On 16 September 1975, Papua New Guinea achieved full independence peacefully, becoming a sovereign nation within the Commonwealth. The early years of independence were marked by the immense challenge of forging national unity from such extreme diversity, managing resource development, and establishing effective governance structures across a geographically fragmented country. A significant challenge was the Bougainville conflict, a secessionist movement rooted in disputes over the giant Panguna copper mine, which lasted for much of the 1990s before a peace agreement was reached.

Navigating this diverse nation requires bridging communication gaps. While English is an official language used in government, business, and higher education, it is not widely spoken by the general population outside urban areas or the tourism industry. Hiri Motu, a trade language historically used along the southern Papuan coast, is another official language but its use has declined significantly. The most vital language for travelers seeking to connect with ordinary Papua New Guineans is Tok Pisin (often called Pidgin English). Originating as a trade creole, Tok Pisin has evolved into a complex and expressive language in its own right, understood and spoken by millions across the country, particularly in the Highlands and northern regions. Learning even a few basic phrases ('Halo' - Hello, 'Tenk yu tru' - Thank you very much, 'Gut moning' - Good morning) can greatly enhance interactions and demonstrate respect.

Politically, Papua New Guinea operates as a parliamentary democracy with a unicameral National Parliament. The Prime Minister is the head of government, while the British monarch, represented by a Governor-General, serves as the Head of State.

The country is divided into provinces, each with its own provincial government, reflecting the desire for decentralization in managing local affairs. Politics can be dynamic and sometimes volatile, often influenced by regional and tribal loyalties. Maintaining stability and delivering services across such a challenging landscape remains an ongoing task for the government.

The national economy relies heavily on the extraction and export of natural resources. Mining (gold, copper, nickel), oil, and liquefied natural gas (LNG) are major contributors to GDP and government revenue. Agriculture remains vital, both for subsistence and export crops like coffee, cocoa, palm oil, copra, and rubber. Forestry and fisheries are other significant sectors. Tourism is recognized as having considerable potential for growth, particularly niche markets like cultural tourism, diving, trekking, and birdwatching, offering opportunities for sustainable development and income generation in rural areas if managed carefully.

Despite its resource wealth, Papua New Guinea faces significant development challenges. Poverty levels remain high, particularly in rural areas. Access to basic services like healthcare, education, clean water, and electricity is limited for much of the population. Infrastructure, especially roads, is often poor and vulnerable to damage from weather and terrain. Law and order issues, including high rates of crime in urban centres, are a serious concern that visitors need to be aware of and take precautions against. Corruption is also acknowledged as a major impediment to progress.

Life expectancy, literacy rates, and other human development indicators lag behind many other countries in the region. However, there is also immense resilience, entrepreneurial spirit, and cultural vibrancy among the people. Community initiatives, the informal economy ('maket'), and strong family ties provide crucial support systems. Efforts are ongoing, often supported by international partners like Australia, China, and multilateral agencies, to address these challenges and improve living standards.

For the prospective tourist, Papua New Guinea offers an experience unlike almost anywhere else. It is not a destination for those seeking perfectly polished resorts, seamless travel, or predictable itineraries. It is a land that demands engagement, flexibility, and respect. It challenges preconceptions and rewards the adventurous spirit with encounters that are authentic, profound, and utterly memorable. The logistical hurdles of travel, the need for careful planning regarding health and safety, and the occasional discomforts are part of the journey.

What awaits the prepared visitor is a world of staggering natural beauty, from mist-shrouded mountains to technicolour reefs. It's an opportunity to witness ancient cultures thriving in the modern world, to experience the warmth and hospitality of diverse communities, and to partake in unique adventures, whether that means

trekking a historic wartime trail, diving among pristine coral gardens, marveling at a 'Sing Sing', or simply sharing stories with villagers along a remote riverbank. Visiting PNG is an immersion, a chance to step outside the familiar and connect with a place of raw power, enduring traditions, and captivating human spirit. It promises not just a holiday, but an expedition into one of the planet's most fascinating and least understood corners.

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